

This Tremendous Lover by Eugene Boylan

“For the heart of the Crucified burned with a more intense love of God than the world has ever known, and the Son’s heart was torn by the offences that men offer to His heavenly Father. And in that same heart there was a fire of love for men, of love for each man and for every man; and the Lover’s heart was torn by the thought of the coldness of those whom He loved and the loss they were incurring by their refusal to love Him.”

'This Tremendous Lover', written by Dom Eugene Boylan OCSO (Trappist) in the late 1940's, is a wise, profound, learned and moving book. Above all, it is an impassioned *cri de coeur* from a religious on behalf of his beloved Christ (the 'Tremendous Lover' of the title), from whom men flee for fear that in having Him, they will lose all else. As the poet writes:

*For, though I knew His love Who followèd,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.*

Fr Boylan's purpose in writing this book is twofold: first, to show us the folly and ingratitude of our refusal to love God as He deserves to be loved; second, to offer us the means to remedy our situation. His central thesis is that the spiritual life consists essentially in a partnership between the soul and Christ which begins at our baptism. Unfortunately, this partnership is, for most of us, never made real and effective and here, argues Fr. Boylan, lies a double tragedy. There is in the first place the tragedy of the Heart of Jesus, who “...comes to us, daily if we will, in complete self-surrender, but — “We will not!” We want to be ourself, to live our own life. Thus the eternal lament still echoes from those sacred lips, the gentle reproach still whispers in our ears: 'Thou wouldst not!' ” Then comes our own tragedy: “(Yet) it is not for His own sake that He wants our love, but because He desires to make us happy with Him forever... it is not His own loss that touches Him so much as the loss which those who reject Him would suffer.”

How do we avert this tragedy? In other words, how do we go about making this partnership into which we have entered both vivifying and salvific? The first step is to understand how the partnership works, and this means understanding our function as members of the Church. Fr Boylan, writing beautifully on a subject which for many people seems dull and uninspiring, shows that our salvation depends upon the fullness of our membership of the Mystical Body of Christ. It is in this Mystical Body that we meet Christ, who comes to us full of perfect knowledge and unlimited love. “He knows all our defects and weaknesses, our mistakes and our sins, but being the perfect lover He comes with the power of God to heal all these ills. He is perfectly prepared to repair our life completely - if we do not prevent Him.”

Having convinced us of the absolute necessity of developing this spiritual partnership with Christ, Fr Boylan devotes the rest of the book to detailing a two-point programme: the first part explains how we must seek and find Christ; the second outlines the means by which we must strive to enter into an ever deepening union with Him.

The first and most essential piece of advice is that we must seek Christ in **all humility**. Humility (that is, self-forgetfulness and reliance on God’s own holiness) is the only, and indeed the 'royal' road to sanctity: “The soul must never, never trust in itself, and, above all, it must never, never, under any circumstances cease to trust Jesus absolutely!” Pride (that is, trust of self) is deadly to our spiritual partnership with Christ, for pride “makes a man live by himself and for himself; but as a member of Christ, a man must live by Christ and for Christ. The proud man opposes the life of the Mystical Body of Christ; he is like a cancer in that Body.”

Whilst waging this war on pride, we must seek Christ through **prayer and spiritual reading**, developing a greater friendship and intimacy with Him. *“You must make a grim, ruthless resolve, that never, never, never, on any account whatsoever, will you give up the practice of attempting to pray daily, no matter how fruitless your attempt may seem. Until you make that resolve, your progress in the spiritual life will never be anything more than that of a cripple.”*

Yet seeking Christ is not enough: having sought Him in earnest, we must unite ourselves to Him ever more closely. We must do this in the first place by means of the **sacraments**, which *“seize upon us, digest us, and make us part of Christ. They are the roots of the vine of which we are to be the branches.”* Fr Boylan writes beautifully about **Holy Communion** in particular. Contemplating the prayer 'My God and my all', he reassures us: *“He is all—for He is God; He is mine—for He has made me one with Himself. What is there left for us to want? Why lose a moment's thought over our own deficiency? Why be discouraged even if our life has been one of continual sin?”*

Writing on the complex topic of **the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass**, Fr Boylan explains that Christ's whole life was one of interior sacrifice of Himself to His Father, to which He gave ritual expression by the external sacrifice of the cross. In the Mass, He has given us this external sacrifice for our very own, to express our interior sacrifice to God. *“This interior sacrifice of ours must be like His: a sincere, humble, and complete abandonment to the will of our Father in heaven, not only at the moment of the Mass—but in every moment of our lives.”*

Fr Boylan insists repeatedly that **abandonment to the Will of God** is a most necessary means to union with Christ, asserting that a man will find peace only when he realizes that *“God wills his happiness, and that all that happens to him is ruled and regulated by God with infinite wisdom and power towards that end, and that all God asks of him is to cooperate with that loving will of His.”*

One further necessary means of union is through **our neighbour**. Given our modern tendency to measure love for neighbour in terms of how much active charity work we do, it can be difficult to keep the focus on the love we bear to God. Fr Boylan reminds us that *“Our principal duty to our neighbour is a supernatural one. The greatest work of fraternal charity is that by which grace is obtained from God for those in mortal sin. And grace is only obtained by a spiritual life; thus the greatest service we can render our neighbour is to sanctify ourselves.”*

We are also given a timely reminder that it is futile to seek union with Christ if we are not prepared to embrace lovingly **the Cross**, since it is not possible to live a Christian life without mortification. However, mortification should not be regarded as merely negative, tending towards self-hatred or contempt of the body. Rather, *“it is the getting rid of self in order to allow Jesus to live His life in us and to enable us to share His life fully. It is an “assertion” of Jesus rather than a denial of self; for we only deny ourselves to find Him, that He may live in us and that we may be united to Him.”*

Perhaps surprisingly to readers who feel that this sort of spiritual striving is appropriate only for professed religious, Fr Boylan devotes a chapter to **'Marriage and Holiness'**, insisting that marriage, as a sacrament, is undoubtedly the path to holiness for those who enter into it. He laments (and this in the 1940s) that the Christian ideal of marriage is deemed 'unrealistic'. This attitude reveals the fact that we have lost sight of the supernatural status of marriage, a Sacrament which raises the spouses above their own natures and limitations so that *“each one loves, and sacrifices self, in partnership with Christ; each one is loved and is served in union with Christ. Beyond her husband, and in his heart, the wife sees and loves and serves Christ. Beyond his wife, and in her heart, the husband sees and loves and serves Christ. Christ is the lover and Christ is the beloved.”* This whole chapter has a great deal of wisdom to offer in our own day given the oft-repeated criticism (even from Catholics) that the Church's teaching on marriage 'demands too much'.

In a chapter devoted to Our Blessed Lady, Fr Boylan outlines her crucial role as Mother of the Mystical Body – the mother of Christ and our mother. He fittingly quotes St Louis de Monfort's words to remind us that true devotion to Christ demands true devotion to Mary: *"We are completely in her hands. We are all hers, and all ours is hers. What then is there to prevent her making us completely Christ's?"* As St. Louis asserts, we need to *'Seek Jesus living in Mary.'*

In the two final, densely-packed chapters, Fr Boylan returns to his starting point. *"Our hearts,"* he writes, *"are made for God, and they cannot rest till they rest in Him; He knows our hearts better than we do. And so in His love, like the Good Shepherd, He comes to seek us; He pursues us, and He uses His providence to draw us away from all else and to draw all else away from us, so that we may be driven to listen to His voice and cast ourselves upon His Heart."* For, as the poet himself finally comes to realise,

***"All which I took from thee I did but take
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come."***

***Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."***

To give the last word to the author: *"Here is a perfect picture of our tremendous lover. Everything that happens to us is but the touch of "His hand, outstretched caressingly," to draw us to Himself, to mould us to His Heart's desire. All He asks of us is that we put our faith and hope in Him, that we love Him with our whole heart, that we renounce our own pretended strength and our foolish plans by humility and abandonment; He will do the rest."*

Reviewed by Kathryn Hennessy