

Sayings of Jean Pierre de Caussade

It is by union with his will that one enjoys and possesses God, and it is an illusion to seek for that enjoyment by any other means. The will of God is the universal means. This means does not belong to this or that method, but it has the virtue of sanctifying all methods and special calls.

The past must be left to God's measureless mercy, the future to his loving providence; and the present must be given wholly to his love through our fidelity to his grace.

Let us understand clearly that we shall not acquire true conformity to the will of God until we are perfectly resolved to serve him according to his will and pleasure, and not according to our own.

If you are docile to the inspirations of God's spirit, you will take care not to make your advancement depend on the warmth and sensible sweetness of your interior impressions. The divine Spirit will, on the contrary, make you esteem rather his almost imperceptible operations, for the more delicate and profound they are, the more divine they are and so much more removed from the impressions of the senses.

We only know perfectly what experience has taught us through suffering and action. Experience is the school of the Holy Spirit who speaks to the heart words of life, and all that we say to others should come from this source.

The doctrine of pure love can only be learnt by God's action, not by any effort of our own spirit.

Let us be truly humble and occupied in the correction of our faults, and we shall not think much about those of other people. Let us see Jesus Christ in all our neighbours, and we shall not find it hard to excuse them, to endure and cherish them. Let us turn our quick temper on to the task of glorifying God in ourselves and in those whose confidence he gives us. For the rest, let us charitably endure ourselves as it is our duty to endure others.

It is the secret method of divine wisdom to impoverish the senses while enriching the heart, so that the latter is filled in proportion to the painful emptiness that the former experience.

God instructs the heart not by means of ideas, but by pains and contradictions.

God does not demand their labour; he desires that their goodwill should be united to him that he may lead and direct them, and favour them in proportion to the intensity of that union.

In one word, the soul is active as far as it is concerned with its present duty, but passive and abandoned as regards all the rest, where its only action is to await in peace the divine motion. These perpetual alternations of light and darkness, of consolation and desolation, are as useful, I should say as indispensable, for the growth and ripening of virtue in our souls, as the atmospheric changes are for the growth and ripening of the harvests.

As it is fire and not the philosophy or scientific knowledge of fire that warms us, so it is the will and designs of God that produce sanctity in our souls and not intellectual speculation about this principle and its effects. If we wish to quench our thirst, we must lay aside books which explain thirst, and take a drink.

We must put speculation on one side, and with simplicity drink everything that God's designs present to us in actions and sufferings. What happens to us each moment by God's design is for us the holiest, best and most divine thing.

The revelation of the present moment is more useful because it is addressed personally to us.

Perfection does not consist in understanding God's designs but in submitting to them

Let your own motto be: have patience, and let God do the work. For, when all is said, you can do no other. Yours is merely to say: 'I adore and resign myself; may your will be done.'

The wisdom of the simple soul consists in contenting itself with its own business, in keeping to the limits of its own path, in not overstepping its bounds. You have ever to love and esteem as best what is present to you, with perfect confidence in God's action which cannot of itself do you anything but good.

Things often go perfectly and then I return thanks to God for it. But sometimes everything goes wrong and then I bless him for that also and offer it as a sacrifice.

The *one thing necessary* is always to be found by the soul in the present moment. There is no need to choose between prayer and silence, privacy or conversation, reading or writing, reflection or the abandonment of thought, the frequentation or avoidance of spiritual people, abundance or famine, illness or health, life or death; the *one thing necessary* is what each moment produces by God's design.

The present moment is the manifestation of the name of God and the coming of his kingdom

Ask God to help you to acquire the solid virtues that please the divine Lover: self-abnegation, humility, patience, gentleness, obedience, charity and the endurance of your neighbour.

The great principle of the interior life lies in peace of the heart: it must be preserved with such care that the moment it is in danger everything else should be abandoned for its re-establishment.

At frequent intervals repeat interiorly: 'Lord, have pity upon me; with you all things are possible.' There is nothing better or more simple than this; nothing more is needed to call forth his powerful help. Hold powerfully to these practices and inclinations. God will do the rest without your perceiving it.

You seem equally ignorant of this great principle, that usually more progress is made by suffering than by acting, and that to take things patiently is to do a great deal, and especially to be patient with oneself.

Jean Pierre de Caussade

1675-1751

Though he wrote very little, the influence of this Jesuit priest is immense.

Of Jean Pierre de Caussade's childhood nothing is known. He entered the Jesuit novitiate at Toulouse in 1693, aged eighteen. He was ordained priest in 1705 and professed in 1708. From 1708-14 he taught grammar, logic and physics in their college in Toulouse. He gave up teaching to become a missionary, confessor and preacher. He worked in Rodez, Montauban, Auch, Clermont, Puy, Beauvais and Lorraine between 1715-31. He was sent to be the spiritual director at the Jesuit house in Albi for two years, but then returned to Nancy as superior for seven years. He renewed his contacts with the nuns of the Order of the Visitation there. It is thanks to these nuns, who kept notes and records of his addresses, sermons, letters and directions to them, that we have his more famous book *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*. It is a compilation done by E J Strickland and edited by Fr. J Ramière.

In 1741 de Caussade wrote his only book, *Instructions spirituelles, en forme de dialogues, sur les divers états d'oraison, suivant la doctrine de Bossuet* (translated as *On Prayer*). In this he defends the mystical understanding of the Christian faith, which had in some senses received a bad press as a result of the attacks on Molinos, Madame Guyon and Quietism, but is very careful to do so in a strictly orthodox manner - according to the doctrine of Bossuet. Bishop Bossuet of Meaux had been heavily involved with the investigations into Madame Guyon.

Fr de Caussade's message owes much to his great teachers St Francis de Sales and St John of the Cross, both very pure sources, and is in line with the Carmelite style of understanding. It teaches moving away from reliance on strong feelings in prayer to a simple, as in fundamental, reliance upon God's goodness. Perhaps the most recent exemplar of this is the great St Thérèse of Lisieux.

According to David Knowles, de Caussade's main thesis is that 'God and the soul perform together a work the success of which depends on the divine Workman, and can be compromised only by the soul's infidelity.' If one stops to think of the phenomenal wonder of this for even a moment, our priorities change. Less important becomes our preferences, more essential becomes the need to do the will of our Father in heaven. 'God permits your slight infidelities to give you a deeper conviction of your weakness, and gradually to destroy in you that unhappy self-esteem, presumption and secret self-confidence which would never otherwise allow you to acquire true humility of heart.' As Archbishop Rowan Williams has written, 'To be good without humility is to be condemned to a really wretched life.'

Fr de Caussade did not invent, but he certainly popularized the phrases *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* and *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*. In beautiful language that is warm and clear, he expressed the most profound teaching on the nature of human living.

We do well to remember that he was writing not for new Christians but for professed religious of many years in the life of prayer. This does not mean that we should abandon all attempts to understand this pure, Christian mystical teaching. Julian of Norwich taught that one of the 'three medicines of salvation' was an intense longing with our will for the will of God to be done in our lives. Reading de Caussade may greatly strengthen that desire.

As with so many wise spiritual counsellors, de Caussade's ideas are best approached through his letters. Unfortunately these are not easily found; modern versions of *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, such as the Fontana edition and Kitty Muggeridge's translation only contain the Books I & II of his treatise. One has to go to the Burns and Oates, 1962 edition of the same title or earlier to find his letters of direction and advice enclosed.

In this passage to the saintly Sister Marie-Thérèse de Vioménil we are reminded of Isaiah 30.15, ('Your salvation lay in conversion and tranquility, your strength, in complete trust.' *The Jerusalem Bible*);

'We must submit to God in all things and about all things; as to the state and condition in which he has placed us, the good or evil circumstances that He has allotted us, and even as to the character, mind, nature, temperament, and inclinations with which He has endowed us. Practise yourself, therefore, in being patient with regard to yourself and in this perfect submission to the divine will.'

His gentle yet powerfully strengthening care consistently shines through: 'You say you do not know how to pray. Experience has taught me that persons of good will who speak in this way know better than others how to pray, because their prayer is more simple and humble, but because of its simplicity it escapes their observation.' Again, 'You explain yourself in a manner which might be misunderstood by those who have no experience of this state of prayer (of recollection). You say that you do nothing ... but your soul acts so quietly that you do not perceive your own interior acts of assent and adhesion to the impression of the Holy Spirit.' 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God', as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote but we need this manner of contemplative prayer to celebrate it.

The Revd Neil Broadbent

Bibliography

- Ed. Robert Llewelyn, *The Fire of Divine Love, Readings from J.P. de Caussade*, Burns & Oates, 1995.
J.P. de Caussade, *Self-abandonment to Divine Providence*, Fontana, 1971.
J.P. de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, The Catholic Records Press, Exeter, 1921.
J.P. de Caussade, *On Prayer*, Burns & Oates, Second Edition 1949.