

Retrieving the Tradition

WE, THE ORDINARY PEOPLE OF THE STREETS

MADELEINE DELBRËL

“Each tiny act is an extraordinary event, in which heaven is given to us, in which we are able to give heaven to others.”



There are many places where the Spirit blows,
but there is one Spirit that blows in all places.

There are some people whom God takes and sets apart.

There are others he leaves among the crowd, people he does not “withdraw from the world.”

These are the people who have an ordinary job, an ordinary household, or an ordinary celibacy. People with ordinary sicknesses, and ordinary times of grieving. People with an ordinary house, and ordinary clothes. These are the people of ordinary life. The people we might meet on any street.

They love the door that opens onto the street, just as their brothers who are hidden from the world love the door that shuts behind them forever.

We, the ordinary people of the streets, believe with all our might that this street, this world, where God has placed us, is our place of holiness.

We believe that we lack nothing here that we need. If we needed something else, God would already have given it to us.

SILENCE

We do not need to find silence; we already have it. The day we lack silence is the day we have not learned how to keep it.

All the noises around us cause much less disturbance than we ourselves do.

The real noise is the echo things make within us. It is not necessarily talking that breaks silence. Silence is the place where the Word of God dwells; if we limit ourselves to repeating this word, then we can speak without ceasing to be silent.

Monasteries appear to be the place of praise and the place of the silence that praise requires.

In the street, crushed by the crowd, we make our souls into so many caves of silence wherein the word of God can dwell and resound.

In those crowds marked by the sins of hatred, lust, and drunkenness, we find a desert of silence, and we recollect ourselves here with great ease, so that God can ring out his name: "*Vox clamans in deserto.*"

SOLITUDE

We, the ordinary people of the streets, do not see solitude as the absence of the world but as the presence of God.

Encountering him in all places is what creates our solitude.

For us, being truly alone means sharing in God's solitude.

God is so great that nothing can find room anywhere else but within him.

For us, the whole world is like a face-to-face meeting with the one whom we cannot escape.

We encounter his living causality right there on the busy street corners.

We encounter his imprint on the earth.

We encounter his Providence in the laws of science.

We encounter Christ in all these "little ones who are his

own”: the ones who suffer in body, the ones who are bored, the ones who are troubled, the ones who are in need.

We encounter Christ rejected, in the sin that wears a thousand faces.

How could we possibly have the heart to mock these people or to hate them, this multitude of sinners with whom we rub shoulders?

The solitude of God in fraternal charity; it is Christ serving Christ, Christ in the one who is serving and Christ in the one who is being served.

How could apostolate be a waste of energy or a distraction?

OBEDIENCE

We, the ordinary people of the streets, know very well that as long as our own will is alive we will not be able to love Christ definitively.

We know that only obedience can root us in his death.

We would envy our religious brothers and sisters if we too could not “die to ourselves” a little more each day.

However, for us the tiny circumstances of life are faithful “superiors.” They do not leave us alone for a moment; and the “yeses” we have to say to them follow continuously, one after the other.

When we surrender to them without resistance we find ourselves wonderfully liberated from ourselves. We float in Providence like a cork on the ocean waters.

But let’s not act like heroes: God trusts nothing to chance; the rhythms of our life are vast because he has willed them so.

From the moment we wake up these circumstances take hold of us. It is the telephone ringing; it is the key that won’t work, the bus that doesn’t arrive or arrives full, or doesn’t wait for us. It is the person sitting next to us who takes up the whole seat; or the vibration of the loose window pane that drives us crazy.

It is the daily routine, one chore that leads to another, some job we wouldn’t have chosen. It’s the weather and its changes—which is exquisite precisely because it is completely untainted by any human doing. It’s being cold, or being hot; it’s the headache and the toothache. It’s the people we meet and the

conversations they choose to start. It's the rude man who nearly knocks us off the sidewalk. It's the people who need to kill some time, and so they corner us.

For us, the ordinary people of the streets, obedience means bending to the ways of our times whenever they are not harmful. It means wearing the same clothes as everyone else, taking on the same routines as everyone else, and speaking the same language as everyone else.

When we live with others, obedience also means we set aside our own tastes and leave things in the place others have put them. In this way, life becomes an epic film in slow motion. It does not make our head spin. It does not take our breath away. Little by little, thread by thread, it eats away at the old man's frame, which cannot be mended and must be made new from the ground up. When we thus become accustomed to giving up our will to so many tiny things, we will no longer find it hard, when the occasion presents itself, to do the will of our boss, our husband, or our parents.

And our hope is that death, too, will be easy. It will not be a big ordeal, but rather the outcome of small ordinary sufferings, to which we have given our assent as they passed, one after the other.

LOVE

We, the ordinary people of the streets, are certain we can love God as much as he might desire to be loved by us.

We don't regard love as something extraordinary but as something that consumes. We believe that doing little things with God and as God does is as much a way of loving him as doing great deeds for him. Besides, we're not very well informed about the greatness of our acts. There are nevertheless two things we know for sure: first, whatever we do can't help but be small; and second, whatever God does is great.

And so we go about our activities with a sense of great peace.

We know that all our work consists in not shifting about under grace; in not choosing what we would do; and that it is God who acts through us.

There is nothing difficult for God; the one who grows anxious at difficulties is the one who counts on his own capacity for action.

Because we find that love is work enough for us, we don't take the time to categorize what we are doing as either "contemplation" or "action."

We find that prayer is action and that action is prayer. It seems to us that truly loving action is filled with light.

It seems to us that a soul standing before such action is like a night that is full of expectation for the coming dawn. And when the light breaks, when God's will is clearly understood, she lives it out gently, with poise, peacefully looking to her God as he inspires her and acts in her. It seems to us that action is also an imploring prayer. It does not at all seem to us that action nails us down to our field of work, our apostolate, or our life.

Quite the contrary, we believe that an action perfectly carried out at the time and place it is required of us binds us to the whole Church, sends us out throughout her body, making us *disponible* in her.

Our feet march upon a street, but our heartbeat reverberates through the whole world.

That is why our small acts, which we can't decide whether they're action or contemplation, perfectly join together the love of God and the love of our neighbor.

Giving ourselves over to his will at the same time gives us over to the Church, whom the same will continuously makes our saving mother of grace.

Each docile act makes us receive God totally and give God totally, in a great freedom of spirit.

And thus life becomes a celebration.

Each tiny act is an extraordinary event, in which heaven is given to us, in which we are able to give heaven to others.

It makes no difference what we do, whether we take in hand a broom or a pen. Whether we speak or keep silent. Whether we are sewing or holding a meeting, caring for a sick person or tapping away at the typewriter.

Whatever it is, it's just the outer shell of an amazing inner reality: the soul's encounter with God, renewed at each moment, in which, at each moment, the soul grows in grace and becomes ever more beautiful for her God.

Is the doorbell ringing? Quick, open the door! It's God coming to love us. Is someone asking us to do something? Here you are! . . . it's God coming to love us. Is it time to sit down for lunch? Let's go—it's God coming to love us.

Let's let him.*



***MADELEINE DELBRÊL** (1904–1964) was a Catholic lay social worker who lived for many years in the heavily Communist town of Ivry outside of Paris.*

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