



# I

My parish is a parish like any other. All parishes are alike. Today's parishes, of course. As I was saying to the curé of Norenfontes yesterday: good and evil are probably in balance there, only the centre of gravity is low, very low. Or, if you prefer, both co-exist without merging, like liquids of different densities. The curé laughed in my face. He's a good priest, very benevolent, very paternal, and is even considered a slightly dangerous freethinker by the archdiocese. His witticisms are a source of merriment in the presbyteries, and he accompanies them with a look in his eyes that's meant to be vivacious and which I find, deep down, to be so worn, so weary, that it makes me want to weep.

My parish is consumed with boredom, that's the word. Like so many parishes! Boredom is consuming them before our very eyes and we can do nothing about it. Some day, perhaps, the contagion will reach us, too, and we will discover this cancer in ourselves. It's something one can live with for a very long time.

The idea came to me yesterday on the road. One of those fine rains was falling, the kind you breathe in deeply and which go all the way down to your belly. From the Saint-Vaast hill, the village suddenly came into view, so huddled, so wretched beneath the ugly November sky. Water enveloped it on all sides like smoke, and it seemed to be lying there, in the soaked grass, like a poor exhausted animal. How small a village is! And this village was my parish. It was my parish, but I could do nothing for it, I watched sadly as it sank into the darkness and vanished . . . A few more seconds, and I would cease to see it. I had never before had such a cruel sense of its solitude and

mine. I thought of the cattle I could hear lowing in the fog, cattle which the young cowherd, coming back from school with his satchel under his arm, would soon lead across the waterlogged pastures to the warm, fragrant cowshed . . . And the village, too, after so many nights spent in the mud, seemed to be waiting – without much hope – for a master it could follow to some unlikely, some unimaginable refuge.

Oh, I know perfectly well how insane these ideas are, ideas I can't even take completely seriously, dreams . . . Unlike animals, villages don't get to their feet at the sound of a schoolboy's voice. No matter! Last night, it might have responded to the call of a saint.

That was when it occurred to me that the world is consumed with boredom. Of course, you have to think about it a little to realize this, it can't be grasped immediately. It's a kind of dust. You come and go without seeing it, you breathe it in, you eat it, you drink it, and it's so fine, so thin, that it doesn't even crunch between your teeth.

You need only stop for a second and it covers your face, your hands. You have to move constantly to shake off this rain of ashes. And the world moves a lot.

Some may say that the world has long been familiar with boredom, that boredom is the true human condition. It may be that the seed was spread everywhere and has sprouted wherever there is fertile ground. But I wonder if men have ever known this contagion, this scourge of boredom? An abortive despair, a low form of despair, no doubt something like the fermentation of a decaying Christianity.

Obviously, these are thoughts I keep to myself. Not that I am ashamed of them. I even think I would be understood perfectly well, too well perhaps for me to be at rest – I mean, for my conscience to be at rest. The optimism of our superiors is quite dead. Those who still profess it teach it out of habit, without believing in it. At the slightest objection, they shower you with knowing smiles and apologize. Old priests are not mistaken. In spite of appearances, even while remaining faithful to a particular vocabulary, which in any case never changes, the themes of official eloquence are not the same, our elders no longer

recognize them. In the past, for example, an age-old tradition dictated that an episcopal speech never finished without a cautious allusion – passionate, admittedly, but cautious – to the persecution to come and the blood of the martyrs. Such predictions have become increasingly rare. Probably because they seem less likely to come true.

Alas, there's a phrase that's starting to do the rounds of the presbyteries, one of those terrible phrases referred to as 'soldiers' talk', which, I don't know how or why, seemed amusing to our elders, but which young men my age find so ugly, so sad. (It is surprising how well the slang of the trenches succeeded in expressing sordid ideas in gloomy images, but is it really the slang of the trenches? . . .) Anyway, it's common nowadays to say that we must 'not try to understand'. But, my God, that's what we're here for! I realize that we have superiors. Only, who informs the superiors? We do. So when we are told to admire the obedience and simplicity of monks, I'm not very convinced, try as I might . . .

We are all capable of peeling potatoes or tending to the pigs, provided a master of novices orders us to do so. But a parish is not as easy to lavish with acts of virtue as a community of monks! Especially as *they* will never know and *they* wouldn't understand anyway.

The archpriest of Baillœil, since he retired, has been spending much time with the Carthusians at Verchocq. *What I saw at Verchocq* is the title of one of those lectures of his which the dean has made it almost a duty for us to attend. There were some very interesting, even fascinating things in it, if you could take the tone: the charming old man has kept the innocent little habits of a former professor of literature, and manicures his words as he might manicure his hands. It is as if he is both expecting and dreading the unlikely presence, among his cassocked listeners, of Monsieur Anatole France, and all his subtle looks and knowing smiles, the wiggling of his little finger, are by way of apologizing for God in the name of humanism. It seems that such ecclesiastical coquettishness was fashionable in 1900, and we tried our best to respond enthusiastically to his sweeping statements even though they

didn't sweep us away at all. (I am probably too coarse, too unpolished by nature, but I confess that I've always loathed well-read priests. Rubbing shoulders with the great minds is basically like dining out: you don't dine out in full view of people dying of hunger.)

Anyway, the archpriest told us lots of anecdotes which were meant to be humorous. I think I understood them. Unfortunately, I wasn't as impressed as I would have wished. Monks are unequalled masters of the inner life, nobody doubts that, but most of these supposedly humorous stories are like local wines: they have to be consumed on the spot and don't travel well.

Or perhaps . . . must I say it? . . . perhaps it's just that such small groups of men, living side by side day and night, unconsciously create a favourable atmosphere . . . I, too, have some knowledge of monasteries. I have seen monks lying face down on the ground, humbly and unflinchingly receiving the unjust reprimand of a superior determined to break their pride. But in such houses, undisturbed by any echo from the outside world, the silence attains a truly extraordinary quality, a perfection, the slightest quiver captured by ears that have become unusually sensitive . . . And there are some silences in chapter rooms that deserve a round of applause.

(Whereas an episcopal reprimand . . .)

I have felt no pleasure in rereading these first pages of my diary. Of course, I gave it a lot of thought before making up my mind to write it, but that's not much of a comfort. For anyone who has the habit of prayer, thinking is all too often merely an alibi, a sly way of confirming us in our intentions. Reasoning easily leaves in shadow what we hope to keep hidden. Of course, the layman who thinks calculates his chances. But what chances do we have, we who have accepted, once and for all, the terrifying presence of the divine in every moment of our poor lives? Unless a priest loses his faith – and what does he have left then, since he cannot lose it without denying himself? – it is impossible for him to have the same clear and direct – one might almost say naive and innocent – vision of his chances as

anyone outside the Church. So what is the point of calculating our chances? One cannot bet against God.

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Received a reply from my aunt Philomène with two hundred-franc notes – just what I need for my most pressing needs. It's frightening how money runs through my fingers like sand.

Mind you, I'm not very bright! For instance, the grocer in Heuchin, Monsieur Pamyre, who is a good man (two of his sons are priests), received me warmly right from the start. He is in fact the official supplier of my fellow priests. Whenever he saw me, he would offer me tonic wine and biscuits in the back room of his shop and we would chat for a while. Times are hard for him: one of his daughters is not yet provided for, and his other two boys, who are pupils in the Catholic faculty, are costing him a lot. Anyway, one day, when taking my order, he kindly said, 'I'll throw in three bottles of tonic wine, it'll put colour back in your cheeks.' I thought, stupidly, that he was giving them to me.

A child of poor parents who goes straight from a deprived house to the seminary at the age of twelve will never know the value of money. I even think it's hard for us to remain strictly honest in business. It's best not to gamble, however innocently, with what most lay people consider not a means but an end.

My fellow priest from Verchin, who is not always the most tactful of men, saw fit to make a humorous allusion to this little misunderstanding in front of Monsieur Pamyre. Monsieur Pamyre was genuinely upset. 'The curé,' he said, 'can come as often as he likes, and we'll have a pleasant drink together. We aren't short of a bottle or two, thank God! But business is business, and I can't just give away my merchandise.' And Madame Pamyre apparently added, 'We merchants also have our duties to perform.'

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This morning I decided not to extend the experiment past the coming twelve months. Next 25 November, I'll throw these pages on the fire and try to forget them. This resolution, which

I made after Mass, did not put my mind at rest for more than a moment.

It's not that I have qualms, in the normal sense of the word. I don't think I'm doing anything wrong in noting down as the days go by, with complete honesty, the very humble, insignificant secrets of a life that is quite without mystery. What I will put down on paper would not be overly revealing to the only friend to whom I still sometimes open my heart, and besides, I am well aware that I will never dare write here what I confess to God almost every morning without any shame. No, these are not really qualms, but rather a kind of irrational fear, as if my instinct is sending me a warning. When I sat down for the first time in front of this school exercise book, I tried to concentrate, to search my conscience. But it wasn't my conscience I saw with that inner gaze that is usually so calm and penetrating, which ignores details and goes straight to the point. It seemed to glide over the surface of another conscience previously unknown to me, a blurred mirror in which I fear to see a face suddenly emerge – which face? mine, perhaps – a face I have forgotten and rediscovered.

One should be able to talk about oneself with inflexible rigour. So why then, at this first effort to grasp myself, did I feel that pity, that tenderness, that slackening of every fibre of my being, that desire to weep?

Yesterday I went to see the curé of Torcy. He's a very good, very conscientious priest, although I usually find him a little too down-to-earth. He's the son of rich peasants, and he knows the value of money. I am always very impressed with his experience of the world. My fellow priests speak of him as a future dean of Heuchin . . . His manner with me is quite disappointing because he hates confidences and discourages them with a big, artless laugh, but he's much subtler than he seems. My God, how I would love to be as healthy, brave and well-balanced as he is! But I think he's indulgent towards what he's pleased to call my sentimentality because he knows I am not at all proud of it. It's even been a long time since I last tried to see that childish fear I have of other people's suffering as being

anything like the true pity of the saints, which is strong and gentle.

‘You’re not looking too well, my boy!’

It has to be said that I was still upset by the argument I’d had with old Dumonchel in the sacristy a few hours earlier. God knows I’d like to give up, along with my time and effort, the cotton rugs, the mite-eaten draperies and the tallow candles bought at great expense from His Excellency’s supplier, but which collapse as soon as they are lit, with a noise like a frying pan. Only the going rates are the going rates, so what can I do?

‘You should kick the fellow out,’ he said. And when I objected: ‘No, absolutely, kick him out! Besides, I know him, your Dumonchel: the old man has enough money . . . His late wife was twice as rich as him – he could have given her a decent burial! You young priests . . .’

He turned quite red and looked me up and down.

‘I wonder what you have in your veins these days, you young priests! In my day, we trained men of the Church – don’t scowl, you make me want to slap you – yes, men of the Church, make of those words what you wish, leaders of parishes, masters, men who could run things. They could command a region, those men, just by lifting their chins. Oh, I know what you’re going to say: they ate well, drank well, too, and were partial to a game of cards. Agreed! When you take your work in the right spirit, you do it fast and well, and you have leisure time, which is all to the best for everyone. Now the seminaries send us altar boys, little beggars who imagine they work harder than anyone else because they never finish anything. They whine instead of commanding. They read heaps of books and have never understood – understood, mind you! – the parable of the Bridegroom and the Wedding Guests. What is a wife, my boy, a true wife, such as a man may hope to find if he is stupid enough not to follow Saint Paul’s advice? Don’t answer that, you’ll only say something stupid! Well, she’s a sturdy wench who works hard but makes allowances, and knows that everything will always have to be started all over again. However hard the Holy Church tries, she will never change this poor world into an altar of repose for Corpus Christi. I once had – I’m talking



about my old parish – an amazing female sacristan, a nun from Bruges secularized in 1908, a fine woman. The first week, with all her polishing, the house of the Lord started to shine like a convent parlour. It had become unrecognizable, word of honour! It was harvest time, mark you, and not a soul came, and yet the blasted little old woman demanded that I take off my shoes and put on slippers, which I hate! I think she actually paid for them out of her own pocket. Every morning, of course, she found a new layer of dust on the pews, one or two brand new fungi on the choir rug, and spider's webs – oh, my boy, enough spider's webs to make a bride's trousseau!

'I thought to myself, "Keep polishing, my girl, you'll see on Sunday." And Sunday came. Oh, a very normal Sunday, nothing to write home about, the usual customers, if you know what I mean. Pitiful! Anyway, at midnight, she was still waxing and rubbing, by candlelight. And a few weeks later, for All Saints – a fantastic mission, preached by two strapping Redemptorist fathers – the wretched woman spent her nights on all fours with her bucket and mop – scrubbing and scrubbing until the foam started to climb up the pillars and grass grew between the flagstones. No way of reasoning with her! If I'd listened to her, I would have thrown everyone out so that the Lord could keep his feet dry, can you imagine? I'd say to her, "You'll ruin me with those potions of yours" – because the poor old woman had a terrible cough! In the end, she took to her bed with an attack of rheumatic fever, her heart gave out, and there was my nun before St Peter. In a way, she was a martyr, let no one say she wasn't. Her mistake, of course, was not to fight dirt, but to try and wipe it out completely, as if that were possible. A parish is dirty, it has to be. A Christian community is even dirtier. Just wait until the Day of Judgement, you'll see what the angels will have to remove from the holiest monasteries, by the shovelful – what a cleansing that'll be! Which all proves, my boy, that the Church has to be a sound housekeeper, sound and reasonable. That nun of mine wasn't a real housekeeper: a real housekeeper knows that a house isn't a reliquary. That's a poet's notion.'

I was ready for him. As he refilled his pipe, I tried in my

clumsy way to point out that his example might not have been very well chosen, that that nun who died in pain had nothing in common with the ‘altar boys’, the ‘beggars’ who ‘whine instead of commanding’.

‘That’s where you’re wrong,’ he said gently. ‘They suffer from the same illusions. The only difference is that the beggars don’t have my nun’s perseverance. They give up at their first attempt, on the pretext that the experience of a ministry contradicts their own knowhow. They’re like snouts looking for jam. A Christian community can’t live on jam, any more than a man can. The Lord didn’t write that we were the honey of the earth, my boy, but the salt. Our poor world is like old Job on his dung heap, full of wounds and ulcers. Salt on an open wound stings, but it also stops a body from decaying. Thinking you can exterminate the devil, your other hobby horse is to be loved, loved for yourselves, naturally. A true priest is never loved, remember that. And shall I tell you something? The Church doesn’t care if any of you are loved, my boy. The important thing is to be respected and obeyed. The Church needs order. Create order all day long. Create order even though you know that disorder will regain the upper hand the following day, because the way things go, night is bound to destroy our work of the day before – night belongs to the devil.’

‘Night,’ I said, knowing I was going to make him angry, ‘is when the monks are active.’

‘Yes, it is,’ he replied coldly. ‘And what do they do? They make music.’

I tried to appear shocked.

‘I have nothing against those contemplatives of yours. To each his own. Apart from their music, they’re also florists.’

‘Florists?’

‘Absolutely. When they’ve done the housework, washed the dishes, peeled the potatoes and put the cloth on the table, they stick fresh flowers in the vase, it’s only natural. Mind you, the only people who might be shocked by my little comparison are idiots, because of course, there’s a subtle difference . . . The mystic lily isn’t the lily of the field. And besides, if man prefers a fillet of beef to a spray of periwinkles, it’s because he himself

is a brute, a belly. In short, your contemplatives are very well equipped to provide us with fine flowers, real ones. Unfortunately, there's occasional sabotage in the cloisters, as there is elsewhere, and all too often what we get are paper flowers.'

He kept giving me sidelong glances without appearing to, and at such moments I think I could see, deep in his eyes, a great deal of tenderness and – how can I put this? – a kind of worry, an anxiety. I have my trials, he has his. But I find it hard to keep quiet about mine. And if I do not speak, it is less out of heroism, alas, than out of that reticence also familiar to doctors, so I'm told, at least in their own way and in accordance with the kind of anxieties that are specific to them. Whereas he will keep quiet about his own, whatever happens, and beneath his gruff rotundity he is more impenetrable than those Carthusians I passed in the corridors at Z . . . , looking as white as wax.

Abruptly, he took my hand in his, a hand swollen by diabetes, but one that grips immediately and unerringly, a hard, imperious hand.

'You may say I simply don't understand the mystics. Oh, yes, you will say it, don't pretend otherwise! Well, my good fellow, in my time at the seminary there was a teacher of canon law who thought he was a poet. He would put together these amazing constructions, with all the feet and rhymes and caesuras and what have you that you could wish for, poor man! He would have made verse out of canon law if he could. There was just one thing he lacked, call it what you will, inspiration, genius – *ingenium* – whatever. I don't have genius. If the Holy Spirit singles me out one day, then of course I'll put down my broom and my cloths – can you imagine that? – and go and spend time with the seraphim and learn music, even if I'm not in tune at first. But don't be surprised if I laugh at people who sing in chorus before the Lord has even raised His baton!'

He stopped to think for a moment, and his face, even though turned towards the window, suddenly seemed in shadow. His very features had hardened as if he expected from me – or perhaps from himself, from his own conscience – an objection, a denial, whatever . . . But he regained his composure almost immediately.

‘What can I do, my boy? I have my own ideas on young David’s harp. He was a talented young man, that’s for sure, but even his music didn’t preserve him from sin. I know perfectly well that the poor pious writers who churn out *Lives of the Saints* for export imagine that ecstasy is a kind of shelter, that a man is as safe and snug there as in Abraham’s bosom. Safe! . . . Oh, of course, nothing is easier sometimes than to climb to those heights: God carries you there. You just have to hold on tight and, if need be, know how to get back down again. Don’t forget, though, that the saints, the real ones, were quite uncomfortable on their return. Once caught out in their high-wire act, they began by begging that it be kept secret: “Don’t tell anyone what you’ve seen . . .” They were a little ashamed, don’t you see? Ashamed of being their Father’s spoilt children, of having drunk from the cup of bliss before everyone else! Why should they? No reason. Just favouritism. The first impulse of the soul is to flee such states of grace. There are words in the Book that can be understood in different ways: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!” Not just into His hands – into His arms, His heart, the heart of Jesus! You have your little part in the concert, you play the triangle or the cymbals, I suppose, and suddenly you’re asked to climb onto the platform, you’re given a Stradivarius and told, “Go on, my boy, I’m listening.” Brr! . . . Now come and see my oratory, but wipe your feet first, because of the carpet.’

I don’t know much about furniture, but his room struck me as magnificent: a solid mahogany bed, a wardrobe with three highly carved doors, upholstered armchairs and a huge bronze Joan of Arc on the mantelpiece. But it wasn’t his bedroom the curé of Torcy wanted to show me. He led me into another room, this one very bare, furnished only with a table and a prie-dieu. On the wall hung a fairly hideous chromo, the kind you see in hospital wards, depicting a very chubby, very pink baby Jesus lying between the donkey and the ox.

‘You see this painting?’ he said. ‘It’s a gift from my godmother. I have more than enough to afford something better, more artistic, but I’d rather keep this one. I find it ugly, and even rather stupid, but comforting. We lot, my boy, are from Flanders, a

country of big drinkers, big eaters – and rich . . . You don't realize, you poor dark-skinned fellows from the Boulonnais, in your cob shacks, how wealthy Flanders is. The black country! Not much point asking us for fine words that make pious ladies swoon, but all the same we have a fair number of mystics, my boy! And not tubercular mystics, oh no. Life doesn't scare us: good thick red blood beats in our temples even when we're brim-full of gin, or when we fly into a temper, a Flemish temper, enough to lay an ox flat – thick red blood with a touch of blue Spanish blood, just enough to set it on fire. Anyway, you have your troubles, I have mine – they're probably not the same. You may sometimes have your moments of doubt, but I've rebelled, and more than once, believe me. If I were to tell you . . . No, I'll tell you another day, you look so bad right now, there's a chance you'd faint. To get back to my child Jesus, just imagine, the curé of Poperinghe, from my region, in agreement with the vicar general, who's a rebel himself, decided to send me to Saint-Sulpice. Saint-Sulpice, as far as they were concerned, was the Saint-Cyr of the young clergy, the Saumur, the École de Guerre. On top of that, Monsieur my father" (incidentally, I thought this was a joke at first, but it seems the curé of Torcy never refers to his father any other way: an old custom?) "Monsieur my father had made a fair amount of money and felt he owed something to the diocese. Only, good heavens! . . . When I saw that flaking old barracks smelling of thick broth, brr! . . . And all those nice boys, so thin, the poor devils, that even when you saw them from the front, they always looked as if they were in profile . . . Anyway, I and three or four good pals, no more than that, rattled the teachers, made lots of noise, silly things, really. We were the first at our desks and the first for meals, but outside that . . . real little devils. One evening, when everyone was in bed, we climbed on the roofs, and I wailed . . . loudly enough to wake the whole neighbourhood. Our master of novices crossed himself at the foot of his bed, poor fellow, he thought all the cats in the arrondissement had gathered in the Holy House to tell each other dirty stories. A stupid prank, I can't deny it! At the end of the term, those gentlemen sent me back home, and you

should have seen the marks! Not stupid, a good boy, kind-natured, and so on and so forth. In short, all I was fit for was keeping the cows. But the only thing I dreamed of was being a priest. If I couldn't be a priest I'd die! My heart bled so much that the Lord let me be tempted to destroy myself – oh, yes. Monsieur my father was a fair man. He took me to see Monseigneur in his cart, with a little note from a great-aunt, the mother superior of the Ladies of the Visitation in Namur. Monseigneur was also a fair man. He immediately admitted me to his office. I threw myself at his feet and told him the temptation I had, and the following week he packed me off to his great seminary, a place that was somewhat behind the times, but sound enough. That's beside the point. What I'm trying to say is that I saw death at close quarters, and what a death! So I resolved from then on to keep my nose clean, to pretend to be stupid. Outside the service, as soldiers say, no complications. My child Jesus is too young to be very much interested in music or literature yet. And he would probably pull a face at people who are content to roll their eyes instead of bringing fresh straw to his ox or brushing the donkey's coat.'

He pushed me out of the room by the shoulders, and a friendly tap from one of his broad hands almost brought me to my knees. Then we had a glass of Dutch gin together. All at once, he looked me straight in the eyes, with a self-confident, commanding air. He was like another man, a man who doesn't need to justify himself to anyone, a lord of the manor.

'Monks are monks,' he said, 'I'm no monk. I'm no father superior. I have a flock, a real flock, I can't dance in front of the ark with my flock, who are just simple livestock – how would that make me look, can you tell me that? Livestock, neither too good nor too bad, oxen, donkeys, animals who pull and plough. And I have goats, too. What am I going to do with my goats? No way to kill them or sell them. A mitred abbot only has to pass the instruction on to the brother porter. In case of error, he gets rid of the goats in no time at all. I can't do that, we have to come to terms with everything, even goats. Goats or sheep, the master wants us to give him back each beast in good condition. Don't go thinking you can stop a goat from

smelling like a goat, you'd be wasting your time, you might well fall into despair. My older fellow priests take me for an eternal optimist, an easygoing fellow, whereas youngsters like you think I'm an ogre, they think I'm too harsh to my people, too military, too tough. Both groups resent me for not having my little reform plan, like everyone else, or leaving it at the bottom of my pocket. Tradition! mutter the old. Evolution! chant the young. Well, I think man is man and that he's no better than he was in pagan times. Anyway, what matters isn't knowing if he's good or bad, but who commands him. Oh, if only we had left it all to the men of the Church! Mark you, I'm not talking about the chocolate-box version of the Middle Ages: people in the thirteenth century weren't thought of as little saints, and while the monks may have been less stupid, they drank more than today, nobody can deny that. But we were building an empire, my boy, an empire in comparison with which the empire of the Caesars would have been nothing but dirt – a peace, a true *Pax Romana*. A Christian nation, that's what we would have made together. A nation of Christians isn't a nation of hypocrites. The Church has nerves of steel, she isn't scared of sin, quite the opposite. She looks it calmly in the face, just like Our Lord, she takes it on board, she accepts it. When a good worker works properly, six days a week, you can allow him a little merrymaking on Saturday night. Here, let me define a Christian nation by its opposite. The opposite of a Christian nation is a sad nation, a nation of old people. You may say the definition isn't particularly theological. True. But it's enough to provide food for thought for those gentlemen who yawn at Sunday Mass. Of course they yawn! Do you really think that in one wretched half-hour a week, the Church could teach them joy? And even if they knew the catechism of the Council of Trent by heart, they probably wouldn't be any more cheerful.

'Why is it that the days of our early childhood seems to us so sweet, so radiant? A young child has his sorrows like everyone else. After all, he's basically quite helpless against pain and illness! Childhood and extreme old age should be the two great trials of man. But it is from his sense of his own powerlessness

that the child humbly derives the very principle of his joy. He relates it to his mother, don't you see? Present, past, future, his whole life is in a look, and that look is a smile. Well, my boy, if they'd let us get on with it, the Church would have given men that same sense of absolute security. Of course, everyone would still have had their share of problems. Hunger, thirst, poverty, jealousy: we'll never be strong enough to overcome the devil! But man would have known that he was the son of God, and what a miracle that would have been! He would have lived, he would have died with that idea in his head – and it wouldn't have been an idea learned only from books, oh no. Because, thanks to us, it would have inspired manners, customs, distractions, pleasures, even the humblest necessities. It wouldn't have stopped the worker from scratching at the soil, the scholar from digging into his logarithm table or even the engineer from building his toys for adults. Only we would have abolished the feeling of solitude, we would have torn it from Adam's heart. With their bevy of gods, the pagans weren't so stupid: they at least managed to give the world the illusion of a rough and ready harmony with the invisible. But the trick is pointless now. Outside the Church, a nation will always be a nation of bastards, a nation of stray children. Obviously, they still have the hope that they'll be recognized by Satan. Not a chance! They'll have a long wait for their little black Christmas! Let them put their shoes in the chimney! The devil is already weary of leaving behind piles of machinery that are out of date as soon as they're invented, now all he leaves are tiny packages of cocaine, heroin, morphine, some filthy powder or other that doesn't cost him very much. Poor fellows! They will have wearied even sin. Not everyone is good at amusing himself. The cheapest of cheap dolls keeps a child happy for a whole season, while an old man will yawn over a toy that costs five hundred francs. Why? Because he's lost his childlike spirit. Well, the Church has been given the task by the Lord of maintaining that childlike spirit in the world, that innocence, that freshness. Paganism wasn't the enemy of nature, but only Christianity enlarges it, exalts it, puts it within reach of man, of man's dreams. I'd like to get hold of one of those awful scientists who



call me an obscurantist. I'd say to him, "It's not my fault if I wear an undertaker's suit. After all, the Pope dresses in white, and the cardinals in red. I'd have the right to walk about dressed as the Queen of Sheba, because I bring joy. I'd give it to you for free if you asked me. The Church has joy at her disposal, the whole share of joy reserved for this sad world. What you've done against her, you've done against joy. Do I stop you from calculating the movement of the equinoxes or from splitting the atom? But what would it profit you to manufacture life itself if you've lost the meaning of life? All you'd have left to do would be to blow your brains out over your test tubes. Manufacture life as much as you want! The image you give of death is gradually poisoning the thoughts of the poor, it casts a shadow and slowly drains the colour from their last joys. It'll keep going as long as your industry and your capital allow you to turn the world into a fairground, with machines that go round at dizzying speeds, brass bands blaring, fireworks going off. But wait, just wait for the first quarter of an hour of silence. Then they will hear the word – not the one they rejected, the one that said quietly: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life – no, the one that rises from the abyss: "I am the door forever closed, the road that leads nowhere, I am untruth and perdition."'

He uttered these last words in a voice so sombre that I must have turned pale – or rather, turned yellow, which has, alas, been my way of turning pale for some months now – because he poured me a second glass of Dutch gin and we talked about something else. His cheerful air did not seem false or even affected, I think it is his very nature, his soul is cheerful. But the look in his eyes didn't completely match it. As I was bowing in farewell, he made the sign of the cross on my forehead with his thumb and slipped a hundred-franc note into my pocket.

'I wager you're penniless, the early days are hard, you can pay me back when you're able to. Now get out of here, and never tell fools anything about the two of us.'

'Bringing fresh straw to the ox, brushing the donkey's coat': these words came back to me this morning as I was peeling