

THE FORTITUDE OF SAINT JULIE

Fortitude is a great gift and a root of greatness. It is the quality of attack, of strength, vigor and energy. Positively, it brings confidence with power, success and limitless desire; negatively, it gives rise to the refusal to give in, to endurance and perseverance, and to that patience which Hopkins said was a “hard thing.” Julie had it abundantly. Her contemporaries, who singled out her greatness of soul and her courage as her most striking characteristics, were really paying tribute to her fortitude. She was strong without being masculine, energetic without being aggressive, for in her the gift of the Holy Spirit combined with a well-tempered moral virtue to give that supernatural, sustained, joyous vigor which is the manifestation of Christian fortitude.

The quality in her was both gift and virtue. It was a gift because it was of the very stuff of her sanctity, and sanctity is itself the gift of God to which man responds. It is a sharing in his nature which proves his triumph in a soul, an assimilation to Christ, an at-one-ing by which Christ’s victory is complete in *this* member of his Body, his Spirit is poured out on this person, his gifts achieve their full purpose here and now in the perfecting of this individual. Like the great interventions of God in the Old Testament, it is a divine initiative. It belongs to an order higher than the moral for it involves God’s free choice, his perfecting of his creature by the communication of himself, a communication to which the creature is open and welcoming. The Holy Spirit, who is the breath of God, gives the initiative which lifts the soul above the moral perfection of man to the uncreated perfection of God.

In Julie the gift and the virtue combined to give her a fortitude which was the source of her zest, her energy, her joy, her buoyancy, her tenacity, thoroughness and directness. So deeply was it rooted in her that it led her to make little of the difficulties which barred her road to God, and filled her with that hunger and thirst for justice which is the spirit of witness, the spirit of the martyrs.

The fact of Julie’s strength is most clearly reflected in her magnanimity, her courage and her perseverance. She had a greatness of soul which reached up to the heights of God’s plan for her. “*Au large! Au large!*” she would say. “Do not whittle down the grandeur of the children’s Christian vocation ... Greatness, breadth of approach, how necessary they are in the vicissitudes and trials of our holy vocation.” To Mère St. Joseph she could write: “Let us set no bounds to our generosity to God. His glory is the one thing to be considered.” She was happy when the sisters gave her a free hand: “*Couper en plein drap,*” she said, and she knew what such a free surrender entailed for she had made it herself to God from the beginning of her life. She encouraged a similar breadth of spirit in those whom she trained: “More than ever I see the need of strong, brave, generous souls, manly souls, who are afraid of absolutely nothing on this earth except sin and displeasing God ..., Come on now, courage! Courage! but a manly courage, my dear sister, don’t let any difficulty ever put us off ... We need brave apostolic

souls for our vocation, those who are not afraid of difficulties and who have no reserves with God ... If we only have a middling virtue, the work won't last, it needs souls of steel to hold firm in the world we live in." She made war on all forms of pettiness and roundly tackled the timorous, the lazy, the self-occupied and those who were unduly subject to human respect. "Don't let's be chicken-hearted," she wrote to one who was full of fears. "Whatever happens we need brave souls. Make an effort, do! Everyone has to try, and for goodness sake don't listen to your wretched timidity!" To another who felt that her health required her to spend much of her time taking long walks, Julie applied the therapy of work. The local superior was informed: "It isn't overwork that kills people . . . and if you have too many sisters they haven't enough to do and become lazy." As for the self-occupied, she refused to accept a candidate who, though she was highly recommended on other accounts, "would only be a bottomless pit of miseries with her scruples." "Laugh at your touchiness," she would say, "and get on with what God wants." Human respect was always miserable: "I'm hoping that this wretched human respect of yours will never prevail over your duty ... because our fidelity to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit depends on our duty being well done." All these pettinesses she lumps together when she talks of womanishness. Intensely feminine as she was, and quite determined to make womanliness an essential part of the educational training which she provided, she had yet no time for womanish weakness: "*Pas de caractères de femmes!*" She would have no *femmelettes* or, worse still, *poules moillées* (dripping wet hens).

Julie's courage was equal to the challenge offered by the great difficulties in her life, and also to the jolt and jar of the lesser trials of every day. Her circumstances demanded courage, both physical and moral. We have only to think of the poverty of Cuvilly, the years of illness, the persecution and the escapes, the loneliness and fear at Compiègne, the stand against the schism at Amiens, the concept of the congregation, the resistance to M. de Sambucy, the constant journeys, the hostility at St. Nicolas, the care of the early institute, the deviation at Ghent, the last illness, the whole background of revolution, persecution and war, to realize the magnificent quality of her fortitude. In face of pain she could go on steadily and faithfully. In mental stress, sorrow and provocation she was wonderfully restrained, in spite of a temperament that was naturally quick and dynamic. There was not an uncharitable word during the whole of the Amiens affair, not a comment when a considerable sum of money overdue was at last refunded to her in large coinage that she could scarcely carry, no recrimination about the heartbreak at Ghent in 1814. She felt misunderstanding keenly, nevertheless, and her anguish of heart over those who were dear to her was deep and lasting. Perhaps the keenest suffering was caused by persecution by the good. Mère St. Joseph may have revealed more than she intended when, reflecting later on Julie's life, she remarked: "What a talent good people have for making other good people suffer."

The everyday cares of the congregation could be as trying as the greater problems. Not for nothing did St. Paul rank "the daily care for all the churches"

with his shipwrecks and scourgings in recounting his apostolic burdens. Julie, too, showed her courage in facing the difficulties inseparable from her foundations. The journeys alone were sufficient to drain her of strength. She wrote on one occasion from Liege in 1810: "Here I am at Liège waiting for a coach which is due to leave at six o'clock tomorrow morning. I was worn out getting here and ran a thousand risks of being overturned even though I got out and walked a lot on the worst parts of the road. It had been raining heavily and so the roads were as bad as they could be for walking. I was very glad when a good man from St. Hubert brought me into Marche. We arrived early, but about half past six in the evening there was a chance of going on to Liège. I would have had to travel overnight to go further and I can't tell you how bad the roads are." In 1812 she noted: "These wretched coaches! I am four times more tired than I would have been if I had walked the whole way." Twelve months later she wrote to Mère St. Joseph: "I have just done a journey of thirty leagues cross-country with a donkey. I was as much on foot as on Neddy." At different times she refers in passing to the crevasse into which her coach nearly fell on a winter's journey, to the bridge at Lille that had been swept away, to the roads of Flanders churned into mud, to the bitter wind whistling across the open plain north of Namur, "so strong that you could lean on it." Twice on one trip she was blown over between Gembloux and Fleurus, and on that occasion she arrived bedraggled and wet at nine o'clock at night, having walked most of the way "because the roads were too icy for the horses."

Even when traveling conditions were favorable, Julie needed her courage to deal with individuals and situations. She was usually called in because some awkwardness had arisen, and we find her holding firm now in Jumet, now in Bordeaux, now in St. Hubert. Soeur St. Jean must make herself respected and keep recalcitrant sisters in their place. Sister E. won't eat again? Then she had better go, because it is only a question of attracting attention. An aspirant wants certain exceptions before she enters? That cannot be, even though she is a promising candidate and highly recommended. There may be no dancing masters at Bordeaux. It does not matter that Mère Vincent, the superior of the house there, has contracted a debt of 16,000 livres without Julie's knowledge, and that the fees for dancing would perhaps help to pay it off. The basic principle is more important, and "dancing masters are not allowed in any of our establishments." For all her affability and her ready smile, Julie had the tenacious courage that does not give in. As she remarked to Mère St. Joseph, "People think that I am too yielding and that I cannot resist. They are quite wrong. I can!" But the resistance had no aggression in it and cost her nothing of her brightness and spontaneity. Through it she maintained the regularity, the buoyancy, the reliability that she ranked high among the virtues she hoped for in her sisters.

Perseverance was a further manifestation of Julie's fortitude. To a remarkable physical stamina that could begin the day when necessary with interviews at four o'clock in the morning, she added a moral endurance which gave her contemporaries the impression that she was always the same.

Constancy and evenness marked her dealings with the sisters. Her advice was neither soft nor over-severe, as it sprang from an even-tempered goodness which was prepared to go on with a smile no matter what happened. This self-control could not have come easily to her, as her natural temperament was lively and vigorous, but it was fully operative and it inspired much of the advice which she gave to the sisters. "Let us have no outbursts, no wild enthusiasms," she would say, "no panicking or acting blindly in agitation." She herself could go on in the most testing conditions, as when she founded the house at Fleurus during the Napoleonic campaign of 1813, with as much deliberation and calmness as if the battle had been a thousand miles away. She also knew how to wait. In 1814, at a particularly trying time, she wrote from Namur: "Those who have any faith are unshaken no matter what happens in life; we have to get used to seeing everything in God, knowing that he permits it all: then everything is fine! Hold on! For if God is with us who can be against us?" This same perseverance, too, underlay her endless patience with unpromising people. Not only would she not give up hope herself if there was any evidence of good will; she would not let others be discouraged either. "I beg of you," she wrote to Mère St Joseph, "go to the very limits with poor Sister N. There is not much promise, I agree, but she still has good will." All Julie's resources of perseverance were supremely manifest in her steady tending towards the sublime end to which God had called her. Her way was undeviating and unhesitant, and the very fact that her consistency was seemingly so effortless argues the gift of fortitude in an advanced degree.

As a result of her supernatural strength, Julie acted with energy, confidence and joy, and also with a kind of detachment that was content to use her powers to the full as long as life lasted, but which did not repine at the prospect of a brief apostolate or work necessarily unfinished. Her words and manner were habitually energetic and she gave herself without reserve. "She did not know what it was to spare herself," was the verdict of her contemporaries, and the hundred and twenty journeys accomplished in her relatively short active life bear out their testimony. Her energy was accompanied by a sense of urgency. To Mère St. Joseph she wrote in 1807: "Come on, let's work for a happy eternity... We only have a very little time to do the Lord's work.... Time is short, evening will soon overtake us, so don't let us set any limits to our generosity towards God." The energy, however, was well-directed and never an irrational activism. "Do what you can and don't waste time lamenting over what you can't," she wrote to Soeur Anastasie in 1810. "Don't try to do all possible good but only what God asks you in his providence."

Her confidence, because of her trust in God, was unbounded. He would provide for the third sister at St. Hubert when the community there had not enough to eat; he would answer the questions raised at Amiens; he would show her what to do about foundations and when and where to do it. "We cannot have too much confidence in him," she said. She relied on God's strength because she was grounded in trust. Above all, she trusted the future of the work to him ... and here her confidence had to be blind. Only in 1813, when the first boarders began

to enter and the congregation, therefore, received postulants who had had some previous education, did she receive human support for the faith which for years had been the substance of her hopes, the evidence of things not seen. She wrote with joy to Soeur Anastasie at Jumet in June 1814: "We have ten or twelve boarders now as postulants and either six or seven more coming today. The fire has caught hold, AMDG." She urged the sisters to have the same confidence as herself. "Tell Sister P. that she only wants confidence in God," was a message sent to the superior of St. Hubert, "but it must be a limitless confidence. I will never preach anything else but confidence to her. With that one thing alone I will make her a good sister of Notre Dame here, and then a saint for heaven." Such sureness of purpose inspired confidence in those who came to her for training. The first sisters were quite sure that she would lead them to sanctity and gave her a free hand to do so, for her strength went with sweetness and she lived herself the advice which she gave to others: "Be firm but be gentle too ... Win the confidence of the children, for if you win that you win everything."

Because she faced every situation in the power of God, Julie was sure and decided, but her fortitude gave her more: she had a quenchless enthusiasm and joy. Her language was often that of the enthusiast. She was "on fire for the sisters' advancement," "just burning to see Mère St. Joseph," thinking of the children "thousands and thousands of times a day." When she was not speaking about something serious, she had all the Picard's love of sweeping exaggerations. Joy bubbled out of her. But the enthusiasm was not effervescence and the joy was no superficial feeling of well-being. Both were grounded on the cross, on that "unconquered love of the cross" which the Church admires in the collect of her Mass. Julie longed for it with the whole force of her being, "running after crosses," she said, "as a thirsty stag runs to water." She rejoiced in the cross wholeheartedly and with an exuberance which must have dismayed any who were less generous than she. "Praised be his blessed cross! Let us love it! Let us carry it! May it be our only happiness!" She cherished it, too, as the hallmark of the congregation, the foundation of the institute, the true proof of the work of God, the most precious of divine gifts. "Days filled with the cross are capital days for heaven ... Let us be cross-bearers, let us love the cross ... In the cross, just because they love it, true Sisters of Notre Dame find peace! ... Only the cross will make you advance ... so expect it then!"

It might be thought that someone so obviously full of life and committed to her work would be reluctant to think of the possibility of death. Julie, however, was very open and matter-of-fact on the subject. Nowhere was her fortitude more homely than in her automatic acceptance of a necessarily brief apostolate. She was fifty-three years old before her miraculous cure at Amiens gave her the possibility of an active life again, and she cheerfully referred to herself as *une petite vieille* almost from the beginning of her work. So convinced was she that God needed nobody, least of all herself, to restore the faith and blessings of Christian education to France that she took it as a matter of course that she could do no more than sow the seeds. She rarely referred directly to the subject

of death though she faced it in violent form during the revolution and in the hazards of her travels as a foundress, but she was faithful to the *Bona Mors* society to which she had belonged as a child in Cuvilly, and she encouraged the sisters to make a preparation for death as part of their devotions on the first Friday of the month. Her awareness was more evident indirectly, particularly in her sense that time was pressing and that there was much still to be done to spread the work of God and to establish the congregation on firm foundations. There was, however, no trace either of anxiety or of fear, not even the fear of what might happen to a disunited congregation after her death. At the most painful moments of the disagreement of 1815 she stood firm and still charitable, even though it looked as if the institute might divide. It was perhaps in this trial from her own sisters and in the childlike trust of her final *Magnificat*, sung over a work whose flowering she would never see on earth, that her fortitude reached its height.

There is a close relation between Christian fortitude, which builds up the interior man in the strength of God so that he achieves sanctity, and that hunger and thirst for holiness which our Lord blessed in the fourth beatitude. The beatitude approves the longing for and the will to pursue holiness, fortitude is the strength in which the pursuit is actually carried out. Most of the saints exemplify the connection between the two, and Julie is no exception. She longed for “justice” and she pursued it.

It would be well to examine briefly what our Lord meant when he declared blessed, or happy, those craving for “justice” with a desire as elemental as their need of food and drink. For us, the concept of “justice” is a moral one; for him, as an oriental teacher speaking to a Semitic audience, it was much less so. “Justness” might better describe what he had in mind. The word our Lord probably used was an old one, long associated with God’s fidelity to the covenant and with Israel’s response. It was *sedeq*. “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after *sedeq* for they shall have their fill.” The word was used to describe a person who corresponded exactly to what a situation called for, its connotation was aptness, fittingness, justness, in the sense in which we use the expression ‘just right’ or the French speak of *le mot juste*. For the Hebrew, the just man was he who was declared to be so by God as Noah and Abraham were, the man who was all that he should be in God’s sight. The prophet Isaiah saw God himself as the just one, the holy one, the one who was all that his nature required him to be, and he looked forward to God’s *sedeq* putting things to rights on earth. *Sedeq* in this sense was always something to be striven for, a regeneration of the world and of the individual. “Send forth thy Spirit and creation will be renewed (put to rights), thou shalt renew the face of the earth.” Our Lord spoke of the kingdom of God and his *sedeq*, that is, of God’s rule in a world which would be what it should be. It meant that each man would be pleasing to God, in his integrity and complete response to God’s demands. The *sedeq* of the Old Testament however was raised to a new height by the fact of the Incarnation. The true Christian must be another Christ, holy with the holiness of the atoning Son of God in whom the

Father is well pleased. Our Lord said by the well at Samaria that to do his Father's will was his very food, and his prayer in Gethsemane compared that will to a chalice which he must drink. It was natural, therefore, that he blessed those for whom the pursuit of his Father's will was, as for himself, as necessary as eating and drinking: those who, one with him, were pressing on to an infinite holiness. Such a sanctifying hunger and thirst, however, could only derive from a gift of God and that gift was fortitude.

In Julie, the gift of fortitude made her desire consistent and free from illusions. All her life long her zeal was directed to God alone, and her holiness grew as her longing for him increased. The substance of her "hunger and thirst for justness" was in her prayers as a child; in the early morning communions in Cuvilly; in the quick and deep grasp of divine truths from M. Dangicourt or in Thibault Guibert's little class; in the concern for the salvation of others: children, laborers, schematics; in the peaceful acceptance of her paralysis; in the long hours of prayer as an invalid; in the courage she showed in persecution and dryness; in the giving of herself to God's active work in his own good time, tirelessly and totally. This was the essential, of which the visions at Compiègne and Amiens were only the outward accompaniment. She sought persistently a holiness without limit, and loved purity of heart so passionately that she would willingly have received the sacrament of penance every day, had that been possible. Yet she was completely free from scruples. The last twelve years of her life were lived in the searching light of the early sisters' close observation of her, yet the evidence of her contemporaries, like her letters and her conferences, shows a desire that never fell away. Her whole existence was focused on "justness," which she preferred to call the goodness of God.

Julie's pursuit of holiness had no illusions about a pseudo-sanctity of her own fashioning. On the contrary, she said that she felt her way along like a little blind woman, not seeing clearly, not knowing from day to day what God would want, but sure only of her desire to please him and of her openness to his will. She took her stand on the sure ground of God's will and let that fashion her. Frequently her remarks reflected the fortitude with which she adhered to that will: "We must pass through fire if we are to do anything of value for God's glory. May his holy will be done in us. That is the only thing that matters on earth as far as we are concerned ... Let us rest quietly in his blessed will ... We must not look so much at the difficulties that there are in the way of doing God's will but rather at the glory which he will receive from our doing it. Let us see only that in all the setbacks that harass us in our charges." From time to time she spoke of her hunger for sound doctrine (and used the same image to describe the needs of the children who came for instruction), of her hunger for the sacraments and for the Mass, particularly of her hunger for souls, but all these united in the overwhelming longing to accomplish God's will and to have it accomplished in her. This desire and all it led her to do show the very heart of the fourth beatitude and of Christian fortitude.

Julie bore out the fact that fortitude is the gift that singles out and supports those who bear witness to Christ, the gift of Christian maturity. The people of Courtrai called her “the walking love of God,” evidence in itself that her whole life was a witness to Christ; and they said that they felt better simply for having met her. Nor did this radiating of Christ to others end with her death. Her fortitude not only served to sanctify Julie herself, it was a spirit which she communicated to her congregation so that her work still bears witness to God wherever it is found.

The logical climax of witness is martyrdom. The Greek word *martys* simply means a witness. We give the title “martyr” now only to those who bear witness unto death, but in its original sense the word was equally applicable to those who, like our Lady, witnessed Christ in their living rather than in their dying. Julie loved this idea of martyrdom. She once said that there was no martyrdom more glorious than that of holy obedience; and she must have drawn on all her reserves of supernatural strength to obey as she did, untroubled, at Amiens and St. Nicolas, at Paris and Ghent and Bordeaux. “Martyr in will, no tempest shook thy soul’s most tranquil sea” is a serene line to sing, but one which suggests a heroic control, given the circumstances of her life. It is significant too that Julie, who was not prone to careless exaggerations when she was speaking on serious subjects, said in her instructions that she looked for the crowns of virgin, doctor and martyr for those who fully lived her rule.

Virgo fortis is a good title for St Julie, provided that her fortitude is associated always with the joy and enthusiasm, the tenderness and the confident gaiety that were hers also. It is a title dear to the congregation too, for Julie’s fortitude was not only that gift of God which inspired her “unconquered love of the cross,” but also the hunger and thirst for holiness, the desire to bear witness to Christ which sent out her daughters in the strength of her own apostolic spirit until “their sound went forth into all the world and their words to the ends of the earth.” (Ps. 18:15).

