

May 17, 1968

Dear Father Ford,

Well, I have been and come. And the plane that lifted me from England lifted a thankful heart, a light heart, a full heart. Not that the thing [i.e., the conference at Louvain] was anything other than what we expected, as you will see from the enclosed dossier. But my heart is thankful for what seems to me a very special gift of grace—something I have never *felt* so before. My heart is light because of new faith and stronger hope. And it is full with affection for those—even our worst adversaries—who have made it possible.

You will see objectively how the thing was rigged and how it went. The whole drift was to raise doubts on the one side (the biological-animation), to describe facts without values (we do them [abortions] this way), and then to suggest a situation-ethics wrapped in rhetoric of great respect for the sacredness of life, man's ministerial and not dominative role, and all that (*we* have heard the song before).

You will note that the last few pages, which are very badly penned, are analytic and synthetic notes I made on the plane coming home. I hope as soon as possible to write this up and I'm going to try to get it out as an article, probably in *AER* [*American Ecclesiastical Review*].

Incidentally, to shift the subject for a moment, you will be pleased to hear that the paper I gave there last fall will appear this July in the *Thomist*. You might also like to look at their April issue, just out, for a traditional article by Ciappi, O.P. (Master or the Palace) and two reviews by Dominicans, one of the Dutch catechism (a beaut) and the other of Van der Marck's latest (scathing) and of a German book on parvity of matter. My German is not much to handle such a thing (and then it is theological anyway) but I wonder if you would check this review and then if you or anyone whom we can trust works through the book I would like to be informed more about it. This seems to me an area where we could make a legitimate development for I am neither satisfied with the manual tradition nor do I have it fully worked out to my own satisfaction how we can sin (objectively) venially in *any* matter. Not that I doubt it in the least, I just have trouble seeing how it works.

Now I should tell you something of what you cannot find in the dossier, because since we have shared so much suffering together, I want you to share a little my joy.

The thing [i.e., the cause of joy] came about through the people I met—three groups of them.

First, the locals, and our adversaries—de Loch (who wonders if the very meaning-giving of the parents might not constitute the unborn non-persons), Heylen (who thinks that Christian morality can transcend mere materialism—i.e., human *nature*; he is a Protestant for sure); Delhaye (who paradoxically joined me in putting down Gelinas, who had been shipped in from California to make St. Thomas a situationist under auspices of the Population Council); Marc Oraison (a psychiatric case, poor man, who argued that since we don't have a liturgy for three-months fetuses they must not be persons); a French priest says he has used often, and people *demand*, the same liturgy as for infants.

Seeing this bunch on their own ground they come down to size. I am much less tempted to think they are *surely* in bad faith, because I am much more convinced of their utter ignorance of nuances of ethical-theoretical method. At the same time it becomes clear how terribly *defensive* they all are, for they utterly lack conviction. Evasion, ignoring the point, ridicule, all sorts of cheap devices appear. And while one might have thought before that it is characteristic of lowlanders, one having met a few ordinary people (employees at the hotel, cab drivers, people in the street) realizes that these traits are symptoms of desperation over their intellectually untenable position much more than anything else.

Second, our very good friends. Mrs. Ayd (he didn't go) who contrasted so perfectly with Frank Notestein of the Population Council when we sat at lunch one day. She a Christian; he ? The Rendus—whom I had wanted so much to meet in Rome. They send regards. What wonderful, firm, clear-headed, confident, open, loyal, and dedicated people they are. Mdme. Dr. Guy—he didn't come because they didn't want both to go through the wringer; it makes them sick for a week every time. Oh, it was hard for her, but she has the determination of a St. Joan, and she is as bold and unabashed as a small tiger amid a bunch of bulls. She told me of a wonderful audience they had on the way home from Mauritius in 1966 (I think that's right) when the Pope [Paul VI] thanked them for their loyalty and work. The Guys were married just about the time Jeannette and I were; they too have four children—oh, what friends we would be if we lived next door. Then there was a Mdme. van Lunen, a journalist, who gave a beautiful paper laying out how abortion is promoted by propaganda. Hers was the only paper cut off because of overtime, though many others were overtime.

These people, our good friends, are a great solace. To find how like our experiences have been, to learn how like our judgments, our feelings, our pains, and our hopes are—this was a confirmation. One feels with them as I think we felt in Rome—you and I, Frank Furlong, and Paul Molinari— that we have not been left orphans whatever the appearances may be.

Third, and a very great surprise, were the British-Irish group. They are worthy adversaries, good opponents at last I think. And this was what made the greatest impression. You will see that Enda McDonagh made the main presentation for the moral section. Of course he is soft; he does not accept intrinsic immorality, or he would not have been asked. But he does not evade an argument and he is rational—if a bit high strung. Denis O’Callaghan, against whom I had a prejudice because of his article in *Catholic World*, another Maynooth moralist, whom I came to like very much. He is a little more worried, a great deal more steady than McDonagh—but both of them have Catholic faith—neither is a dialectician who merges it all and comes out with Protestantism or naturalism. Maurice O’Leary, of CMAC [Catholic Marriage Advisory Council] in London, a wonderful person who blends theory and practice without confusion. Restraining the theoreticians gently, he is loyal to the Pope and will help to keep many in the Church when the Pope finally is forced to take a stand. In London later I met O’Leary’s helper, Frank Handley, a feet-on-the-ground Englishman who modestly describes himself (and probably accurately) as “the hardest working priest in all of England.” There were others, Dr. Parker of Birmingham, who does *all* his practice in the health service, as he explained under my inquisition, because that’s where the need is.

I fell in with this group early on, spent hours in the rooms late at night talking and arguing, and made some wonderful discoveries. They were faithful to the teaching of the Church in practice until they became convinced in theory. They are therefore not defensive. And it is wonderful to argue with someone who respects the elemental rules of logic and debate, and who is patient enough to listen and interested enough to *respond*. They are not very happy with the implications and are getting worried. The most far out is McDonagh, who is working at the most theoretical level; as one moves toward the grass roots there is a notable shift (*sensus fidelium* ?) toward a more conservative position.

We drank Johnnie Walker Black Label and became friends. Maurice O’Leary wanted me to come to London for a week but I had to come back Monday because of my work here and was booked from Brussels Monday morning. Denis O’Callaghan was going to London Sunday afternoon to visit at CMAC, but O’Leary himself was not there since he was going to Holland. So they

talked me into coming over for Sunday evening and Monday morning anyway, and I would be the guest of a guest in the absence of the host.

Meanwhile, Denis and I took to one another, and one evening I told him about much of what I personally had been through (without any secrets about others) and he about his developments. When I got to London Sunday, after Handley retired, we went on in an even more personal vein about our childhood and so on.

During all this I was feeling more and more fatigued, and too exhilarated by the rush of experience to mind anything too much. Monday morning I woke much too early [with bright sunlight shining into my white-walled, garret room] and thought things out while I arranged and rearranged my things. I began to realize that the ship, the Church, surely is sinking. We can see it sinking, we can feel it sinking. But that doesn't mean anything. We simply cannot, must not [believe it]—and for my part I will not believe it even though I see it. That is the first principle. Does that mean the Pope and Bishops will do what they ought to do? Eventually, of course, but probably not now. There is absolutely no reason for optimism on that side—I heard numerous rumors all of which indicate how solid and traditional the Pope is and how unwilling he is to act decisively without conditions in the ecclesiastical polity (support) that he may never see again. So the ship sinks; but we do not believe it anyway.

What then is going on? What has God got in mind? That seemed to me a rather arrogant question, but is it wrong to try to form an image for oneself, not to substitute the need for hope, but only to remove what otherwise would become insuperable moral obstacles to it? I don't think so. God is responsible for our condition, so he has to make the best of its necessities. What, then, is he up to? Faith and unbelief can never become equated—that is for sure. All men are given a choice, and some go one way and others the other. Therefore there are only two kinds of people in the world from God's point of view—those who will and those who won't serve. In former times perhaps the community of faith was too weak to be unified and identified for what it is. But it has gained strength through history, and now the time has come to begin a little threshing, and at the same time to bring believers together—thus the ecumenical movement.

In this movement all who believe must be brought to one according to Christ's prayers to the Father. But that means discarding immense quantities of bad baggage acquired in the world. All of us must get rid of a lot. What the Catholic Church has to contribute is the integrity of faith and morals and the apostolic officer who guarantees that integrity. But much of our way of teaching, our pastoral, our discipline, the very (non-magisterial) common expression of the doctrine

must be modified most radically. On the other hand, in the area of interest, Protestants have most unfortunately picked up and become stuck with situation ethics. It is a product of Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*; and they have unfortunately and quite mistakenly latched onto this sorry mess in order to find *some* moral theory when their fideism broke down (19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) and when the only alternative around was some form of naturalism. We can't blame them too much; they did the best they could, considering.

Now, how can this particular bit of bad baggage be get rid of—or to change to a better metaphor: how can this disease be expelled from the part of the body of Christ that happens to be located in the churches and ecclesial communities that won't listen to all the fine and true things said by the popes of the last 100 years? This is a therapeutic problem for the divine physician. His solution is quite simple. He mixes the blood of the infected with that of those who have been preserved from the disease. Thus the antibodies in the blood of the disease-free can react and eliminate the disease from all. God lets us Romans become sick so that by generalizing the disease it may be extirpated.

That seems like a rather hard thing for him to do. It is as if we were merely *used*. But, after all, look at Christ. What have we got to complain about? For all his infinite wisdom, God does not seem to know how to bring about perfection without agony. If that is the way it is, we must accept it.

All this, of course, I do not regard as a reading of the divine mind. It is a story I will tell myself; its one essential meaning is: God is up to something more than we can imagine. It is something good. We need have no fear. It will very likely go from bad to worse. All right then, accept it. It would be much better without agony, as Jesus said himself—but, if that is what is necessary. . .

Then it was time finally to come down to Mass. They concelebrated—on Monday, May 13 [then the Memorial of St. Robert Bellarmine, Doctor of the Church]—and I was lector. The epistle [Wis 7:7–14] was so moving to me—as if the Wisdom speaking were Christ within my own breast, so close that his voice might come out instead of my own, as if his skin might wrap me up like a mask so that they would actually see him stand there. I think they were a bit worried about me; I probably looked ill.

At breakfast all normal. Happy talk, but Handley is concerned about people's faith. I find myself reassuring him—the ball never bounces until it hits the ground.

Then Denis took me to the tube and we went to Whitehall. With no English around, we made fun together of British triumphalism, hummed and whistled "Rule Britannia." We went to the Great Hall of Westminster and stood on the spot where a plaque marks Thomas More's last statement in court. I realized in a flash what More had really died for—in his situation it should have been necessary to compromise a bit, but he held there is intrinsic evil. How all our martyrs would be devaluated if situationism were accepted! Well, Thomas, you too knew your natural law. Not a failure of love but a fidelity to reason's signs of the transcendent is what did you in.

As we went I was trying to tell Denis what was going on in me, and I do not think he really understood. Perhaps he was still a little worried, but I think he began to realize it was neither intoxication from fatigue nor the onset of mania.

Then we went to Westminster Abbey and decided what we would leave alone and what we would change when we take back this beautiful but desecrated shrine which the black Protestants stole from us. In the kings' area is the tomb of Edward Confessor—so we are linked one to another in piety, not as Wordsworth thought, nor as Teilhard thought, but as Christ and Paul have explained.

Then we went back up to Trafalgar square, kidding the British, telling jokes, like a couple of boys. Back at CMAC the housekeeper gave us something to drink and we stood in the kitchen. "You ought to come to Ireland," they said. "Fix it up for me." Discussion of dates for a lecture or two—none possible in session except in January. "But it's not beautiful then." "Let it be then," I kid, "the first time, and then when things change and I'm in as much demand as Rahner is now, the students will come back for a summer term just to hear me."

Frank Handley gets out his little new English Ford to take me to the airport and I bid all goodbye, but Denis means to come along to see me off. Frank is worried. I explain a little more what I think I see now better than before, and he is afraid I mean to change. No, not that. The Church cannot change. But there is reason and there is providence and we have nothing whatever to fear.

And then I turn to Denis, who is sitting in the back. "Denis, come a little my way on this." "Oh, I've come in the last year, you'd be surprised." "Just come some more."

Oh, I have come some more just in the last few days. “Well, but Denis, just come a wee bit more. Then if it is necessary I will be More and you can be Fisher and we will see this through together.”

We are at the airport and no place to park. We get out and shake hands. It is so hard to leave. But I go in alone so they will not be towed away. After I am checked and before passing the barrier, Denis comes running in. “We wanted to make sure the plane would leave and they would let you on, since we were a few minutes late.” “Goodbye, goodbye.”

And so home. Jeannette, the boys. And then Tuesday, the last class of the term in ethics and in my graduate course on Aquinas. The ethics course ends with ethics and religion, a critique of Bonhoeffer. After the lecture, there is still five minutes left, and I speak to the students as I have never done before:

“Well, that is all the course. In it I have tried to give you reasons and to proceed in a strictly philosophic way. You may not like the reasons or think you have better arguments. That is to be expected. Some of you have tried hard to understand, and I want you to know I appreciate it, for that is all I ask of you. Now, at last, I want to say a personal word, for even though philosophy can’t be “I feel” and “I believe” there is something more than philosophy.

“No good father who sees his children thinking and doing what he considers to be utterly wrong will stand by and leave it to them to decide for themselves. No good father who knows in his mind and feels in his heart that something is evil will tell his children, if they ask, that this is a matter on which there are many opinions. And no good father will ask himself before he speaks whether his children will be pleased by what he has to say, or whether the neighbors will think him silly.

“I have wanted to be a good father to you. Oh, I know, that paternalism is supposed to be such a bad thing. But what other relation would you want me to assume toward you? Fatherhood is not so bad if you think of it. It is not there to frustrate and suppress, but to help to give life and nourish it, to provide a safe protection for it, and then to help it come out of the protection when the time is right and go along its proper way.

“So I tell you that not only the selfishness of humanistic ethics but the apparent personalism of situation ethics is wrong. Beyond this life there is a transcendent, and we must respect limits so that sometimes we accept there are things so wrong nothing can ever make them right—that is what keeps the way open to the more.

“You are terribly worried about success and that is why so many things become *necessary*. But a life that is lived for the sake of success is a failure before it begins. You must be willing to fail; you must not care about success or failure as long as you do what is right. Surely you can use all your ingenuity to make the very best of what is right—that was what Thomas More said God had given us our reason for—to wend its way cleverly. But when you come to the limit, then don’t be afraid. If your life must be validated by success, then an accident could make it meaningless. Have the heart to fail, and to fail on a grand scale if need be. At this point, you have the right to expect miracles, and if they don’t come, that is God’s fault.

“Yesterday morning I stood in the Great Hall of Westminster on the very spot—as nearly as they can make it out—where Thomas More stood when he was condemned and when he spoke his true mind. Standing on that spot I said a prayer for you, my children.

“I would not have you love less, but I would have you love more *perfectly*. I would not have you love without feeling, but I would have passion keep its eyes open and gaze clear. To love the hungry is to feed them, the ignorant to teach them, the wrongdoers to help them (by making oneself a means of grace) to do better. Love between man and woman in marriage is to perfect one another, to help one another, to join in giving life, to welcome it, not to kill it, not to prevent it, not to fear and hate it.

“Thomas More did not die because he was small-hearted. He died in spite of that [i.e., in spite of not being small-hearted], though his wife and daughter, his king and friends told him to make a small gesture which would really mean nothing. He died because he saw a boundary that he would never cross.

“Those of you who are Catholics know how much trouble we are having today in the Church over these things; those who are not may be having like trouble in your own churches. I have come to see that we must not admit to ourselves that the ship can go down.

“There she is, a rusty old steamer, ugly, wallowing, all in disarray, and a storm beating her. Everyone can see that she is sinking, and those who stand away even sometimes raise a cheer. Now she upends and goes beneath the oily water.

“But this is only Friday. (It was, in fact, Tuesday.) On Saturday there will be nothing to be seen on the water but bits of flotsam. But with early light on Sunday, there she will be again, her hull sleek, her brass polished, her band playing, cutting through the water without a roll, her pennants snapping smartly in the breeze—all in order and perfect. So she will sail—forever.”

Well, I turn on my heel and walk out on that note, noticing that some of the girls are weeping. “Watch it, now, Grisez,” I say to myself, “This emotional bit is dangerous. With your hunger for a little success as a teacher you are liable to become the biggest cornball around here if you’re not careful.”

Well, Father John, there it is. I wanted you to know. I have reflected since with a slight skepticism, but I can’t find anything wrong with it, and so I have concluded (provisionally, to be sure) to chalk it up to grace. Somehow it seems much too good to be true, but that is how grace should be. My graduate class was on the subject—predication of logically relative predicates concerning God. I have never learned so much during one class, especially not when I was so fatigued.

Does this make you happy? Do I manage to communicate something of what I feel? I hope so, very much so, because (as I said) we have shared so much else. And I am sure that if this is veritably the finger of God, then it must be in answer also to your many prayers. Jeannette has caught my mood too. We both hope you are well and send our prayers.

Affectionately and joyfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Germain". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.