



1948

Stevenson and the Catholic Church; A Background for the Damien Letter

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STEVENSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
A BACKGROUND FOR THE DAMIEN LETTER

BY
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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF ARTS AT LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY
FEBRUARY
1948

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Vita Auctoris

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"Not all roads lead to Rome - only
that you have begun to travel."

- R.L.S., Aphorism

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CHAPTER I

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE DAMIEN LETTER

1

Towards the end of May in the year 1889, Robert Louis Stevenson visited the leper settlement of Father Damien at Molokai. His stay lasted about a week, "eight days and seven nights," he explicitly tells us later.² During the time he spent there, Stevenson formed from careful observation a definite estimate both of the leper priest and his work. Father Damien had died only the previous April. When Stevenson completed his visit he continued his cruise in the South Seas among the islands of Oceania and the following February was in Sydney, Australia.

It was there one evening over the dinner table that someone spoke of Molokai. Another asked if Stevenson had seen published in the Sydney Presbyterian a letter written by the Reverend Doctor Hyde, a Presbyterian minister whom Stevenson had met in Honolulu. The letter attacked the moral character of Father Damien and belittled his work for the lepers. Now Stevenson had conceived a

1 Stevenson's letter to Hyde received at publication the title of Father Damien, An Open Letter to the Reverend Dr. Hyde of Honolulu. The short title is Father Damien. However, it is useful here to refer to the work as "the Damien letter," thus avoiding possible confusion of the letter with the person of Father Damien. The text used is that published by Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1916.

2 The Damien letter, 22

2

burning admiration for the Belgian missionary, and his reaction on being shown the letter was to jump to his feet in hot rage.³ He was furious with the man who had written it. Mrs. Stevenson recounts that he beat his head and locked himself in a room where he muttered aloud as he wrote his immortal reply.⁴ The completed piece was dispatched to London and New York for printing in the dailies, the Argus and other papers. The London papers, fearing libel suits, seem not to have printed it, but the Scots Observer, less reticent, printed the whole thing in two installments, May 3, and May 10, 1890.⁵ Immediately afterward it was published as a booklet by Messrs. Chatto and Windus. Stevenson gave the profits to the publishers, saying,

The letter to Dr. Hyde is yours, or any man's. I will never touch a penny of remuneration. I do not stick at murder; I draw the line at cannibalism. I could not eat a penny roll that piece of bludgeoning had gained for me.⁶

Andrew Chatto, the publisher, sent the author's share of the profits to the leper settlement at Molokai. This was said to have

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- 3 John A. Steuart, Robert Louis Stevenson, A Critical Biography, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1924, II, 188
4 John Farrow, Damien the Leper, Sheed and Ward, N.Y., 1937, 206
5 Steuart II, 189; Charles J. Dutton, The Samaritans of Molokai, Dodd, Mead and Co., N.Y., 1932, 113. (This writer is not to be identified with Damien's coworker, Joseph Dutton.)
6 Dutton, 113

given Stevenson much pleasure.⁷ It was in this way that Stevenson's ever-to-be-remembered defence of Father Damien was given to the world. 3

The author of Treasure Island held the theory that "A man is of no use until he has dared everything,"⁸ and it is notable that he supported this principle with practice on at least two occasions: the first was in risking parental displeasure by marrying the woman he loved; the second was in the case of his letter to Hyde, when, angry though he was, he yet coldly considered all the possible consequences and risked the financial security he had long labored to attain in order to come to the rescue of Damien's reputation. He believed that there would indubitably be a libel suit if he replied to Hyde in the way that his indignation demanded. He tells us:

I knew I was writing a libel; I thought he would bring an action; I made sure I should be ruined; I asked leave of my gallant family, and the sense that I was signing away all I possessed kept me up to high-water mark, and made me feel every insult heroic.⁹

7 Steuart II, 189

8 Steuart I, 277

9 Graham Balfour, Life of Robert Louis Stevenson, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1923, 268; also Steuart II, 188. In the light of this statement, the remark of the otherwise very reliable Dutton that "Stevenson was so angry that he forgot all about the danger of libel suits" does not seem quite exact. (Dutton, The Samaritans of Molokai, 112)

It is not necessary to give Stevenson's reply to Doctor Hyde here. Indeed, it can be found not only among the works of Stevenson himself, but is quoted wholly or partially in many biographies of Damien.¹⁰ After a short introduction recalling his previous acquaintance with Hyde, Stevenson gives Hyde's letter in full. Alluding in scathing terms to Hyde's wealth and home comfort Stevenson goes on to say that envy was the cause of the calumny. With such a beginning it is obvious that Stevenson has no intention of restraining himself by the niceties of polite disagreement. He feels that Hyde has forfeited his right to such consideration by his opprobrious attack on a martyr of charity.

Citing frankly and freely from his own diary passages written while on the Island, Stevenson shows the merited admiration he had conceived for Damien. True, Damien had acquired what Stevenson calls in the letter a "conventional halo" from the accounts of well-meaning but misguided friends. But, shrewd observer of men that he was, Stevenson discovered that along with his heroic virtues Damien had a very human quality and manifested it in the usual way of little frailties and defects - a discovery that endeared him to the very human R.L.S. Stevenson burned with rage on reading the unspeakably degrading charges which Hyde, all the while belittling his marvelous work for the lepers, alleged. These

10 We may mention Farrow's Damien the Leper as being one of the most recent. (Cf. Note 2 above)

charges were false. Taking up the letter, Stevenson reviews the allegations one by one and treats them in a twofold fashion. "Disposing of each accusation separately he shows that what had been imputed is groundless or if at all grounded is to the honor of Damien rather than to his discredit."¹¹

Stevenson well points out that the only thing remaining to Hyde after his ignominious defeat by Damien in the "rivalry to do well" were some "rags of common honor...Common honor; not the honor of having done anything right, but the honor of not having done aught conspicuously foul; the honor of the inert."¹² Even this, he said, Hyde sacrificed by his ungentlemanly conduct. It will be well to bear this point in mind. How low in Stevenson's eyes the "honor of the inert" was will become manifest in due course. Indeed, it is at the root of his disagreement with the monks of the monastery of Our Lady of the Snows which he visited many years earlier.

If one were looking for the primary characteristic of the letter, doubtless he would conclude that it is its vehemence and anger. Stevenson was angry. When one says that a minister has voluntarily assumed the role of devil's advocate, has taken up a

11 Matthew J. Ashe, S.J., "Stevenson's Catholic Leaning," Catholic World, CLVI (Oct. 1942 - Mar. 1943), 208
 12 The Damien letter, 13

position of wealth and ease in a costly manse in preference to working among the poor and the sick, that he is animated by envy, that he is a scandal-monger on a level with those who frequent the island barrooms, that he speaks falsehood - such a man is highly indignant, one with whom it would be well to avoid an engagement, especially were he the foremost English stylist of the day.

As a human document, the letter's chief merit is its sincerity. Chesterton has spoken marvelously and convincingly of the undeniable sincerity of Stevenson, though the iconoclast school of biographers often questions it.¹³ Certainly it is true to say that this school has found least sympathy when attacking this particular characteristic of the nineteenth-century writer, and justly, too, for it will be evident to anyone even cursorily glancing through the contents of the letter that so great a hater of duplicity could never consciously tolerate it in his own soul. In this the letter does not differ from other writings of Stevenson. They are all sincere, for the man who wrote them was sincere.

In its particular vein, the literary merit of the work is very great. Satire and irony, or course, two of the most effective tools of correction, are here freely used. Walter Raleigh admits that "it is a matchless piece of scorn and invective not inferior in skill to anything he ever wrote," even while advancing his

13 Gilbert K. Chesterton, Stevenson, Dodd, Mead and Co., N.Y., 1928,
21

claim that the letter is probably Stevenson's "only literary mistake."¹⁴ Raleigh's criticism was given to the Royal Institution in 1895, a few years after the author's death. As late, however, as 1942 one critic did not hesitate to say that the letter is a "withering satire perhaps unsurpassed by any writing of its kind in recent English literature."¹⁵

This estimate on first hearing sounds like the customary enthusiasm of a too ardent Stevensonian. A close examination, however, shows that it approximates the truth. In the first place the statement restricts itself to "writing of its kind." In modern times this type of writing has become almost unknown because of the increasingly stringent legal protection given to anyone assailed in print. Indeed, the situation has greatly improved since the days when Juvenal could lash with stinging words those whom he would, and this with impunity. Witness the refusal of many papers to print Stevenson's letter. Even the moderate Newman did not escape without fine after his justified revelation of the true character of Doctor Achilles. Such a precedent and many another make a modern literary man think twice before he carries on an acrid controversy in print. Stevenson did think

14 Walter Raleigh, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edward Arnold and Co., London, 1927, 44

15 Ashe, Catholic World, CLVI, 208

twice, and he still resolved to do it. As Dutton points out, "the letter is relishable by those who enjoy seeing a man hit out straight with no fear of the consequences when he knows his cause to be just."¹⁶ Stevenson's gallantry, sometimes ridiculed, can be only admired here.

Steuart says that the letter "bears the marks of both the haste and the surging anger in which it was written. Inspired by an overheated chivalry, it runs too easily into unreasoned vehemence and personalities."¹⁷ Without doubt this would be a just criticism had not Stevenson made it part of the effectiveness of his reply to conceive Hyde "as a man quite beyond and below the reticences of civility."¹⁸ He said to Hyde, "with what measure you mete, with that shall it be measured to you again; with you, at last, I rejoice to feel the button off the foil and to plunge home."¹⁹ To attack the personal morals of a dead man as Hyde did certainly "runs...into..personalities." Stevenson was effectively vehement; with justice he did not disdain to use the weapons which Hyde himself had chosen.

As for the vehemence being unreasoned, as Steuart says, it is hard to see the grounds for this criticism after close analysis

16 Dutton, 113
 17 Steuart II, 189
 18 The Damien letter, 8
 19 Ibid.

of the letter. Stevenson is angry, very angry, at every moment of the letter's composition, but he is never unreasonable. In fact, his anger seems to sharpen his reasoning. The letter is logic personified, as orderly as a scholastic syllogism; so inevitable is its logic that it is easy to see why Hyde at first tried to avoid answering it by brushing off Stevenson as inconsequential. From Hyde it simply admitted no answer, only revocation and regret.

To argue, as Stuart does, that the letter "lacks the urbanity with which Newman pierced and demolished Kingsley" is to use an unfair comparison. The two refutations are not in the same genre. For one thing, Newman was defending himself, and hence he was bound by rules of propriety not necessary for one defending another. If one is effectively to defend himself from attack, a certain delicacy of approach is a prime condition, for a defense too self-righteous would be as damaging, as alienating, perhaps, as the charges themselves. It is to be remembered, too, that Newman was mellowed by years of retirement. Stevenson was a "knight of the unshielded heart,"²¹ turning among men in the affairs of the world. Newman's sensitive soul was shaped to a unique spirit of humility and holy honor that was as characteristic of the Cardinal as Stevenson's fine chivalry was of him. Both answered

20 Ibid.

21 R.L.S., Underwoods, XXIII, "Our Lady of the Snows," 7, 2, 43

10
in their own spirit, both effectively for all time. The vehement emotion does not detract from the literary merit of the piece as such, for it is not left unsustainable, but is supported by choice diction and perfect style. As Raleigh says, it "is not inferior in skill to anything he ever wrote."

22
It is certainly not true to say, as Steuart assumes, that the letter is inaccurate. The letter is correct in all details except one, one of no consequence, one which, if known, would have heightened the understandable indignation of Stevenson. He says that Dr. Hyde had never visited the Island, a statement he was fully justified in making, judging from the mistake Hyde makes about an obvious and inescapable point of the Island's geography. As a matter of fact, however, Hyde had visited the Island on three occasions²³ and had shown himself most friendly with Damien, spending long periods in conversation with him - a thing which makes his accusations of the dead priest more damnable. The gratuitous assertion of Steuart that Damien was really lacking in the virtue of chastity "not because of inherent viciousness, but because he was not strong enough to resist the horrible degrading influences which enfolded him and penetrated him like an atmosphere,"²⁴ is absolutely without foundation. Indeed,

22 Steuart II, 189

23 Dutton, 107

24 Steuart II, 189

it is nothing less than a perpetuation of Hyde's initial calumny. A thorough investigation of the charge is made in Dutton's The Samaritans of Molokai. His proof, from both first-hand witnesses and the signed deathbed testimony of Damien, leaves not the vestige of a doubt as to the baselessness of the charge. ²⁵ With Stevenson's accurate knowledge of Molokai we shall deal more at length in its proper place.

The importance of the letter both as the vindication of an honest, holy, and heroic man coupled with the fact that it brought before the world the work that Damien lived and died to promote makes it hard for us to concur with the opinion of Raleigh that the letter was a "literary mistake." He urges a "doubt whether he [Stevenson] really has a claim to be Father Damien's defender, whether Father Damien had need of a literary freelance," and argues that the "curse spoken in Eden, 'Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life,' surely covered by anticipation the case of the Rev. Dr. Hyde." ²⁶

25 Cf. Ch. 6, Dutton. Other authorities testifying Damien's innocence: George E. Brown, A Book of R.L.S., Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1919, 70; Francis Watt, R.L.S., Methuen, London, 1913, 223; Libert Boeynaems, "Father Damien," Cath. Ency., VIII, 615

26 Raleigh, 44. Brown's comment is illuminating. Also expressing his disagreement with Raleigh, he says: "A mistake in logic, in controversy, it may have been according to the established rules, but unless it be held that righteous anger is to have no place in literature the critic's [Raleigh's] judgement of it falls to the ground. The hot haste in which it was written denied Stevenson the opportunity of his habitual revision; and it is thus a revelation of his raw power which no other of his writings affords." (Brown, 67)

Inclined as we are to agree with a statement, so cleverly put, of the general theory of the case, we cannot ignore the fact that the consequences of the letter, its writing and publication, were practical and useful. Nor do we believe that Stevenson only further burnished the "conventional halo" of Damien. This is another of Steuart's contentions ²⁷ and is a point we shall discuss when treating of Stevenson's profound impressions of the priest.

Because of the letter's historical importance and its intrinsic merit as a unique species of English literature, written by an outstanding stylist in a century of fine writers, we are interested in its background. We want to know all of the relevant facts, because they in turn help us to understand and appreciate with greater fulness the letter itself. On the other hand, there are few questions about the historical background that investigators and biographers have not already answered for us. Indeed, we have merely sketched the immediate background here. The letter's antecedents and effects, its publicity for the deceased Damien's work, the memorial fund with the Prince of Wales as its patron (that Hyde's letter might possibly interfere with it was one of the motives impelling Stevenson to act as he did ²⁹), Hyde's first response that his assailant was a "Bohemian crank, a negligible person, whose opinion is of no value to anyone," ³⁰ his second reply published a year later in the American Congrega-

27 Steuart II, 189
28 Dutton, 105

29 Balfour, 268
30 Farrow, 220

31 Dutton, 121-2

tionalist which blundered stubbornly into new slanderous errors - these things are well known; or at least on written record, and it is doubtful that further studious elaboration would bear proportionate fruit in greater understanding of the letter. Perhaps, however, someone may eventually perform the useful task of gathering this material together in one place.

What is not known and what has not been discussed except in a general way is the background of Stevenson's own mind which is indeed a much more interesting realm than the concrete facts of contemporary circumstance. We must remember that Stevenson took up the defence of a Catholic missionary who was both priest and religious. It is of the highest importance for understanding the letter that we know just what his attitude towards things Catholic was at the time he composed it. Was he favorable, unfavorable, or indifferent towards the Catholic Church, towards priests and religious, towards missionaries and their work? Did he have a set attitude that was characteristic of him all his life, from the earliest days of his Scots Presbyterianism to the last days at Apia? It is vital to know these things if we hope completely to understand the letter, to know Stevenson's motivation in writing it, to set it not only in its particular historical background but also in the background of the writer's own mind, his own way of looking at the question. It is a necessary condition of our knowledge, according to the canon given in Stevenson's own words: "In all works of art, widely

speaking, it is first of all the author's attitude that is nar-
rated."³²

We have asked primarily to know Stevenson's specific view of the Catholic Church and those vocations which are proper to her doctrine and discipline, priests, religious, and missionaries, and secondly whether there was any development of his view in the course of years up to the time of the Damien letter.

Stevenson himself never answered these questions expressly. It is notable, however, that both he and his biographers have given us detailed accounts of his early religious inclinations and environment. When Stevenson eventually began to write, his first subjects were Catholics and Catholic localities so that he must commit himself on the subject from the very beginning. Nor was this the case only with his initial works. Many of the writings that intervene between the Inland Voyage and the Damien letter likewise touch on Catholicism, so that by a chronological study we may arrive not only at a knowledge of his attitude at one particular period, but trace the development through the years to the end of his life, some time after the Damien letter was written.

It will be obvious to anyone pursuing an inquiry into the spirit of his first works that, despite the fact that he rebelled

32 R.L.S., "On the Art of Writing"

against the Presbyterian religion of his home, during his early years he retained a very decided intolerance (perhaps it would be better to call it lack of understanding) of the Catholic Church. This can be illustrated by examples from such works as the Inland Voyage and the Travels with a Donkey. It is important to note, too, that his account of the life of the monks of Monastier (in the "Travels") is definitely colored by his utilitarian philosophy of external activity, indeed, to such an extent that he cannot appreciate the life of prayer to which the monks devote themselves. To him, they too have the "honor of the inert," a thing, it will be remembered, which he ascribed to Hyde. His writing, especially one poem, "Our Lady of the Snows," clearly shows that he believes the monks defaulting in what to him is always the "battle of life"; that he believes a life of prayer is not on a level with the active, external vocation; that his God is a

...Lord of might; 33
In deeds, in deeds, he takes delight;

that, finally, to him the philosophy of the monks is escapism. This is his bone of contention with them. Considering what he himself said at various stages along the way of his life, we have no reason to think that Stevenson ever consciously relinquished this philosophy, nor, as we shall point out, was his vigorous defence of Father Damien at all at variance with the principles

on which he disagreed with the monks of Our Lady of the Snows monastery.

During his French days and later world travel his spirit became much more sympathetic with the Catholic Church. In the South Seas where he spent the days immediately prior and subsequent to the Damien letter, his innumerable contacts with Catholic missionaries and religious, many of whom he makes the subjects of his writing, lessened his intolerance even more and increased his understanding to a point hardly believable in one whose early attitude was of so contrary a nature.

To sum up we may say that the Damien letter of Robert Louis Stevenson, while written at a time when his hereditary prejudice of things Catholic had greatly lessened, was not a departure from his utilitarian philosophy of external activity, and in this respect indicates that his attitude towards the forms of Catholic asceticism which he observed at Our Lady of the Snows in his earlier years had not essentially changed.

CHAPTER II

EARLY RELEVANT BACKGROUND

"You belong, sir," Stevenson tells Hyde in his letter, "to a sect - I believe my sect, and that in which my ancestors labored - which has enjoyed, and partly failed to utilize, an exceptional advantage in the islands of Hawaii." ¹ Further on in the letter he also says, "Your sect (and remember, as far as any sect avows me, it is mine) has not done ill in a worldly sense in the Hawaiian Kingdom." ² This is the way in which Stevenson alludes to the religion of his parental environment in the letter that defended Damien's honor.

For our inquiry, the early religion of Stevenson has the importance not only of a terminus a quo, for he early became disaffected towards it, but also the significance of a very formative influence as regards his later views towards religion in general and Damien's religion in particular. Stevenson in the Memoirs of Himself and in other places has recorded in detail the impression that the religion of his family made upon him; biographers have been greatly indebted to his account for what they narrate.

1 The Damien letter, 9

2 The Damien letter, 11

A native of Edinburgh, an only son, Stevenson's family church was the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and his parents strict adherents of that denomination whose bulwarks of defense were the Covenants of 1638 and 1643. His mother was, indeed, the youngest daughter of the Reverend Louis Balfour, D.D.;³ and of his father he tells us:

The Church of Scotland, of which he held the doctrines (though in a sense of his own), and to which he bore a clansman's loyalty, profited often by his time and his money... he served the church on many committees. [then alluding to his father's writings] What he perhaps valued highest in his work were his contributions to the defence of Christianity.⁴

Both of his parents were very religious individuals; the childhood of Stevenson was set in a background of Calvinistic piety. Since his father, Thomas Stevenson, planned a career of civil engineering for him, Louis, as he was then called, was never destined from his youth, in the way he says his maternal grandfather was, "to wag his head in a pulpit."⁵ There is, however, no doubt that his parents instructed him carefully in the strict ways of his creed. "I please myself often by saying that I had a Covenanting childhood," Stevenson says in a fragment alluding to his earliest years.⁶

3 Balfour, 11

4 R.L.S., "Thomas Stevenson," IX, Memories and Portraits, 4, 2, 94

5 Quoted in Balfour, 3

6 " " " , 27

The influence of Calvinism was brought very closely to bear on little Louis by the nurse his parents engaged for him, "Cummy," a pet name for Alison Cunningham. Quite frankly he tells us,

That I was eminently religious, there can be no doubt. I had an extreme terror of Hell, implanted in me, I suppose, by my good nurse, which used to haunt me terribly on stormy nights, when the wind had broken loose and was going about the town like a bedlamite.⁷

It is pathetic to note from his candid statement that the first religious development of Stevenson is manifested not so much by the oft-mentioned history of Moses that he composed at the age of six⁸ nor the later one of Joseph.⁹ To one who determines not to lose himself in detail, these are trivial and insignificant facts. What is most important are the impressions that the Calvinistic preoccupation with Hell and the difficulties of predestination were making on his sensitive young mind. The record he gives of the religious experiences evoked by the indoctrination of these two points of belief is one of the keys to unlock the mystery of his later disaffection for religion. We know that his young, unmoderated imagination conceived and dwelt upon grotesque images of everlasting punishment while he lay in

7 Quoted in Balfour, 29

8 Memoirs of Himself, South Seas Edition XIII, N.Y., Chas. Scribner's Sons, 281

9 Steuart I, 48

bed at night, and he often pondered, just as the young American Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, did, the awful fact of his own pre-determined eternal destiny.

But the time when my mind displayed most activity was after I was put to bed and before I fell asleep. I remember these periods more distinctly and I believe further back than any other part of my childhood. I would lie awake declaiming aloud to myself my views of the universe...One of these Songstries, for so I named my evening exercises, was taken down by my father from behind the door, and I have seen it within the last few years. It dealt summarily with the Fall of man, taking a view most inimical to Satan... It was certainly marked when taken in connection with my high-strung religious ecstasies and terrors. It is to my nurse that I owe these last: my mother was shocked when, in days long after, she heard what I had suffered. I would not only lie awake to weep for Jesus, which I have done many a time, but I would fear to trust myself to slumber lest I was not accepted and should slip, ere I awake, into eternal ruin. I remember repeatedly, although this was later on, and in the new house, waking from a dream of Hell, clinging to the horizontal bar of the bed, with my knees and chin together, my soul shaken, my body convulsed with agony. It is not a pleasant subject. 10

These Memoirs of Himself and other accounts of his childhood give other evidences of the same state of mind.

Considering the terror with which he later was to approach

a monastery of religious men, it is pleasant to know that some of the brighter moments of his earlier days were spent paging through the Hermits of Marco Sadeler. To put his memory of it in its proper place, we ought to move forward momentarily to a sentence of the Travels with a Donkey that harkens back to these childhood days. He was on the road approaching the monastery when he looked up and saw

a medieval friar, fighting with a barrowful of turfs. Every Sunday of my childhood I used to study the Hermits of Marco Sadeler - enchanting prints, full of wood and field and medieval landscapes, as large as a county for the imagination to go a-traveling in; and here, sure enough, was one of Marco Sadeler's heroes. 11

It is indeed unfortunate that of his childhood environment very few other circumstances would conspire to give him "enchanting prints" of Catholic life. Far from it! Such was not to be expected from the religion of John Knox.

We have been brought to the question as to what view of the Catholic Church Stevenson received from his religion. It is a query which could be answered by endless research into the origins and outlook of Scotch Presbyterianism, by inquiry into pronouncements of contemporary clergymen of that denomination. We prefer, however, to go to Stevenson himself for the answer.

11 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 198

He responds quite neatly in speaking of Robert, the gardener, in Memories and Portraits. Though holding definite religious opinions, Calvinistic, of course, Robert, an old workman,

never talked about these views, never grew controversially noisy, and never aspersed the belief or practice of anybody. Now all this is not generally characteristic of Scotch piety; Scotch sects being churches militant with a vengeance, and Scotch believers perpetual crusaders the one against the other, and missionaries one to the other. 12

Tolerance, then, towards any other religion, let alone that of Rome, was definitely not, according to Stevenson, a mark of Scotch Presbyterianism. But, to place Rome in the picture just a little more definitely, there is a more significant sentence that precedes the above, for he says that the gardener

never expatiated (at least in my hearing) on the doctrines of his creed, and he never condemned anybody else. I have no doubt that he held all Roman Catholics, atheists, and Mahometans as considerably out of it. 13

Note the company that the Catholics keep, according to the mind of a typical Scot. It is hard to believe that there is not an introspective note in Stevenson's description of the belief of the old laborer. He knew from personal experience what the attitude of his countrymen towards Rome was and doubtless was

12 R.L.S., "An Old Scotch Gardener," V, Memories and Portraits,

4, 2, 61

13 Ibid.

here speaking of the average Presbyterian mind. The prejudice which Stevenson absorbed in the Edinburgh atmosphere is a matter of which he would become entirely conscious during his days in France. Then, when feeling especially helpless, his mind hemmed in by the bonds of misunderstanding, he could only say, "This it is to have had a Protestant education."¹⁴

We have indicated that we are interested in Stevenson's childhood faith not only because it was his point of departure for a more permanent theological outlook, but also because for many years it exercised the function of a formative norm. In itself, Calvinism was terrifying to him. As Sydney Colvin's article in the Dictionary of National Biography points out, the harsher forms of Scottish Calvinistic Christianity were at all times repugnant to his nature. His revolt from it came at the first opportunity. No sooner was he of age than he was all too ready to throw off the yoke that had been so burdensome to him from the very beginning, the cause of so many childhood tears. He had no knowledge of another form of Christianity to turn to; with him it was either Calvinism or atheism. At the University of Edinburgh where he first took up the study of engineering and then of law, Stevenson came into direct contact with the speculative thought of the time - the nineteenth century, the century of doubting and questioning, the century of

14 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 198

15 Steuart I, 124

Huxley, of Hume and Tyndal. The result was that "First he was an agnostic; then a sceptic, then proceeding by leaps and bounds, he avowed himself a full-blown atheist."¹⁵

A very serious consequence of this change was the shaking of his relations with his father, whom he had already disappointed in more than a small way by forsaking the career of a civil engineer that had been cut out for him.

Of all Stevenson's difficulties those concerned with religion were the most important, if for no other reason than that they alone affected his relations with his father. The one was questioning dogmas and observances which the other regarded it as impious to examine; and no duty too arduous, no sacrifice was too great for the father, if only it could avert from his child the doom of the freethinker. On the other hand, sooner than be tied to the doctrines of Calvinism, the lad called himself an atheist - such is ever the youthful formula of independence. 16

Thomas Stevenson indicated that he would disinherit Louis, since he did not feel that he could leave his money to an unbeliever. Louis avowed with spirit that he was right, and that any person taking money in such circumstances was no better than a thief. 17
'And a damned thief, too,' was his father's trenchant comment."

16 Balfour, 71

17 Steuart I, 124

Later on, in the "Travels," Stevenson speaks of changing one's religion. Though he does not say so expressly, he gives us a momentary glimpse into his own feelings at the time of this crisis in his life and confides that

It is not only a great flight of confidence for a man to change his creed and go out of his family for heaven's sake; but the odds are - nay, and the hope is - that, with all this transition in the eyes of man, he has not changed himself a hair's breadth in the eyes of God. Honour to those who do so, for the wrench is sore. 18

Indeed, for Stevenson the wrench was sore. Colvin sums up the change and its causes briefly but accurately:

A restless and inquiring conscience, perhaps inherited from covenanting ancestors, kept him inwardly calling in question the grounds of conduct and the accepted codes of society. At the same time his reading had shaken his belief in Christian dogma. 19

That Stevenson became in turn a proselytizing atheist, offensively aggressive in his incredulity, is hard to believe. Colvin, who knew him, says that he does not think he was. ²⁰ With this opinion Steuart disagrees quite decidedly, and he presents in evidence certain verses written during this period. In one of them Stevenson addresses a minister of religion in the

18 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 198

19 Sidney Colvin, "R.L. Stevenson," Dict. Nat. Biog., (1937-8 printing), XVIII, 1132-41

20 Sidney Colvin, Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1901, I, 14

following way:

Stand on your putrid ruins - stand
White-neck-clothed bigot - ...
Back, Minister of Christ and source of fear, 21
We cherish freedom - back with thee and thine.

The most notable thing about these verses is not their boldness. That was to be expected from one thinking along the extreme, reactionary line that he was taking at the time. What is most significant is the fact that he never published them. This alone would seem to indicate a consideration for the belief of his parents and friends. Steuart simply says that they were not published until long years afterwards. Indeed, they were never published by Stevenson at all, but by someone else after his death. Far, then, from disproving Colvin's statement, Stevenson's action in regard to these verses would seem to substantiate it. No one can object to a man's confiding his private thoughts to a paper which only he will see. Such procedure is not the least offensive.

If there was, however, the usual tendency of atheism to be come most articulate, to be noisily intolerant of the religious views of others, views contrary to the newly found "truth," in Stevenson the sharp edge was certainly removed from such intolerance. But how? Certainly it was not his religion which taught him consideration for the persuasions of others. We have

21 Quoted in Steuart I, 119

seen above from Stevenson himself that Presbyterianism was a sect "militant with a vengeance and Scotch believers perpetual crusaders the one against the other, and missionaries one to the other."²²

Stevenson's first tolerance seems to have come from his association with Fleeming Jenkin, whose memoir he was later to write. His mind was broadened by the contact, a contact which looms large in our eyes, because it prepares him with a modicum of receptivity for what he was shortly to see in Catholic France.

Fleeming Jenkin was a professor of engineering at the University of Edinburgh. To Stevenson he was more than an instructor; he was an intimate counselor and dear friend. A brave, humble, and lovable man, his influence on his young student was very great. Perhaps this was because he had vitality, was active, interested in all sorts of things. He had qualities especially appealing to one whose favorite maxim came to be: "Acts may be forgiven; not even God can forgive the hanger-back."²³ Stevenson tells us

Far on middle age, when men begin to lie down with the bestial goddesses, Comfort and Respectability, the strings of his nature still sounded as high a note as a young man's. He loved the harsh voice of duty like a call to battle. He loved courage,

22 Cf. Note 12 of this chapter

23 Colvin, Letters I, xxxv

enterprise, brave virtues, a brave world,
and ugly virtues; everything that lifts us
above the table where we eat or the bed we
sleep upon. ²⁴

25

According to Steuart much of the joyous philosophy, fortitude, and courage for which Stevenson has become famous was derived from this one man, Fleeming Jenkin. He tells us, and all that Stevenson himself says in his memoir of Jenkin corroborates his opinion, that this man taught him to respect the beliefs of others, made him open to arguments against the extreme position which he had adopted, planted a killing doubt at the very root of Stevenson's atheism. Jenkin himself was not a dogmatist, but he believed that the fundamental tenets of religion in general were true. "I cannot conceive that any single proposition whatever in religion is true in the scientific sense; and yet all the while I think the religious view of the world is the most true view." ²⁶ His reference to scientific truth must be interpreted. "Science was true," Stevenson says that Jenkin believed, ²⁷ "because it told us almost nothing."

We have said that Jenkin planted a killing doubt at the very root of Stevenson's atheism. This is a point verified by Stevenson's own words. He tells us, as he looks back upon his association with Jenkin, "The atheistic youth was met at every

24 R.L.S., Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, 6, 2, 175

25 Steuart I, 187

26 R.L.S., Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, 6, 2, 172

27 Ibid.

turn by a scepticism more complete than his own, so that the very weapons of the fight were changed in his grasp to swords of paper."²⁸

It is interesting to note a parallel in the lives of these two men. It is anticipating Stevenson's religious development, but the point is worth mentioning while we are on the subject of his relations with Jenkin. It helps to show, moreover, how closely the two natures were allied. Stevenson tells us in his recollections of Jenkin:

I should observe that as time went on his conformity to the church in which he was born grew more complete, and his views drew nearer the conventional. "The longer I live, my dear Louis," he wrote but a few months before his death, "the more convinced I become of a direct care by God - which is reasonably impossible - but there it is." 29

In turn, Colvin says of Stevenson that "as time went on he grew more ready, in daily life, to use the language and fall in with the observances of the faith in which he had been brought up."³⁰ The two lives are exactly the same on this point, though Jenkin had, of course, never reached the extreme of unbelief that Stevenson arrived at.

Stevenson, of course, never took up again rigid Presby-

28 R.L.S., Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, 6, 2, 173

29 Ibid.

30 Cf. Note 20 of this chapter

terianism of the type which had terrified him as a boy. Thus it³⁰
is that his references to it in the letter to Hyde are couched in
such terms as: "to a sect - I believe my sect..."³¹ and, "Your
sect (and remember, as far as any sect avows me, it is mine)..."³²
It was, moreover, some time before Stevenson began to walk the
road back.

Steuart tells us that "the man who did more than any other
to weed out his [Stevenson's] so-called religious difficulties
was Fleeming Jenkin."³³ From the fine and touching description
which Stevenson gives of him, there can be little question about
the fact that Jenkin did take off whatever sharp-edged belliger-
ency there may have been in his new atheism. Stevenson relays
to us some of Jenkin's thoughts, and it is plain how they would
affect someone moving in the direction that Stevenson was at that
time.

Certainly the church is not right, he would
argue, but certainly not the anti-church either.
Men are not such fools as to be wholly in the
wrong, nor yet are they so placed as to be ever
wholly in the right. Somewhere in midair,
between the disputants, like hovering Victory
in some design of a Greek battle, the truth
hangs undiscerned. And in the meanwhile what
matter these uncertainties? Right is very
obvious;...a man must be very sure he is in
the right, must (in a favorite phrase of his)
be "either very wise or very vain," to break
with any general consent in ethics.³⁴

31 The Damien letter, 9 (Italics added)

32 " " " , 11 " "

33 Steuart I, 184

34 R.L.S., Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, 6, 2, 174

Along with many other fine qualities which Stevenson came to possess, he cultivated tolerance and understanding, habits of mind he did not get from Presbyterianism as such. They were due in large measure to the influence of Fleeming Jenkin. It was because of him that the Stevenson of the Edinburgh days was, as Chesterton says,

not a Catholic; he did not pretend to have remained a Puritan; but he was a highly responsible and chivalrous Pagan, in a world of Pagans who were most of them considerably less conspicuous for chivalry and honor. 35

Chesterton had, we may remark, little patience with smug, Victorian pietism. Indeed, he could not bring himself to condemn Stevenson too much for the revolt.

35 Chesterton, 57

CHAPTER III

FRENCH DAYS

It would indeed be a grievous error to suppose that Stevenson left his Presbyterian prejudice towards the Catholic Church when he deserted the Presbyterian religion. It is not that easy to throw off an attitude of mind that has been acquired with one's maturing years. We shall have an opportunity to study this attitude toward a creed in many ways diametrically opposed to that which had been his own, since Stevenson spent much of the time, after his university days, in France, so many of whose institutions are Catholic.

Though Stevenson had traveled in France, Germany, Holland, and Italy even before this time, he began in 1873 a number of more prolonged visits to the Continent. The main reason for most of these excursions to and residences in France was his poor health. Thus it was that he was ordered by his doctor to the Riviera for the winter of 1873-4. In 1875 he began the first of a series of visits to Fontainebleu where his cousin, R.A.M. Stevenson, was living at the time. In 1876 he toured Belgium in company with Sir Walter Simpson, and this is the trip recounted in An Inland Voyage. During the fall of 1878 he lived four weeks

at Monastier in Velay, whence he made his walking tour with Modestine. Even after his trip to America where he married, the subsequent periods until July, 1885 were spent with Mrs. Stevenson largely in France.

An examination of the works of this French period reveals Stevenson commenting both directly and indirectly on Catholic beliefs and customs. For instance, we have an apt illustration of the tendency of Stevenson's mind to dwell on the medieval corruption of the clergy in two of the first pieces he wrote for publication. Both of them were on the famous vagabond poet, Francis Villon. One of the works is an historical essay and appreciation: Francis Villon, Student, Poet, and Housebreaker. The other is a short story built around the same character. It is remarkable that in the essay Stevenson tells us enough about the poet's adopted father, the chaplain of St. Benoit, to show that the priest is a decent and honorable character. Nevertheless, in A Lodging for the Night, a short story based on Villon's life, the chaplain is quite arbitrarily reshaped into a surly, selfish, and cruel person. It is not our intention to quarrel with an author about his privilege of painting his characters in any way he wishes in a piece of acknowledged fiction. Here we merely note that when Stevenson comes across a priest to deal with as he sees fit, a very unattractive personality is the result.

Nor is this all. Three other clerics come into the picture, two of them disreputable, one of them foolish. So in the same

story we meet "the silly old priest from Montargis,"¹ Dom Nicolas, the Picardy monk whose face "had the beery, bruised appearance of the continual drinker's,"² and "Guido Tabary, clericus."³ None of these latter, however, arouses our anger to the extent that the chaplain of St. Benoit does when he refuses admittance to Villon as the poet stands outside freezing in the cold of a fierce, French, winter night.⁴

We may take another example from Sire de Maletroit's Door, written about the same time and in exactly the same spirit. Here too we have a French scene. The chaplain of the Sire de Maletroit is a hard and cold figure, reflecting the nature of his stern master. Every allusion shows him at the heels of his lord in disgusting obsequiousness and a slave to the Sire's least wishes, even those of dubious probity.

Lest our inferences from these portraits, drawn at the close of 1877, be unjust, as indeed they might be by themselves, since they deal with admittedly fictitious characters, we turn to more direct evidences of Stevenson's views of the Church at this time. Our first source is An Inland Voyage which, though published in 1878, is an account of a trip made in 1876.

We shall discuss this work more thoroughly, since Stevenson's

1	R.L.S.,	<u>A</u>	<u>Lodging</u>	<u>for</u>	<u>the</u>	<u>Night</u> ,	1,	1,	279
2	"	"	"	"	"	"	1,	1,	281
3	R.L.S.,	"	"	"	"	"	1,	1,	284
4	"	"	"	"	"	"	1,	1,	291

opinions are here quite unmistakable. His impressions of Catholic characters, institutions, and customs are carefully recorded. One has only to turn to these pages for answers to such questions as: What does a non-Catholic feel when he travels through Catholic cities and countryside; when, though a stranger, he is at perfect liberty to enter all the churches and visit private homes where intimate family devotions are carried on in his presence; when, in a word, he is able to observe Catholicism as it is being lived?

It is, for instance, most interesting to follow Stevenson as he inspects Noyon Cathedral. He loves the grandeur of the church, its lofty spires and uplifting air, but the nature of the procession he beheld inside he "could never rightly make out."⁵ For him it was merely a matter of sitting out "an act or two of the play."⁶ The singing of the Ave Maria, the devout though matter-of-fact procession of the young girls, the lighted tapers - these are passed over with an unappreciative mention. But the presiding priest is singled out for opprobrium.

The priest who seemed of the most consequence was a strange, down-looking old man. He kept mumbling prayers with his lips; but as he looked upon me darkling, it did not seem as if prayer were uppermost in his heart.⁷

Two others of the clergy come in for similar abuse, and he imagines

5 R.L.S., An Inland Voyage, 7, 1, 111

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

that "a big nun who played marshal fairly stared him out of countenance." To such an account it is hard to give complete credulity. French nuns do not stare people out of countenance, though it is quite possible that the casual way in which services may have been carried out lent itself to misinterpretation. A Scotch Presbyterian is not the best judge of French piety, nor is the power given him to search the hearts of French priests.

One is annoyed on reading this chapter devoted to the Noyon Cathedral at Stevenson's oblique point of view, his comments on the Miserere, his unwarranted attacks on the priests (for him they "feign to be at prayer"), his unkind attitude towards the nun, which is indeed a far cry from the spirit of the verse he wrote to the sisters of Molokai later on. His final comment, "If I ever join the Church of Rome, I shall stipulate to be Bishop of Noyon on the Oise," is either highly whimsical or bitterly sarcastic.

In another chapter of the book, "Down the Oise, Church Interiors," we run across another comment in much the same vein. He makes his way to the church where you find both the "deadliest earnest, and the hollowest deceit." One well suspects what he has in mind here. A woman, kneeling at various shrines in the church, is the first to come in for condemnation. Her simple

8 R.L.S., An Inland Voyage, 7, 1, 112
 9 " " " " 7, 1, 113
 10 " " " " 7, 1, 129

method of prayer, reciting the beads (how like the widow's mite!) excites his wonder. Her devotion to various saints draws on her from the Scotsman standing in the rear of the church the comparison to a "prudent capitalist with a somewhat cynical view of the commercial prospects," who wishes "to place her supplications in a great variety of heavenly securities, etc." His final comment is: "I could only think of it as a dull, transparent jugglery, based upon unconscious unbelief."

Counting prayers, multiplying intercessors, working now with an idea of gaining merit in heaven, these were at all times repugnant to the spirit of one who had been a Presbyterian. It was his complaint about the woman mentioned above who "at each shrine dedicated an equal number of beads and an equal length of time." Such was the basis of other sharp comment. "The Association of the Living Rosary" was "something worse than foolishness" to him when he read the placard about it in the lobby of the church at Creil. Its indulgences granted for certain prayers - "the recitation of the required dizaine" - provoked his unkind words about people who "serve the kingdom of Heaven with a pass-book in their hands." "Pass-book," as applied to piety and religion, was a phrase he would use again many years later in this same regard. When he was dealing with the nuns at Molokai,

11 R.L.S., An Inland Voyage, 7, 1, 130
 12 " " " " 7, 1, 130
 13 " " " " 7, 1, 134
 14 Ibid.

one of the sisters remarked that for her the island was a "ticket-office to heaven." "What are the odds?" Stevenson asks himself on hearing the statement and admits that the "pass-book kept with heaven" stirs him to anger and laughter.¹⁵ This is a point of view which Stevenson never abandons in the whole course of the thirteen years between Creil and Molokai.¹⁶

Much more enlightened is the surprisingly clear observation which follows. For a brief moment Stevenson becomes self-conscious and ashamed of his boldness in having judged matters of which he knows nothing. It is an occurrence which becomes more frequent in the course of time. As he transcribes his travel notes, preparing them for publication, a doubt first, then a flash of the real, unguessed truth crosses his mind.

I cannot help wondering, as I transcribe these notes, whether a Protestant born and bred is in a fit state to understand these signs, and do them what justice they deserve; and I cannot help answering that he is not. They cannot look so merely ugly and mean to the faithful as they do to me. I see that as clearly as a proposition in Euclid. For these believers are neither weak nor wicked. They can put up their tablet commending Saint Joseph for his dispatch, as if he were still a village

15 Colvin, Letters, II, 188

16 We do not pause here to interpret correctly all the things which R.L.S., unintentionally, we hope, distorted. We are aroused only to sympathize with one torn by so many misgivings, with one, for instance, who so completely failed to understand the spirit of love and simple Faith manifested by the ex voto offerings of a ship-captain and of others among the grateful poor. (R.L.S., An Inland Voyage, 7, 1, 132)

carpenter; they can "recite the required dizaine," and metaphorically pocket the indulgence, as if they had done a job for heaven; and then they can go out and look down unabashed upon this wonderful river flowing by, and up without confusion at the pin-point stars, which are themselves great worlds full of flowing rivers greater than the Oise. I see it plainly, I say, as a proposition in Euclid, that my Protestant mind has missed the point, and that there goes with these deformities some higher and more religious spirit than I dream. ¹⁷

Indeed, in the light of what he had written, this is coming a long way in one step. Though An Inland Voyage as a piece is more full of misunderstanding, more "full of Puritanical obtuseness," as Swinnerton says, ¹⁸ than any of his other works, it is doubtful that Stevenson was ever much closer to the truth about his own position than he was in the above confession. He follows with the words:

I wonder if other people would make the same allowances for me? Like the ladies of Creil, having recited my rosary of toleration, I look for my indulgence on the spot. ¹⁹

We appreciate his frank confession.

From An Inland Voyage it is a much more pleasant task to turn to the Travels with a Donkey where his attitude to what is

17 R.L.S., An Inland Voyage, 7, 1, 135

18 Frank A. Swinnerton, R.L. Stevenson: A Critical Study, Mitchell Kennerley, N.Y., 1915, 45

19 R.L.S., An Inland Voyage, 7, 1, 135

Catholic in France, while it still leaves much to be desired, nevertheless seems to be somewhat more sympathetic. Stevenson made the trip narrated in the book in the autumn of 1878, and the book was published in June of 1879. The section which concerns us most is that describing his visit to the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of the Snows.

That Travels with a Donkey is not completely sympathetic with the Catholic view is evident from the early pages. For example, it is with a certain aloof superiority that he comments in one place: "I was proof against the landlady's desire that I should visit our Lady of Pradelles, 'who performed many miracles, although she was of wood.'" ²⁰ Again, Stevenson's agnostic views come in for an amusing airing a little later as he inspects a church in ²¹ Cheylard; but we must quickly pass on to the prime object of our interest, his visit at the Trappist monastery.

When he was about to write the justly famous section of the "Travels" which he entitled "Our Lady of the Snows," he called to mind certain lines of Matthew Arnold's Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse which ran,

I behold
The house, the Brotherhood austere!
- And what am I, that I am here? ²²

20 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 177
21 " " " " " 7, 1, 191
22 " " " " " 7, 1, 196

Stevenson would probably have done much better to have taken lines further on in Arnold's poem as his text for this section of the "Travels" which describes the monks:

Not as their friend, or child, I speak!
 But as, on some far northern strand,
 Thinking of his own gods, a Greek
 In pity and mournful awe might stand
 Before some fallen Runic stone; 23
 For both were faiths, and both are gone.

At this time, Stevenson's Presbyterianism, like Arnold's Anglicanism, was but a memory, and Stevenson believed that the Faith of the Trappists was but a facade, even as Arnold thought when looking on the Carthusians. In spite of this fact, however, it is noticeable that Stevenson shows much more understanding in the "Travels" than in An Inland Voyage.

This effort to understand can be observed in Stevenson's view of the practical aspects of the cenobitical life. He was better qualified than most to judge in this matter. He himself had experienced a kind of "common life," when, during these very years he would visit Barbizon, at Fontainebleu, a colony of artists outside Paris. Here was a union for common aesthetic, and not ascetic, purpose, much resembling the MacDowell experiment in New England. Stevenson reflects on his Barbizon past in noting the utility of the rule of cloister and silence.

23 Matthew Arnold, Matthew Arnold's Poetical Works, Thos. Y. Crowell, N.Y., 1897, 428

24 Stevenson describes Barbizon in "Fontainebleu," XIII (South Seas Edition). Part of it is duplicated in Balfour III.

And yet, apart from any view of mortification, I can see a certain policy, not only in the exclusion of women, but in this vow of silence. I have had some experience of lay phalansteries, of an artistic, not to say a bacchanalian, character; and seen more than one association easily formed and yet more easily dispersed. With a Cistercian rule, perhaps they might have lasted longer. In the neighborhood of women it is but a touch-and-go association that can be formed among defenseless men; the stronger electricity is sure to triumph; the dreams of boyhood, the schemes of youth, are abandoned after an interview of ten minutes, and the arts and sciences, and professional male jollity, deserted at once for two sweet eyes and a caressing accent. And next after this, the tongue is the great divider.²⁵

One of the associations which Stevenson saw "easily dispersed" was a group-project for touring the continent in a barge, refitted and christened, incidentally, "The Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne." The plan was abandoned when money failed.

Passing over the fact that Stevenson ignores the merit of the virtue of celibacy, does he speak truly when he alleges that women break up the friendships of men? In this regard it is helpful to recall that he himself was finally separated from the dearest friend he ever had, W.E. Henley, when Mrs. Stevenson became involved in a quarrel with the latter about a book she published. It happened long after Stevenson made this prophecy.

As to the domestic silence, Stevenson, highly sensitive and

²⁵ R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 207

nervous man that he was, required a specially secluded room in his residences where he could write. How often he must have wished that his home had some sort of regulation on silence, so that his whole attention could be given to his work.

In the same way he notes the advantages of an orderly distribution of the day and the careful management of time. (Again he apologizes: "I am almost ashamed to pursue this worldly criticism of a religious rule."²⁶) He notes with pleasure the cheerfulness and amenability of the silent monks.²⁷ As a matter of fact, when we study the spirit of his narrative about Our Lady of the Snows as a whole, we note a great advance in Stevenson's ability to understand. After his contact with the monks, he never again painted clerics of the type in A Lodging for the Night, Sire de Maletroit's Door, and "Noyon Cathedral."

On the other hand there are two fundamental points on which he quite positively disagrees with the philosophy of the monks of Monastier. Stevenson, it is true, was cognizant of certain natural advantages of the monastic life, but could he ever believe that its purely natural advantages might make the life as a whole attractive? Probably not. And yet, he would rather think that the monks chose it for itself rather than for any supernatural motive. One of the brothers said he came to the monastery to

26 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 207

27 Ibid.

save his soul. Stevenson was surprised.

I am afraid I must be at bottom what a cheerful Indian critic has dubbed me, "a faddling hedonist"; for this description of the brother's motives gave me somewhat of a shock. I should have preferred to think he had chosen the life for its own sake, and not for any ulterior purposes; and this shows how profoundly I was out of sympathy with these good Trappists, even when I was doing my best to sympathize.²⁸

Of course, we note with joy the words, "I was doing my best to sympathize." But to choose the life for its own sake! Why Stevenson should think the silence of the Trappists with their strict and rigorous life attractive in itself is as much a mystery as his labelling the saving of one's immortal soul an "ulterior purpose." The answer is lost in the whole complexity of his philosophy of life, a material optimism which looks to present joy and does not count too much on what is to come. We know that he was so interested in this present life that he felt any undue preoccupation with the eternal to be slighting the business of the moment. Thus he praised Fleeming Jenkin because in him there was "no touch of the motive-monger or the ascetic."²⁹ Thus, too, it was that he had no patience with the nun on Molokai calling the island a "ticket-office to heaven,"³⁰ for this was to "serve the kingdom of Heaven with a pass-book in their hands."³¹ It was a

28 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 216
29 " Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, 6, 2, 174
30 Cf. Note 15 of this chapter
31 Cf. " 14 " " "

thing he could not abide.

The heinousness of being a motive-monger was equalled in the eyes of Stevenson only by desertion from the army which fights what for Stevenson was always the battle of life. We have seen that, ironically enough, the author of the charming Apology for Idlers really had no use for men who sit back content, smug, out of the rush and whirl of life. It was the glory of his idol, Fleeming Jenkin, that he loved "courage, enterprise, brave natures,"³² and Stevenson's tastes were quite parallel in this regard. The only place where he writes in the spirit of the opposite philosophy is in Will o' the Mill where he defends the desire for retirement as a "kind of experiment in the way of taking an opponent's argument and pursuing it to its logical conclusions."³³ We turn to a poem he wrote, "Our Lady of the Snows," which was published in his volume, Underwoods, 1887. Here his belief that the monks had deserted the world, had succumbed to escapism, seems clearly set forth.

In this poem the monks take on a quite different aspect from what they possessed in the essays. Stevenson seems to forget the "freshness of face and cheefulness of manner"³⁴ which had once so charmed him. Now the religious become "aloof, unhelpful, and

32 R.L.S., Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, 6, 2, 174

33 George E. Brown, A Book of R.L.S., Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1919, 282

34 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 206

unkind," and "unfraternal brothers."³⁵ Looking at the monks in their "fortress on the hill," the "prudent turret and redoubt," Stevenson sets forth his own philosophy: it is, he believes, the opposite of that of the monks.

O to be up and doing, O
 Unfearing and unshamed to go
 In all the uproar and the press
 About my human business!...
 Thou, O my love, ye, O my friends - ...
 Forth from the casement, on the plain
 Where honor has the world to gain,
 Pour forth and bravely do your part,
 O knights of the unshielded heart! 36

Stevenson pursues his attack with an ad hominem argument; God, he would say, is a God of external activity:

For still the Lord is Lord of might;
 Indeeds, in deeds, he takes delight;...
 Those he approves that ply the trade, 37
 That rock the child, that wed the maid.

Alas! Knight of the unshielded heart though he was, Stevenson could not see that

Poor passionate men, still clothed afresh
 With agonizing folds of flesh 38

had not in their "fortress on the hill" defaulted in the battle of life. Neither had they left behind their ability to help others

35 R.L.S., "Our Lady of the Snows," XXIII, Underwoods, 7, 2, 43

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

47

and their firm determination to do so. These were actually the motives of their retirement. They had assumed a vantage point, a position before the throne of God, where they could work more effectively. They were doing an heroic work, invisible though it was to the eyes of men. Stevenson could not see this. He materialistically denied the value of a vocation of prayer (no "deed"); such a way of life was beyond his powers of comprehension at that time. He could only look at the external accidents of the vocation and judge from these.

Much the same spirit is manifested in the next poem of Underwoods, "Not yet, my soul, these friendly fields desert." Though both of these poems are filled with much elevating emotion, we cannot agree with their basic philosophy. Nor can we take time here to defend the validity and dignity of the purely contemplative vocation. It does not need our defense. We can only note that Stevenson missed the point completely. We are amused to know, too, that Stevenson was one who would have been very surprised to learn that Damien, whom he lauds to the skies for scorning the "honor of the inert,"³⁹ whose vitality Stevenson so admired, had long considered entering the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of the Snows, in order to direct his tremendous energy along the ways of prayer!⁴⁰

39 The Damien letter, 14

40 Farrow, 14

Though Stevenson came to the monastery with terror in his heart,⁴¹ he left with genuine regret.⁴² How much he was affected by what he observed at the monastery we can only guess. That he understood the monastic way of life much more than he was willing to admit, however, we infer from subsequent writings.

For instance, one has the suspicion that he is speaking from first-hand experience, from his chats with the monks, when at the end of his first essay Virginibus Puerisque he counsels young people that marriage will not "sober and change light-headed and variable men." He says:

Like those who join a brotherhood, they fancy it needs but an act to be out of the coil and clamor forever. But this is a wile of the devil's. To the end, spring winds will sow disquietude, passing faces leave a regret behind them, and the whole world keep calling and calling in their ears. 43

Stevenson's words in this case are but one aspect of the old, old proverb, "Cucullus non facit monachum - A cowl does not make a monk," but they ring with a fulness of truth one would expect to find only in some tried-and-true instruction for novices. So too does the superior's counsel to the hermit of Franchard echo of Monastier,⁴⁴ while whatever criticism or scornful allusion to

41 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 198

42 " " " " " " 7, 1, 218

43 " Virginibus Puerisque, 6, 1, 23. It is true this essay was written before the visit to the monastery. However, it was revised after the visit. To know the extent of this revision of Times Literary Supplement, March 7, 1918.

44 R.L.S., Treasure of Franchard, 1, 2, 269

49
medieval monasticism there is in the Treasure of Franchard is put
on the lips of a pompous atheist where it has an effect opposite
that of its intrinsic meaning.⁴⁵ In the Wrecker we have allusion
to something that closely resembles religious detachment,⁴⁶ and
there is reference to French monastic history in his notebooks.⁴⁷

Even as late as In the South Seas, Stevenson, remarking the
social position of women on the islands, recalls that the "first
ladies" of medieval countries were always granted exemption for
themselves and their entourages from the penalties for entering
Papal cloister.⁴⁸ It was, doubtless, a point he remembered from
his stay at Monastier and shows what the monks taught him he never
forgot.

In Olalla (1885), the story in which he deals with the prob-
lem of pain and mortification, whose moral is that "pleasure is
not an end, but an accident, that pain is the choice of the
magnanimous, and that it is best to suffer all things and do well,"
the sentiment is so lofty, the spirit so alien to Stevenson's own

45 R.L.S., Treasure of Franchard, 1, 2, 243
1, 2, 253
1, 2, 257
1, 2, 269

46 Balfour 131

47 R.L.S., Selections from his Notebook, XIII (South Seas Edition),
312

48 R.L.S., In the South Seas, XX (South Seas Edition), 47

philosophy of life, that we know the unacknowledged insight gained at Monastier is shining through the pages.⁴⁹ In fact, Stevenson felt uncomfortable preaching such a view of pain. He could not feel he was being frank in voicing such a doctrine. "Olalla⁵⁰ is false," he wrote to a friend.

Finally, one of the most hauntingly beautiful passages in all of Stevenson, written, it is said, in a paroxysm of melancholy, comes to a climax with a figure which we suspect is compounded from his recollection of the Hermits of Marco Sadeler, the book of enchanting prints which he pored over every Sunday of his childish years, and the memory of Father Apollinaris emerging from the woodland of Monastier to welcome Stevenson to the convent. The passage is a dreamy, poetic transport, deserving of reproduction here. The style is characteristic.

I feel I desire to go out of the house, and begin life anew in the cool blue night; never to come back here; never, never. Only to go on forever by sunny day and grey day, by bright night and foul, by high-way and by-way, town and hamlet, until somewhere by a roadside or in some clean inn clean death opened his arms to me and took me to his quiet heart forever. If soon, good; if late, well then, late - there would be many a long bright mile behind me, many a goodly, many a serious sight; I should die ripe and

49 R.L.S., Olalla, 1, 2, 233

50 For an interesting discussion of Olalla's significance in English literature, reference may be made to Robert Sencourt, Carmelite and Poet, Macmillan, N.Y., 1944, 221.

That R.L.S. was too Presbyterian to feel at home in moralizing of this genre is obvious from his comments quoted in Brown, 182.

perfect, and take my garnered experience with me into the cool, sweet earth. For I have died already and survived a death; I have heard the train of mourners come weeping and go laughing away again. And when I was alone there in the kirk-yard, and the birds began to grow familiar with the grave-stone, I have begun to laugh also; and laughed and laughed until the night-flowers came out above me. I have survived myself, and somehow live on, a curious changeling, a merry ghost; and do not mind living on, finding it not unpleasant; only had rather, a thousandfold, died and been done with the whole damned show forever. It is a strange feeling at first to survive yourself, but one gets used to that as to most things. Et puis, is it not one's own fault? Why did not one lie still in the grave? Why rise again among men's troubles and toils, where the wicked wag their shock beards and hound the weary out to labor? When I was safe in prison, and stone walls and iron bars were an hermitage about me, who told me to burst the mild constraint and go forth where the sun dazzles, and the wind pierces, and the loud world sounds and jangles all through the weary day? I mind an old print of a hermit coming out of a great wood towards evening and shading his bleared eyes to see all the kingdoms of the earth before his feet, where towered cities and castled hills, and stately rivers, and good corn lands make one great chorus of temptation for his weak spirit, and I think I am the hermit, and would to God I had dwelt ever in the wood of penitence... 51

Thus, in dealing with the spirit of the Travels with a Donkey we have, by noting parallels, also included pertinent points from other relevant works of this French period. There remain but a few stray threads from the "Travels" to gather up. Their latter

51 Quoted in Doris N. Dalgish, Presbyterian Pirate, Oxford U. Press, London, 1937, 22

section, touching on the Catholic-Protestant difficulties of southern France, ⁵² is interesting in so far as Stevenson seems quite impartial in his treatment of the two factions. This impartiality indicates progress in his endeavor to throw off his false preconceptions.

Besides, in this last portion of the "Travels" we again come across an open acknowledgement of bias on the part of Stevenson. ⁵³ He seems more and more to realize that his nature thus far has not been formed to sympathize with anything Catholic. His lack of Catholic sympathies is the subject of a long paragraph. This is significant in one who held that "a fault known is a fault cured to the strong; but to the weak it is a fetter riveted." ⁵⁴ Stevenson meant to cure the fault as far as he was able.

We may briefly summarize what we have learned in our study of his early background and the French days. Brought up in a Presbyterian environment, Stevenson gave up his belief in the family religion and in all religion. Fleeming Jenkin started him on his way to a more reasonable point of view, gave him a certain tolerance towards religion in general.

However, we see that when Stevenson came to France, though he had thrown over Calvinism, its concomitant hostility towards

52 R.L.S., Travels with a Donkey, 7, 1, 235, etc.
 53 " " " " " " 7, 1, 257
 54 Colvin, Letters, p xxxv

work. He believed that the monks were not doing enough in a world where there was yet so much to accomplish.

On the whole, though, it is impossible to deny that so far he has made great progress in removing his bias, even though some of it remains. After all, we cannot expect an instantaneous, complete revolution of sentiment, since all preconceived notions have, generally speaking, many of the characteristics of spunky Modestine.

CHAPTER IV
IN THE SOUTH SEAS

Stevenson's French background, though it throws much light on his later defence of Damien, is, nevertheless, not as relevant as the facts of that period of his life which we shall presently consider. In taking up this next period we pass over the three years from 1884 to 1887 immediately following those he spent on the Continent. During this time his home was at Bournemouth, where his residence was marked by some of his more famous work, such as Kidnapped and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. However, if we except his Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, whose special pertinence to our topic we have noted in the second chapter, this period is not remarkable either for Catholic contacts or for direct expressions of his attitude towards the Church. Nor is the year he spent in the United States significant in this respect.

The time of his life which immediately concerns us is that which follows June 28, 1888, the day on which he sailed from San Francisco to cruise among the islands of the Southern Pacific.

An interesting fact to discover is that his meeting an American Catholic convert, Charles Warren Stoddard, during his visit to San Francisco many years before was the cause of his

initial impulse to see the South Seas. Stoddard, who later became Professor of English at the Catholic University of America, was himself a charming essayist, and his South Sea Idylls¹ stimulated the roving spirit of his friend from Scotland.

We are not concerned with the events of the whole of Stevenson's life; hence, our account of his travels themselves in the South Seas will be of the sketchiest, though the adventures of the voyage may be read with interest elsewhere. He sailed from San Francisco on June 28, 1888 for Oceania. July 28 his yacht arrived at the Island of Nukahiva in the Marquesas. Here he remained six weeks, and the events of his visit are narrated in Part I of In the South Seas. In September he was in the Paumotus (the visit is described in Part II), and in October he arrived at the Society Islands where he stayed two months, leaving at Christmas. The first six months of 1889 he spent in Honolulu, and it was in May of that year that he visited the leper settlement at Molokai. Three letters written for the New York Sun described the colony of Father Damien. In the South Seas Edition of Stevenson's works, they are printed at the end of Volume XX, In the South Seas.

June again saw him embarking on travels described in Parts III and IV of the same work. It was during this trip while

1 Balfour, 151. Also Balfour's introduction to the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, W.J. Black Co., N.Y., n.d., 13

stopping in February at Sydney, Australia, that he wrote the
 2
 Damien letter.

The fact that Stevenson's prejudice lessened still more in the interval between his departure from the monastery of Our Lady of the Snows and his assuming the task of defending Damien's honor can doubtless be ascribed to his repeated contacts with Catholic missionaries scattered over the islands of Oceania. His volume of travel essays, In the South Seas, is sufficient testimony to the frequency and cordiality of these contacts. It almost seems that one notices greater understanding as the essays progress, and this impression is verified by a statement we find elsewhere in Stevenson: "I went there," he tells us, "with a great prejudice against missions, but that prejudice was soon annihilated...The missionary is a great beneficent factor."³ Even if we had only this book from which to judge, we should see that in the beginning of his South Sea travels Stevenson was not in favor of the missionary activity, no matter what religion it endeavored to propagate. He inclines to accept rumors and is eager to pass judgment, sight unseen, on conditions which, to do them justice, he ought to inspect personally.

Thus he objects to what he thinks is excessive rigor on the

2 Clayton Hamilton, On the Trail of Stevenson, Doubleday, Page, and Co., N.Y., 1923, 156
 3 Rosaline Masson, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, Fred. Stokes, N.Y., 1923, 314

part of both Catholic and non-Catholic missionaries, the latter in Mangareva, the former in Hawaii. It is connection with his observations on island depopulation that he mentions his disapproval of missionary work, noting that wherever some changes in the manner of living have been introduced by ministers of religion, mortality increases. He continues:

We are here brought face to face with one of the difficulties of the missionary. In Polynesian islands he easily obtains pre-eminent authority; the king becomes his maire du palais; he can proscribe, he can command; and the temptation is ever towards too much. Thus (by all accounts) the Catholics in Mangareva, and thus (to my knowledge) the Protestants in Hawaii, have rendered life to a more or less degree unliveable to their converts.⁴

Several things can be remarked in this comment. First, Stevenson accepts on mere hearsay reputed facts about Catholic methods. This hints at preconceived bias, a thing which we have seen he later frankly acknowledged. Secondly, he is careful to follow up his criticism with evidences of some understanding.

It is easy to blame the missionary. But it is his business to make the changes. It is surely his business, for example, to prevent war; and yet I have instanced war itself as one of the elements of health.⁵

Thirdly, in this matter Stevenson would be consistent. We shall

4 R.L.S., In the South Seas (South Seas Edition), 39

5 Ibid.

see that one of his main causes for admiration of the Catholic missionaries was his eventual discovery that they did not, as he previously had thought, try to change the people's ways more than necessary, that they made allowances for the faults of race and environment, they bent their influence towards strengthening the power of the chiefs rather than towards diminishing it, and finally, took up the native people's way of life as their own, unhampered, as priests were, by wife or family. Especially did he find these things admirable in Bishop Dordillon and Father Damien, as we shall discover.

In Chapter VII, Part I, of In the South Seas we find an account of Stevenson's visit to the lay brother's school for boys at Hatiheu. The poor old man had been teaching on the island for thirty years. His pupils, sixty in number, ranged from the ages of six to fifteen years. As we consider his record of teaching the natives for three decades with (to use his own phrase) point
de resultats,⁶ we are lost in admiration for the persevering zeal of the holy old man. Not so Stevenson. For him, the old brother's course of studies was "dreary"; he was not making enough of his opportunity to give the boys a real education; too much time was spent in making the boys "pious." Stevenson was even wroth at the simple old man for expecting the consolation of heaven after such a long period of hard, seemingly fruitless work.⁷ It makes us

6 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 53
 7 " " " " " " 54

wonder whether the critic himself could have persevered enthusiastically for thirty years with only supernatural motivation, or only charitable, philanthropic purpose, point, however, de resultats. But we must remember in this regard, as we have more than once observed, that Stevenson could never favor the merit-in-heaven motive.

The methods of discipline and instruction used at the lay brother's school seem to have suffered by comparison with those used at the nuns' school for the girls of the district at Tai-o-hae. The "brisk, housewifely sisters"⁸ impressed him greatly. We recall the nun in Noyon Cathedral had not found such favor with him. The sisters at Tai-o-hae seem to have changed his attitude towards the usefulness of the religious orders of women. Now the sisters presented a "picture of efficiency, airness, and spirited and mirthful occupation that should shame them [the lay brothers] into cheerier methods."⁹ Stevenson loved the happiness of the girls' school, and ventured the opinion that the system of the nuns might "save the race."¹⁰ He believed that the boys' school, teachers, pupils, and all, was marching to its death with the rest of the population whose habits were changed by the white man.

At Hatiheu, too, Stevenson saw the poverty of the clergy, which was a happy contrast with the wealth of the gendarmarie.

8 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 54

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

The priests were "sparsely subsisting on their rations," while
 "you will never dine with a gendarme without smacking your lips."
 Perhaps this should be noticed, since fine living and good food at
 Hyde's address on Beretania Street, Honolulu, were points which
 Stevenson did not hesitate to use tellingly when the time for
 writing his defence of Damien came round.¹²

In all these observations about missionary activity on the island Stevenson was trying to be objective, and he reaped the special reward of this virtue by being able gradually to change his misconceptions about the rôle of the missionary in Oceania. But, looking at his objectivity, if we are disappointed in his criticism of the lay brother's school, we ought to be especially happy at his delight in the one conducted by sisters. His praise is the result of impartial investigation. In themselves, though, the two contacts do not indicate overmuch. One is balanced by the other. Perhaps the only significance is in regard to the nuns, for Stevenson here records for the first time a favorable view of

11 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 55

12 Beretania Street seems inevitably linked in Stevenson's mind with luxury, comfort, and wealth. Thus it is that in The Bottle Imp, when fortune and success come to one of the characters, Stevenson settles him in a house on Beritania (sic) Street. The Bottle Imp was written before the letter to Hyde, but after his visit to Hyde's home.

There is no reason to connect Hyde's name with the evil counterpart of Dr. Jekyll. Stevenson had written this famous story long before.

their work, so efficient and cheerful. On Molokai the impression would be deepened and he would break forth into even more vocal praise.

The contact with the teaching lay brother did not much affect his permanent attitude towards men religious, as is evident in the next few pages. Here we run across the first of a series of charming pen pictures of Catholic missionaries in the South Seas. We meet the architect lay brother, Michel.

It was while he admiringly inspected the church at Hatiheu that Stevenson conceived the hope of meeting its clever designer, for he thought he perceived in his work that

secret charm of medieval sculpture; that combination of the childish courage of the amateur, attempting all things, like the school boy on his slate, with the manly perseverance of the artist who does not know when he is conquered. ¹³

Stevenson was unquestionably delighted to become thoroughly acquainted with Michel. This was not difficult, for an open, candid simplicity was one of Michel's outstanding characteristics; the artistic turn of mind, moreover, which was so pronounced in both the writer and the architect, was a strong bond between them. Stevenson guessed that Michel was

13 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 57

a type of all that is most sound in France, with a broad, clever, honest, humorous countenance, an eye very large and bright, and a strong and healthy body inclining to obesity. But that his blouse was black and his face shaven clean, you might pick such a man today, toiling cheerfully in his own patch of vines, from half a dozen provinces of France; and yet he always had for me a haunting resemblance to an old kind friend of my boyhood, whom I name in case any of my readers would share with me that memory - Dr. Paul, of the West Kirk. 14

After their first long chat about Brother Michel's churches, his gargoyles and his angels, a conversation which Stevenson long remembered, he had "occasion to see much of this excellent man." Brother Michel sailed with the writer the ninety miles from Tai-o-hae to Hiva-oa. There he was, as Stevenson tells us, his "cicerone and [lest this sound too condescending] patron."¹⁵ Michel's ability, spirit, and history are delicately sketched in a short paragraph which closes the chapter:

Michel Blanc had been a carpenter by trade; had made money and retired, supposing his active days quite over; and it was only when he found idleness dangerous that he placed his capital and acquirements at the service of the missions. He became their carpenter, mason, architect, and engineer; added sculpture to his accomplishments, and was famous for his skill in gardening. He wore an enviable air of having found a port from life's contentions and lying there strongly anchored; went about his business with a jolly simplicity; complained of no lack of results - perhaps shyly thinking his own statuary result enough; and was altogether a pattern of the missionary layman. 16

14 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 57
 15 " " " " " 59
 16 " " " " " 59

It is easy to see why Stevenson would understand more of the Church through the life of such an active, artistic nature than in the contemplatives of Monastier. It was in accord with his own philosophy of activity. In Michel he could even admire a certain kind of retirement from the world, a thing which is more difficult to understand, considering his previous attitude and forceful expression of it. Michel, indeed, was the first of Stevenson's Catholic South Sea friends. He was not the last.

Also in Part I of In the South Seas is a narrative about Bishop Dordillon, Vicar Apostolic of the Marquesas. The name occurs several times in the text. Finally in Chapter X, "A Portrait and a Story," we are told just who the Bishop is. The portrait is that of Bishop Dordillon.

Stevenson admired Bishop Dordillon in much the same way that he did Damien. Like Damien, the bishop had already died before Stevenson visited the islands where he worked; close inquiries on the part of the author, however, had many of the effects that an intimate acquaintance with the ordinary might have achieved.

The bishop, a strong character, yet prudent and gentle, was the cause of many improvements in living conditions on the Marquesas. His influence with the natives was almost boundless, and that he did not abuse his authority is evident from the way he maintained his position with undiminished dignity when the French civil power which had supported him was withdrawn. His

span of life was the "brief golden age of the Marquesas."¹⁷

Stevenson was fascinated by what he heard about the old bishop, his mild, fatherly methods with the natives, and his genius in being able to observe the niceties of Polynesian etiquette.

It is not feasible to repeat here all that Stevenson crowds into half a chapter about the bishop. Salient, relevant points, none the less, can be noted. He is at pains to excuse the seeming rigor of Bishop Dordillon in his enforcement of Church law:

He made no distinction against heretics, with whom he was on friendly terms; but the rules of his own Church he would see observed; and once at least he had a white man clapped in jail for the desecration of a saint's day. But even this rigor so intolerable to laymen, so irritating to Protestants, could not shake his popularity. We shall best conceive him by examples nearer home; we may all have known some divine of the old school in Scotland, a liberal Sabbatarian, a stickler for the letter of the law, who was yet in private modest, innocent, genial, and mirthful. Much such a man, it seems, was Father Dordillon. And his popularity bore a test yet stronger. He had the name, and probably deserved it, of a shrewd man in business and one that made the mission pay. Nothing so much stirs up resentment as the inmixture in commerce of religious bodies; but even rival traders spoke well of Monseigneur. 18

We see here that Stevenson does not blame the bishop for his rigor. In the Damien letter he went even a step further and showed how without a certain stubborn quality missionaries would never have

17 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 77

18 Ibid.

achieved any good.

Now, taking a more positively affirmative attitude than he did at first, when speaking of the missionary effect on depopulation, Stevenson highly praises the mission endeavors of both Protestants and Catholics in the islands; "the best and most useful whites in the Pacific" is how he terms them.¹⁹

There follows an interesting discussion on the benefits of missionaries having wives. While admitting that "the married missionary, taking him at his best, may offer to the native what he is much in want of - a higher picture of domestic life" - Stevenson points out that in many ways the wife of a missionary constitutes a barrier between him and his people, tending "to keep him in touch with Europe and out of touch with Polynesia, to perpetuate, and even to ingrain, parochial decencies best forgotten."²⁰ Considering all the aspects of the question, Stevenson thinks that "the Catholics have sometimes the advantage." So it was that a man like Bishop Dordillon could devote himself so completely to the interests of the natives - a thing for which Stevenson came to admire him greatly. Unhampered by wife or children,²¹ this "eminently human" prelate was able

to live among the natives like an elder brother; to follow where he could; to lead

19 R.L.S., in the South Seas, 78
 20 " " " " " , 79
 21 " " " " " , 81

where it was necessary; never to drive; and to encourage the growth of new habits, instead of violently rooting up the old." 22

Indeed, the "temperate and sagacious mind" ²³ of the old French bishop found great sympathy in the heart of the young Scots ²⁴ writer.

Another of Stevenson's island acquaintances was Pere Simeon, ²⁵ his "scholar-guide" on at least one ramble over the island. His was the temperance and prudence of another Dordillon, and he was to Stevenson the exemplification of Catholic good sense. This is evident, for, having discussed the awful horrors of cannibalism, Stevenson first observes that it is easy

to understand, if not to excuse, those fervours of self-righteous old ship-captains, who would man their guns, and ²⁶ open fire in passing, on a cannibal island.

Then he muses, as he stands in the place of cannibal execution with Pere Simeon at his side:

And yet it was strange. There, upon the spot as I stood under the high, dripping vault of the forest, with the young priest on the one hand, in his kilted gown, and the bright-eyed Marquesan schoolboy on the other, the whole business appeared infinitely distant, and fallen in the cold perspective and dry

22 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 79

23 " " " " " " , 93

24 In the following chapter, XI, Stevenson has an amusing story of a pig on board his yacht, the Casco, whose name was Catholicus, because he was a particular present from the Catholics of the village, and who early displayed...courage and friendliness."

25 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 91. 26 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 93

light of history. The bearing of the priest perhaps affected me. He smiled; he jested with the boy, the heir both of these feasters and their meat; he clapped his hands and gave me a stave of the old, ill-omened chorus. Centuries might have come and gone since this slimy theatre was last in operation; and I beheld the place with no more emotion than I might have felt in visiting Stonehenge. In visiting Hiva-oa, as I began to appreciate that the thing was still within the bounds of possibility that I might hear the cry of the trapped victim, my historic attitude entirely failed, and I was sensible of some repugnance for the natives. But here, too, the priests maintained their jocular attitude: rallying the cannibals as upon an eccentricity rather absurd than horrible; seeking, I should say, to shame them from the practice by good-natured ridicule, as we shame a child from stealing sugar. We may here recognise the temperate and sagacious mind of Bishop Dordillon. 27

To Stevenson, as to all of us, prudence is an imposing quality. It always engenders respect.

It was, in fact, the intelligent sympathy of the priest-missionaries for the natives that drew on them in turn the understanding of Stevenson. In the whole of Stevenson's writings there is perhaps no picture so charming, so full of praise and respect, as that of Pere Simeon. It is included in his notes, not in the South Sea volume. Here again he indicates that his anticipation of the missionaries was contrary to the reality which he found:

27 Ibid.

Pere Simeon, the small frail figure in the black robe drawing near under the palms; the girlish, kind and somewhat pretty face under the straw hat; the strong rustic, Gascon accent; the sudden lively doffing of the hat, at once so French and so ecclesiastical; he was a man you could not look upon without vision of his peasant ancestors, worthy folk, sitting at home to-day in France, and rejoiced (I hope often) with letters from their boy. Down we sat together under the eaves of the house of Taipi-Kikino, and were presently deep in talk. I had feared to meet a missionary, feared to find the narrowness and the self-sufficiency that deface their publications, that too often disgrace their behaviour. There was no fear of it here; Pere Simeon admired these natives as I do myself, admired them with spiritual envy; the superior of his congregation had said to him on his departure: "You are going among a people more civilised than we - peutetre plus civilises que nous-memes": in spite of which warning, having read some books of travel on his voyage, he came to these shores (like myself) expecting to find them peopled with lascivious monkeys. Good Bishop Dordillon had opened his eyes: "There are nothing but lies in books of travel," said the bishop.

What then was Pere Simeon doing here? The question rose in my mind, and I could see that he read the thought. Truly they were a people, on the whole, of a mind far liker Christ's than any of the races of Europe; no spiritual life, almost no family life, but a kindness, a generosity, a readiness to forgive, without parallel; to some extent that was the bishop's doing; some of it had been since undone; death runs so busy in their midst, total extinction so instantly impended, that it seemed a hopeless task to combat their vices; as they were, they would go down in the abyss of things past; the watchers were already looking at the clock; Pere Simeon's business was the visitation of the sick, to smooth the pillows of this dying family of man. 28

In all that he wrote about the missionaries, Stevenson was trying to be objective; a priori, he was not at all biased in favor of the Church's work there. Hence, if his book, In the South Seas, contains much praise of things Catholic, it is because in fact he did find much that was praiseworthy. Since his contacts with the missionaries were so pleasant, so full of mutual appreciation and respect, there is no question about the fact that the Church rose immeasurably in his estimation.

Even when he praised, however, Stevenson praised as a Protestant, that is, from the outside, not as one almost a Catholic. This is wonderfully exemplified by a description of another clerical host of his, Father Orens. In spite of his gentle praise for the old man, it is obvious that Stevenson looks on the priest and his work as a Protestant would look on them, understanding though he was.

Father Orens, a wonderful octogenarian, his frame scarce bowed, the fire of his eye undimmed, has lived, and trembled, and suffered in this place since 1843. Again and again, when Moipu had made cocoa-brandy, he has been driven from his house into the woods. "A mouse that dwelt in a cat's ear" had a more easy resting place; and yet, I have never seen a man that bore less mark of years. He must show us the church, still decorated with the bishop's artless ornaments of paper - the last work of industrious old hands, and the last earthly amusement of a man that was much of a hero. [Bishop Dordillon] In the sacristy we must see his sacred vessels, and, in particular, a vestment which was a "vrai curiosite," because it had been given by a gendarme. To the Protestant there is always something embarrassing in the eagerness with which grown and holy men regard

these trifles; but it was touching and pretty to see Orens, his aged eyes shining in his head, display his sacred treasures. ²⁹

And so, because of his praise, it would be a mistake to think Stevenson Catholic in either feeling or sentiment. We may add another point in proof of this, namely, Stevenson's persevering lack of knowledge about the Catholic devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the spirit that lies behind it, and this even though he had passed her shrines all over the world. We early noticed how he rejected a suggestion that he visit, during the "Travels," Our Lady of Pradelles, who, he said superiorly, quoting the French peasant woman, "performed many miracles, although she was of wood." ³⁰ Further on in his "Travels" he passed a wayside shrine to Our Lady of All Graces, ³¹ and another situated over the ruins of the castle at Luc. ³² A white statue of the Mother of God directed him to the very home of Our Lady of the Snows, ³³ and in the monastery garden a black madonna drew his attention. ³⁴ Mere contact with these devotional expressions of the Catholic cultus of the Blessed Virgin could not in themselves generate understanding. Thus it is that even after so many years, long after the days of his "Puritanical obtuseness," here in the South Seas,

29	R.L.S.,	<u>In the South Seas</u> ,	111		
30	"	<u>Travels with a Donkey</u> ,	7, 1,	177	
31	"	" " " "	7, 1,	191	
32	"	" " " "	7, 1,	194	
33	"	" " " "	7, 1,	198	
34	"	" " " "	7, 1,	202	

Michel's reference to his statue of Our Lady (a source of pride for him) gets scant attention,³⁵ and Bishop Dordillon's loving zeal in setting the image of his queen high on the cliff overlooking the sea completely baffles Stevenson. On the one hand he saw the childlike devotion; other hand, the wise Bishop Dordillon. How reconcile the two?

It is here that an overhanging and tip-tilted horn, a good seamark for Hatiheu, bursts naked from the verdure of the climbing forest, and breaks down shoreward in steep taluses and cliffs. From the edge of one of the highest, perhaps seven hundred or a thousand feet above the beach, a Virgin looks insignificantly down, like a poor lost doll, forgotten there by a giant child. This laborious symbol of the Catholics is always strange to the Protestants; we conceive with wonder that men should think it worth while to toil so many days, and clamber so much about the face of precipices, for an end that makes us smile; and yet I believe it was the wise Bishop Dordillon who chose the place, and I know that those who had a hand in the enterprise look back with pride upon its vanquished dangers. 36

This whole incident has an interest because we may here see concretely exemplified the general process by which Stevenson's prejudice lessened because of his personal contacts with the missionaries. In themselves the Catholic doctrines seem foolish and without meaning to him. He has been taught this from his very youth, from the days he spent on Cummy's knee. And yet his mind reasons that sensible men believe in these doctrines.

35 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 57
36 " " " " " " , 56

73

Is it logical to think they would concern themselves with what is ridiculous?

So we see his mind working over the problem of the statue of the Blessed Virgin on the cliff. By itself and from all that he has been taught, the madonna seems to be a laborious symbol, and the dangers involved in placing it high on the cliff were dared "for an end that makes us smile." On the other hand, Stevenson reasons that "it was the wise Bishop Dordillon who chose the place." Thus, his respect for Dordillon unconsciously laps over into Dordillon's creed. His unstated conclusion is that perhaps the whole affair is not so silly after all.

But, on the whole, we conclude with a recent writer who also sees in this last incident the fact that Stevenson would not have felt at home in the Catholic religion,³⁷ that he retained at least a fraction of the "anti-Catholic prejudice with which "Cummy" had infected his childhood."³⁸ Without doubt, though, his misunderstanding was lessened by his South Sea contacts with Catholic priests and religious, for it is needless to say that the vigorous work of their vocation would find great sympathy in one whose philosophy was external activity.

We ought not be too disappointed that his prejudice did not

37 Dalgish, 134

38 Ibid.

entirely vanish, for we have to admit that each one of us has an ⁷⁴
unwarranted, preconceived notion about one thing or another, some
queer idea that we take with us all through life without altering
it as much as Stevenson did his. In this sense what he says in a
dedicatory note to the "Travels" is eminently true: "We are all
travelers in what John Bunyan calls the wilderness of this world
- all, too, travelers with a donkey." ³⁹

CHAPTER V

STEVENSON ON MOLOKAI

On May 6, 1889 Stevenson began his visit to Molokai, a visit made memorable by his spirited defence of Damien. From afar he thought the windward coast of the island "gloomy and abrupt,"¹ but what were his feelings when he first set foot on Molokai?

The ideas of deformity and living decay have been burdensome to my imagination since the nightmares of childhood; and when I at last beheld, lying athwart the sunrise, the leper promontory and the bare town of Kalaupapa, when the first boat set forth laden with patients; when it was my turn to follow in the second, seated by two Sisters on the way to their brave employment; when we drew near the landing-stairs and saw them thronged with the dishonored images of God, horror and cowardice worked in the marrow of my bones.

The coming of the Sisters had perhaps attracted an unusual attendance. To many of those who "meddle with cold iron" in the form of pens, any design of writing appears excuse sufficient for the most gross intrusion - perhaps less fortunate, I have never attained to this philosophy - shame seized upon me to be there, among the many suffering and few helpers, useless and a spy; and I made my escape out of the throng and set forth on foot for Kalawao. 2

1 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 364. The three letters about Molokai did not form part of the original volume.

2 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 378

Thus he wrote for the public. A letter to Mrs. Stevenson gives us a few more details on his thoughts as he landed with the two sisters.

I do not know how it would have been with me had the sisters not been there. My horror of the horrible is about my weakest point; but the moral loveliness at my elbow blotted all else out; and when I found that one of them was crying, poor soul, under her veil, I cried a little myself; then I felt as right as a trivet, only a little crushed to be there so uselessly. I thought it was a sin and a shame she should feel unhappy; I turned round to her, and said something like this: "Ladies, God Himself is here to give you welcome. I'm sure it is good for me to be beside you; I hope it will be blessed to me; I thank you for myself and the good you do me." It seemed to cheer her up; but indeed I had scarce said it when we were at the landing-stairs, and there was a great crowd, hundreds, of (God save us!) pantomime masks in poor human flesh, waiting to receive the sisters and the new patients. 3

As it was the case with him in every other part of the world, so too on Molokai it was not long before Stevenson was making himself at home. He was to a large extent on his own, being a lone visitor and sole occupant of the Guest House at Kalawao. As he himself has said,

Singular indeed is the isolation of the visitor in the Lazaretto. No patient is suffered to approach his place of residence. His room is tidied out by a clean helper during the day and while he is abroad. He returns at night to solitary walls. For a

3 Colvin, Letters, II, 183

while a bell sounds at intervals from the hospital; silence succeeds, only pointed by the humming of the surf or the chirp of crickets. He steps to his door; perhaps a light still shines in the hospital; all else is dark. He returns and sits by his lamp and the crowding experiences besiege his memory; sights of pain in a land of disease and disfigurement, bright examples of fortitude and kindness, moral beauty, physical horror, intimately knit. He must be a man very little impressionable if he recall not these hours with an especial poignancy; he must be a man either very virtuous or very dull, if they were not hours of self-review and vain aspirations after good. ⁴

His eight days on the island he spent observing the work of the priests, brother , and sisters, in seeking out the history of Molokai from its earliest days, in finding out all there was to know about Damien, who had died only the previous month.

There was some external exercise for him. He wrote,

I used to ride over from Kalawao to Kalaupapa (about three miles across the promontory, the cliff-wall, ivied with forest and yet inaccessible from steepness, on my left), go to the Sisters' home which is a miracle of neatness, play a game of croquet with seven leper girls (90° in the shade), get a little old-maid meal served me by the Sisters, and ride home again, tired enough, but not too tired. ⁵

We may speak first of all of his relations with the sisters, since they were the ones who saw most of him, it seems, while he

⁴ R.L.S., In the South Seas, 368
⁵ Colvin, Letters, II, 187

was on the island. They made up a large part of that moral beauty so intimately knit with physical horror that Stevenson remarked. They were, incidentally, Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis from St. Anthony's Convent, Syracuse, New York. Arriving in the Hawaiian Islands November 8, 1883, they worked first in Honolulu and did not go to Molokai until several years later.⁶

Stevenson had seen nuns before, in France and in the South Seas. His mental image of the "fat nun who played marshal" in the procession at Noyon Cathedral had been eventually supplanted by nuns who were quite popular with their charges, by "sisters with a little guard of pupils" (Who is playing marshal now?) whom he had seen in the Marquesas,⁷ by "brisk and housewifely" nuns who were as neat, "as fresh as a lady at a ball."⁸

That the sisters found favor in Stevenson's eyes is not strange. Even Hyde when he visited the island in 1885 before the sisters arrived had called them indispensable for any success in caring for the lepers.⁹ Stevenson in his letter to Hyde said they were "the best individual addition" of all the improvements following Damien's death.¹⁰ Stevenson and Hyde were at one on this point.

6 Ann Roos, Man of Molokai, J.B. Lippincott, N.Y., 1943

7 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 112

8 " " " " " " , 54, 79

9 Dutton, 107. This book has a brief biography of Hyde, based for the most part on a memoir written by his son. The contradiction between his attitude immediately after visiting the island in 1885 and that given expression in his letter to Gage is hard to explain.

10 The Damien letter, 39

So much does Stevenson appreciate their work that in a letter to his friend, Sidney Colvin, he proceeds to do a little begging for the nuns:

The girls all have dolls, and love dressing them. You who know so many ladies delicately clad, and they who know so many dressmakers, please make it known it would be an acceptable gift to send scraps for doll dressmaking to the Reverend Sister Maryanne (sic), Bishop Home, Kalaupapa, Molokai, Hawaiian Islands. 11

On their part, the sisters were solicitous about the health of their distinguished visitor, himself a sick man. Mother Marianne found it necessary to tell him to be easier on himself, for he persisted in playing such strenuous games with the leper children that he became at times completely exhausted and would have to lie upon the ground. Mother Marianne was worried. "What could we do," she complained, "should he have a hemorrhage in this dreadful place where he could not have proper medicine, food or care? He is not thinking of himself, but is determined those children must know how to play before he leaves them!"¹² "It is not right for you to exert yourself," she told him, "It may be dangerous in your condition."¹³ Indeed, her motherly solicitude for his health found a warmly grateful response in the heart of Stevenson.

We have anticipated earlier in this study the one disagreement Stevenson had with the nuns of Molokai. It was a question

11 Colvin, Letters, II, 187
12 Farrow, 204
13 " 203

of motives:

I have seen sights that cannot be told, and heard stories that cannot be repeated; yet I never admired my poor race so much, nor (strange as it may seem) loved life more than in the settlement. A horror of moral beauty broods over the place: that's like bad Victor Hugo, but it is the only way I can express the sense that lived with me all these days. And this even though it was in great part Catholic, and my sympathies flew with never so much difficulty as towards Catholic virtues. The pass-book kept with heaven stirs me to anger and laughter. One of the sisters calls the place "the ticket office to heaven." Well, what is the odds? They do their darg, and do it with a kindness and efficiency incredible; and we must take folk's virtues as we find them, and love the better part. 14

With Stevenson the question of motives has risen again and again. We shall say a word more about them in dealing with Brother Dutton. But, aside from the question of motives, the passage quoted above is notable for the fact that Stevenson here frankly claims to be out of sympathy with Catholicism, though he admires Catholics very much. The frank expression of his feelings was completely justified in the privacy of a personal letter; it is not recorded that he ever openly voiced such feeling while on the island. He was too courteous, too much of a gentleman for that.

On the contrary, when he was about to leave Molokai and the sisters asked him for his autograph, he gave it to them with the following lines preceding it. "Infinite pity," incidentally, is

14 Colvin, Letters, II, 187

the phrase he uses in his letter to Colvin to describe the
 15
 place.

To the Reverend Sister Marianne
 Matron of the Bishop Home, Kalaupapa

To see the infinite pity of this place,
 The mangled limb, the devastated face,
 The innocent sufferers smiling at the rod,
 A fool were tempted to deny his God.

He sees, and shrinks; but if he look again,
 Lo, beauty springing from the breast of pain!
 He marks the sisters on the painful shores,
 And even a fool is silent and adores. 16

After Stevenson left the island, he sent the sisters a piano
 17
 for their children's home.

Brother Dutton, the famous assistant of Father Damien, was
 also one of Stevenson's Molokai friends. Not too much is told us
 by Stevenson about his relations with the lay brother, probably
 because Dutton was too busy to spend a great deal of time with
 him. In fact, one of the few times the writer mentions being
 18
 with Dutton was while the lay brother went on with his work.

From Dutton himself, though, we learn more about his acquaint-
 ance with the visiting writer. Over thirty years afterward he
 wrote a note about the visit for an ardent Stevensonian requesting
 it. In it he tells about Stevenson's coming over to the part of

15 Ibid.

16 Rosaline O. Masson, Life of R.L. Stevenson, Fred. A. Stokes,
 N.Y., 1923, 294; also Farrow, 206

17 Farrow, 206

18 In the South Seas, 381

the island where he was working with the lepers, dressing their sores. The busy lay brother had heard of "some writer" on the island, but "did not pay attention to it" until the visit.

He came in the latter part of his week here (on this Island) - I was busy - looked for someone to show him over the place - the old home - saw no one suitable. The crowd with me were having sores dressed. Mr. Stevenson looked cool and pleasant in yachting cap and suit. Name on capband "Casco." I said he would have to take me. He dismounted and we went over the place together, and saw the bad cases. He was sympathetic.

Mr. Stevenson was highly interested, and showed it in sympathetic feeling and expression. Highly strung organization and temperament, quick to feel, quick to love - a very affectionate disposition. Seemed as if he had not completed his plans. He was looking for a place wherein to end his days - weak - inquired as to the danger of contracting leprosy here - how it would be with one advanced with other disease. He knew of course his physical condition, I could only judge partly. His objects were only suggested; but when I knew - later - who he was and more of him, these thoughts seemed more clear - that he was going to put himself away somewhere to spend his dying years.

I heard the same gentle melody, observed the same earnest desire, that had been features of my own aim and hungry search for what might be my greatest good, while trying to do good for others.

Looking over the old place, quaint and strange to him - quaint now to me, as memory goes back to those days, - as we walked and looked, particularly seeing and sympathizing with all of the sick and far advanced cases, and as we talked even to the time of his remounting the horse and

slowly working toward the gate, he seemed more and more interested, and with consummate skill drew from me the motives that controlled me in coming here. He showed a deep sympathy with those motives and inquired very particularly as to the life here.

When I heard he had located at Samoa the thought came back that when he was here he was "looking around." Considering his family, however, he could hardly have settled here even if he ever thought of it. 19

Motives always interested Stevenson, especially the ones with which he could not agree. One of these latter, meriting in heaven, seemed to keep recurring in his life. Thus he discussed it in the case of the woman of Creil, also when dealing with the Trappists at Monastier, again with the sisters on Molokai, now finally with Dutton. He never agreed with motives that had a pass-book-to-heaven quality, as he termed it, in spite of the fact that such a purpose was productive of so many good works of mercy, spiritual (as in the case of the Trappists), corporal (as with the nuns). Now he wonders whether Dutton is animated by the same, and so with "consummate skill" he draws from him his reasons.

Whatever Dutton told him, we know that Stevenson "showed a deep sympathy with these motives." It was the only tactful thing to do in the case; but if Dutton revealed his frank, supernatural purpose in its stark simplicity, we have reason to doubt that

19 Rosaline O. Masson, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, Fred. A. Stokes, N.Y., 1923, 281

Stevenson's hearing it sympathetically was more than courteous respect. We are forced to this conclusion by what he wrote to his wife. On the other hand, it may be that Dutton generalized in stating his motives, feeling that such generic reasons as "trying to do good for others" would be more understandable to one in Stevenson's position.

Indeed, with such mere philanthropy Stevenson could agree wholly. In fact, the knowledge that he was not doing anyone merciful service seemed to prey on his mind all the while he was there. A sense of his own uselessness in relieving the sufferings of the afflicted seems to be the predominant note of his whole description of the landing on Molokai. The thought is revealed explicitly in the firsttwo passages cited in this chapter, and it recurs. "I was happy," Stevenson tells his wife later on in his letter, "only ashamed of myself that I was here for no good." and he confesses that his hours alone on the island were "hours of self-review and vain aspirations after good."

He did what he could, though, and wore himself out teaching the leper children how to play. It was a noble gesture, and we admire its underlying purpose.

Stevenson dreamed of doing more, and he played with the idea

20 cf. R.L.S., In the South Seas, 378

Colvin, Letters, II, 184

21 Colvin, Letters, II, 184

22 R.L.S., In the South Seas, 368

of making his permanent home on Molokai. Dutton refers to this in the notes quoted above, and it is certainly true that at this time Stevenson was looking for a place to spend the remainder of his days. In a letter the lay brother is more explicit on this point:

Stevenson came. Remember his health seemed poor; he was weak, and much depressed over it. Said that Molokai was the most beautiful place he had ever seen - restful, calm. Added had a great mind to come and spend the rest of his years here. Said he doubted if he would live long himself, and might as well die here as anywhere. All this said on first night on Island. Next morning he seemed more cheerful and did not again refer to subject. 23

23 Dutton, lll. Incidentally, Brother Joseph Dutton is to be carefully distinguished from Charles Dutton, whose Samaritans of Molokai is cited in this note and in other places.

Brother Dutton, moreover, must not be thought of as a lay brother in the sense that he was a member of any religious order. His title of "Brother," given him by his friends, has a foundation in the fact that he was, to use his own words, "brother to everybody." (Dutton, 187, 188)

In Chapter III we mentioned the fact that Stevenson would have been surprised to learn that the externally active Damien had long considered entering the Trappist Monastery to devote his strong will and burning soul to the purely contemplative life, a vocation a prayer, the calling which the Scots writer did not at all understand. We wonder if Brother Dutton told Stevenson that he himself had actually lived twenty months with the Trappists at their abbey in Gethsemane, Kentucky!

Stevenson never mentions his urge to stay in letter or note of any kind; he only hints at it with his repeated self-reproaches for not being on the island to help in caring for the lepers, with his vague words about the "hours of self-review and vain aspirations after good" which he experienced while there. Chance made Dutton the only witness.

The whole matter has a significance for us because it shows how profoundly the example of the religious on the island affected the visiting writer. Though Stevenson, six months later perhaps, definitely decided to settle in Samoa instead, we think much more of him for knowing that he was strongly impelled to stay on Molokai. Certainly not selfishness, but practical common sense, told him that such a plan was not workable for a near-invalid. Besides, Stevenson later did his part to help in the work, a part for which he was most fitted as a writer; he defended Damien in a way the world will never forget.

Damien was, of course, the one whom he came to know best of all on the island. The leper priest had died in April, a few weeks before Stevenson's visit in May, but by inquiry the curious Scot came to know Damien, know in same sense that Newman was able to say that he "knew" King David. One of Stevenson's main occupations on the occasion of his stay at Molokai was to learn the truth about the fabulous character of the Belgian missionary and martyr.

His sources of information were many. Dutton tells us that Stevenson asked him "many questions about Damien, showing great interest in all he did." The lay brother told him what he could, "trying to give a true picture of the sainted father." ²⁴ The significant point, however, about Stevenson's later praise of Father Damien is that it was based mostly on material gained from men who had opposed him in life. He did so with a purpose. First, he was already acquainted with Damien's virtues. Second, he was "a little suspicious of Catholic testimony: in no ill sense, but merely because Damien's admirers and disciples were the least likely to be critical." ²⁵

The Damien letter itself gives us the results of these investigations. It has three paragraphs taken from Stevenson's own diary:

A. Damien is dead and already somewhat ungratefully remembered in the field of his labors and sufferings. 'He was a good man, but very officious,' says one. Another tells me he had fallen (as other priests so easily do) into something of the ways and habits of thought of a Kanaka: but he had the wit to recognize the fact, and the good sense to laugh [over] it. A plain man it seems he was; I cannot find he was popular."

B. "After Ragsdale's death [Ragsdale was a famous luna, or overseer, of the unruly settlement] there followed a brief term of office by Father Damien which served only to publish the

24 Ibid.

25 The Damien letter, 29

weakness of that noble man. He was rough in his ways, and he had no control. Authority was relaxed; Damien's life was threatened, and he was soon eager to resign."

C. "Of Damien, I begin to have an idea. He seems to have been a man of the peasant class, certainly of the peasant type: shrewd; ignorant and bigoted, yet with an open mind and capable of receiving and digesting a reproof if it were bluntly administered; superbly generous in the least thing as well as in the greatest, and as ready to give his last shirt (although not without human grumbling) as he had been to sacrifice his life; essentially indiscreet and officious, which made him a troublesome colleague; domineering in all his ways, which made him incurably unpopular with the Kanakas, but yet destitute of real authority, so that his boys laughed at him and he must carry out his wishes by means of bribes. He learned to have a mania for doctoring; and set up the Kanakas against the remedies of his regular rivals; perhaps (if anything matter at all in the treatment of such a disease) the worst thing that he did, and certainly the easiest. The best and worst of the man appear very plainly in his dealings with Mr. Chapman's money; he had originally laid it out [intended to lay it out] entirely for the benefit of Catholics, and even so not wisely, but after a long, plain talk, he admitted his error fully and revised the list. The sad state of the boys' home is in part the result of his lack of control; in part, of his own slovenly ways and false ideas of hygiene. Brother officials used to call it 'Damien's Chinatown.' 'Well,' they would say, 'your Chinatown keeps growing.' And he would laugh with perfect good nature, and adhere to his error with perfect obstinacy. So much I have gathered of truth about this plain, noble human brother and father of ours; his imperfections are the traits of his face by which we know him for our fellow; his martyrdom and his example nothing can lessen or annul; and only a person here on the spot can properly appreciate their greatness." 26

Stevenson included paragraph B almost verbatim in his letters to the New York Sun. He apologizes for making public the passages without correction. We certainly agree with him that they are a list of the man's faults, without doubt taken from those who had opposed Damien in life. But we must remember that Stevenson noted these things because Damien's faults were what he was looking for. As he says, "It is rather these I was seeking: with his virtues, with the heroic profile of his life, I and the world were already sufficiently acquainted." ²⁷ Stevenson kept this in mind in interpreting the bare facts he recounted above and came to a rational conclusion. "Yet I am strangely deceived," he summarizes the above, "or they build up the image of a man, with all his weaknesses, essentially heroic, and alive with rugged honesty, generosity and mirth." ²⁸ Stevenson, admitting human faults in even the eminently heroic, the saint, comes closer to what the Church understands by true holiness than many another outside commentator.

To his friend Sidney Colvin Stevenson wrote a description having much the same nature as that in his notes. One thing is added, the adjective untruthful.

Of old Damien, whose weaknesses and worse perhaps I heard fully, I think only the more. It (sic) was a European peasant: dirty, bigoted, untruthful, unwise, tricky, but superb with generosity, residual candour and fundamental good-humour: convince him he had done wrong

27 The Damien letter, 29

28 The Damien letter, 30

(it might take hours of insult) and he would undo what he had done and like his corrector better. A man, with all the grime and paltriness of mankind, but a saint and hero all the more for that. 29

The word untruthful is an unfortunate choice, hard to explain away. Doubtless Stevenson had a foundation for it, perhaps in the testimony, as he tells us, of Damien's enemies. He used the word only once, and then in a private letter, where the flow of adjectives has an evident purpose of giving a general impression. He seems not to intend that each one be taken individually and weighed carefully.

The picture of Damien that Stevenson paints is candid, candid in the extreme, and there are, without doubt, some who will say that it is too rough, too harsh, too severe; that Stevenson's admissions of admiration and love for the man are insufficient to balance the list of faults. Hence, for the sake of comparison we introduce an account of Damien written by Brother Dutton. The frank words of the lay brother verify to a large extent what is set down by Stevenson. He admits, for instance, that Damien was short-tempered.

He was at times very vehement and excitable in regard to matters that did not seem right to him; or, if opposed by anyone, sometimes doing and saying things which he would afterward regret. But he had the faculty in a remarkable degree of putting resentment

aside. Very soon after a heated altercation he would be toward the opponent as if no such thing had happened. In certain periods he got on well with everyone. 30

Dutton is also gently frank about Damien's lack of personal cleanliness. But, as above when speaking of Damien's disagreements with his co-workers he is careful to note that he never held a grudge, so here too he points out that this defect is merely the result of Damien's lack of vanity, his neglect of personal comforts:

...to the effect that he was unclean in his personal habits. Of this I cannot say much in denial. When visitors were present he used to keep in presentable appearance, but ordinarily he paid very little attention to cleanliness of person or dress. He told me he considered this a defect.³¹

Damien himself was frank about his own faults!

In spite of human frailties, damnable though they were to Hyde, the leper priest was to the lay brother "the sainted father,"³² and the reverence he bore him made him use considerate words even when speaking of his deficiencies. To Stevenson, too, Damien was "a man with all the grime and paltriness of mankind,³³ but a saint and a hero all the more for that." In the end, we may want to admit that perhaps Stevenson was a little too

30 Dutton, 116

31 " , 115

32 " , 111

33 Colvin, Letters, II, 188

conscious of the negative side of his "saint and hero," but this is because the Damien with defects was much more attractive to him than an inhuman, "perfect," unnatural Damien would have been. His faults showed Stevenson that he was of human mold, and his achievement in spite of them made his glory the greater. This is his meaning when he says, "Of old Damien, whose weaknesses and worse perhaps I heard fully, I think only the more."³⁴

It is interesting to see that Stevenson, as defender, makes use of many of the same adjectives to describe Damien's shortcomings as Hyde does in the rôle of calumniator, but, as one writer has pointed out, the defender "reveals a saner and sweeter judgement in counterpoising these with Damien's greater virtues."³⁵ This is easily verified by reference to Stevenson's

34 Ibid. Stevenson was so fond of Father Damien that in him he would defend even bigotry. We deny, of course, that Damien was bigoted. Stevenson did not see fit to do so, for perhaps he took bigoted in the sense of being devoted to one's Faith as the only true Faith. He says as much when he uses in apposition to bigotry the words "his intense and narrow faith." (The Damien letter, 35) This kind of bigotry, he argues, "wrought potently for good, and strengthened him to be one of the world's heroes and exemplars." (The Damien letter, 35)

Hyde uses bigoted about Damien in another sense, linking it to the adjective intolerant, but this was false, since Damien never refused to help non-Catholics. In the beginning, just after his arrival on the island, when there was no law in the place and there was need for an universal charity, his help was given equally to Catholics and non-Catholics. Later on, when civil authorities assumed their share of the care for the lepers of the settlement, Damien, seeing that the others were now being assisted from other quarters, by degrees restricted his work to those of his own Faith (Dutton, 79).

estimates of his character given in the private letters and in the open letter to Hyde.

To simplify, we should say that to critical Hyde Damien was "a coarse, dirty man," ³⁶ despicable for his faults; to realistic Brother Dutton he was the "sainted father," ³⁷ venerable in spite of his defects; to the humane Stevenson Damien was a "saint and hero" ³⁸ all the more lovable, all the more admirable because of his frailties. ³⁹ Stevenson, indeed, did not hesitate to call him his "noble human brother and father." ⁴⁰

Such then was the Damien, the Molokai which Stevenson came to know. His intimate knowledge of the priest, his acquaintance with the devoted sisters and Brother Dutton were instrumental in lowering still further the barrier of prejudice which separated him from greater understanding of the Church. That some of the barrier still remained in place, unmoved, is also patent, when we consider the statement in his letter to Colvin which follows his praise of the spirit of charity on the island: "And this even though it was in great part Catholic, and my sympathies flew with never so much difficulty as towards Catholic virtues." ⁴¹

36 Hyde's letter to Gage (quoted in the Damien letter, 6)

37 Dutton, 111

38 Colvin, Letters, II, 188

39 Ibid.

40 The Damien letter, 29

41 Colvin, Letters, II, 188

Moreover, we see that his high praise for these missionaries is not in the least contradictory to his hostile attitude towards the philosophy of life which governed the monks of Our Lady of the Snows, for the religious and clerics in the South Seas were externally active, engaged in a work which (over and above its supernatural character) was so humane and philanthropic that Stevenson truly envied them, was tempted to remain with them. He wanted no part of the "honor of the inert" which he attributed to Hyde.⁴²

42 The Damien letter, 14

EPILOGUE

Five and a half more years of life were allotted to Robert Louis Stevenson after he visited Molokai. During the rest of the year 1889 he made the further travels described in Parts III and IV of In the South Seas. Towards Christmas he put in at Apia, island of Upulu, in Samoa. Here he purchased the estate subsequently called Vailima. In February he went to Sidney and there wrote the Damien letter. After further cruises he returned in October to Samoa and the estate prepared for him. Except for the time given to occasional excursions, here he spent the remainder of his days occupying himself with writing, with the care of his estate, with the pleasures of family life, and with not a small interest in Samoan politics.

Several points might be observed about this last period. First of all, Stevenson settled down on an estate, desiring, it is said, to imitate Scott in the landed dignity of Abbotsford. Like Scott, too, it is alleged that he wrote himself to death trying to pay for the place. To be noted is the fact that, whether he willed it or no, this action was a concession to the fortress-on-the-hill idea which he so contemned in the monks of Monastier. Stevenson, indeed, storm-tossed and tired, was bent on a security, a seclusion of his own!

Second, it was here that he composed the "Vailima Prayers" which he said with the whole family gathered together on Sunday. Though there are some who think them excessively gloomy, it would be difficult to show that they really are.¹ Others have taken them not as a sign of true religious inclinations, but merely as the expression of a certain paternal feeling towards his family and household. If we consider the fact that the very people who put forth this explanation would be the last to charge Stevenson with insincerity, we shall see that such a hypothesis falls to the ground. If it were true, the prayers would be little more than an affectation. The following example is typical of them:

For Success

Lord, behold our family here assembled. We thank Thee for this place in which we dwell; for the love that unites us; for the peace accorded us this day; for the hope with which we expect the morrow; for the health, the work, the food, and the bright skies that make our lives delightful; for our friends in all parts of the earth, and our friendly helpers in this foreign isle. Let peace abound in our small company. Purge out of every heart the lurking grudge. Give us the grace and strength to forbear and to persevere. Offenders, give us the grace and strength to forgive offences. Forgetful ourselves, help us to bear cheerfully the forgetfulness of others. Give us courage and gaiety and the quiet mind. Spare to us our friends, soften to us our enemies. Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavors. If it may not, give us strength to encounter that which is to come, that we be brave in peril, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath, and in all

1 Dalgish, for example, 186

changes of fortune, and down to the gates of death, loyal and loving one to another. As clay to the potter, as the windmill to the wind, as children of their sire, we beseech of Thee this help and mercy for Christ's sake. ²

In reality, as Steuart says, "Like most reflective, and all sensitive, imaginative souls, he had in those latter years moments of rapt brooding on human destiny, on the unspeakable mystery of the infinite and man's piteous need of a Power greater than himself."³ When one sees the spirit of humility and gratitude in these prayers, this appears to be their only true meaning. These prayers are evidence that he had completed the cycle - from religion, to agnosticism, to atheism, and back to religion.

In this question of religion it is somewhat surprising to learn that after Stevenson died the Publisher's Circular reported Bishop Lamaze, Catholic Vicar Apostolic of Central Oceania and Samoa, as saying that, if the novelist had lived longer, he would have been converted to the Catholic Church.⁴ We suspect that the prelate had private reasons for this statement. Whatever they were, none were given.

Would Stevenson have become a Catholic? It is an interest-

2 Balfour, 1901 ed., II, 232

3 Steuart II, 273

4 John A. Hammerton, Stevensoniana, John Grant, Edinburgh, 1910, 224

ing question upon which to speculate. Certainly a man who, as Father Daly, the Jesuit English scholar, says, was magnanimous enough to throw off the "ancestral hobgoblin" of ingrained prejudice to the extent that Stevenson did might eventually have come into the Catholic Church. We have seen, of course, that he had some objections to her doctrine even so late as Molokai, but they were nothing compared to the "Puritanical obtuseness" of the earlier days. The barrier of prejudice had been brought very low, so low, in fact, that, as Chesterton says, Stevenson now admitted a "defective sympathy with Catholicism." Conversion, we know, whether it be sudden or gradual, sweeps difficulties before it as ocean surf does the unresisting driftwood. Today a man is an adversary; tomorrow he is a convert.

5 James J. Daly, The Jesuit in Focus, Bruce, Milwaukee, 1940, 143
6 Chesterton, 178

7 It was in January, 1893, that Stevenson began St. Ives, an adventure novel which, since he left it unfinished, received its closing chapters from Quiller-Couch. Here we have the interesting circumstance of Stevenson assuming the character of a Catholic soldier of Napoleon in order to tell the story in his person. There is but infrequent mention of religion, for the soldier is not over-devout. The incidents, however, of the Papist attending Scottish services, of the minister attacking all other churches including that of Rome, are quite amusing. So too the haughty rejection by Mrs. McRankine of the suggestion that there could be such a creature as a good, sincere Papist. Her sentiments tally well with Robert the gardener's which we discussed in Chapter II. Stevenson's gentle irony in thus treating a prejudice quite his own is revealing. In general the situation of Stevenson speaking as a Catholic is interesting, but not significant. His exhortations to his body-servant not to become a Catholic, but to stay in the religion of his birth (because it was the religion of his birth) sounds much like the agnostic palaver voiced in An Inland Voyage and the Travels with a Donkey. R.L.S., St. Ives, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1914

Would Stevenson have become a Catholic? To answer this question it would help to know the effect of Catholic influences on him after those of Molokai. How, for instance, did the religion of his servants affect him, for they were all Catholic natives. Indeed, when he had died they felt kinship enough with him to ask permission to say the Catholic prayers for the dead over his body. As Osbourne says,

Sosimo asked, on behalf of the Roman Catholics, that they might be allowed to recite the prayers for the dead. Till midnight the solemn chants, the prolonged, sonorous prayers of the Church of Rome, continued in commingled Latin and Samoan. ⁸

Another Catholic influence: of his friend, Mataafa, a native chief, Stevenson tells us in A Footnote to History, "Mataafa, a devout Catholic, was in the habit of walking every morning to Mass from his camp at Vaiala beyond Matautu to the mission at Mulivai." ⁹ Doubtless such example was not without fruit.

We are told, moreover, that the French Bishop along with his priests and sisters were visitors at Vailima. ¹⁰ His relations with these Catholic missionaries were most pleasant, and not the less so because he agreed with their policies both political and social. More light is thrown on this point by Balfour. After

⁸ Balfour, 332

⁹ R.L.S., A Footnote to History, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1892, 157

¹⁰ Balfour, 307, 310

speaking of his cordial relations with Protestant missionaries with whom he was acquainted, he goes on to say that

With the Catholics Stevenson was on equally pleasant, but quite different terms. His interest in Molokai, even apart from Father Damien, always made his heart warm towards the priests and Catholic sisters; the accidental circumstance that all his best boys at Vailima belonged to the Church of Rome strengthened the connection. For the Bishop he had a real appreciation: "a superior man, much above the average of priests": "Monseigneur is not unimposing; with his white beard and his violet girdle he looks splendidly episcopal, and when our three waiting lads came one after another and kneeled before him in the big hall, and kissed his ring, it did me good for a piece of pageantry." 11

One smiles when he thinks what Stevenson's comment might have been had he witnessed this ceremony at Noyon Cathedral.

We recall that one of Stevenson's first criticisms of the missionaries in the South Seas was that they were too intent on changing the customs of the natives, and this either too abruptly or without cause. We saw that he revised this opinion so that it did not include Catholic priests and religious, who, he found, took up the way of life of the natives as their own and were not without appreciation for certain aspects of Polynesian culture. This was exemplified in Pere Simeon. The revised judgment of Stevenson was confirmed at Samoa. Still

treating of Stevenson's attitude towards the Catholics, Balfour goes on to say:

Of the spiritual merits of their work he was of course in no position to judge; but he always had a special admiration for the way in which they identified themselves with the natives and encouraged all native habits and traditions at all compatible with Christianity. Above all things he welcomed the fact that the influence of the chiefs was increased instead of weakened by their efforts. He agreed with them that it was better to concentrate their forces on people of rank, than to impose such a democracy as that of some of the Protestant societies, for he felt that the salvation of Samoa lay in the chiefs, and that it was unfortunate that all white influence except that of the Catholics was in the line of diminishing their authority. ¹²

Besides these Catholic connections which, we may believe, broadened still further the sympathy of Stevenson with Rome, we must also consider the fact that religion as such always interested him, even during that period when he formally severed relations with it, and even though in the end his reasoning reached conclusions only of the most general nature. For, as Colvin points out, "In few men have the faculties been so active on the artistic and the ethical sides at once," ¹³ and Chesterton states his conviction that "Stevenson's enormous capacity for joy flowed directly from his profoundly religious temperament." ¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Colvin, Dict. Nat. Biog., XVIII, 1135

¹⁴ Cf. Ashe, Cath. World, CLVI, 208

Nevertheless, conning Stevenson's works with the special purpose that we have had, we are liable to overestimate the significance of the sum total, which may seem to have an aggregate import far out of proportion to reality. Words of his St. Ives come to mind: "Now every incident had a particular bearing, every by-way branched off to Rome."¹⁵ We can, after all, only confess that we do not know what Stevenson would have done had he lived longer.

As for the Damien letter itself, Stevenson's final judgment of it was that in it he was a bit too rough with Dr. Hyde. In a letter dated September, 1890 he confesses, "It is always harshness that one regrets...I regret also my letter to Dr. Hyde. Yes I do; I think it was barbarously harsh; if I did it now, I would defend Damien no less well, and give less pain to those who are alive."¹⁶

Stevenson's own moral justification, the philosophy behind the vehemence of the letter, can perhaps best be found in a remarkable passage of his "Christmas Sermon," written for Scribner's Magazine near the end of 1887, two years before the defence. He is speaking about the moral problem involved in the protection of one's life and personal property:¹⁷

15 R.L.S., St. Ives, 335
 16 The Damien letter (note), 53
 17 Matthew J. Ashe, S.J., has called attention to this point, Cath. World, CLVI, 209

The difficulty is that we have little guidance; Christ's sayings on the point being hard to reconcile with each other, and (the most of them) hard to accept. But the truth of them would seem to be this: in our own person and fortune, we should be ready to accept and to pardon all; it is our cheek we are to turn, our coat we are to give away to the man who has taken our cloak. But when another's face is buffeted, perhaps a little of the lion will become us best. 18

18 R.L.S., "A Christmas Sermon," South Seas Edition, XIII, 234

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Earl August Weis, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Sept. 15, 1947
Date

John D. Conrath, S.J.
Signature of Adviser