

FIRST ACCOUNT

Autobiography

Preliminary Oblation

O my God, God of love and infinite goodness, aid me with your grace to fulfil your will and accomplish now what you desire of me. Accept from my hand all I write as acts of praise and thanksgiving for all the favours I have received from you. It is with confidence in your help, my God, that I undertake to reveal the great mercies you bestowed on the most unworthy of your creatures. And to you, my dear and Reverend Father,¹ I give this account as the greatest witness of my submission to and respect for your desires and wishes, which indeed to me are orders, laws that are absolute.

How God watched over me

Infancy

I was born, or baptised in any case,² on 17 January, in the year 1618, in a small town of [Franche-Comté] called [Scey-sur-Saône], of a father and mother of good family and considerable private means. It pleased God to take my mother from this world when I was about 8 or 9 years of age and, even so, the eldest of three children she left behind. My father took great care to make sure that we were given all the education needed to fit us for the world. But he prepared us with much indifference with regard to piety and virtue; for, between the age of reason and that of 12 years, I had already committed more sins than I could ever recall.

My natural inclinations were wanton; so much so that only you, my God, were able to deliver me from them. I loved to play at cards. And as might be expected, to anyone who was willing to play with me I would give all the time I could find. I had a penchant for oaths such as 'My faith!' 'My soul!' and, sometimes, 'The devil!' I would say all sorts of abusive things to the domestics and even beat them; and I would get angry both with them and my brother and sister. Most days I was untruthful and

You Looked at Me

vain, and made light of those who were like myself. And with regard to that which directly concerns the service of God, how often did I fail to hear holy Mass on feast days and Sundays! For remaining in bed late out of an appalling laziness, I would miss the last Mass which, in a little town like ours, was at 10 o'clock. Since I flouted my obligation in this regard, one can imagine my attitude to less rigorous duties.

I received Communion when I reached the age for it. I believe now, that, apart from the required number of years, I did not have what was necessary to do this. I do not remember if I ever had any particular instruction for it; other than, perhaps, being told to read a few prayers in some book. Also, on account of the sins I had not confessed, a confessor I once had said to me that this first Communion was a sacrilege. But others said this was not true, because I had not committed these sins voluntarily. For, O my God, you have always protected me from consciously hiding anything in confession; and it is you alone who know if I have ever had the misfortune of falling into this horrible sin.³ My God, look at me in pity and have mercy on me.⁴

The beginning of my life having been so wretched - since I cannot see that there was any particular inclination to the good in me then, except for the odd time when, in secret and not too often, I said my rosary and some few prayers, what would have been its continuation and end if you had not looked at me with eyes of mercy?⁵ But your divine Providence, already watching over me as a father, ordained, and indeed inspired in me the desire, the desire of a child, that I be sent to a convent school. It was more a desire born out of curiosity, and a wish to change my country, than a desire born from any good inclinations.

School

For several years I had asked if I could be sent to the Ursulines at [Langres] where I had a cousin who was a religious. And so, towards the end of my twelfth or at the beginning of my thirteenth year I was sent there.⁶ What gratitude must I show you, my God, for having taken such care of me! Before it was even possible for me to be lost in my bad habits, you made sure you let me know about goodness and virtue; of which as yet I had no knowledge. For, by an act of your particular kindness, you made me love them almost as soon as I knew them.⁷ Through your grace, and because of my docile spirit, in less than no time I accepted quite well all the instructions that were given me, despite all my bad habits. For you brought about in me affections that were completely different from what I had known up to then. My God, you were already developing in me a special attraction to mental prayer. My schoolmistress told me of the difficulties involved, but permitted me to practise it sometimes, together with other little exercises of penance and mortification; which I did, it seems to me, with great pleasure. And I am indebted to you, my God, for having given to her a loving concern for my well-being: and indeed for all the other affections I was to receive later.

Desire for the religious life

The first year I stayed there had not passed by before I desired ardently to be a religious. I wrote several times to my father about this, to see if he would allow me to be admitted among the novices, but he never gave his permission. Seeing my desires thus frustrated, I fell ill out of sadness. I was sick for almost three months.

I remained in that little Paradise for very nearly two and a half years.⁸ Around the time of my fourteenth birthday,⁹ I took a vow of chastity, of which I spoke to no one. It is true that I have since doubted whether that vow was ever valid. But God permitted me to make it then, and in that manner, as a foil to the danger I was to find myself in later. Subsequently, and thanks to God, I made the vow in due form; and I renew it now with all my heart.

Although I was still only a boarder, the sisters had given me their word that they would let me take the habit when my father was willing. But your divine Providence, my God, ordained it otherwise; for you knew well that I would make a very bad religious. My father, having informed the sisters that he wished to be sure about my desires, asked many lay and religious people if he should remove me from there; and there were those who were for and those who were against. But finally, he resolved to take me home for some time in order that I might test my vocation; and he promised to bring me back in three or four months. On his word, then, I returned home with him because it was impossible to do otherwise. And so, with pitiful tears and great chagrin, I said goodbye to those dear sisters.

Worldly life

I spent three or four months in my father's house, continuing my exercises of devotion and leading a rather secluded life.¹⁰ But after that time, my father was asked if he intended to bring me back to the convent as promised. He let me have an answer¹¹ that shocked my very spirit, for I was told: 'Tell her I will marry her off!' But when I asked if I could have some clothes made for myself - for I only wanted the most modest kind - he did not dare refuse me that.¹²

All I needed now was to go and look for companions elsewhere; as if I did not have enough with him!¹³ And so, little by little, not having much steadiness in virtue, I returned to the world. For my evil inclinations - which were never really dead, and had not appeared while at the convent for the simple reason that they did not have the opportunity to do so - soon carried me away wherever they wished. Card playing, the reading of romances and comedies, useless or perhaps harmful company - all these were my daily occupations, enthralling me more than I care to mention. No trace of true Christian piety appeared in me any more; and sometimes, if one were ever to speak to me about my previous state,¹⁴ I would become red with anger. For, although I sometimes mentioned that I would have wished to be reinstated into the religious life, I was now completely against that thinking and did, I believe, wish that I had never been there.

You Looked at Me

Forgetting God

I was for about seven years at the beck and call of that miserable existence,¹⁵ living in such a forgetfulness of God and of the good instructions that had been given me, that I passed entire days without remembering him. I did not serve him any better - I would say, worse - on feast days than on other days, since I still often failed to hear Mass. In this I committed the gravest of sins. After all, my God, who but you would have suffered the dissoluteness of my life and not have abandoned me, hurling me a thousand times into Hell?

War

At this time war was declared between the Kings of Spain and France,¹⁶ and the neutrality which had always been observed in our country¹⁷ was now broken.¹⁸ We were a long time at war before we began to feel the inconveniences of it ourselves; but in the long run we also began to suffer. And when I deeply felt poverty and need, I began to open my eyes and see the deplorable state of my life. O my God, was it not on account of the depravations of my life that I caused the war in our country and the particular ruin of our family? Yet, instead of chastising me according to the rigours of your justice, you let me feel the effects of your great mercy!

‘I had my mind elevated to God’

I was in [Besançon]¹⁹ then,²⁰ where my father had sent me on some business. And having been touched in my heart, I made a general confession of my life since the time I had left the convent. Our Lord granted me many graces. From that moment on I began to feel very strongly attracted to prayer. I stayed in that town for three to four months, not being able to return home from there on account of the danger the various routes presented. But just a few days after I made my confession, such a safe way home did present itself that I was unwilling to pass it over.

On leaving the town fairly late, we had only gone a league or so of the road when the Providence of God took extraordinary care of me, in ways which I cannot fully describe because it would take too long. But what I cannot omit saying is, that for the whole night - which we²¹ spent without sleeping in a barn in the middle of a courtyard, for we did not wish to enter the dwellings for fear of coming upon the people there unexpectedly - I had my mind elevated to God, and this without anyone, or even the commotion of the journey, hindering me in the slightest.²² And the prayer I made was to say to him: ‘Lord, that your hand may serve me as a pillow, so that, if I happen to fall, I should not hurt myself.’²³ It is possible I repeated this more than a hundred times during the night. I do not know from where I took these words; neither do I know why I said them. But whatever happened to me explains that I had need to make that request. When morning arrived, the whole convoy got ready for departure. Missing the articles I thought I had brought with me for making the journey, I was obliged to accept the travelling case of a captain, who offered it to me with much civility. Not all people of war are bad! But his horse leaped and knocked me to the ground onto a pile of rocks

which I did not see as I fell backwards. I was as if dead for more than two hours, so I was told. It is here, my God, I experienced that care of your Providence; for, the whole convoy having gone, I was left alone with people whom I did not know. But you prompted those soldiers not to leave me there. One of them took me in his arms; and without seeing in me, I believe, any sign of life, unless perhaps a little breathing, he carried me straight on for about two leagues of the journey. Later, on opening my eyes, and directing my first thought to God, I said to him from the bottom of my heart: 'I abandon myself within the arms of your Providence.'²⁴ During my loss of consciousness I saw nothing, I mean in mind any more than in body. But when I came back to myself, our Lord filled me with great light.²⁵

I finished my journey in the most remarkable of circumstances. About two hours after I had regained consciousness, and after such a serious accident, I went seven leagues on foot without the slightest inconvenience.²⁶ But I had to go straight to bed on arrival at my father's house; and there I remained sick for about fifteen days to three weeks. The doctors consulted with one another; and concluded that they should perforate the skull. But I was resolved to die rather than suffer that; and so they left me in peace. Since then, thanks to our Lord, I have not had any further trouble.

During my illness a good Jesuit priest - a holy religious - came to see me and gave me *The Introduction to the Devout Life*²⁷ to read. This did me a certain amount of good. But in no way did I begin to put my life in order; for through lack of direction, and there being nobody to encourage me, I was very faltering in virtue. But I thank you, my God, that you removed me from the occasion of sin because of the poverty which prevented me from re-establishing myself in company and in my former ways of vanity.

Sickness

Soon after I was cured of that sickness it pleased God to visit me with another one. On the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross,²⁸ the good Jesus let me participate in a portion of his Cross. But, O my Saviour, I still did not know well enough the value of that treasure, even though you had already planted in my mind some slight knowledge of it. As it happened, I was taken with a fever²⁹ that lasted till November, so that I had it for about fourteen and a half months. I experienced this illness in every possible way during that time; unremittingly once or twice; and on one particular occasion it lasted for eighteen days. I felt the cold so strangely for the first seven months that the shivering and trembling used to last for six or seven hours at a time. I do not understand how a body like mine was able to withstand it. There were many people sick that year. But they were sick off and on, sometimes being well for a complete month or so and then falling ill again. But if I had really understood it then, my Saviour, I would have realised that you treated me much better than all of them; for I never had one day of respite.

This sickness was accompanied by such great poverty that I was without any relief whatever; for the affairs of the family were becoming worse and worse as the days went by. My Jesus, you gave me the grace to endure this patiently, and all its

You Looked at Me

circumstances. And also, for almost ten months of my sickness, I do not think I desired a cure even once. Eventually, however, I did prepare some rather drastic treatments; but did not have the means to continue with them.

I suffered that pain, my God, with a virtue that was indeed mediocre; for I did not accept it with that great joy, that love with which one must receive suffering. Through your great mercy, however, you prevented me from committing any sin in this! Having been rid of the sickness, I was left however with its after-effects; which I felt for a long time and, perhaps, still do.

Letter to the Ursulines

Finally, not seeing our way of putting our affairs in order, we, my sister and myself, desired to leave home and work as domestics while waiting for a peaceful end to the war. With this in mind, I took the opportunity of writing to the Ursulines. For it happened that some people from [Vesoul], who were being sent as hostages to the Count of [Grancey] until such time as the amount of money which their town had agreed upon with him was paid,³⁰ had to pass through [Langres]. For on account of the war, and all communication having been destroyed accordingly, it was about four years, I believe, since I had last let the Ursulines have any news about me. I conveyed to them, then, the state of affairs and the plan we had to work as domestics.

The sister who was superior then had been my schoolmistress when I was there. She always had a great affection for me. Although she was sick when she received my letter, she wrote back to me herself, saying that we should get someone to take us to her and that, while waiting for a situation to be found for us, we could stay with the sisters in attendance.³¹

Having got this assurance, we prepared ourselves for the journey. And the sisters on their part summoned some men from the town to find out from them whether our being received there would present any difficulty.³² The gentlemen informed the sisters that we would not be allowed to enter. This troubled the sisters very much, and they wrote me many letters, telling me not to leave our country. But our Lord - who knew well what he wanted to do - saw to it that I did not receive any of the letters apart from the one in which the sisters³³ had advised me and my sister to come.

Departure

We left home, then, in February, on the twelfth day of the month, I think it was, in the year 1642. On our journey there, the good God let us be robbed by peasants. The person who was driving us, on seeing this, fearing that once at [Langres] we would raise objections and not pay him, because we were saying that he was on the side of those who robbed us, left my sister and myself - together with two young women who had come along with us on leaving our homeland - completely destitute in the middle of the countryside. We did not have the least idea of which road to follow.

I accepted this setback without any worry, at least, not that much. And, already

Autobiography

being accustomed to turn to divine Providence, we now had full recourse to it; for with regard to human assistance, we saw no trace anywhere. O my God, that you may be blessed for ever, for the care you take of those who hope in you!

A man came along who brought us to the nearest village,³⁴ which had only a few inhabitants. Fortunately, inquiring if any people of good birth were there to whom we could speak, we found a young lady who was living in that place with her father and who happened to have been at the Ursulines with me. When I introduced myself to her and told her my name, she recognised me and received us all with the utmost expression of charity and friendship. But she and her father, having lost everything, were so poor that our hearts went out to them. She gave us whatever she could, and with such heart that even that alone would have been sufficient for us. We spent the night there. The next morning, she and M. ,³⁵ her father, having conducted us a certain distance along the road and offered us what little money they had, sent us on our way. We said our goodbyes to one another, feeling deeply our mutual afflictions. And thus your divine Providence, my God, succoured us in that need. May you be ever praised for that!

Arrival at Langres

We had only four or five leagues to go to [Langres], part of which we did on foot; for, passing through a certain village, we took a cart which brought us to within one league of the town. That good young lady had given us a guide to lead us; and it was you, my God, who were directing us, you who were waiting for us at the gates of the town in order to let us enter. For we entered without anyone saying even one word to us.³⁶ We arrived at the sisters; seeing what pitiful state we were in, they were deeply touched. They received us there with all the demonstrations of love and charity possible; and they gave us whatever clothes and linen they could, for we had nothing.

After we had remained there with them for five or six weeks, I urged the superior to give some thought to what was going to become of us. The whole community, and she in particular, had so much charity in them that they offered to keep us permanently; but, for good reasons we did not wish to accept. They had at least the intention of sending my sister to Dijon, where we had a relative who was a religious; and when they wrote to him about my sister, he offered to take care of her. They intended keeping me with themselves. But having only recently come out of our homeland and away from all our relatives, my sister and myself could not agree to this separation.

Those good sisters said many prayers and offered up their Communions to know where they should direct us. And one day the superior came to me and said that it would be necessary for us to go to Paris since we did not wish to stay with them; and that we would find there - more than in any other place - what we were looking for. Paris has such a bad reputation in the provinces - but without reason - that this proposal troubled us greatly. But after some encouragement, our voyage was decided upon. The sisters summoned some gentlemen from the town, who were to leave in the same coach as we

You Looked at Me

were, to come to speak to them. They beseeched the gentlemen with great affection to take care of us. Having relatives in religion, these men received well the request made to them. Your divine Providence, my God, ordained it that the sisters had this foresight. In this way you wished to deliver us from the peril which, as you only knew too well, we were bound to find ourselves in.³⁷ For although they were people of position and honour, if these gentlemen had not known us at all, perhaps they would not have helped us as they did. For this may you be always blessed!

Dangers on the road

So we left [Langres] on Holy Thursday, 17 April 1642. On Easter Sunday,³⁸ in a market town,³⁹ where our coachman had stopped to feed the horses, we met with a great number of soldiers who came at once to speak to the gentlemen and the coachman about having us. Dismissing completely such a proposition, the gentlemen let them know that we were ladies of position and honour and entirely different from what they imagined. And they had sent a soldier to us to come and ask us to stay with them, and to tell us about the attractive qualities of their lieutenant, on whose behalf they were bringing us this message.

We trembled with fear at such a horrible proposal and immediately rid that soldier of the hope of having from us what he desired. He said to us as he went away: 'Since you do not wish to comply out of friendship, you will be made to do so out of force.' The people from the inn came to us to tell us that we were done for and that the soldiers had resolved to carry us off. O my God, only you knew the anguish of our hearts! And I believe that never before had I prayed to you with such affection and confidence as I did then. Not knowing really what to do, all in the coach were greatly distressed by all this.

As we left, there were fifteen or sixteen men on horseback, and as many on foot, who accompanied us; for they did not wish to treat us violently in the village, but at a half league or more from there, where we would not be able to have any help. On seeing this, the gentlemen in our carriage made them return immediately; one remaining in the coach to look after us, while the other, who had found out where the lieutenant was, went to him - for it was he who was responsible for initiating all this, although he himself never appeared - and complained about the disgraceful intention of his soldiers, saying boldly to him: 'If any dishonour is intended, it will be necessary to kill us all, because we shall never fail to complain about it to the King, and nothing less than your head will be at stake.'

The lieutenant was greatly taken aback, made many excuses and wished to come and apologise to us. But this gentleman said to him that it was not necessary, and that he should merely prevent the evil the soldiers intended doing to us. The lieutenant then gave an order to his soldiers that no one was to be so bold as to dare approach the coach, and that they should leave us to go in peace. Thus, my God, you delivered us from that peril through the care of your paternal Providence; for which I render you infinite thanks.