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## I Swear By My Life

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## "I Swear By My Life"

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

JOHN GALT, a hero in a modern novel, announces his philosophy of life in these words: "I swear by my life—and my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another to live for the sake of mine." The author acknowledges that the hero gave expression to her own personal philosophy of life. She considers pity immoral and humility a sign of weakness. When asked if this was not a selfish view of life, she answered, "Selfish? Most certainly. Every man has a right to exist for himself—and not to sacrifice himself for another."

These words are as pure a distillation of contempt for others as are likely to be found. Even apart from any consideration of God, they form a kind of blasphemy. The good pagan, as well as the Christian, reads them with a discomfort which is only a little short of terror. The first reaction is that what is here set forth is not really philosophy but animality in its more basic form. But on a little reflection, both pagan and Christian will say that such a view of life does not attain animality. The law of the forest is indeed bestial: the survival of the fittest and the biggest bone to the biggest dog. However, the generality of animals retain a hard instinct. On the level of pure animality, regard for others is not entirely lacking.

It would be difficult to excuse such a philosophy, but perhaps we can explain some of its more immediate origins. Social psychologists have pointed out the pressures which society—states, business organizations, educational institutions—have been exerting on the individual. When the pressures become too great, then the individual rebels and refuses allegiance. He becomes the perpetual adolescent. Rebellion has been erected into a way of life.

A few years ago, David Riesman wrote a book called *The Lonely Crowd*, in which he pointed out the growing emphasis in America on the art of sociability. For instance, the important thing in an increasing number of schools is life adjustment—which means con-

forming to the ways of the group. Cooperation, amiability, and acquiescence to the demands of the crowd are the real virtues. But we do not ask too many questions about the desirability or intrinsic goodness of that to which we are adjusting. But adjust we must, and the individual is swallowed up by the group.

Another book, *The Organization Man* by William H. Whyte, describes the pressures to which the individual is subjected in the world of organized business. The ideal businessman is the one who loses himself in the organization. Individuality is frowned upon, and the aspiring young man is exhorted to fit himself into the established pattern, sanctified because efficient. Here, too, conformity is the law.

When demands become too totalitarian, when the individual is denied individuality in the name of the group, then rebellion can be expected. Against the claims of the group, the individual takes refuge in a flagrant individualism: "I swear by my life . . ."

What does the Church have to say about the battle between the individual and the group? The problem of sanctity is related to the problem of the individual vs. group. How?

The famous Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev once wrote: "Personality is the exception, not the rule. The secret of the existence of personality lies in its absolute irreplaceability, its happening but once, its uniqueness, its incomparableness." The Christian not only has no quarrel with this concept of personality but even insists upon it. Each man is made in the image of God. But the image of God is not endlessly reproduced with infinite sameness. Each man is unique. Personality is the exception.

Some erroneously believe that it is the ascetic ideal of the Christian to take the exception and turn it into the rule, to strip the personality of its individuality. Strange though it may sound, the ideal is not to put on Christ so that man loses his identity, so that he is the same

as any other product of the same mold. The saint can say, "I live, now not I but Christ lives in me." Indeed the greatness of the saint is the Christ who lives and works in him.

The saint, however, can also say, "I am myself. The Christ who lives in me is the guarantee of my individuality. Christ lives His life in me uniquely, in a manner that is not repeated in St. John Bosco, nor in St. Thérèse. I stand before God and man with my personality, my individuality, inviolate." The wonder of sanctity cannot be the dull repetition of dulled and stunted personalities. The wonder is rather that Christ is made flesh in every saint uniquely. The same Christ expresses Himself in each Christian in what is a new creation, an unrepeatable form.

To define holiness in terms of the individual and Christ is only half a definition. In Christianity, the one never attains holiness apart from the many, certainly not in forgetfulness or defiance of the many. The Catholic is a member of Christ's Mystical Body, the Church. Only in union with other members of that Body is sanctity possible. The man who pursues sanctity alone, in isolation from others, forgetful of the Church as a whole, careless of her universal needs, that man pursues the saddest of illusions. The life he is to live is the same as that of the Head and members of the Body. Apart from the Body, there is only death.

Individual and society, personality in group, find their antagonisms resolved in the Body of Christ. The saint is unmistakably an individual. His individuality is often disquieting to those of us who find conformity comfortable. Belonging to the Body of Christ assures the integrity and uniqueness of the personality. The Body cherishes the individuality of its members, if only for utilitarian reasons: each member has a contribution only it can make. Neither supernatural life nor sanctity nor the peace of God is attainable alone, in isolation from, or neglect of, Christ and the fullness of His members.