

[In this letter Vincent in his haste omits the “Dear Theo.”]

I have been thinking over what we were discussing, and the saying sprang to mind, ‘Nous sommes aujourd’hui ce que nous étions hier.’ [We are today what we were yesterday] That does not mean that one must stand still and may not try to improve oneself, on the contrary, it is a compelling reason for doing so and for being glad to do so. But to be true to the saying, one must not backslide, and once one has started to look at things freely and openly, one must not face about or stray.

Those who said: “We are the same today as we were yesterday,” were “honnêtes hommes” [honest men], as is apparent from the constitution they drew up, which will remain for all time and of which it has been well said that it was written “avec le rayon d’en haut et d’un doigt de feu.” [With a ray of light from on high and a fiery finger].

It is a good thing to be an ‘honnête homme’ and to try increasingly to be one, partially and wholly, and one does well to understand that this entails being an ‘homme intérieur et spirituel.’ [An inward and spiritual man].

He who is firmly convinced he is one of their band will always go about his business quietly and calmly, never doubting that all must end well. There once was a man who went to church and asked: “Can it be that my ardour has deceived me, that I have taken a wrong turning and managed things badly? Oh! if only I could be rid of this doubt and know for certain I shall come out victorious and succeed in the end.” And then a voice answered him: “And if you were certain, what would you do then? Act now as if you were certain and you will not be disappointed.” Then the man went on his way, not unbelieving but believing, and returned to his work no longer doubting or wavering.

As for being an ‘homme intérieur et spirituel’ might one not be able to develop into one through knowledge of history in general and of certain individuals from all ages in particular, from the history of the Bible to that of the Revolution and from the Odyssey to the books of Dickens and Michelet? And could we not learn something from the work of such men as Rembrandt and from Breton’s *Mauvaises Herbes* or Millet’s *The Hours of the Day*, *Le Bénédicité* by de Groux or Brion, or *The Conscript* by de Groux (or else by Conscience) or his *Apothécaire* or *The Large Oaks*, by Dupré, or even by Michel’s mills and sandy plains?

It is by continually holding fast to these thoughts and deeds that we are filled with a good leaven at the last, that of being sorrowful yet always rejoicing, which will become apparent when our lives have come to fruition, bearing the fruits of good works.

Le rayon d’en haut does not always shine upon us and may well be hidden behind clouds, but without that light a man cannot live and is worth nothing and can do no good, and those who claim that man can live without faith in that higher light and need not trouble to acquire it, are sure to have their hopes dashed.

We have talked a good deal about our duty and how we may attain the right goal, and we have properly concluded that our first objective must be to find a specific position and a profession to which we can wholly devote ourselves. And I believe that we also agreed on this point, viz. that one must pay particular attention to the end, and that a victory gained after a whole life of work and effort is better than one gained with greater dispatch.

Anyone who lives an upright life and experiences real difficulty and disappointment and yet is not crushed by them is worth more than one for whom everything has always been plain sailing and who has known nothing but relative prosperity. For who are the most obviously superior to us? Those who merit the words: “*Laboureurs, votre vie est triste, laboureurs, vous souffrez dans la vie, laboureurs, vous êtes bien-heureux,*” [Labourers, your life is sad, labourers, your life is full of suffering, labourers, you are blessed]. It is they who bear the marks of “*toute une vie de lutte et de travail soutenu sans fléchir jamais.*” [a whole life of struggle and labour borne unflinchingly] It is right to try to become like that. So we go on our way, “*undefessi favente Deo.*” [Should be *indefessi favente Deo*, (by the grace of God unwearied)]

As for me, I must become a good preacher, who has something to say that is right and is of use in the world, and perhaps it is as well that I should spend a relatively long time on preparation and be securely confirmed in an unwavering faith before I am called to speak to others about it. (It is fitting that before one embarks upon that work, a treasure should be gathered up that others can enjoy). Let us but go forth quietly, testing everything and holding fast to what is good, and trying all the time to learn more of what is useful and adds to our experience. Weemoed [Melancholy] may be a good experience, provided we write it as two words: wee [woe], which is in every man, each of us having reason enough, but it must be allied to moed [courage], and the more the better, for it is good to be someone who never despairs.

If only we try to live righteously, we shall fare well, even though we are bound to encounter genuine sadness and real disappointments and shall probably commit real mistakes and do things that are wrong, but it is certainly better to be ardent in spirit, even though one makes more mistakes, than to be narrow-minded and over-cautious.

It is good to love as many things as one can, for therein lies true strength, and those who loves much, do much and accomplish much, and whatever is done with love is done well. If one is affected by some book or other, let us say by Michelet’s *L’hirondelle*, *L’alouette*, *Le rossignol*, *Les aspirations d’automne*, *Je vois d’ici une dame*, *J’aimais cette*

petite ville singulière – to mention just a few, then it is because that book is written from the heart in simplicity and meekness of spirit. Better to say but a few words, but filled with meaning, than to say many that are but idle sounds and as easy to utter as they are useless

Love is the best and the noblest thing in the human heart, especially when it is tested by life as gold is tested by fire. Happy is he who has loved much, and is sure of himself, and although he may have wavered and doubted, he has kept that divine spark alive and returned to what was in the beginning and ever shall be. If only one keeps loving faithfully what is truly worth loving and does not squander one's love on trivial and insignificant and meaningless things then one will gradually obtain more light and grow stronger.

The sooner one tries to become accomplished in a certain position in life and a certain field and adopts a relatively independent way of thinking and acting, and the more one keeps to set rules, the stronger in character one will grow, and that does not mean becoming narrow-minded. It is a wise thing to do this, because life is short, and time passes quickly. If one is accomplished in one single thing, understanding one single thing well, then one has insight into and knowledge of many other things into the bargain.

It's as well to go out into the world from time to time and mix with other people (and sometimes one feels, in fact, obliged and called upon to do so) – or it may simply be one way 'de se jeter dans le travail sans arrière pensée et de toutes ses forces' [Of throwing oneself into work unreservedly and with all one's strength] – but one who prefers to be quietly alone with his work and seems to need very few friends will go safest in the world and among people. One should never feel secure just because one has no difficulties or cares or handicaps, and one should never be too easy-going. Even in the politest circles and the best surroundings and circumstances one should retain something of the original character of a Robinson Crusoe or of primitive man, for otherwise one cannot be rooted in oneself, and one must never let the fire in one's soul die, for the time will inevitably come when it will be needed. And he who chooses poverty for himself and loves it possesses a great treasure and will hear the voice of his conscience address him ever more clearly. He who hears that voice, which is God's greatest gift, in his innermost being and follows it, finds in it a friend at last, and is never alone!

Happy is he who has faith in God, for he will in the end be tided over all life's difficulties, albeit not without trouble and sorrow. One cannot do better than hold on to the thought of God come what may, in all circumstances, in every place and at all times, and try to get to know Him better. One can learn this from the Bible as well as from all other things. It is good to go on believing that everything is more miraculous than one can ever begin to understand, for that is the truth; it is good to remain sensitive and humble and tender-hearted even though one may have to hide one's feelings, as is often necessary. It is good to be well versed in the things that are hidden from the wise and the learned of this world, but that are revealed as if by nature to the poor and simple, to women and little children. For what can one learn which is better than that which God has given by nature to every human soul and which goes on living and loving, hoping and believing, in the depths of every soul, unless we wantonly destroy it.

The need is for nothing less than the infinite and the miraculous, and a man does well to be satisfied with nothing less, and not to feel easy until he has gained it.

That is what all great men have acknowledged in their works, all those who have thought a little more deeply and searched and worked and loved a little more than the rest, who have plumbed the depths of the sea of life. Plumb the depths, that is what we too must do if we want to make a catch, and if we sometimes have to work the whole night through without catching anything, then we do well not to give up and to cast the net once more at dawn.

So let us go forward quietly, each on his own path, forever making for the light, 'sursum corda' [lift up your hearts], and in the knowledge that we are as others are and that others are as we are and that it is right to love one another in the best possible way, believing all things, hoping for all things and enduring all things, and never failing. And not being too troubled by our weaknesses, for even he who has none, has one weakness, namely that he has none, and anyone who believes himself to be consummately wise would do well to be foolish all over again.

'Nous sommes aujourd'hui ce que nous étions hier', that is, 'honnêtes hommes', yet men who must be tested in the fire of life to become fortified inwardly are confirmed in what, by the grace of God, they are by nature.

So may it be with us, my boy, and may you fare well along your path, and may God be with you in all things and help you to succeed, which, with a warm handshake on your departure [Theo had been temporarily transferred to the Goupil house in Paris], is the wish of

Your very loving brother,

Vincent

It is only a very small light, the one in the little Sunday-school room in Barndesteeg, but let me keep it burning. Even if I should not, however, I do not think that Adler is the man to let it go out.