

## YOU'D BETTER COME QUIETLY \*

Fr. Leonard Feeney

### 1

We might begin by talking about nothing, but there wouldn't be much to say. Nothing is not a book, a rock, a snowflake, a meadow, a meadow-lark, a fish, a man, an angel. It isn't you or I or anything tangible or thinkable. All you can do with nothing is to abuse it by telling it what it isn't.

### 2

Let us pass therefore, from nothing to the simplest order of something: the sheer material world, the world of stuff, extensioned, dimensioned, resistible, lying at the bottom of all creation, subsisting in the simple status of length, breadth and thickness, pitched one hop above the eternal void.

This material world is not dead, because it was never alive. And yet it is worse than dead, because it was never informed with the dignity of a living principle. I shall call this lowest order of being "the kingdom of thingdom," a fanciful phrase, but I am in a mood for it, because I am on the road to talk about the loveliest being God made.

The kingdom of thingdom is made up of, so it seems, of little particles called electrons and protons, wreathed into a trillion fantastic shapes in the varied flux of the material world. These little entities are not immanent, they do not live, rather, their activity is *ad extra*; they work on one another; they revolve, interlock, combine into every sort of shape and substance, some for contemplative, some for practical uses, and God is very pleased with them.

It took infinite power to produce these little electrons, to raise them from the possible to the actual state, to throw them out of the realm of nothing into a simple dimensional existence. No matter how insignificant they are in the order of creaturehood – they have neither intelligence, freedom nor reflection – they are tremendously more wonderful than nothing. And to prove their excitement at the fact of existence, they expand as water, evaporate as air, explode as fire, congeal as rock. In their congealed state (minerals) they are proletarian aristocratic as the case may be: junk or jewels. I admire them

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\* "You'd Better Come Quietly," *The Leonard Feeney Omnibus*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1942, pp.149-165.

very much massed in the magnificence of a mountain, diffused in the plume of a cloud, banked in the brilliance of a star.

A great darkness broods over the kingdom of thingdom: the darkness of unknowability (because matter ultimately resists being the object of thought, is stubborn to it, is nauseating to it, if I may use a metaphor); and also a great sadness: the sadness of essential complexity and change. You see the inhabitants of the kingdom of thingdom are not *things* the authentic, subsistential use of the word. They do not exist for themselves, they exist for some other things. They are constantly reaching out for a permanent state of selfhood in “surrenders” which we call chemistry, in “conquests” which we call physics. Yet because permanency is the prerogative of spirit alone, and not of matter, a true “self” is always denied them. No sooner has an “otherness” been attained than they abandon it for the sake of something still other, in variations of weariness and frenzy (again physics and chemistry – in reverse order) which exchange accounts for the perpetual maelstrom of the material world.

Into this realm of minerals there fall incessantly discarded relics from the soft world of life. These latter are not welcome in the kingdom of thingdom. The plow will ravage the loam, the axe hew the timber, the scissors cut the cloth. Fights among themselves are fairest. And diamond cut diamond is a tournament *par excellence*.

Prodigious events happened in the kingdom of thingdom, all of their own accord: landslides, earthquakes, whirlwinds, tornadoes. Prodigious effects are also wrought in their midst under the guidance of the thought of man: skyscrapers, mortar-mixers, derricks, bridges, ocean liners.

But the most beautiful service offered to man by the mineral world is its adaptability in symbol to suit some whim of human emotion. Perhaps I shall express this idea best in a verse, before I leave this brief contemplation of creation’s lowest world, to ascend, world by world, to the throne of God.

In the little kingdom of thingdom  
 That has no soul,  
 A pebble will tinkle and roll  
 In a bric-a-brac bowl.  
 By the brewing and brothing  
 Of silver and steel,  
 A knicknack is never not nothing  
 Sand a trinket is real.  
 By repulsion, attraction,  
 Devoid of all immanent action,  
 The length, breadth and thickness of stuff  
 Is existence enough  
 In the little kingdom of thingdom.

In the little kingdom of thingdom,

Where shells become pearls,  
 Where diamonds are princes and princesses,  
 Emeralds earls,  
 The well-fueled ruby will flash,  
 The coin on the counter will clash;  
 There's is a lovely alarm for the ear,  
 Were there someone to hear,  
 There's a mineral meaning to find,  
 Were there only a mind,  
 In the little kingdom of thingdom.

In the little kingdom of thingdom,  
 Where hands are all handles,  
 The lady was pleased to put shiny white sticks under lily  
     White candles,  
 With one of her fingers residing in ringdom:  
 A beautiful pledge that was bought in a honeymoon store,  
 One day in the little kingdom of thingdom.

### 3

Our next step on our way up from the darkness of nothing to the blazing splendor of the Deity, is to move from the kingdom of thingdom to the first simple world of life: the world of flower and tree (for a tree is only a wooden flower). Easy as it is to take this step with the mind, it is required that we traverse an almost infinite distance to take it in meaning. For the difference between a rock and a rose is so tremendous that it unveils a whole new vista of essence before the light of our intelligence.

A rock and a rose are, of course, in many points alike. The points in which they are similar: their dimensional activity, is all too evident. They resist each other, attract each other, if you drop both from a window they will obediently obey the law of gravity and will, in one case drop, in the other case flutter, to the ground. But the points in which they are different awake astonishment in the mind to the point almost of fright.

For here's what a rose is which a rock isn't. It is a little unity of being, each part succulently united to another in a way no piece of rock could be to any other piece. It works in the short space of what we are pleased to call its "life," as a small pseudo-self in the realm of matter. It can grow, nourish itself, reproduce its kind. No rock can do that.

I once put the problem to a young University student, who had all his certitudes destroyed in college by an atheistic professor and who (remembering his textbook) was not willing to admit an essential difference between a living and a non-living being, this way:

"Now take this ink-bottle. Do you think I should ever leave it on my desk, and come back some day and find a brood of baby ink-bottles cluttering around it?"

He laughed – which we all do when our sanities are touched – but was not willing to admit that it could *never* be so.

“Do you think I should ever leave this small ink-bottle on my desk and then come back some day and find (while knowing that no one had entered my room in the interval) that it had grown to be a great big ink-bottle!

Another laugh!” Another tribute to the sense of what I was saying. For laughter is, in some way, an arbiter of truth. But still he “didn’t know *for sure*.”

And, finally, the third question.

“Would there be any need for me, ever, to keep coming in and watering and feeding this ink-bottle, in order to keep it in its present status? Does it, in other words, need nourishment of any kind in order to keep on being a good ink-bottle?”

Again he sniggered , humanly, but still didn’t know academically. So I had to leave him in the possession of the worthless assurance, “You never can tell what science will discover.”

But to return to the rose and the rock. All the magnificence and power of the inanimate world packed into one display could not begin to adequate the wonderfulness of performance in one small rose, acting as a unified being, exercising itself in marvelous functions of growth, nourishment and reproduction, putting forth its little challenge of thorns. Because the time will come when you can say of this rose, “It now is dead.” You cannot say that of any rock that ever existed, from the tiniest pebble on the beach to the Grand Canyon of Colorado.

I may say that instinctively we notice – let us say on coming into a room – the superior excellence of being that is enjoyed by a flower or plant when we discover it in a melange of rugs, chairs, books and crockery. “Ah, a flower!” we exclaim, and immediately we want it placed in the sunlight, knowing the needs of its fragile, perishable nature.

#### 4

We are now two worlds away from nothing in our progress towards Infinity. Many of my readers will have tired of the journey at this point, I daresay. But for those who have courage to climb with me, I shall climb with them. There will be constantly countless reasons for delaying as each superior degree of being is reached. But I have an impetus preventing me from delaying, as will later be shown. So let us climb, up from this world of flower into the world of animal.

#### 5

Nothing!...Rocks!...Flowers!...And what then?...The fish, the beast and the bird!...Are they a new world? You would think so if you studied the behavior by which

they surpass all operatives in the realm below them. Here are creatures which are not only dimensioned, nor only immensely active, but equipped with five astounding instruments of knowledge. They are able to smell, see, hear, taste and feel. Not all the oceans and mountains of the world can approximate in such activity on fluttering butterfly. Not all the forests and field flowers, one squirming worm.

Once arriving at the stage of animal in the hierarchy of creation, we are set in thought three hops away from nothing, and are beginning to fumble for the first time with the profundity of the great mystery of knowledge.

Gorillas, gazelles, antelopes, tigers, seals, bluebirds, monkeys – is there any way to catalogue or classify all the fantastic forms and shapes which God the Father (who is the poet, the “maker” in God) has delighted to reveal Himself in symbol, once He has reached the world of sensitive creation? I stand – and so must you – astounded at what I behold in the jungle, the aquarium, the zoo. Think of what nerves must be arranged in order that one tiny mouse should smell a crumb of cheese! Think of what fibres must be devised and coordinated in order that a single whale should explode a jowl-full of salt water in mid-ocean!

And yet while lions crouch in their lairs and hippopotamuses splash in their baths, while watch dogs bark in the night to protect their masters, and the skylarks soar aloft to sing their songs, we must be content to unify the marvelous ensemble in a category: the category of “sense,” which distinguishes the third world above the void from the unfeeling world that lies just below it.

So remarkable is the performance of an animal in its five-fold assimilation of the world through which it prowls, that a host of scientists (masquerading under the guise of philosophers) with minds that have been *drilled* in the ways of knowledge rather than *schooled* in them, have attributed human intelligence to an ape, human emotions to a baboon. This is not the time to refute this group. Let us climb to another world and then settle the score against them. But let us first pay tribute to God the Father, for the infinite display of His variety and humor in the world of animal creation. “I have made a lot of necks,” He would seem to say. Do you now want to see what I can do when I specialize in neck? Behold the giraffe! Do you want to see me truly intent on the subject of nose? I give you the elephant! And for eyes, the owl. And for legs the ostrich! And for belly, the hippopotamus.” And so on.

## 6

It is humiliating for me to say so, but the next world into which we pass in our progress upward from nothing to God, is the world of *you* and *me*, the human world, the world of *man*.

Being still in the sphere of matter, we will find in the human world similarities of behavior with all the orders below us. I am like a rock in that I fall from a height. I am like a

flower in that I nourish myself, grow, and can reproduce my kind, I am like an animal in that I can smell, feel; taste, hear and see.

The way to differentiate a man and a stone, a man and a vegetable, a man and a dog, is, by the way, not to study the points in which they are similar. That is the trick of Julian Huxley, Pavlov et al., a trick so subtle that it has in my presence sent a lady in a moving-picture house (while witnessing Pavlov's picture "The Mechanics of the Brain") sprawling into the aisle in a dead faint.

"My dear lady," I said to her when she revived (since no one else wanted to play the hero) "don't you let Pavlov worry you. You are neither fish nor a monkey. I assure you are not. Pavlov has been trying to rub in the points in which you are like these animals. Let me tell you the points in which you are different. You can sing, laugh, read, talk, play the piano, draw pictures, say your prayers. Today you saw on the screen Pavlov making a study of an amoeba to discover its secrets of life. Now when an amoeba begins to make a study of Pavlov, then we shall both begin to worry. And speaking of monkeys, monkeys have been eating bananas since the world began, but never in the world's history has a monkey ever been impelled to draw a picture of a banana!"

The lady began to feel a little better. And felt all better when she got out into the open air and saw people behaving pretty much as they did before she entered the cinema theatre.

It is unfortunate that the philosophers have called us "rational animals." This is by way of putting us in a category of the *genera* devised by Aristotle. But these *genera* exist in the logical, not in the physical order. As a matter of fact we are not animals at all. We are men. Every single fibre of us is informed by a spiritual, indestructible soul, which gives even to our humblest functions an exquisiteness, a dignity, not enjoyed by any beast that lives. We are matter made fastidious to the utmost degree, by reason of the spiritual principle that keeps us alive. We do not eat, sleep, breathe, suffer, die in the same way a beast does. Even a nurse in a hospital, caring for man in his most humiliating conditions, will realize that she is in charge ( and that's part of the reason she wears a white dress and a white cap) of a being infinitely more to be revered than an ox or a cow in charge of a stable-keeper.

Still we are partly material. This is our triumph as well as our shame; our triumph, because we can exercise in this lowly sphere such beautiful qualities of forgiveness, patience, purity, resignation; our humiliation, because we are subject to such indignities as nausea, rheumatism, sinus trouble.

Yet there is a formula in regard to the human world which I shall now reveal. Our fundamental problems, it is true, are birth, love, suffering and death. But the situation can be summarized more succinctly. Everyone is sensitive. Everyone is lonely.

Think of our problem of loneliness! Eyes and mouth are, at rest, closed. Only the ears are open, through which we do not communicate, only receive. And how little we

receive! I have found the sweetest voice imaginable (one which I knew well in my childhood) incapable of assuaging the insatiate human spirit desiring to know both why it is and why it is left so shut off from comfort.

## 7

How beautifully , exquisitely the human body is apportioned and structured in order to meet the needs of an immortal spirit is shown by some statistics from the biologists. There are in the eye (each eye) in a space not larger than the head of a pin, twenty-one million little mirrors (twenty-one million reflecting substances, nine million rods and twelve million cones – or maybe it's the other way) showing how anxious God is to have His child equipped with vision, capable of appraising not only color, but every degree of shade, depth, texture. There are twenty-thousand harp strings in every human ear. (Think of a piano or an organ with twenty-seven thousand notes!) And so we become aware not only of outward noise, but of every grade and variation of sound. We recognize wood when it is knocked on, a saxophone when it is blown, a violin when it is sawed with a bow, we can even discriminate exactly among footsteps, the impact of a voice friendly or hostile.

If I were to continue on through the various material faculties (take the taste buds, for instance, by which so clearly discriminate between the savor of a lemon and an orange) I should be indefinitely occupied with the marvelous function of sense-knowledge in man. To close this paragraph with a bang I may say that in each human brain there are one billion cells. (A billion is a thousand million.) Each cell is connected directly or indirectly with flesh wires with every other cell housed inside the human skull. At a single moment, because of our unpredictable activity in the requirements of sense, the whole exchange is likely to be in operation. Imagine a telephone operator with a billion calls buzzing at the same time!

Into our world God came as a baby. He never entered the world of angel in personal life. There is an Incarnation, but not any Angelization of God. Why He became one of our kind, I do not know, except to put it down to the immeasurable extent of His love. Let us not be too ashamed of ourselves, therefore. There is a dignity in having bones and flesh and blood and limbs, and eyes, and a heart since Bethlehem gave us Jesus. But if we are to accept the consolations of the Incarnation, we must accept the annoyances as well. And Bethlehem was chiefly a nuisance to Jesus and Mary as soon as Our Saviour had been born. There was no room for them in the inn. The stable was cold. There was no light. It smelled very badly. And the crib of the Holy Infant was only a much-munched oats box. No sooner had they settled in these ungracious quarters than King Herod tried to kill the Holy Child. It was all bother, borne for love of us.

## 8

After we leave the material world, of which we are the most excellent, and perhaps the most awkward members, where do we pass next? To the Deity Himself? Not quite yet. Not quite yet by a large margin.

When we leave man, we soar into the world of angel. No length, breadth and thickness now. All stuff ceases. No Law of Gravity. No muscles and blood adhering to the bones of a skeleton. Merely a clear, bright will and intelligence unhampered by dimensional hindrances, able to assert its selfhood free of all our flesh-fetters, our stumbles and our falls. It must be beautiful to be an angel and never know fatigue!

Yet we would be wrong in dismissing an angel with such a description. For though essentially simple in nature, angels are marvelously complex in intensity and degree of perfection. There are exactly nine worlds of angels, each order surpassing the order below it similarly as the orders of life surpass each other in the material sphere.

The notion of an angel will, or course, be obnoxious to a mind not prepared to receive it. Angels are not for the bourgeois, who lack any relish for hierarchy. Angels are for poets, soldiers and saints. College professors, shop-keepers and butter-and-egg salesmen are more suitably entertained with ghosts and ghost stories.

Angels cannot be photographed, or visualized with our material eyes. Therefore what? Therefore there are no such things as angels? To say this is to contradict God's sacred affidavit that there are. A disinclination for an invisible world, simply because it cannot be apprehended with a yardstick or measured like a pound of butter, is one of the sure symptoms of incipient savagery. Remember we are only one degree above the animal's in creation's order, and if we do not give our spiritual intellect some concepts befitting its dignity, back into the jungle we will fall and quickly disintegrate in greeds, lusts and growls.

Let me tell you one thing about an angel that will impress you. First he is launched into existence by a stroke of God's will, fully intelligenced for all his natural functions. He knows in the first flash of his existence all he will ever know, short of the Beatific Vision, which, of course, he must earn by some trial of fidelity. No angel ever went to school. Secondly, so powerful is his will that when he makes a choice he remains rooted, fixed in it by sheer force of spiritual drive, forever and ever. The angels who chose God in their trial-instant in eternity, stayed fixed in their adoration of Him always. The angels who chose Lucifer and themselves for adoration, fixed themselves immediately in Hell and stayed rooted there. If there could be in us any sense of pity for a damned angel, or rather any sense of excuse – which there can not properly be – it would be at least to admit that God had made him so beautiful it were possible to apprehend in himself the mirage of divinity. If you were want to ask what an angel could do in relation to the material world, I shall tell you. He could, by sheer force of will, without the aid of a slingshot or a fulcrum, hurl the planet Mars out of it orbit and disrupt the whole solar system. What wonder that Christ says that part of an angel's care of us is to see we do not dash our foot against a stone! And angle could really make a cow jump over the moon.

If this be just one angel, I mean a simple plain angel of the lowest order of pure spirit, what must an archangel be, a super-angel!

There are no pictures I can apply to enable my readers to climb visually the ladders of being that rise in the angelic order all the way from flesh and blood to God. But some

intellectual apprehension of what it is to see one order surpassing another we have experienced in climbing from stone to flower, from flower to animal, from animal to man. Somehow in the same way we could climb as we went from

ANGELS  
to  
ARCHANGELS  
to  
PRINCIPALITIES

for so the lowest hierarchy in the in the celestial order is named. This hierarchy is especially interested in human welfare. We have, upon the assurance of St. Jerome, an angel to protect and pray for us – a Guardian Angel we call him. There is an Archangel set over large spiritual enterprises, such as a diocese, maybe even a parish, maybe even a large household. The Principalities concern themselves with human interests that rise to the proportions of national importance. It is possible that each state of the forty-eight in our United States may be complex enough in spiritual needs to require a Principality to protect it. Then of course the upper angels look always with special care and interest in the order of angels just below them. Everything created participates in the providence of God whose care of things is boundless.

The second great hierarchy of angels is called by these mysterious, yet wonderfully impressive names:

POWERS  
VIRTUES  
DOMINIONS

Remember, please, as you advance towards God, through the ranges of excellence in intellectual and spiritual intensity bestowed on each of these ascending groups, you see a new revelation in the order of knowledge and love of the raging power of God written in the creatures of His hand. It is *on and on* with the angels, *more and more greater and greater*, *wilder and wilder* beauty, *intenser and intenser* light as we follow an arrow-path to the Absolute.

Let me count the steps I have taken so far in going from nothing to God.

NOTHING  
STONES  
FLOWERS  
ANIMALS  
MEN  
ANGELS  
ARCHANGELS  
PRINCIPALITIES  
POWERS

VIRTUES  
DOMINIONS

And now we soar into the last great hierarchy of angels, the mightiest, loftiest spirits of all. Ranged in a last breathless order of three (everything created seems to be threefold in some aspect, so as to image the Blessed Trinity of God Himself) are the top aristocrats of the angelic system. Their concerns all lie Godwards. God is their ecstasy to such a point that they would swoon out of existence, with all their raging, blinding strength, if God did not support them. This last hierarchy of angels is called

THRONES  
CHERUBIM  
SERAPHIM

Even to mention them takes your breath away, for since an angel is invisible, he seems to bestow on his poor human brothers some blinking awareness of what he is, simply as a reward for saying an angel's name.

The THRONES are the "foundation" angels, or so I like to call them. The CHERUBIM are the "knowledge" angels, that is to say, theirs is knowledge *par excellence*. The SERAPHIM are the love angels. They feed on the infinite adorableness of the divine essence.

Creation's bonfire can, in nature's scheme, reach no higher. The topmost flame has been mentioned. The last soaring spark has been reached.

I don't see what more I can say, except to make another summary. Please bear that it should be repeated. Here's how it goes again, with all the items accounted for.

NOTHING  
STONES  
FLOWERS  
ANIMALS  
MEN  
ANGELS  
ARCHANGELS  
PRINCIPALITIES  
POWERS  
VIRTUES  
DOMINIONS  
THRONES  
CHERUBIM  
SERAPHIM

Make a little chart of this and put it on your wall. Think of it daily no matter how little results you get. You'd be surprised to find, sometimes, how much you actually can get. Let the chart be called merely a series of signposts, if you will. These are the RIGHT signposts, not the wrong ones. And we've got into the habit of getting things so wrong these days, it will do no harm to get at least one thing verbally right. After all the words of all languages and all the literatures are potentially placed in the right alphabets.

After we have passed the last flaming seraph in the world of angel, what comes next? The Godhead itself?...In the order of nature, yes. In the order of grace, no!

Strangely enough, in the dispensation of Grace, creation restores itself into flesh and blood once more, and we find human nature again at the portal of the Divine Reality. We find it in the form of a girl. Our minds, weary of climbing without pictures to assist us, through the tenuous droves of spirits that lie above us in the nine worlds of angel, are refreshed once more with an imaginative picture of something we know, love and have seen, before we step across the threshold again; with hands and eyes and hair, and a heart; airing her maiden-mother manners at the summit of all creation, constituted Queen of the Universe, with dominion over all angels and all men, more beautiful in her single reality, more pleasing to God, more full of Grace, than all the rest of creation put together. She is "beautiful as the moon, chosen as the sun, mighty as an army set in array." She is the Queen of Angels. She is the Mother and Queen of Men. She originated on this little planet of ours, pertains to our race, is related to us not by angelic ties of love and thought, but by the very fibres of flesh and blood.

She is still a woman, even in this awful majestic status bestowed upon her by God. And she likes compliments. Tower of Ivory, Mystical Rose, Morning Star ...Such tributes please her. Her alliance to God is threefold. She is the Daughter of the Father, the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, and the Mother of the Son. She presents all creation with a baby, whose name in eternity is God, and whose name in time is Jesus.

She is the Mother of Divine Grace, powerful in her intercession. She is not God, she is the Gate to God, the Gate of Heaven. There is no passing to Eternal Life except through her. She is understanding, innocent, marvelously simple and unsuspecting, tender towards sinners. She takes us each by the hand and leads us to the Beatific Vision, and shares the radiant beauty of Christ's human nature begotten in her womb.

One cannot escape her. One cannot get into Heaven except through the Gate!

"You'd better come through the Gate!" God says to each of us. "Hesitations, uncertainties, nervousness, doubts, what good do these do either a man or an angel?"

"You'd better come through the Gate...!"

"And YOU'D BETTER COME QUIETLY!"