

Simone Weil, Affliction and Freedom Components  
in the Sacrificial Life of a Christian

by

(C) J. Thorogood-Milne

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There are three kinds of suffering.

Needless suffering (degrading):

Expiatory suffering:

Redemptive suffering (this latter suffering is the privilege of the innocent).

Simone Weil

Notebooks Vol. I.

## ABSTRACT

Affliction and freedom were two crucial factors in the thought and experience of Simone Weil. Affliction is that which comes upon the individual from without, from his or her given physical make-up, or from pressures imposed by social and political structures. Affliction quenches the spirit and tends to enslave, yet persons never become merely victims. However attenuated, freedom remains. It permits the individual to accept voluntary suffering as he or she identifies with others in their affliction. It opens the way to sacrificial living. This pattern, sometimes exaggerated and often flawed, is to be seen in the life of Simone Weil, and allows her to be regarded as belonging to the spirit of the Christian tradition, though she could never accept formal membership of it.

## PRECIS

L'Affliction et la liberté étaient deux éléments cruciaux dans la pensée et la vie de Simone Weil. Affliction est ce qui dépasse la réalité physique et les pressions imposées par les structures sociales et politiques. Affliction possède l'esprit et permet à l'individu de ne jamais devenir victime et le force à se surmonter; aussi, la personne accepte volontiers sa souffrance autant que celle des autres et arrive à s'y identifier. Ce chemin ayant été suivi, jusqu'à l'exagération par Simone Weil, pourrait-on dire, à été sa faiblesse. Cette vie lui a permis d'être vue comme appartenant à l'esprit de la tradition chrétienne, mais elle ne pourrait jamais faire partie de son Eglise.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT . . . . .	iv
PRECIS . . . . .	v
PREFACE . . . . .	1
CHAPTER 1 - EMERGING PATTERNS . . . . .	7
CHAPTER 2 - INDIVIDUALITY AND COLLECTIVITY . . . . .	26
CHAPTER 3 - ENTERING THE REALITY . . . . .	37
CHAPTER 4 - FREEDOM . . . . .	51
CHAPTER 5 - CHOICES . . . . .	63
NOTES . . . . .	76
WORKS CITED . . . . .	81

## PREFACE

Andre Gide quotes Simone Weil herself. "She said it was her vocation to stand at the intersection of Christians and non-Christians." She thus becomes the patron saint of all "outsiders". Other perspectives have been voiced by noted philosophers, Christians and great writers of our time. Charles Moeller suggests that Weil is definitely not a Christian but probably fulfilled the Christian "caritas" more fully than many formal Christians. Malcolm Muggeridge considers Waiting on God the greatest work of mysticism of the twentieth century.

In general, Simone Weil is considered an outstanding woman for her century. This thesis intends to investigate, as the subtitle suggests, two particular aspects of her life, sacrifice and affliction, as she experienced them and as she dealt with them or responded to them, and to suggest that, in general terms, these components of affliction and sacrifice are an integral part of the life of a Christian.

As stated earlier, affliction is that which is imposed from without, sacrifice on the other hand comes from within and is chosen, willingly or unwillingly but still chosen. There are two kinds of sacrifice, the one a person makes for his own personal needs and development, regardless of others, and the sacrifice one makes 'in Love' for the needs

of another. To use the terms chosen by C.S. Lewis in The Four Loves, the first form might encompass "need love", and the second motive for sacrifice could be based upon Agape. Both forms of sacrifice are productive for the individual and for society as a whole. The flaw in Weil and in others of the Christian or other faiths is that there may be a point at which any chosen sacrifice may become destructive to self or to others. Christianity is not merely a religion of sacrifice and affliction but also of resurrection and joy.

Simone's entry into this world was premature, her philosophy, thinking, activities and writings were ahead of her time and her death was also premature. In her developing years, that is from her birth to her first appointment at La Puy as a philosophy teacher, Simone was beset by a variety of handicaps. At an early age she underwent an operation on her appendix. She had very small hands which ultimately became arthritic, extremely poor eyesight and severe migraine headaches. Added to these physical disabilities she developed an inferiority complex in trying to keep up with her brilliant brother Andre Weil. None of these influences in her early life, however, daunted her inexorable spirit. It is almost as if her personal afflictions were the instruments of creating within this woman an immense gift of perception and sensitivity to the suffering of others. Her particular afflictions instead of destroying her or turning her inward, appear, instead, to have deepened and enriched



her spirit and interior life so powerfully, that she became a living sounding-board for all who suffered physically, socially and emotionally. Weil did not succumb to pain and difficulty; she took it and transformed it into living concern for others. Her background and environment allowed her particular privileges and encouraged her intellectual development which she used, once again, not for herself but for others.

Her life follows a pattern of affliction and sacrifice interrupted by peaceful and joyful moments and powerful experiences of prayer and mysticism. Some of her choices to sacrifice herself led to real affliction and suggest almost a drive towards self immolation.

Although Weil's ideals and concepts were altruistic she was also realistic. She believed that man felt he was born for liberty, but that this remained a dream for most people. Her writings held up the ideal of liberty and then pragmatically asked, what could be achieved realistically? It is only in dealing with her own life and with her own personal needs that Simone appears to become compulsive. Her great talent for opening doors and shedding light on such subjects as freedom, affliction, God and love of neighbour grows in intensity as she deals with her own person.

She met head on the legalism of the Roman Catholic Church as it existed in France in her time matching each anathema sit with an appropriate Weilian concept, and as a

result never entered the official Catholic Church through baptism. Personal need for logical certitude, as she experienced it allowed little room for the required element of faith necessary to be a practising Christian.

She met Christ during her life and most certainly died in His Presence. He met her at the crossroads where Christians and non-Christians alike may enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

This thesis will attempt to demonstrate that her childhood, parenting and environment had a deep effect upon her particular psyche, causing her to be open to sacrifice for others. Within the context of Weil's life, however, she sometimes allowed her sacrificial nature to become immolative; yet her thought and actions far superseded this flaw and her general approach to affliction and sacrifice did indeed involve components necessary to a Christian life.

The thesis is composed of five chapters.

Chapter I is a review of Simone's life from infancy to adulthood. The concern in this chapter is to offer insights into some emerging patterns that deeply affected Simone's life.

In Chapter two the thought and concern of Simone Weil for those in affliction around her is expressed in both writing and action. This chapter establishes her crystallizing thoughts and her personal desire to serve others by teaching, and writing. At this point in her life her choice to serve is productive. In Chapter three we view Simone entering the world of the worker and it is in this particular part of her

life that we may recognise a certain compulsion in her desire to live the life of the worker. The theory of chapter two becomes the experience of chapter three. The foreshadowing of self-immolation in Chapter I gives way to reality when she was allowed to use a pick-axe and a compressed air drill. According to her friend, Thevenon, if she had not been stopped she would have used the drill until she collapsed. The flaw in her sacrifice becomes evident. Her desire to affirm the freedom and supreme value of the individual over the collectivity was expressed in writings containing her criticism of Marxism.

In Chapter four we note that Simone's spiritual freedom becomes a reality following the realistic experience of her concern for the worker. It seems relevant to suggest at this point that such a freedom for Weil seems to have resulted from a chastizing of the flesh rather than from a blossoming of and co-ordinating of the whole person. The fruits of this freedom, however, are filled with compassion and love, and it is at this point that Weil's life begins to express itself in a spiritually Christian form.

In Chapter five I use explicit examples of Simone's personal choices to clarify perspectives of Christian understanding in order to appreciate more fully the personality of Simone Weil and the parallels in her life that are similar to those of other Christians.

The list of works cited are works read with a view to

writing this thesis. I have chosen to concentrate in particular on Weil's own writings in order to formulate the thesis. Books read and not cited tend to permeate the concepts illustrated in it.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the supervision, direction and advice provided by my advisor, Dr. Monroe Peaston and also Dr. John Hellman, who loaned me his very informative and interesting work, Simone Weil. The assistance and direction of Dr. Monroe Peaston was immeasurable and along with the support and encouragement of my children and friends has enabled me to complete a scholarly inquiry that has been an experience in personal growth.

## CHAPTER 1

### EMERGING PATTERNS

Sacrifice is the acceptance of pain,  
the refusal to obey the animal in  
oneself, and the will to redeem suffer-  
ing men, through voluntary suffering.

Simone Weil<sup>1</sup>  
As cited by  
Simone Petrement.

How deep were the earliest influences upon Simone Weil and how did they affect her particular way of life? On February 3rd, 1909 Simone Weil was born prematurely to Selma and Bernard Weil in Paris. The first six months of her life did not appear to be affected by this fact; however, Selma Weil whilst nursing her baby had a serious attack of appendicitis and following this the baby Simone became seriously ill. She continued to be sick from her eleventh to her twenty-second month and at one point a doctor had stated, "This baby cannot survive." At the age of two she had trouble with her adenoids and at the age of three and a half she had a violent attack of appendicitis. She was operated upon and made a very slow recovery, remaining in the hospital for three weeks.

It was during this convalescent period following her operation that she was reading the story "Marie in Gold and Marie

in Tar". It is a fairy-tale, in which the heroine, Marie, is taken to a house in the forest by her stepmother. The house has two doors, one made of tar and one made of gold. When asked which door she would choose to enter the child replies, "For me, tar is quite good enough." As a result of this humble answer the child is showered with gold. The stepmother returns home and then returns with her own daughter to the same house in the forest. This girl chooses to enter by the door of gold and is promptly covered with tar. Simone said, later in life, that this story had a profound effect upon her life. There is no doubt that during her life Simone entered many a "tarred door" and that her interpretation of the shower of gold would not have been expressed as material gold but metaphorically as the golden gift of light or truth.

As parents, Bernard and Selma Weil raised their children without any formal religious foundation or structure. They were somewhat agnostic, if not atheistic in their attitude to religion. Simone, however, did not lack a good example in terms of caring for others. Her father has been described as being<sup>2</sup> utterly unselfish, a man who went out of his way to please others and do what was asked of him. He was extremely frank and very honest and there is no question that these characteristics had their effect upon Simone. Selma her mother was noted for her extreme generosity; she also possessed a persuasive power that to many was overwhelming. Both parents

had noble ambitions for their children and gave them the best education possible in terms of exposure to literature, travel and schooling. They were a couple totally devoted to each other. It was Madam Weil, who later on at the time of Simone's fame, said "Ah, how much I would have preferred her to be happy." <sup>3</sup>

Simone's father had a close relationship with a microbiologist, Elie Metchnikov, and through this relationship the Weil family developed an extreme fear of microbes. Madam Weil frowned upon the children being kissed by other people and scrupulous washing of hands before meals was always observed. It is paradoxical to note, however, that Selma Weil admits to having spoiled her daughter through fondling and kissing her more than she should. Bernard Weil was also extremely affectionate with his daughter. Simone herself developed strong feelings of repugnance towards being kissed and would not touch or eat certain things. She sometimes spoke of her disgustingness. It is possible that when developing her spiritual life these early experiences led her towards catharism and manichaeism, rather than to true Christianity.

It is evident from this rather brief survey of Simone's infancy and early parenting that she experienced physical pain at an early age, in varying degrees and that her response appears to have been passive. One of her favourite fairytales is a remarkable example of humility and being rewarded

for such humility. These patterns are repeated throughout her life.

## 2

At the age of six, a rather serious-looking girl, with good features, dark eyes and an unruly mop of black hair, gave up her sugar ration for her adopted godson, one of many soldiers in the first world war who had no family of his own. This act in itself is not over-sacrificial, however it might be asked how many six-year-old children at this time willingly contracted to such a gesture and also held to it? At the same age Simone and her brother were exchanging quotations from Cyrano de Bergerac. In order to entertain their parents Simone and her brother used to learn by heart certain passages of classical plays and perform them. This was part of their "playing". These children did not spring from an average family. Long holidays in hotels in beautiful places allowed the children a great deal of freedom. Such trained and disciplined minds and such free and active bodies, with little restriction on time, allowed the children to grow in extra-ordinary ways, both in independence and individuality. The children also appear to have experienced freedom from all the confinements and limitations of an average family with its chores and restrictions, its regular social demands and habits. Sometimes the children would be provided with tutors,



particularly Simone because of her fragile health. Such treatment isolated the young Weils from their peer group and from many of the realistic pains of everyday living. The godson for whom Simone had given up her sugar ration came to visit the family whilst they were holidaying at Chartres. The little girl was thrilled. They went for long walks by the sea holding hands. He then returned to his regiment. She never saw him again. He was killed in action soon after his return from leave. To experience the death of a hero at an early age would not have added to her sense of joy or faith or security.

It was at the age of eleven that Simone attended her first meeting of the unemployed. She was already concerned about the poor, and seeing a demonstration of the unemployed in the street one day, she naturally ran out of the house and attended it.<sup>4</sup> This was probably her first introduction to any form of protest march or public meeting and would have left some kind of impression upon her. This also foreshadows her early adult life concerning trade unionism and her work and activities with the unions.

Upon returning from a holiday in Paris, Simone's freedom was suddenly curtailed. Her brother Andre had been sent to the boys lycee and she had become totally bored without his companionship. Her parents decided to send Simone to the girls lycee. Entering into a more average world Simone

had to take great pains with her work to succeed and she would sometimes wake up at night to do her homework. She was over-conscientious. However, she was soon at the top of her class. This hard-earned success was no consolation when her brother Andre passed his university entrance exams at fourteen and entered the Ecole Normale at sixteen.


She was thirteen years old when she entered what she called her "bottomless pit". She had an inferiority complex because compared to her brother she felt very stupid. Her small hands caused her to write very slowly and she was already wearing thick heavy glasses due to failing eyesight. Her despair led her to wish to die, not because she was a failure, but because she believed that she would not be able to enter the "transcendent Kingdom" where truth abides, if she was not truly great. It is clear that at the early age of thirteen Simone equated "intellectual achievement and logical truth" in some way with the "transcendent Kingdom."<sup>5</sup> This Kingdom was definitely not the Kingdom of heaven of Christianity. One of the greatest difficulties for Simone in later life was that her essentially logical certitude as understood and enlightened by her intellect, was both her greatest gift to the world and others, through her writings, but also one of her greatest limitations. The sense of failure that she experienced during her brother's success, and her almost compulsive drive to prove or disprove attitudes and concepts in life, repeated itself during her life and was a

strong factor in the circumstances of her death.

At the age of sixteen, whilst on holiday with her parents at Hotel du Chateau in Challes-les-Eaux, her concern for others less fortunate than herself re-surfaced. Simone observed that the staff of the hotel in which she was staying were overworked and she pressed the staff to organise a union to protect themselves, much to the chagrin of some of the guests.

## 3

The dream that Emile Chartier would one day become Simone's teacher, was fulfilled. The passionate concerns of a young adult were honed and challenged and built upon in a venerable fashion. The detached, sophisticated, skeptical and agnostic philosopher developed her intellect, sometimes in agreement, sometimes in disagreement. His attitude to institutions and society reinforced Simone's growing concern for the poor. Her demand and search for absolute truth within the realm of her own particular need and sensitivity did not always blend well with Alain's detached and skeptical urbanity. Because she had little interest in romance and close friendships she was considered somewhat eccentric. She rejected any intellectual compromise and thus suffered both intellectually and socially. She hid her inner conflict from her fellow students. A spiritual affliction was already



germinating in her soul.

It was Alain who introduced Simone to the writings of Jules Langeau. It is apparent that, in her later life, this man also had an empathetic influence on her life and thought. He wrote, "Certitude is an absolute creation of the spirit, it is the spirit itself, it is the absolute, it is God who creates it in us."<sup>6</sup> Thus Simone had support for her own particular need for logical certitude and tended to think of it as a divine gift.

Simone failed her first attempt to write the entrance exam to the Ecole Normale. She had spent too much time in cafes and in studying only her favourite subjects, math and philosophy while neglecting her other subjects. In her second attempt she succeeded, and was placed first of all entrants. Simone de Beauvoir was placed second the very same year. The severe academic and intellectual requirements of the Ecole Normale did not disturb Simone. It was in such an environment as this that her mind and soul began to express themselves more clearly and to a larger world.

It was in 1930 that Simone began to develop severe migraine. There were several theories as to the cause of this further violent pain in her life. One suggestion was that they were caused by larval sinusitis, from rhinitis, which she had contracted through resting outside after physical exertion, without putting on a coat or sweater. It is also possible

that she had a congenital disposition to headaches, inherited from her father, who also suffered from severe migraines.

Others wondered if it was the excessive work that she undertook.<sup>7</sup> Simone herself once said to her mother, "You ought

not to be sorry that I have had headaches, for without them, there are many things I would not have done."<sup>8</sup> In a sense

she appears to be stating that pain for her was in some way

a challenge to achieve in spite of it, rather than happiness

being a source of good works or achievement. Herein lies

perhaps a wide controversy. Is it better or more Christian

to choose the tar door and be rewarded with gold or is it

better to choose the golden door and use the golden choice to avoid the tar. Is it necessary to suffer to be a Christian

and perform good works or is it possible to be happy and

choose to let an outpouring of that happiness also result in good works. To give in to pain is one perspective, to accept

it and work through it another, and it appears that at times

Weil literally used pain as a stimulant for certain achievements. That is not to say that nothing was ever done to re-

move that pain. It was a source of concern to both her parents and also her friends and many doctors were consulted about a cure but none could be found.

It was common for "Normalie" students, during their holidays, as extra-curricula activities, to take up work with the workers and also become involved with them. She began to teach at a college for railway workers, which she enjoyed very

much. She also began to take a deep interest in trade unionism. On one of her holidays she worked on a farm bringing in the harvest. Although she had little stamina, and suffered her regular headaches, she forced herself to work as hard as the men. She often pushed herself beyond the limits of her own strength. One farm labourer from Normandy said, that he believed that Joan of Arc must have been like Simone Weil.<sup>9</sup> Is this desire to push herself beyond her own limits part of her tragic flaw, her need to be as good as her brother, reflected in the male workers on the farm? Or is it a divine inspiration, a way of overcoming pain, a form of mind triumphing over matter? I tend to believe that this cited instance is an expression of a psychic flaw rather than a divine inspiration as experienced by Joan of Arc.

Simone, while at the Ecole Normale also began to develop a political awareness. She leaned towards a left-wing pacifist position. She had also developed a persistent passion in her convictions and a strong determination to live by them. Her bourgeoisie background seemed to cause her some personal embarrassment if not some kind of guilt for being so economically privileged when so many were born into deprivation and suffering. She had little respect for fellow students who did not view the poor and the needy with at least some concern and consideration. Her ability to determine her own point of view or position on any subject was clear. Once she

made a decision, it was unshakeable. Certitude and a certain inflexibility were beginning to surface in Simone's personal perspectives. Certitude in faith is an essential component of a Christian. However, there was inflexibility appearing at this time in Weil's character. Christians must always be open to the many faces and facets of Divine Power.

Simone's attitude to money was stringent. She smoked heavily but always rolled her own cigarettes. She ate poorly continuously and sent most of her earnings to others much less fortunate than herself. She always wanted to teach in an industrial area, to follow through on her idea to live with and serve the poor. It was very clear in her mind, before she graduated from the Ecole Normale, that at some time in her life she would work in a factory.

Simone at this point in time was certainly not averse to Christianity, but she was not deeply involved in religious discussion or study. She was beginning a period of militant protest in support of pacificism. Marching, writing and speaking, in her personal areas of concern were the ways in which Simone began to express publicly her deeply ingrained compassion for humanity and in particular the underprivileged and the poor. Just before taking up her first post as a teacher at Le Puy, a small fishing town and not the industrial area she had desired, she holidayed in Normandy with her parents, spending most of her time with the fishermen. She

found two brothers at Le Puy who would allow her to go fishing with them. Some of the people who knew about this were not too happy about it. It must have been one of her genuinely freeing experiences, because, later she refers to the life of a fisherman as being a life of freedom even though fishing is the work of the poor.

4

Simone was a good teacher and liked her students. However, she was still plagued with migraine headaches which sometimes lasted as long as six days. During these times she would go without eating. Since the headaches were so violent they caused her to vomit. Perhaps here we may evidence some simple examples of sacrifice. During her migraines she fasted, simply to prevent vomiting. During her migraines she never missed a class in school, thus her students never suffered any loss of teaching at this time. Simple sacrifices for both self and others, quietly achieved. Simone's teaching was not only confined to her students at Le Puy, she collaborated with another teacher named Thevenon, in an education course for the miners in St. Etienne.

Her disregard for her image as a teacher appeared, at times, almost wilful; however, it was a persistent perverse pattern which she maintained throughout her life. This wilfulness, if such was the case, was a strong characteristic of



Madam Weil. Andre Weil, Simone's brother, told Malcolm Muggeridge in an interview, that his mother was a "very energetic and wilful woman."<sup>10</sup> He cited the instance that Madam Weil followed her husband, whilst he was in the army "everywhere" even against strict military orders. It would seem that Simone's singleness of mind in some incidents in her life sprang from a similar characteristic.

Simon's activity in politics was channelled mostly towards dealing with and writing about the unions. Her desire was to unite the workers through unions and improve their working conditions. However, sometimes the way she fraternized with the workers caused her some notoriety and she was accused of "inciting the unemployed against the authorities." She believed in both visibly and physically supporting her beliefs wherever possible.

During her time at Le Puy Simone gained permission to visit a mine. This was not only a very unusual request, but it was almost unheard of that a woman should be allowed to go down into the mines. She was allowed to use a pick-axe and a compressed air-drill. According to her friend Thevenon, if she had not been stopped she would have used the drill until she collapsed. She tried to gain employment in this mine but was told that it was impossible. She published an article about her visit and described the worker as a tool who served a tool.

The conflict for the worker now is more than just money between buyers and sellers of labour; it is now between those who have the machine at their disposal and those who are at the disposal of the machine. 11

Simone's ultimate solution for the above problem was to educate the worker ~~not only~~ in how to operate the machines with which he worked but also educate him in the function and the purpose of the machine. Because of much of her behaviour and her writings Simone was understood by many people to be a Communist. She was never, however, a card-carrying member of the Communist party though she did share Marxist ideals with fellow students at the Ecole Normale.

One winter she went without heat in her apartment so that she might keep food in her cupboards and the unemployed workers could freely take for themselves and their families the food that they so desperately needed. She seems to have done this entirely upon her own initiative without any support and encouragement from others. Her unshakeable dedication to the poor was characteristic of her independent decision making and her strong determination to carry through such decisions. Her action with and for the unions and her Marxist attitude was quite common among French intellectuals at this time.

It was as a result of some of her unorthodox behaviour and because of the attitude of others towards her lifestyle that Simone compromised her teaching post at the Lycee, and although the Minister of Education had no complaints about her teaching and her students liked her, she was finally

persuaded to apply for a transfer.

Simone left Le Puy at the end of the academic year in 1932. Her teaching methods, which were ahead of her time, her general behaviour towards her peers whom she basically ignored, and her controversial writings and activities finally caused her to take a leave of absence after teaching in Auxerre and a year in Roanne.

She applied to the Ministry of Education in 1934 for a leave of absence for "personal studies". She was officially going to prepare a philosophical treatise concerning relations between modern technology, social organization and culture. For her fieldwork she was going to enter the world of the factory worker, his quarters, his environment, his factory, his life. On December 14th, 1934, Simone Weil entered employment at the Alstom electrical works in Paris, as a factory worker.

5.

Finally, we must ask what was the significance of suffering and affliction upon Simone Weil during her informative years. Although the discomfort of a premature birth cannot be known, it cannot be discounted as an experience in Simone's life that is hardly unique but neither is it common. Appendicitis also is a fairly common malady but a severe attack and at such an early age would have deeply affected

her personality and her way of responding to the world. Is it possible that this early pain in her life deepened her sensitivity as well as her acceptance of pain both in herself and in others? The influence of her parents obviously implanted and reinforced the most noble and unselfish characteristics as well as some of the more disruptive qualities of her nature. Her life experiences were deep and her own suffering made her sensitive to the suffering of others.

This genuine concern and sensitivity to others is a major Christian quality, for it is essential to serve others with feeling, with compassion and with love and not with just a trained intellectual faith that says "Love your neighbour as yourself." One must be in touch with, aware of and able to love oneself before one can possibly love another. Empathy and compassion are the fruits of a Christian spirit and these in turn spring from life experience, active or vicarious.

Unlike many of us, Simone Weil did not rebel directly against her family: she rebelled against her society. Consequently there was no breaking of the original tender ties and emotions with her creators, and no reforming or re-rooting of such original gifts as generosity, courage, commitment and compassion. They sprang from their original source and remained genuine and sincere, reaching out to the enslaved and underprivileged.

Other famous protestors of her time such as Barbusse and Gide found their expression mostly through writing and did

not put themselves in the position of being confronted by the authorities. Simone, however, was an activist and would have felt that writing alone was not enough.

Simone de Beauvoir, a contemporary of Simone Weil, admired the latter's intelligence, ascetism, her total commitment and her sheer courage.<sup>12</sup> Simone Weil did not just reach for an ideal, she lived it, and therein lies much of her personal freedom. The extraordinary freedom and privileges that she experienced while still living with her parents allowed her to take risks in later life. Many times her parents came to her rescue finding her ill-fed and ill-housed, after a long siege of personal sacrifice had taken its toll of her health.

Simone Weil was unique and part of that uniqueness was fostered by her environment. When one lives out an ideal one may be admired or mocked, praised or persecuted, but few people will compete with one or take similar risks. Perhaps it is because in many ways, ideals become unique and personal, depending upon the individual's search, discovery and achievement.

Simone's genuine concern for the workers and the unemployed is clearly expressed in her writings and involvement throughout her life. She was deeply affected by the knowledge that some persons are born into such a deprived situation, that they are totally manipulable through having to

undertake employment to sustain their daily needs, and often such employment became almost enforced slavery. It is remarkable that she would sacrifice herself with such determination that others might not suffer so much.

Simone will enter the experience of her concern during her life and will write and live out this experience for others. Her flaw, if it can be called that, was that she was not able, or refused to give herself as much love and concern as she did others. Her "topos", a particular form of essay required by Alain from his students, at the Ecole Normale, began with philosophy and political theories, still in favour of the poor, but they soon became living witnesses of her life, expressing her experiences of the life of the worker. She began as an eager student of the Marxist theory accepting the hypotheses of the leaders themselves, questioned such theories, became a renegade and ultimately viewed the situation from the perspective of the individual worker. It was from this grass roots position that she began to perceive the problems of the workers.

The questions she raised, then, following this break with Marxism, we have with us today. How can we prevent the machine, the tool or technology in general from overpowering, desensitizing and generally debilitating the worker and yet maintain life and productivity? One of the important functions of the Judeo-Christian faith is to allow each person to develop in their full potential towards the Image of God

or "Imago Dei". Each one should help the other towards this end. Simone in her experience may not have expressed her personal concern for both the unemployed and the worker in such a Christian form. However, that man, particularly the worker, was being denied this fullness of life, due to his work, which was also his means of survival, was the root of her concern.



## CHAPTER 2

### INDIVIDUALITY AND COLLECTIVITY

Let us not forget that we want  
to make the individual and not  
the collectivity, the supreme  
value.

Simone Weil<sup>1</sup>  
Oppression & Liberty

As in the first chapter I reviewed the life of Simone Weil from the perspective of affliction and sacrifice, I shall now briefly write about her early thinking as she reflected upon the condition of the poor and sought solutions to their problems. It is important at this time to recognise that her concerns for the poor did not change after her factory experience. Many of her thoughts before the factory experience were confirmed by the reality of it. Other ideas and thoughts were proven entirely illusory.

It was because of her concern for the poor that Simone explored the theories of Karl Marx, actively testing and questioning his thesis and others of her time, who were supposedly fulfilling and applying his doctrines in everyday living.

The youthful Weil had volunteered to give up her sugar ration for a soldier; wept for the starving when she heard about a famine in China; handled an air-hammer in St.



Etienne for the experience and taught the railway workers while still studying at the Ecole Normale. Although many Normalie students would have and did become involved at that time with Marxism and working with the labourer, Simone's basic reasons for such activity were different.. Simone Weil's interest in Marxism, or, in fact, any political movement concerning the poor, sprang from her heart. This was unusual for someone of her milieu and generation.

Normaliens of comfortable middle-class backgrounds have become Marxists for a host of reasons, but compassion for the disfavoured was not particularly high on the list . . . some came to Marxism through intellectual snobbery, others to fulfill a need so common in that generation (on the Right as well as the Left) for commitment, for some it seemed the best way of heading off the threat of fascism or war, for others it was the total, coherent explanation of history and society they craved. But, above all, it was hatred of French middle-class society, a need to break up bourgeoisie culture, that seemed an important factor in the Marxism of the leaders of the generation of 1930 in France.<sup>2</sup>

Moeller's "Mother of Charity" is already recognised.

Simone's writings, activities and investigations sprang from a commitment of heart, not a rebellion of anger. That is not to say that she did not enter the tide of the revolutionary, she did, but only to draw back and offer criticism from her own very special perspective on basic Marxist theories. It was the individual worker within the collective that she

28

constantly bore in mind when considering Marxism.

2

Weil approached Marxism as she approached everything else, with an open and compassionate heart. Her critique of this great work was not merely a destructive attack on a particular philosophy, it was a genuine search for a solution to the problems of the worker, in which a very brilliant mind and concerned heart came into play.

She accepted Marx's theory that if the worker would revolt against his oppressor, in this case the capitalist, then the oppressor, capitalism, would be abolished. It was not until after Weil's experience in factory work that she was able to resolve this illusion. However, it was before this latter experience that Weil "worried" Marxism, questioning and opening up all areas of concern that she perceived:

that the true reason for the exploitation of the workers is not any desire on the part of the capitalists to enjoy and consume, but the need to expand the undertaking as rapidly as possible so as to make it more powerful than its rivals. 3

Weil posited that Marx worked with the assumption, without proving it "that every kind of power will disappear on the day socialism is established in all industrial countries". 4

What Marx failed to realise and what Weil juxtaposed was that regardless of the structure or pattern or control

over society, "the degrading division of labour into manual and intellectual labour" is the very foundation of our culture, which is a culture of specialists. <sup>5</sup>

The whole of our civilization is founded on specialization, which implies the enslavement of those who execute to those who co-ordinate. <sup>6</sup>

Economic equality, therefore, cannot be equated with freedom from oppression for man. To make property common or incomes equal would not resolve the fact that labourers, miners and factory workers are still required and would still, as human beings, suffer accordingly.

The problem for Weil becomes quite clear, realistically bearing in mind the many needs of mankind.

The problem is, therefore, quite clear: it is a question of knowing whether it is possible to conceive of an organization of production which, though powerless to remove the necessities imposed by nature, and the social constraint arising therefrom, would enable these at any rate to be exercised without grinding down souls and bodies under oppression. <sup>7</sup>

She challenged that the Marxism as practised in her day was distorted. While management in this philosophy took the form of state control, oppression became the inevitable lot of the workers.

Her concern for the worker was not only for his physical condition but also for his spiritual and personal needs as a human being. The oppression that Marx was fighting was one of the major causes of affliction for the worker according

to Weil. However, the Marxian perspective was very limited from Simone's perspective. It was not the individual with his or her limitations that brought affliction to the workers, but collective values administered by an executive few. Power based on economics or politics was the greatest aggressor for it crushed anyone and anything to gain its ends.

Every human group that exercises power, does so, not in such a way as to bring happiness to those who are subject to it, but in such a way as to increase that power; it is a matter of life and death for any form of domination whatsoever. <sup>8</sup>

"A carefully cultivated fanaticism"<sup>9</sup> develops under this state control generating "a mixture of mystical devotion and unbridled bestiality."<sup>10</sup> This statement of Weil's is extremely powerful and what follows, I believe, is an accurate though simplified précis of her explanation of such a statement. Weil is claiming that where fanaticism develops it is possible for poverty amongst the masses to become an acceptable sacrifice rather than a burden. Such a sacrifice they offer to the state, as if the state were an unseen god. Weil states that the capitalist system ultimately led to war, and the bureaucratic state ultimately led to a silent and passive destruction of initiative, culture and thought. Marx himself did not see that the state itself would ultimately become the oppressor.

As she encountered the lot of the worker she changed

her political position. She was extremely interested in educating the worker so that at least he might understand some of the tools and processes that were part of his life. She believed that the worker should be given a full understanding of the technical process with which he was working. In understanding such a process the worker would then be able to control his tools and not allow them to control him. Man, she reasoned, was supposed to be overlord of nature. Part of her concern for the worker here is involved with his human dignity. Humiliation to Weil is a deep affliction and if the worker could secure more knowledge about his work, she concluded, he would suffer less and enjoy more self-respect. An understanding of the machinery, a knowledge of how it works might appeal to some of the workers; to many it would just be an extra complication in their lives. For those to whom this information would be an added complication, could it be said that they were already desensitized from a healthy human response, or is Weil's personal subjective curiosity an over-ruling factor here? I believe that most men wish to know and understand what they are doing and that personal dignity does result from such knowledge. This, however, is placing a very high level of human sensitivity on all persons, many of whom are not able to enjoy such sensitivity due to their culture, background or some handicap. Weil ultimately swung from the idealistic political Manifesto of Marx to a very direct and realistic consideration of the worker,

his working conditions, environment and general personal welfare. It was in "Prospects", her unpublished thesis, that Weil made this move in argument and ultimately dropped out of the political arena. Her article was applauded by many. However, the powerful voice of Leon Trotsky denounced her ideas in an article the following October.

At Bernard and Selma Weil's apartment in Paris, Simone and Leon had a "long conversation". According to Andre Weil in conversation with Malcolm Muggeridge, it ended with Trotsky saying to her:

I see you disagree with me in almost everything. Why do you put me up in your house? Do you belong to the Salvation Army? ll

3

Simone's encounter with trade unionism in France had not been wasted. Her critique of Marxism was both creative and constructive. She was emerging not as a dreamer, but as a deeply concerned human being. She believed that there was enough strength among the proletariat to struggle towards better conditions individually. In her mind there was a real possibility of what we consider today as a grass roots movement. She also believed that to will something and to work towards it, even though there appeared to be little chance of success, was better than blindly wishing for it. She used

the analogy of the man thrown overboard in the middle of the ocean, saying that he should not let himself drown, even though there was little chance of swimming to safety. He should swim until exhaustion took over.<sup>12</sup> Just in terms of human life and growth this was an essential theory. It is, in fact, a truth of life, that any kind of growth and human development can only take place if the individual is prepared to strive for what he wants regardless of the odds.

She followed the oppression of man historically from the primitive hunter, through the slavery of the Egyptians and Romans, to the serfs of the Middle Ages. Weil stated that some outside constraint or threat of pain has forced man to work throughout the ages. Up to the time of her writing she concluded:

Mankind has known two principal forms of oppression, the one (slavery or serfdom) exercised in the name of armed force, the other; in the name of wealth, transformed into capital.<sup>13</sup>

She followed this statement with the suggestion that these historical oppressors were being superceded "by a new species of oppression; oppression exercised in the name of management."<sup>14</sup> Modern man has tried to replace himself by a machine and technology, which has resulted in him becoming more passive and less informed and finally a slave, not to another human being or group of human beings, but to technology itself.

The worker has not the feeling of earning his living as a producer, it is merely that the undertaking keeps him enslaved

for long hours every day and allows him each week a sum of money which gives him the magic power of conjuring up at a moment's notice ready-made products, exactly as the rich do.<sup>15</sup>

The latter part of this statement may appear to be somewhat shallow for Weil, but in context she was arguing about the relationship of work done and money earned. The rich or governing classes suffer a similar passivity, she continued, for in order to make their money, they are "snowed under by an avalanche of inextricable problems they long since gave up governing."<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note at this point that Simone was beginning to grasp the fact that the rich exist in their own kind of slavery. It was not the slavery of the machine or even of management, for in general terms the rich are management. We are now entering the more personal areas of man's dehumanisation and no longer dealing specifically with the physical needs.

There was a third aggressor for Weil, and indeed a very powerful one. In her meditations on liberty she stated emphatically, "The social order, though necessary, is essentially evil, whatever it may be."<sup>17</sup> She frequently referred to society as the Great Beast. This name originated with Plato's Republic Book IV:

To adore the "Great Beast" is to think and act in conformity with the prejudices and reactions of the multitude to the detriment of all personal search for truth and goodness.<sup>18</sup>

Society is a seething mass of people being formed and



governed by this Great Beast, its collective self, that alternatively can control and be controlled by two other oppressors - economics and politics. Here we have Simone at her most anti-social. She never was a part of the Great Beast because of her particular background and environment. She no doubt looked out upon it. In this sense she had no concept of what exactly the collective self felt like from the perspective of an individual member, surviving in it, thriving in it or striving against it.

Gustave Thibon, a close friend of Simone's, states, in his Introduction to Gravity and Grace, a collection of Simone's writings, that the text nolite conformari huic a seculo (be not conformed to this world) was for her a commandment allowing of no reservations." This would certainly support and deepen our understanding of Simone's life and death. Whereas she was deeply concerned with the lot of the worker she was personally so far removed from the "seething masses" herself that the only oppressor she personally had to face was her own self-sacrificing commitment and personal discipline. Perhaps an element of wilfulness and independence which passes that very fine line between productiveness and destructiveness, entered into her life. She saw how the world was afflicted and she sought to change it. She loathed any kind of structure although her intelligence told her that both organisation and structure were essential to order. Within any group there must be a structure or some

form of organization, be it a factory, a corporate body, a "grass roots" support group or a volunteer group for whatever task. One is reminded of Simone's early observation, that every group ultimately feeds itself and becomes power-hungry or else it fails.

The three areas of deepest concern to Weil with regard to the workers were the economic (material or physical), the political (emotional or spiritual) and finally the social, Society itself. This was how she observed the major oppressive forms afflicting the worker of her day. It was also how she viewed affliction itself. It was not, however, until her serious and committed entry into factory work as regular employment, that she had a total view of the true experience of the worker and his bondage. It was within this experience that she was totally involved with affliction itself.

## CHAPTER 3

### ENTERING THE REALITY

As I worked in the factory the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil

Cited: Simone Petrement

There are those among us who wish to enter and experience the suffering of others in order to claim brotherhood with them and to serve them better. And there are those who serve others and in their service and self-giving enter the experience and suffering of others. Simone needed to enter the life of the factory worker and the fisherman personally so as to experience that which her head and heart already told her existed. She was left with no illusions and learnt more about suffering people and herself than if she had remained only intellectually aware.

It was the entry into the reality of the life, work and experience of the factory worker that confirmed all Simone's sensitivity, observations and concern expressed in her previous writings. She had lived vicariously and had expressed her views and discernments concerning the worker as if at a distance from him. She now entered the sea of workers, ill-equipped physically, but mentally determined to

experience in the flesh all that she had perceived and expressed through her mind. Most people will feel some sense of admiration for a slender, rather awkward, not too well co-ordinated twenty-five year old intellectual woman with thick eye-glasses, who with a certain amount of opposition, entered the employment of factory work. Those who are aware of her sensitivity to the worker also know that she was not entirely ignorant of the circumstances and conditions that she was entering. She was not watching and reflecting any more; she was plunging into the icy waters of reality with a deep awareness of what she was choosing to do and why. I am reminded of her belief<sup>2</sup> that such an act must at least be willed and followed to exhaustion, even though nothing may be accomplished.

Simone began work as a power press operator and by doing this she also began to live out the reality of her true concern for others. It was through embarking on this living reality of the suffering of workers that Simone appeared to have experienced a change of character or emotion. Her chosen experience confirmed all her previous ideas about affliction and brought her own suffering and that of others into a unified perspective.

I knew quite well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world; I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. As I worked in the factory . . . the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul.<sup>3</sup>

It is important at this point to note what Weil had to say about her understanding of affliction:

There is not real affliction unless <sup>4</sup> the event, which has seized and uprooted a life, attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological and physical. The social factor is essential. There is not really affliction where there is not social degradation or the fear of it in some form or other.

In various letters she expressed her personal experiences of affliction in the factories. Most of the factory work Simone attempted caused her immense physical pain. In one instance she explained to Albert Thevenon "that she had to place copper bobbins in a furnace pierced with holes so that the fire could pass through it, and then take them out a few moments later."<sup>5</sup> The first day she had difficulty avoiding the flames and she carried the burn marks for several months. There was, however, one saving grace in this workshop; she found her fellow workers very empathetic and helpful. Simone's personal handicaps of poor eyesight and arthritic fingers only made her factory ordeal more perilous and painful. Simone Petrement records, "On December 19th all the time she worked she cried almost without stopping, and when she got home she had a fit of interminable sobbing."<sup>6</sup>

Conveyor belt work was equally difficult for her, particularly with her crippled fingers. She was only able to work at fifty per cent of the required speed of the workers and, as a consequence, she was moved to another area of the

factory. An example of Weil's understanding of affliction occurred when she wrote of a conversation with a fellow worker on a streetcar:

She told Simone, that after some time, even just a year, a person no longer suffers from it. Simone thought that this was the lowest form of degradation. The woman explained how she and her fellow workers had let themselves be reduced to this slavery. "Five or six years ago", she said, "we could get seventy francs a day, and for seventy francs we'd have put up with anything; we would have croaked."<sup>7</sup>

She wrote again to Albertin Thevenon after a year of factory work, explaining that within two or three weeks of factory employment her sense of dignity and self respect were radically destroyed because of "brutal constraint", and that any rebellious action that she might have expected to result from this experience was to the contrary. She experienced "The resigned docility of a beast of burden."<sup>8</sup> All her personal physical deprivations added to her awareness of suffering that the average peasant took for granted. This particular discovery was a severe blow for Simone. She had previously hoped and believed that the proletariat would have a certain amount of energy in reserve, with which they could rise in revolution against their transgressors. Her personal experience proved the contrary to be true.

Simone's concern for the labourer, the poor, in fact all suffering persons but particularly the first two groups, was genuine and deeply imprinted in her soul. Her experience in factory work was invaluable for her own particular vocation

in life. However, her employers found her a burden and extremely unproductive in monetary terms and so, having been fired from one job and meeting with similar difficulties in other factory work, she left industrial work after a year and recovered her strength and health on a freighter trip to Spain. This trip to Spain was typical of the parental pampering that Simone received all through her life. She lived at two extremes; on the one hand in abject poverty and self-sacrifice and on the other hand in luxury both materially and psychologically. Her parents or friends usually came to her rescue after a long spell of self-neglect, or self-sacrifice for others. I use these words intentionally for I believe that her extreme behaviour is questionable in terms of compulsion but not in terms of motivation. At some point, and only in some areas of her sacrificial life, Simone appears to pass that fine line between constructive and destructive action.

She had not found the means for a real liberation of the workers, which was an important motive for entering this work, but she had discovered the reality of the affliction of the industrial worker and had entered truly into this experience with her whole being and not just with her head.

She had learned certain things about herself and human nature. What's more, she had changed. She realized this . . . I have lost my gaiety in this factory existence, she adds; "And nevertheless I am glad to have lived through it." 9

Simone's factory experience confirmed most of her

pre-suppositions held before entering the factory. However, her experience of her own docile submission and loss of dignity, coupled with the fact that the camaraderie and support she expected the workers to share were absent, removed some serious misconceptions and illusions that she had previously harboured. It was among the more skilled workers that she found sympathy and assistance. This discovery later caused her to comment, "I have always found among these rough simple creatures, that generosity of heart and a skill with general ideas were directly proportional to each other." <sup>10</sup> She later concluded that whatever lowers the intelligence degrades the whole man.

In terms of physical suffering as a factory worker, there is no question that Simone suffered a great deal, certainly more than her working companions. However, this fact does not discount her personal sensitivity to the worker or the conclusions she drew from sharing their life.

## 2

One of the first difficulties Simone faced was the inability to think as she did her work. This was a particularly painful experience for her. She awoke each morning with a sense of anguish and dread, knowing what she would have to face during the day. Time was an intolerable burden



for she was doing piecework. Moreover, she never enjoyed enough sleep so she was always concerned about waking up in the morning. She also lived with a very deep fear. This fear, she explained, was due to the directions she received. In a letter to Albertine Thevenon she attributed the "speed-up" and "orders" as being the greatest factor in industrial slavery. The manner in which the orders were given could be very humiliating and their end result usually involved taking on a more difficult job or "speeding up" what was already being done. The major issue for Simone was not the suffering involved but the humiliation experienced. Her original sense of dignity was shattered. She was no longer able to think for herself, but was at the mercy of someone else, manipulated like an object in order to produce. Simone Petrement declares bluntly, "This year of factory work was a martyrdom." <sup>11</sup> The question must be asked and faced; did Weil enter this experience solely for others or was there within her a need to punish herself? Surely she was intelligent enough to recognise that the workers did not suffer as deeply as she did. They did not have her small arthritic hands nor her severe migraine attacks. Why then did she drive herself to work, get herself fired, look for employment again and become rehired, two or three times during this year? She was so determined to be hired <sup>12</sup> that upon hearing that only "pretty" girls would be hired at Renault, she borrowed make-up from Simone Petrement including lipstick and rose-

coloured make-up for her cheeks. She transformed herself and, incidentally, was hired. Simone Weil did not venture this far in beauty treatment when she was a teenager or when she attended the Lycee, or as far as we know for the sake of any romantic attachment. There can be no doubt, however, that her concern for the poor was authentic and that part of her drive to share the life and factory experience of the worker was an expression of this authenticity. While this experience supported her previous perceptions about the sufferings of the worker, it also changed her own person. Her physical entry into the workers' world not only affirmed and supported what she had already perceived but developed further thoughts and reflections upon the human situation.

In her Notebook Volume One she comments,

Love and justice - to be just towards a being different from oneself means putting oneself in his place. For then one recognises his existence as a person, not as a thing. This means a spiritual quartering, a stripping of the self conceiving oneself as oneself and as other.<sup>13</sup>

Consciously Weil may not have been thinking of her factory experience when writing the above but there is no question in my mind that the above concept sprang from this experience. Her motivation for entering the factory was to discover some way of helping those who by their very birth were driven to living such an existence. She had hoped to be able to alleviate, if not free the worker, from some of his hardships. The immediate result of her experience she

communicated to Albertine Thevenon at the end of her year's work. The general sense of this passage has been referred to earlier, but it summarises her thought so well that the passage is worth quoting in its entirety:

My sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, were radically destroyed within two or three weeks by the daily experience of brutal constraint. And don't imagine that this provoked in me any rebellious reaction. No, on the contrary: it produced the last thing I expected from me - docility. The resigned docility of a beast of burden. . . . when I was kept away from work by illness, I became fully aware of the degradation into which I was falling and I swore to myself that I would go on enduring the life until the day when I was able to pull myself together in spite of it. And I kept my word. 14

## 3

Simone had discovered slavery. She had discovered slavery in the forms of the control of her time, the orders given to her, and the machinery she had to tend. She had discovered the slavery of fear, of routine, boredom and pressure; she had discovered the slavery of brutal constraint. She had suffered severely, humiliation, loss of dignity, physical pain and ultimately the ability to think or function at all. Her own suffering was greater than that of the other workers, because her background was different. However, her perception of the suffering of the worker in general as a man

supposedly born to be free, was confirmed and accurate.

She discovered a way to recover her own sense of dignity, but at this time she did not discover a way to help the worker. She only knew that her theory of oppression and rebellion was invalid and that the situation of the workers appeared less hopeful than when she had first entered their world. She had, however, learned something important for herself. "Slowly and painfully, in and through slavery, I reconquered the sense of my human dignity - a sense that this time relied upon nothing outside my self." <sup>15</sup>

Wherever there is affliction there is the cross - concealed, but present to anyone who chooses truth rather than falsehood and love rather than hate. Affliction without the cross is hell, and God has not placed hell on earth. <sup>16</sup>

I cannot help but refer to Simone Weil's personal entry into factory work as a descent into hell and her exit from factory work as a kind of resurrection; certainly the aftermath of this devastating experience was a kind of resurrection. She entered an experience on behalf of others and, in a sense, discovered a greater part of herself. She freely chose affliction and learned how to combat it within herself. It was through affliction that Simone deepened her compassion and began to enter a new phase of her life - a deeply spiritual one. Her entry into the factory was indeed a Gateway to God, which is the title of one of her books.

The commonest effect of affliction, according to Weil, is that man seeks consolation in his misfortune by harbouring contempt and hatred for his fellowmen. She compared this kind of man to the impenitent thief on the cross at Calvary. The good thief to whom Christ promised paradise was an example of how we should be when crippled with affliction. It was in the penitent thief, Weil believed, that there was expressed the concept, no matter what degree of affliction we may be subjected to, we have, in some way deserved the affliction we have received.

It is a perversion to desire affliction, asserted Weil; it must be suffered unwillingly. However, as long as people are not overwhelmed by it, they can desire to experience it as if they were participating in the Cross of Christ. Weil believed that the individual's physical, spiritual and social parts are extremely fragile and any one, or all three of these parts can be struck down at any time in his life. This constitutes affliction. She believed that people should be constantly aware of this fragility and that they should accept it with love and gratitude at all times. The carrying of the cross is not to diminish the joyful times and emphasise the suffering in life; but conversely, to add to the individual's experience of joy and alleviate his suffering. It was by being aware of man's fragility "living with and being

aware of it" <sup>17</sup> that Simone believed was the true carrying of the Cross of Christ.

The two essential truths of Christianity for Simone <sup>18</sup> were the Trinity and the Cross. The Trinity in her view was perfect joy and the Cross perfect affliction. She believed that the knowledge of affliction was the Key to Christianity. If one had not suffered affliction, one cannot know it. Thought, according to Simone, could not conjure up affliction, for affliction was an experience of the whole being. Thought by its very existence, when face to face with affliction begins to lie. In other words, human beings will lie to avoid pain. To be able to face affliction a man must love truth in order to accept the death of his soul. Such acceptance of the death of the soul could not exist unless, said Weil, one's treasure could be placed elsewhere, "in the hands of our Father who is in secret." <sup>19</sup> Such people she believed have been born of the water and the spirit and are now open to what she described as a two fold obedience. This obedience is, on the one hand necessity, a mechanical necessity which is produced by the world, and on the other hand an obedience to divine inspiration. According to Simone people who live in this way have completely conquered the "I".

The above concept mirrors the concept of discipleship in the synoptic Gospels. However, it is not clear what Weil means by "divine inspiration" and in an overall view of her

work it is highly probable that her description would not coincide with that of any particular Christian church. It is highly probable that Weil's own personal idea of "divine inspiration" was based upon the intellectual gifts of man rather than upon the spiritual gifts.

Weil believed that many Christians have distorted the Word of the Gospel by claiming that their little daily troubles are a Cross to be borne. For Weil, to carry the Cross of Christ was to be vulnerable, to be aware of fragility, to place oneself in God's hands and accept the "necessity" demands of this world while trusting in divine providence. If one can find this balance, one will find strength in adversity and supreme joy without adversity. This is the true Cross of Christ. If the individual can understand this and carry it thus, the yoke of Christ would certainly be gentle.

It is not enough, however, to be aware of this possibility. Having adopted this stance one must love it and embrace it. In affliction, man is deprived of all human relationships. For the afflicted there are only two possible kinds of relationship. First, there is the mechanical relationship, the one which considers the afflicted as a thing, and secondly, the supernatural relationship which springs from divine love. It is at this point, so Weil thought, that those who experience the "Cross of Christ", contain Christ's presence in their souls and such persons are able to reach out to those in affliction.

Affliction, when it is consented to and accepted and loved, is truly a baptism. 20

Affliction is God's way of telling man that He is in control. It is a tender sign that He wishes to be loved by him. If man remains constant in affliction and turns to love and the cross and not hatred, "what he will discover, buried deep under the sound of his own lamentations, is the pearl of the silence of God." 21



## CHAPTER 4

### FREEDOM

"I am free" is like a contradiction,  
for that which is not free in me  
says 'I'. 1

Simone Weil,  
Notebooks Vol.I.

Weil's most explicit writing on freedom occurs in Oppression and Liberty and The Need for Roots. Implicitly, freedom for others dominates her writings and freedom for the individual is clearly a theme in her spiritual journey. She uses precise terminology which is uniquely her own. The world as she sees it is driven by necessity. In Gravity & Grace she states, "we have to consent to be subject to necessity and to act only by handling it." 2 The check balance in the world for necessity is obedience.

Obedience. There are two kinds. We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationship of things. In the first case we do what we are driven to do by the imagination which fills up empty spaces. We can affix a variety of labels to it, often with a show of truth, including righteousness and God. If we suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship of things, a necessity becomes apparent which we

cannot help obeying. Until then we have not any notion of necessity and we have no sense of obedience. After that we cannot be proud of what we do, 3 even though we may accomplish marvels.

It is within obedience then that Weil offers a choice and a choice, however limited, offers some freedom. She believed <sup>4</sup> that man feels he was born for liberty; however, only in his dreams will he attain it. Perfect liberty is the goal, but the realistic view must be the hope of attaining a less imperfect liberty than one already has. Necessity will always be with us and if we overcome the necessary obstacles which occur in our lives then we have an opportunity for self-conquest. Children would enjoy perfect liberty if their parents imposed no rules upon them. Upon reflection, however, one must observe that rules or guidelines imposed or taught to children, which protect them and enable them to grow, are a necessity. Rules imposed upon children, which are merely rules to fulfill the needs of the parents are not necessarily valid or productive.

Weil does not speak merely of a liberty that obtains pleasure without effort. Choice of the good and freedom of action are important for her. She calls such a conception of liberty "heroic" and associates it with wisdom.

True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action; the absolutely free man would be he, whose every action proceeded from a

preliminary judgment concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end. 5

The success or failure of any such chosen action was not important for Weil, in terms of liberty; the important point is that there can be no humiliation as long as he is in control of the disposal of his action. For Weil, liberty springs from within and necessity "pricks" from without. 6 Servitude consists of blindly following the prick of the spur from without; liberty springs from adapting oneself to the inner representation which the individual forms by himself. Weil believed that complete liberty could be found in abstract form "in a properly solved problem in arithmetic or geometry". 7 The limitations of man did not allow him, however, to be the direct author of his own existence, Weil posited:

... he would possess the equivalent of that divine power if the material conditions that enable him to exist were exclusively the work of his mind directing the effort of his muscles. This would be true liberty. 8

In other words, Weil saw liberty as a high form of independence where the mind exerts the power or controlling thought and the body functions accordingly. It must also be remembered that the relationship between desire and satisfaction has nothing to do with her particular definition of true liberty.

In my reading of this particular part of Weil's thesis on liberty, I got the impression that she seemed to equate desire with emotional and possibly physical needs, which when gratified must result in satisfaction. For me, whether the idea or impulse springs from my body, my heart or my mind, there is still a cause/effect sequence and, in fact, an intellectual move that directs the effort of my muscles. That the organism known as me, generated an original thought and carried out this thought without any stimulus or interference from outside, certainly constitutes a form of freedom. However, to suggest that this freedom exists only if it is free from emotional or sensual desire limits the freedom of the person to intellectual control only and renders the other essential gifts of the senses, emotions and bodily gifts an encumbrance to "true liberty". This makes our natural humanity and God-given gifts deterrents to "true liberty" instead of assets with which both to discover and enjoy liberty.

## 2

In another perspective on freedom Weil deals with external forces impinging on man and considers freedom in relationship to his work.

It is clear enough that one kind of work differs substantially from another by

reason of something which has nothing to do with welfare or leisure, or security, and yet which claims each man's devotion; a fisherman battling against wind and waves in his little boat, although he suffers from cold, fatigue, lack of leisure and even of sleep, danger and a primitive level of existence, has a more enviable lot than the manual worker on a production line, who is, nevertheless, better off as regards nearly all these matters. That is because his work resembles far more the work of a free man despite the fact that routine and blind improvisation sometimes play a fairly large part in it. <sup>9</sup>

Having experienced working on a fishing boat, and working in a factory, Simone was able to bring her own personal perspective to bear on the conditions of the fisherman and the factory worker. She strongly favoured the work of the fisherman, because although he is constantly working with certain hardships, such as cold, tides, weather, etc., he has a certain amount of independence, freedom and responsibility. The factory worker, on the other hand, monotonously doing his job under the scrutiny of the foreman, had a distinctly inferior occupation which had its own stultifying effect on him. John Hellman, in his manuscript Simone Weil, points out that her choice was highly subjective and his observation that many a worker might choose direction and dependency over challenge and independence, is extremely valid. <sup>10</sup>

The forces of nature, of course, may be considered as

a living and active component in the fisherman's life, a constant challenge, an invigorating factor that demands such qualities as courage, ingenuity and a high degree of physical activity. Conversely, the factory worker faces the restrictions and limitations contrived by man to manufacture an artifact as quickly and cheaply as possible. In the process the worker becomes merely a functioning instrument, another "mechanical device", a "living" part of the production. From this perspective alone Weil's point is well taken. She provides a kind of hierarchy of freedoms in her study.

She does not, however, appear to take into consideration the general concerns of a family. A steady and meagre pay package of a factory worker could be a consolation to a wife and children; the general safety of his job on dry land would also be a factor for security. In contrast the fisherman, dependent upon the forces of nature for his livelihood, could lose his life in a storm, or at least his catch.

Then there is the skilled worker of former times:

The craftsman of the Middle Ages also occupies from this point of view, a fairly honourable position although the "tricks of the trade" which play so large a part in all work carried out by hand are to a great extent something blind; as for the fully skilled worker, trained in modern technical methods, he perhaps resembles mostly the perfect workman. 11

The above occupations both represent a certain amount

of independence from external pressures which is not apparent in the two preceding examples. The workmen mentioned in the quotation require a certain level of education or training through some kind of apprenticeship or schooling, wherein the worker develops a particular sensitivity and expertise to his trade through experience and exposure. It is through this experience that the "tricks of the trade" are developed and fostered, though this is, as Weil expresses it, "to a great extent something blind." The "fully skilled worker", of course, is the worker who is able to manipulate the machinery, rather than the unskilled factory worker who is totally manipulated by the machinery or the foreman.

## 3

Weil discovers varying degrees of freedom in collective action and states:

A team of workers on a production line under the eye of the foreman is a sorry spectacle, whereas it is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building trade checked by some difficulty, ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it and then apply unanimously the method conceived by one of them, who may or may not have any official authority over the remainder. At such moments, the image of a free community appears almost in its purity.<sup>12</sup>

Weil's ideal for mankind is basically expressed in the last lines of the above quotation. She uses the word

"community" and concludes by suggesting that,

Men would, it is true, be bound by collective ties, but exclusively in their capacity as men; they would never be treated by each other as things. Each would see in every work-fellow another self-occupying another post, and would love him in the way that the Gospel maxim enjoins.<sup>13</sup>

The parallels between the early Christian Community, as expressed in the Acts of the Apostles, and the purest ideals of Marxism have been aired over the decades. Weil, travelling her own path of intellectual creativity and personal experience, arrived at her own particular concept of community based upon the marriage of her mind with her experience. She presented this in her Theoretical Picture of a Free Society obviously with no apparent experience of such a community within her own life. Humiliation and diminution of heart and mind are the results of oppression and lack of freedom. It was on this particular hypothesis that she based most of her ideas of freedom. The collectivity, she believed was the most powerful force for freedom or slavery. It is not possible to imagine an individual achieving even a portion of what the collective can do. However, Weil posited one exception.

In the case of the mind, the relation is reversed; here the individual surpasses the collectivity to the same extent as something surpasses nothing, for thought only takes shape in the mind that is alone face to face with itself; collectives do not think. <sup>14</sup>



Thus even a truly loving team-oriented community must obviously have some kind of individual leadership with a thinking mind. Weil again returns to the mind in terms of freedom. The Great Beast in its most constructive form demands that:

...the general run of men are most often obliged to think while acting, have the most opportunity for exercising control over collective life as a whole, and enjoy the greatest amount of independence. <sup>15</sup>

Weil's greatest philosophical concern at the beginning of her very short adult life with regard to freedom, involved the freedom of the individual and the freedom of man in general. For her, man's freedom specifically involved his work or occupation, his freedom had also to be considered in relation to the collectivity or community. Weil believed that man is basically enslaved by the Great Beast, by society as a whole.

4

There are two other areas of freedom discussed very briefly in her book The Need for Roots. Here Weil opens with what she calls "The Needs of the Soul,"<sup>16</sup> These needs are fourteen in all and are as follows: order, liberty, obedience, responsibility, equality, hierarchism, honour, punishment, freedom of opinion, security, risk, private property, collective

5

property and truth.

Liberty for Weil is an indispensable food of the human soul. In its concrete sense, liberty consists in the ability to choose. If the individual is to exercise this liberty, the rules of the community must be sensible and straightforward so that anyone may understand their usefulness and appreciate the circumstances surrounding the necessities which have generated their institution. Under such conditions men of goodwill may experience liberty. The internalisation of such a healthy set of rules, by men of goodwill, presents no limitations to be rejected by the mind.

Such a man lives in complete freedom. Those who are lacking in goodwill, or who remain adolescent are never free under any form of society. Men cease to enjoy liberty when their choices are so wide that they may injure the commonweal. Where men do injure the commonweal, they believe that they possess liberty but because they do not receive enjoyment from it they conclude that liberty is not a good thing. Liberty in this sense is really a liberty of the soul and the spirit. In so much that any action could by chance injure the community; so may the soul or spirit of the individual also be damaged.

For Weil, freedom of opinion without restriction or reserve is an absolute need of the intelligence. This automatically becomes a need of the soul because when the

intelligence is ill-at-ease, the whole soul is sick. The intelligence, according to Weil, is exercised in three ways. 17

It can be used in the solution of technical problems. Secondly, it can provide light when a choice has to be made, and finally it can operate separately from all other faculties in a purely theoretical speculation. Where all questions of action have been provisionally set aside, with a healthy soul, the intellect acts in the first capacity as a servant. In the second capacity, it can act destructively in its selection of choices and at such a time must be silenced. In the third instance, it must operate in sovereign liberty, within the area of speculation "otherwise something essential is wanting to the human being." 18

It is important to note that Weil states that there is no such thing as a collective exercise of the intelligence. When groups begin to formulate and express opinions they inevitably tend to impose these opinions on their membership.

As for freedom of thought, it is very nearly true to say that without freedom there is no thought. 19

Certainly the above statement is true in terms of slavery, for where there is slavery in any form there is no possibility of thought or freedom. One might suggest indeed, that thought is the greatest enemy of slavery and promotes freedom.

But it is truer still to say, that<sup>20</sup>  
when thought is non-existent, it is  
non-free into the bargain. There has  
been a lot of freedom of thought over  
the past few years but no thought.  
Rather like the case of a child, who  
not having any meat, asks for salt with  
which to season it.

Freedom, both collective and individual, is extremely  
important in Weil's search for life's meaning and her emphasis  
upon it reflects her concern for her fellowman. Her early  
observations on the slavery of the worker were deeply per-  
ceived and were ultimately confirmed as being empirically  
true. Simone did not concretely solve any one person's  
problems concerning freedom, but she certainly affirmed her  
own convictions and achieved some personal insights which  
she shared liberally with her readers.

In the living of her own life, Weil believed that  
she had made totally free choices and so had expressed her  
freedom.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHOICES

The most beautiful life possible has always seemed to me to be one where everything is determined, either by pressure of circumstances or by impulses . . . and where there is never any room for choice.

Simone Weil<sup>1</sup>  
Waiting on God

Simone Weil was Jewish by race but not by creed. She never completed the writing of her own creed or Testament but there is no question from her writings in general, that she believed in Christ, and that she found her own very independent path to the Christian God. Her attraction to the Roman Catholic faith was powerful enough to act as a catalyst in her spiritual development but not powerful enough to infringe upon the very personal and determined relationship she herself maintained with her vision of God. Few would deny her the label of Christian, though no formal faith would claim her. Luckily, Simone was not the kind of person who would wish to be labelled or claimed.

Even as an infant she appeared to have been strongly disposed towards an acceptance of suffering and a natural

inclination towards humility. Sacrifice and concern for others flash spontaneously from her throughout her life like a natural flow of supernatural love. At such times she appears to have been totally unaware of such gestures. This instinctive, or unconscious giving is a definite Christian characteristic. This is not to say that it is not a characteristic of other faiths, but that is not our concern here. To speak of self-giving as unconscious is not to say that the actor is unaware of the act, but only that he is unaware in the ego, of acting or receiving during the act. The act was not preplanned or intellectually chosen and the result of the act appears to bring no particular reward in terms of satisfaction, or a sense of wellbeing or even a sense of loss or sacrifice. Yet all these areas of being are involved in such an act. One might suggest Simone Weil was born to give of herself for others.

As a result of her early maladies and unduly affectionate and protective parents she could have become totally introverted, self-centered and an intellectual snob. She became just the opposite. Extroverted, other centered and believing that education should be given to all regardless of class or economic condition. What qualities did this woman possess that allowed her to attempt to give every advantage, that she herself had experienced, to others? What grace persuaded her to accept unto herself every disadvantage she ever faced,

overcome it, and offer from such experience, insights and growth for herself and others? She not only generously shared her gifts with others, but also actively worked towards helping others achieve a better life. The preceding chapters are a witness to the above statements.

A phrase used to describe Weil is, "Mother of Charity". This phrase is used in Literature du XXe Siecle et Christianité by Charles Moeller.<sup>2</sup> Moeller clearly states that Weil was not a Christian: she was neo-stoic, gnostic and Manichaeian but certainly not Christian. She most assuredly passed through all Moeller's suggested conditions as part of her spiritual journey. In calling her "Mother of Charity",<sup>3</sup> Moeller expressed the thought that she was probably closer to God than most Christians. Although stating that much of her thought can be positive for Christian development, Moeller warns that in no way should Christians be trapped into any or even part of her incomplete religious system. However, it is not the purpose of this work to prove whether or not Weil is or was a Christian, but instead to seek out the components of Christianity that were certainly explicit in her life.

Both Gustave Thibon and Moeller agree, that it is in her active life and in her spontaneous thoughts and actions that Simone Weil becomes a pure messenger, rather than in her intellectual arguments. It is in such statements as follows

that such purity, goodness and truth is expressed.

If someone does me harm I must want this harm not to degrade me -- this out of love for him who inflicted it upon me, so that he shall not really have done harm. <sup>4</sup>

Such understanding and expression of love of neighbour is not commonly found among Christians. Such a statement is an excellent Christian meditation. Weil seems to have had a natural understanding of pain and suffering. It was this compulsiveness of some of her actions and activities that are questionable. Intellectually speaking, her roots are not explicitly Judeo-Christian.

The mind and intellect that she used so freely and positively to serve others does not appear to have freed her. In terms of trying to solve the problems of others her intellect came into constant play, creating solutions and possible adjustments that might help her fellow man. It is this same mind that sets up her own standards and values of freedom. It is these self-chosen standards-values that appear to become insurmountable when other world views of freedom are presented for consideration. Her personal idea of freedom refused to allow her to enter into a formal community of faith. It was in the area of receiving the sacrament of Baptism that we notice that she was not free to step forward in faith and perceive the spirit of the law of the Catholic faith. Instead she competed with the letter of that



Church's law. She was bound by her intellect and her desire for logical certitude, in this instance.

Fr. Perrin, a priest with whom she had a friendship and whom she trusted, spent many hours speaking with her and in particular on the subject of baptism. He states:

Her love of Christ seemed to be enough for her, and the extremely superficial idea she had of the Church and Catholics was not of a nature as to suggest the slightest question in her mind. 5

While in Marseille where she spent long hours with Fr. Perrin, she also spoke with Monk Vidal. In such conversations these men discovered a deep renunciation of the Jewish faith. Her personal admiration of the Greek philosophers caused her to allow Plato and others to supersede Christ, whereas the Christian view is that Christ fulfilled and redeemed all who preceded Him. Vidal points clearly to what he considers to be the root of her conflict and her ultimate choice to remain outside the Catholic Church.

It has been written that if she had been humble, she would have embraced the Catholic faith. I am not of this opinion. Simone Weil was not kept back by the pride of the intellectual. She submitted herself docilely to the truth she had discovered. But it was necessary for her to have discovered it and for her to have good reasons to admit its being well founded. Yet she had come alone and by her own efforts, thanks to her illuminations, to the possession of certain truths of the Catholic faith.

A vigorous, exigent, personal mind, which was rather thwarted and troubled by her very great learning, it would have taken time for her to simplify her thought and assimilate aspects of the truth, unfamiliar to her mine. She was not accustomed to our categories.<sup>6</sup>

Intellectually, she believed that other religious bodies had as much power over human beings who followed them as those who placed Christ at their centre. The story of Prometheus she insisted was the very story of Christ projected into the eternal. All that was wanted was its localization in time and space. Simone believed, that the Catholic faith contained explicit truths which other religions contain implicitly and vice-versa. It is unfortunate that she viewed this fact from a perspective that detracts from the richness of Christianity, and re-enforces the validity of pre-Christian thought as being equal to its fulfillment in Christianity. However, for Weil this view sprang from her own personal logical certitude.

## 2

More important, however, concerning her decision not to become a baptized catholic was her problem with the laws or "restrictions" of the Catholic Church, which she encountered when contemplating baptism. She wrote:

When I read the catechism of the Council of Trent, it seems as though I had

nothing in common with the religion there set forth. When I read the New Testament, the mystics, the liturgy, when I watch the celebration of the mass, I feel with a sort of conviction that this faith is mine, or to be more precise, would be mine without the distance between it and me by my perfection.<sup>7</sup>

It is hard to guess at what Simone believed her imperfection to be in this statement. One can be sure, however, that she did not consider herself imperfect intellectually. Here is the crux of Simone's conflict. She could not accept the legal system of a formal church, which at its best preserves and develops the faith and at its worst confines and lags behind current developments. However, as an outsider, an unbaptized woman, it was necessary for her to study and accept the rules before she could receive the other sacraments. As a born catholic one may enter the mystery before encountering the law; as an outsider one must overcome the law before one can enter the mystery. Simone encountered law with her intellect and was freely able to displace and replace every concept and rule from her own perspective.

Weil entered the mystery of mysticism without the dogma and doctrines of a Christian faith. Christ-centered mystical graces were received, as she sought truth and goodness. It is quite understandable that she would hesitate to change such thinking that had already led her to the Master. In re-considering her philosophy concerning the

workers, after her personal experience in factory work, she wrote an article entitled Theoretical Picture of a Free Society in which it is clear that her social ideas of brotherhood strongly resemble the early Christian life as outlined in the Acts of the Apostles. This was written also after reflecting upon the discovery that slavery breeds docility not rebellion.

Weil in her own way had proven that goodness leads to God. She began with the theory that Goodness is God, and in her search for truth was graced. Many Christians believe that one must be good to know God rather than to know that Goodness is God. Weil had courage to stand alone and she did not choose to martyr herself as many have suggested. She stood by her own particular conscience and integrity and in doing so she remained outside the catholic church, an unbaptized believer. She chose rational, logical certitude to faith, which is partly like saying she chose philosophy over theology, and was granted the presence of Christ.

What are the components in Simone's life that are both implicitly and explicitly Christian? Initially, we must say that her ability to accept suffering and to grow through it, thereby helping herself and others, was remarkable. Her gift of charity, which obviously sprang from this attitude to suffering, blossomed forth into warm, generous sacrificial acts of which the cost was immeasurable. She

both experienced and saw great beauty in creation and wished that all men might be allowed to fulfill themselves as God had designed them. Her purity of heart was surely her greatest gift that allowed her to see God and to share with the world some of the purest meditations that have ever been written. Her total detachment towards material things and her ability to endure and stand by what she believed, was comparable to that of many of the saints.

The official notice of her death read, "a failure of the heart muscle, caused in turn by deprivation and pulmonary tuberculosis." <sup>8</sup> The laws of the United Kingdom of Great Britain do not allow the term suicide to be used in the death of a lucid person. Maurice Schumann makes this point in his book, La Mort Née de Leur Propre Vie. Schumann was a friend of Weil's for thirty years. He is Jewish by birth and catholic by conversion.

I met this very wise and incredibly charming Frenchman at the Mauriac Conference held at McGill University in the fall of 1980. He is at present an active member of the Sénate of France. In a few brief moments of conversation it was possible to detect a certain sorrow about the loss of his friend and a certain anger that she was so labelled at her death. Simone's end for him was not an act of suicide but a determined acceptance of death. He implied that this act may have been a selfish one, but it was certainly not a weak one. The addition on the official certificate, explained

Schumann, was an account of witnesses, not part of the official autopsy.

The deceased condemned herself to die by refusing to eat, at a time when her spirit was troubled. 9

Weil was devoted to France. She left with her parents for New York just before France fell into the hands of the Germans and she left feeling like a traitor. When she returned to England she begged her friend Maurice to allow her to return to France to fight with the free-French. This was a deep desire within Simone's soul. Had it been gratified perhaps it would have helped her to feel less of a traitor. She was refused her request and there seem to be two reasons for this. Her racial background was quite evident in her appearance and had her Jewishness been seen by an occupying German soldier, death would have been certain both for herself and anyone with whom she associated. Secondly, her poor co-ordination would have been a serious hazard within the underground resistance.

She was devastated by this refusal and it was at that time that she determined to eat no more food than was being eaten by the French Resistance fighters in France. Surely at the time, this was not a suicidal decision. Many believers have at a certain time in their lives made decisions in keeping with an event in their lives and taken on some form of fasting. The Jewish Passover is a major example. It is

natural, if one is denied the privilege of offering a personal sacrifice, to attempt to sacrifice in another manner with the same intent, particularly if the original desire to sacrifice was deep-rooted and sincere. It was the simple working woman with whom Simone lived before her entry into hospital, who believed that Simone had chosen a way of dying for France. She could not risk in action so she chose to sacrifice another way.

A personal commitment for Weil was irrevocable. If she had been part of a community of faith, I believe it is highly possible that she would have found a new perspective in her approach to life; a perspective that could have broadened her own. Christ died in order that we may live. Christianity is a religion of resurrection wherein the Christian dies unto himself and lives with, in and for Christ.

With all her love and respect for the early Greek philosophers, she seems to have escaped noticing, within herself, a tragic flaw. Some may suggest that this flaw was her background and highly developed intellect. Others might consider it to be her determination to discover, test and prove truths to her own satisfaction. Moeller goes as far as to say that she had a sexual pathology. Her infancy history reveals a large amount of suffering, placed upon a helpless child, who apparently never rebelled against it and grew through it quite naturally. This acceptance of suffering and her ability to derive benefits from it is a remarkable trait.

and most certainly a Christian ideal. Early patterns were reinforced when her parents took such kind and protective care of her, that she seldom had to take care of herself. The rigorous life at the Ecole Normale reinforced stringent self-discipline, which only encouraged Simone to be harder on herself instead of more generous. As a believer, outside the faith community she tried to change the world and basically died of grief, offering herself to Christ.

During the last few days of her life, she suffered deep affliction just as she had defined it a few years earlier in her life. At 34 years of age, this frail saintly woman was in deep physical pain and extremely weak. She knew that the staff of the hospital considered her "not all there",<sup>10</sup> and emotionally she was grief-stricken over the overwhelming suffering in the world. A recurrence of her grief for those in China suffering a famine when she was a child. There was no physical strength left for deep prayer and her last committed act of sacrifice for France, as she saw it, totally undermined her health.

At her death Weil was aware of her own affliction. There can be some understanding of Weil choosing to enter the "Kingdom" at this time, for by now she believed in Christ and His love. A woman who wrote:

Affliction is the surest sign that God wishes to be loved by us; it is the most precious evidence of his tenderness.<sup>11</sup>



did not commit a violent act against her soul, psyche and physical body, an act of suicide. Such a woman chose to acknowledge God's call to be loved and gently, by choice entered into His tenderness. The choice in this sense was selfish, but in the best sense of the word. Simone chose at last, to break with intellectual rationality and enter the embrace of the crucified Christ.

Thou shalt love the Lord your God  
with all your mind and with all  
your heart and with all your strength  
and your neighbour as yourself. 12

If the commandment of Jesus can be considered as a way of understanding Weil's love and charity, we might well conclude that she loved God above all else and loved her neighbour more than herself. Many Christians have done likewise. Her suffering produced good and beautiful fruits, and by these fruits we shall know her.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER 1

<sup>1</sup> Simone Petrement. Simone Weil A Life. (New York, Pantheon Books, 1978), p.37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>6</sup> David Anderson, Simone Weil, (London, S.C.M. Press. Ltd. 1971), p.22.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Petrement. Simone Weil A Life, op.cit., p.69.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.70.

<sup>9</sup> David Anderson, Simone Weil, op.cit., p.24.

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge and Andre Weil in conversation. Gateway to God. (London, Fontana, 1974), p.148.

<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil. Oppression and Liberty. (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958) p.10.

<sup>12</sup> John Hellman. Simone Weil (Unpublished manuscript), p.23.

### CHAPTER 2

<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil. Oppression and Liberty, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> John Hellman, Simone Weil, p.33.

<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil. Oppression and Liberty, p.40.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.56.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>11</sup> André Weil and Malcolm Muggeridge in conversation:  
see Gateway to God, p.154.

<sup>12</sup> Simone Weil. Oppression and Liberty, p.22.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.117.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.118.

<sup>17</sup> Simone Weil. Gravity and Grace (London. Routledge  
and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.144.

<sup>18</sup> Gustave Thibon. Introduction to Gravity and Grace,  
p. XXXV.

### CHAPTER 3

<sup>1</sup> Simone Petrement, op.cit., p.125.

<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, Oppression & Liberty, op.cit., p.22.

<sup>3</sup>Petrement, p.215.

<sup>4</sup>Simone Weil. Waiting on God. (London, Fontana, 1974), p.78.

<sup>5</sup>Petrement, p.230.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.228.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.239.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.245.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.246.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.232.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.244.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.240.

<sup>13</sup>Simone Weil - Notebooks Vol.I. translated from the French by Arthur Willis (London and Henley, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p.292.

<sup>14</sup>Petrement, p.245.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.245.

<sup>16</sup>Simone Weil. Gateway to God. op.cit., p.87.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.87.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.81.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p.92.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.95.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.95.

CHAPTER 4

- <sup>1</sup> Simone Weil. Notebooks Volume I. op.cit., p.175.
- <sup>2</sup> Simone Weil. Gravity and Grace. op.cit., p.38.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.43.
- <sup>4</sup> Simone Weil. Oppression and Liberty. op.cit., p.83.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.86.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.86.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.86.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.87.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.101.
- <sup>10</sup> John Hellman. Simone Weil. op.cit., p.51.
- <sup>11</sup> Simone Weil. Oppression and Liberty. op.cit., p.83.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.101.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.100.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.98.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.103.
- <sup>16</sup> Simone Weil. The Need for Roots. (London. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.3.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.22.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.26.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.31.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.31.

CHAPTER 5

- <sup>1</sup>Simone Weil. Gateway to God. op.cit., p.30.
- <sup>2</sup>Charles Moeller. Litterature du Siecle et Christianisme, Vol.I. (Tournai Cartheman, 1967), paragraph 3.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid., paragraph 9.
- <sup>4</sup>Gustave Thibon. Introduction to Gravity and Grace. op.cit., p.XXXVII.
- <sup>5</sup>Simone Weil. cited in A Life Simone Weil. Simone Petrement, p.412.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., cited p.451.
- <sup>7</sup>Simone Weil. Gateway to God. Letter to a Priest, p.103.
- <sup>8</sup>Maurice Schumann. Le Mort Née de Leur Propre Vie. (Paris, Fayard, 1974), p.64.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.64.
- <sup>10</sup>Simone Petrement. A Life, p.534.
- <sup>11</sup>Simone Weil. Gateway to God, p.97.
- <sup>12</sup>Jerusalem Bible. Mark 12: v.30-31.

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