

# Good Soil: Bernanos and Kierkegaard on Overcoming Despair

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## **Abstract**

In *The Christian and Anxiety*, Hans Urs von Balthasar praises Søren Kierkegaard's description of anxiety while criticizing the Danish thinker for remaining under the influence of German Idealism. For Balthasar, the lacuna found in Kierkegaard's philosophy of anxiety can be addressed by turning to literature; for example, the work of French novelist Georges Bernanos. This paper proposes that contrary to Balthasar's critique, there is much overlap between the work of Kierkegaard and Bernanos, particularly in examining the human experience of overcoming despair. By reading Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest* alongside Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, this paper will show similar movements in both authors' accounts of Christian life.

**Key terms** *Kierkegaard, Bernanos, despair, Christianity, philosophy of religion*

In his remarkable philosophical, literary, and theological study on anxiety, Hans Urs von Balthasar acknowledges Søren Kierkegaard's contribution to the understanding of this all-too-human experience. Through a careful reading of Kierkegaard's "psychological" analyses of anxiety, Balthasar's *The Christian and Anxiety* unearths the insight and limitations of Kierkegaard's philosophy. For Balthasar, Kierkegaard never pierces through the cloud of anxiety, which remains "a matter of the finite mind horrified at its own limitlessness."<sup>1</sup> Although Balthasar agrees with Kierkegaard's description of anxiety, he nonetheless criticizes Kierkegaard for remaining under the influence of the German idealism against which he rails. Balthasar argues that Kierkegaard failed to see that anxiety occurs when the mind turns the "nearness and concreteness of God" into estrangement and abstraction.<sup>2</sup> In Balthasar's analysis, Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the anxious self leads to an isolated and alienated self-absorption which no leap of faith can truly escape.

Interestingly, Balthasar turns to literature to fill the lacuna which Kierkegaard is unable to address, and one of the authors to which Balthasar refers is Georges Bernanos (1888–1948). Bernanos, Frenchman and Catholic, was also the subject of an exhaustive study written by Balthasar. Bernanos's brand of Catholicism gained him opponents among Catholics and non-Catholics alike, as his style of faith criticized many of the positions consciously or unconsciously taken by members of the Catholic Church at the time.

Like Kierkegaard, Bernanos demanded a faith lived without compromise. For Balthasar, however, Bernanos's account of anxiety, found in his novels and even his own life, fulfills the missing dimension in Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety. According to Balthasar, Bernanos's work faithfully describes the anxiety experienced by Christians. Moreover, Balthasar writes that Bernanos is able to penetrate the mystery of anxiety in

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety*, trans. Dennis D. Martin and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), ePub file, "Introduction."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3, "The Essence of Anxiety."

all its dimensions, including the theological. The anxiety to which humanity is prone is overcome, as Balthasar understands Bernanos, through a quiet courage “to be naked and defenseless before God,”<sup>3</sup> like the saints Bernanos often writes about.

Notwithstanding Balthasar’s criticism of Kierkegaard’s shortcomings, I would venture that there is more overlap between Bernanos and Kierkegaard than is obvious. At least in terms of another Kierkegaardian category, one might see more consonance between Bernanos and Kierkegaard. I would say that Kierkegaard and Bernanos offer comparable accounts of the experience of despair and its overcoming. I propose to demonstrate this through juxtaposing Kierkegaard’s study on despair, *The Sickness Unto Death*, and Bernanos’s novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*. Writing as Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard aims to discuss what he calls “Christian heroism.” Christian heroism, defined by Anti-Climacus, is “to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> True human selfhood is achieved by binding oneself to the Absolute. Kierkegaard’s works, pseudonymous or otherwise, reveal the centrality of this insight to his thought. However, when this relationship with the Absolute is distorted, we are left in the condition of despair, “the sickness unto death.”

And despair permeates the world, as revealed by Bernanos’s work. Bernanos’s diagnosis of human life is one in which “the three theological virtues no longer occupy their former place of importance,” and we are left “in a state of disillusionment, turmoil, and bitterness.”<sup>5</sup> While *The Diary of a Country Priest* could be described as a “boring” novel, as it simply shows the life, times, and death of the unnamed parish priest of Ambricourt, it might also be read as a potent example of the drama of sin and salvation as it

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., ch. 2, “The Christian and Anxiety.”

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Didier, “Bernanos’ World,” *Yale French Studies* 8, *What’s Novel in The Novel* (1951): 103.

plays out in everyday life. That is to say, Bernanos's novel unflinchingly illustrates the state of despair as it surrounds and seeps through ordinary human life. I would also say, contrary to Balthasar's assessment, that Bernanos and Kierkegaard arrive at similar conclusions as to how this despair is overcome. The overcoming of despair has to do with the transformation of a self towards selfhood, and the paradigmatic transformation we will be examining is that of the title character of Bernanos's novel.

The following reading of Kierkegaard's and Bernanos's texts will be structured around the parable of the seeds and the sower, one of the simplest yet most baffling parables in the Gospels. Indeed, this parable left the disciples so puzzled that Jesus himself volunteers to explain it. Christ says that a sower went out to sow, and that the seed fell on many kinds of soil. It fell upon rocky ground, where it could not thrive for lack of depth. It fell upon thorny ground, where it was choked and stifled. Some of the seed fell by the wayside. Some of it became food for the birds. And some of it fell upon good soil, where it thrived and yielded a great harvest.

Now while Christ explains to us why the seed could not grow upon the soil filled with rocks or with thorns, we are never told what makes the good soil, good. Luke tells us that those hearts in which faith flourishes are those who have embraced the seed of faith and have borne fruit through perseverance. The Gospel of Mark says that it is those who accept the Word of God, and Matthew's Gospel is no different. Still, they do not tell us what makes good soil, good. Put in another way, might we not expand the parable of the seeds and the sower to describe the process by which "good soil" is produced? How does one become oneself such that the Word of God might flourish within them?

According to Kierkegaard, the self is "a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."<sup>6</sup> If this is indeed the case, then the process by which a self learns to relate with itself (and therefore to another) is the means by which

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<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 13–14.

despair is countered. Applying the parable of the seeds and sower to this Kierkegaardian category, the self becomes “good soil” when it is cleared, tilled, watered, and exposed to the sun, and it is this transformation that we see in the life of Bernanos’s country priest.

### **The Soil is Cleared of Thorns and Stones**

“Good soil” would perhaps not be too different from any other kind of soil; the composition would be the same. It would have its share of stones and thorns, being part of the landscape. The difference would be that this soil has been cleared: someone has taken the time to remove obstructions present in the soil, to eliminate elements that prevent it from becoming fertile ground. The time and effort wasted on the soil as it is cleared would be incremental, yet dramatic in effect. Clearing the soil in this way would prepare it for tilling and for planting.

Such clearing occurs also in *The Diary*, but the purity it brings is dearly bought. The clearing begins from the moment the young priest sets foot in Ambricourt, when he becomes aware of the harsh reality of ministering to this town, caked in melancholy and boredom. He describes his parish as a lonely one, “waiting too—without much hope after so many nights in the mud—for a master to follow towards some undreamed-of, improbable shelter.”<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the loneliness that greets him in his parish, the priest also intuits an ennui that besets the people, a loss of interest that is affiliated with despair: “I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay.”<sup>8</sup>

“An aborted despair, a Christianity in decay” is a description akin to that found in *The Sickness Unto Death*. As Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard

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<sup>7</sup> Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1938), 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

attempts to describe “the most appalling danger which the Christian has learned to know,”<sup>9</sup> which is despair. “Despair is the misrelation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself,”<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard says, and in view of his definition of selfhood, it would appear that the process by which the self is established has gone awry. Despair then would not be an accident that befalls the human person, as though external to herself; it would stem from her own self, and upon that self “rests the responsibility for all despair at every moment of its existence.”<sup>11</sup>

Kierkegaard locates the responsibility for despair in the self, but the self is never separate from the context in which it is discovered and configured. Looking at the life of our country priest, we find him mired in a situation with people who have lost themselves without even realizing it.

In this parish where rich and poor know their places and act out their roles, the young priest sticks out because of his naiveté. Early on, he acquires a debt for his daily supplies, and realizes that the world of the parish is quite different from the world of the seminary, and that he must find a way to cope. He chooses poverty, which immediately turns off his wealthy parishioners (for they cannot stand him), as well as his poor constituency (for they cannot respect him). Throughout the novel the poverty of the country priest purifies and punishes him, setting him on the path towards his pathetic end. Even as this poverty surprisingly becomes a source of consolation for him, there is always the sneaking suspicion that his destitution is his own fault. As he makes his choices and his enemies in his life in the parish, the country priest also discovers his solitude, which both beckons and repels him. He experiences alienation, not only from his parishioners, but also from himself. Bernanos writes:

Last night after writing this, I knelt at the foot of my bed and prayed that Our Lord might bless my resolutions. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by a sense of destruction, a feeling that all

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<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the dreams, hopes, and ambitions of my youth had been broken down . . . It is hard to be alone, and harder still to share your solitude with indifferent or ungrateful people.<sup>12</sup>

The country priest is stripped of the security of the seminary, as he comes face-to-face with the problems of his parish. His sense of self is threatened as the distress that he feels so overwhelms him, a distress that he cannot share with anyone, for “it belongs only to him, like his face and his hands.”<sup>13</sup> The country priest experiences here what Kierkegaard describes in *The Sickness Unto Death*: “To be sick *unto* death is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death. When death is the greatest danger, we hope for life; but when we learn to know the even greater danger, we hope for death. When the danger is so great that death becomes the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die.”<sup>14</sup>

Part of Bernanos’s genius is the capacity to locate in ordinary parish life the bleakness of despair which Kierkegaard analyzes. As the young priest discovers, the misery of his everyday life is like a sort of dying. As Kierkegaard puts it: “The dying of despair continually converts itself into a living . . . [D]espair is veritably a self-consuming, but an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do. What it wants to do is to consume itself, something it cannot do, and this impotence is a new form of self-consuming, in which despair is once again unable to do what it wants to do, to consume itself; this is an intensification, or the law of intensification.”<sup>15</sup>

The country priest’s youthful idealism withers away in confronting the apathy of his parishioners. Despite his efforts, the people of Ambricourt believe him to be an ineffective pastor, and his lack of success confirms it.

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<sup>12</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 34–35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

For the young priest, unable to do what he wishes to do, it is not without great strain that he struggles to “drink the cup.” The diary itself appears to be an account of his fascination with his own destruction; there is a certain relish with which the young priest remembers his despair. As Bernanos remarks: “The sin against hope—the deadliest sin and perhaps also the most cherished, the most indulged. It takes a long time to be aware of it, and the sadness which precedes and heralds its advent is so delicious!”<sup>16</sup> Here we note part of the process a self on the way to selfhood must undergo: The clearing of the ground means coming to terms with the loss of hope and the reality of the self’s fragility.

This obsession with one’s fragile selfhood reveals what Kierkegaard means when he says that despair over oneself takes twin forms: “To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair. Therefore the other form of despair, in despair to will to be oneself, can be traced back to the first, in despair not to will to be oneself, just as we previously resolved the form, in despair not to will to be oneself, into the form, in despair to will to be oneself.”<sup>17</sup>

Understood in this manner, it would appear that the person in despair both wills to be herself and not herself. While the country priest is at least aware of this struggle, his parishioners appear oblivious to it, having already capitulated to the despair which has pervaded their existence without their consciousness of it. “Compared with the person who is conscious of his despair, the despairing individual who is ignorant of his despair is simply a negativity further away from the truth and deliverance,”<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard says, but “ignorance is so far from breaking the despair or changing despair to nondespair that it can in fact be the most dangerous form of despair. To his own demoralization, the individual who in ignorance is in despair is in a way secured against becoming aware—that is, he is altogether secure in the power of despair.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



Here we must note an important contrast between the despair felt by the young priest and the despair that surrounds him. Much of the country priest's despondency comes from the lukewarm, even hostile, reception of his flock. Despite his efforts, it seems they do not appreciate his ministering to them. Pierre Didier describes the priest-archetype of Bernanos's novels as ambiguous: inasmuch as he is the main character, he is hardly impressive. He is often reviled by the people he serves, or at best, sneered at or ignored.<sup>20</sup>

However, this lukewarmness, this "aborted despair" of the people of Ambricourt, comes from a much deeper source. The parish Bernanos paints is a microcosm of a world "devoid of mystery," where "except for a few pleasures that soon wear thin, the only prospect left to us is to spend our lives in a dreadfully humdrum and uneventful fashion, without expecting anything to brighten their gray monotony."<sup>21</sup> This entrenched despair is like a sickness upon the land, and the young priest might just be a seam of good soil that runs through the blighted pasture. Unlike his ignorant townsfolk, the young priest recognizes his despair. While he is not much better off, he at least becomes aware that his despair appears to be the despair of not willing to be oneself. Given the miserable situation the country priest is in, it is understandable why he would not want to be himself. The awareness of his despair is already a step towards purgation.

The clearing of the ground allows the young priest to gain insight into the nature of sin. Speaking with one of the parishioners who test him, Mlle. Chantal, the country priest preaches on sin with stunning eloquence:

I know what sin is. And you don't. All sins are alike. There is only one sin. I'm not speaking to you in riddles. Such truths are within the reach of the humblest Christian if only he be willing to receive them from us. The world of sin confronts the world of grace like the reflected picture of a landscape in

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<sup>20</sup> Didier, "Bernanos' World," 102.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

the blackness of very still, deep waters. There is not only a communion of saints; there is also a communion of sinners. In their hatred of one another, their contempt, sinners unite, embrace, intermingle, become as one; one day in the eyes of the Eternal God they will be no more than a mass of perpetual slime over which the vast tide of divine love, the sea of living, roaring flame which gave birth to all things, passes vainly. Who are you to condemn another's sin? He who condemns becomes part of it, espouses it.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of sin induces the human being to wage war upon herself, confusing human nature, forcing it to become the negative image of what it really is. The hatred of oneself brims over to a hatred of others. As Bernanos has stated, the “communion of sinners” is a festering mass that feeds on itself. Bernanos further remarks: “Truly, man is always at enmity with himself—a secret sly kind of hostility. Tares, scattered no matter where, will almost certainly take root. Whereas the smallest seed of good needs more than ordinary good fortune, prodigious luck not to be stifled.”<sup>23</sup>

Kierkegaard writes that “Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself.* Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair.”<sup>24</sup> Sin reduces to a misrelation between self and God, as Kristen Deede comments. According to Deede, Kierkegaard’s central insight on sin is that it is the tragic inability to become oneself, a distortion of the relationship with oneself and with God.<sup>25</sup> About this, more shall be said later. It must be said, however, that Bernanos’s image above captures the

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<sup>22</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 138–39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 77. Emphasis is Kierkegaard’s.

<sup>25</sup> Kristen K. Deede, “The Infinite Qualitative Difference: Sin, the Self, and Revelation in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53.1 (February 2003): 33, 37.

potent impotency of the sin that is despair, “over which the vast tide of divine love passes vainly.” And this is where the country priest’s salvation lies: That this confrontation with despair leads to another path.

While the diary reveals his rather bleak outlook on his life and his work, the act of recounting his experiences also allows the young priest to process his struggle. Working through the crises that beset his soul, the young priest’s self is cleared of stones and thorns as it were, and allows for the discovery of a faith that is more steadfast than it gives itself credit for. After the stones and thorns have been removed, the soil is exposed, and the potential for growth is revealed. This potential remains nascent, however, as the soil is not yet finished, not yet “good.” In the midst of his mundane tribulations, the young priest discovers a real faith, with all its weakness, uncertainty, and misery:

No, I have not lost my faith. The expression “to lose one’s faith,” as one might a purse or a ring of keys, has always seemed to me, rather foolish . . . Faith is not a thing which one “loses,” we merely cease to shape our lives by it . . . No, I have not lost my faith . . . my faith is still whole, for I can feel it. I cannot reach it now; I can find it neither in my poor mind, unable to link two ideas correctly, working only on half-delirious images, nor in my sensibility, nor yet in my conscience. Sometimes, I feel that my faith has withdrawn and still persists where certainly I should never have thought of seeking it, in my flesh, my wretched flesh which yet was baptized.<sup>26</sup>

The lengthy passage above already lays out some of the features of an outline of selfhood: The “wretched flesh” of the young priest, with all its weakness and frailty, becomes the locus of discovering himself. I would say

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<sup>26</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 122–23.

that “flesh” here not only represents the physical trials the priest undergoes, but also his very humanity. The clearing of the young priest’s soul has led to a deeper self-knowledge. As Bernanos notes: “Purity is not imposed upon us as though it were a kind of punishment, it is one of those mysterious but obvious conditions of that supernatural knowledge of ourselves in the Divine, which we speak of as faith. Impurity does not destroy this knowledge, it slays our need of it.”<sup>27</sup> Faith is tied to self-knowledge, and the lack of desire to know ourselves indicates impurity and faithlessness.

C. Stephen Evans writes: “Not only is God the ontological foundation of the self; God is also the highest ethical task, in the sense that the highest form of selfhood requires a conscious relation

to God.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, “the God-relation for Kierkegaard must be understood as an ultimate and intrinsic good; since God is a genuine person who loves me, and is capable of a relation in which I am addressed, demands may be made on me, questions may be addressed to me, and so on, just as is the case for other persons.”<sup>29</sup> In this regard, the country priest is saved because he clings to God despite all the misery he undergoes; in clinging to God, he discovers and perhaps loves himself. As Bernanos goes on to say: “I no longer believe, because I have no wish to believe. You no longer wish to know yourself . . . We can only really possess what we desire, since complete and absolute possession does not exist for a human being. You no longer want to possess yourself. You no longer desire your own joy. You can only love yourself through God. You no longer love yourself, and you will never love yourself again either in this world or hereafter—through all eternity.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>28</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 272.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>30</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 126.

### The Soil is Tilled

After the ground has been cleared of stones and thorns, the work is not yet finished. Left in this state, the soil may yet remain barren and stagnant. Even those who have arrived at some measure of self-knowledge may become complacent, or can succumb once more to despair or delusion. As the young country priest learns, even priesthood can become a lie, forming a “crust around the consciousness, of evasion and subterfuge.”<sup>31</sup>

As discussed above, ignorance of one’s despair leads one further from the remedy to the sickness unto death. As the parish priest of Ambricourt discovers, however, his awareness of his own despair does not necessarily mean that he is free from its effects. While the ground has been cleared and exposed, it must yet be tilled to bring to the surface the richness concealed below. Some upheaval must occur for the soil to become fresh again. Self-knowledge can lead to complacency, which must be shaken by knowledge of realities outside the self. Within Kierkegaard’s schema, this upheaval occurs in the relationship with the other, and with the Other.

In the case of the young priest, upheaval comes in the person of his mentor, the M. le Curé de Torcy. In many ways, the Curé de Torcy is like Bernanos himself, filled with radical ideas about the faith, always prodding and questioning the Cure of Ambricourt. His questioning, however, is never cynicism, and his radical ideas never the ravings of a decrepit old man. The fiery faith that the Curé de Torcy demands of the young priest is rooted in the very poverty and solitude which so rocked the Cure of Ambricourt. As the Curé de Torcy explains: “Our Heavenly Father said mankind was the salt of the earth, son, not the honey. And our poor world’s rather like old man Job, stretched out in all his filth, covered with ulcers and sores. Salt stings on an open wound, but saves you from gangrene . . . A true priest is never loved, get that into your head.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 86–87.

<sup>32</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 11.

In this manner, the Curé de Torcy reprimands and edifies the young priest, challenging him to minister to a world that has forsaken itself. The Curé de Torcy castigates those priests who would seek comfort instead of spreading the Gospel: “Truth is meant to save you first, and the comfort comes afterwards. Besides, you’ve no right to call that sort of thing comfort . . . The Word of God is a red-hot iron. And you who preach it would go picking it up with a pair of tongs, for fear of burning yourself, you daren’t get hold of it with both hands.”<sup>33</sup> If the young priest sought consolation from his mentor, it seems that this mentor offers no succor.

Whence comes this fire of the Curé de Torcy? Observing his mentor, the young priest notes: “Real sadness found no home with M. le Curé de Torcy . . . A certain note in his voice surprised me. Though grave, it could never be called a sad voice; it vibrates with imperceptible inner joy; so profound a joy that nothing in this world could shake it, like the vast calm waters under storms.”<sup>34</sup>

The Curé de Torcy possessed joy; that is the source of his self-possession. This joy, however, is not a generic sort of joy, but one forged in the endless exchange between self and Absolute. The overcoming of the sickness unto death occurs only in the individual’s relationship to the Absolute. As the Curé de Torcy notes, speaking of vocation: “Each one of us serves God in his own way, in his own language.”<sup>35</sup> This vocation is so personal that the Curé de Torcy describes it thus: “One day among all the other days, His eyes happened to rest upon you and me and so we were called, each in his own particular way, according to the time, place and circumstance.”<sup>36</sup>

For the young country priest, his particular circumstance was the Garden of Gethsemane, “strangely in that very instant when He sets His hand upon Peter’s shoulder asking him the useless question, almost naïve

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

yet so tender, so deeply courteous: *Why sleep ye?*<sup>37</sup> It appears that the tilling of the soil works, but only to a degree. The parish priest of Ambricourt has been schooled in joy, yet he has not learned it. He considers himself “the prisoner of His Agony in the Garden.”<sup>38</sup> While the soil has been cleared and tilled, it is not yet “good.” It will need to be washed by rain.

### **The Soil Drinks the Rain**

The ground has been cleared, the thorns and stones removed. The ground has been tilled, upturned in order to draw forth the new life waiting underneath. But the soil may yet be parched, it may lack water. Upon this soil, rain must fall, washing and refreshing it, making it a channel of life. In a similar fashion, the young priest of Ambricourt must experience rain in order to become a channel of grace.

Perhaps the most dramatic scene in *The Diary of a Country Priest* is the confrontation between the young priest and the Comtesse. Within those few pages is detailed the battle for a soul, in which the clearing of the ground and its tilling come into play. The young priest meets with the Comtesse regarding her problematic daughter, who has troubled him with her behavior and her attitude. Mlle. Chantal lacks the love of her family and thus lashes out at the world. In meeting the Comtesse, however, the young priest unearths a deeper problem, and from the depths of his misery and solitude, proceeds to attack it.

The distance between the Comtesse and her family had grown because of the death of her son. The wound of that loss caused her estrangement from her husband and her daughter. However, in her mind, neither her daughter nor her husband is to blame for the death of her son: It is all God’s fault. And so a war begins between the Comtesse and God; He may have all her external practices of faith, but He will never have her soul.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 203

God's betrayal cost her her son, and God's treachery is avenged with her own refusal to love. To this refusal, the young priest addresses the following words:

It's because the lowest of human beings, even though he no longer thinks he can love, still has in him the power of loving. Our very hate is resplendent, and the least tormented of the fiends would warm himself in what we call despair, as in a morning of glittering sunshine. Hell is not to love anymore, madame. Not to love anymore! That sounds quite ordinary to you. To a human being still alive, it means to love less or to love elsewhere. To understand is still a way of loving. But suppose this faculty which seems so inseparably ours, of our very essence, should disappear! Oh, prodigy! To stop loving, to stop understanding—and yet to live!<sup>39</sup>

The country priest has struck at the root of the problem: to live a human life, one must love; to stop loving is to abandon our humanity. Greater than the laws that govern our countries, greater even than vengeance, “love has its own order, its own laws . . . God is love itself . . . If you want to love, don't place yourself out of love's reach.”<sup>40</sup> The Comtesse's rebellion against God has exiled her from both God and herself. To return to the earlier discussion of sin, it would appear that the Comtesse exemplifies the misrelation between God and self. Her rejection of God isolates her in the most tragic manner possible. As Deede writes: “The problem the individual encounters in trying to become a self is that without God it proves impossible to properly relate oneself to oneself.”<sup>41</sup> Following Kierkegaard's description of the sickness unto death, we said that despair is both not willing and willing to be oneself. If the country

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>41</sup> Deede, “The Infinite Qualitative Difference,” 36.



priest is an example of the former, the Comtesse is an example of the latter. As Kierkegaard writes:

Demonic despair is the most intensive form of the despair: in despair to will to be oneself. It is not even in stoic self-infatuation and self-apotheosis that this despair wills to be itself; it does not will to be itself as that does which, mendaciously to be sure, yet in a certain sense, wills it according to its perfection. No, in hatred toward existence, it wills to be itself, wills to be itself in accordance with its misery. Not even in defiance or defiantly does it will to be itself, but for spite.<sup>42</sup>

The Comtesse has decided that she will stand up to God (as opposed to Kierkegaard's "standing before God.") In her defiance, she wills herself to be herself out of spite, out of hatred, out of a skewed sense of justice. In so doing, the Comtesse alienates not only her husband and her daughter, but also herself, all because of the contempt she feels for God. In a way, the Comtesse's sin is also a sin of the imagination: In her despair, she can no longer imagine life in which her family remains whole despite the separation brought about by death. Such a possibility is not within her power, but it is possible with God. In rejecting God, however, she also rejects the restoration of her family, and ultimately, the restoration of herself. As Louis Mackey puts it:

The self is as decisively sundered from God as it is from itself. When Christianity proposes that the division in the self can be healed by the power of God, it proposes the impossible. If difference is the essence of the self, its totalization is inconceivable, and its restitution to integrity—which would amount to the creation of a new self,

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<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 73.

something like a second birth—could be accomplished only by a power for whom, literally and inconceivably, all things are possible.<sup>43</sup>

In desiring to be free of God, the Comtesse ends up in a greater unfreedom. As William Davis notes: “The individual reaches for freedom and falls, thereby gaining the bonds of unfreedom. The contrary motion is that of faith, in which true freedom is gained precisely by accepting bondage and relinquishing freedom.”<sup>44</sup> Asserting her independence from the Absolute isolates the Comtesse in a way that only a renewed dependence or faith in God can rectify. And so the young priest invites the Comtesse to take the Kierkegaardian leap of faith in no uncertain terms: “God is not to be bargained with. We must give ourselves up to Him unconditionally. Give him everything. He will give you back even more.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, he tells the Comtesse: “Hell is not to love anymore. As long as we remain in this life we can still deceive ourselves, think that we love by our own will, that we love independently of God. But we’re like madmen stretching our hands to clasp the moon reflected in water.”<sup>46</sup>

The young priest’s exhortation works; the Comtesse achieves a breakthrough, and she is grateful for the first stirrings of restoration. The rain of grace poured through the young priest, channelling it to the Comtesse. Although her own death due to a weak heart will follow shortly, her soul is at peace with God, through the intervention of the country priest. How was it possible that he, empty and in turmoil, could provide the Comtesse with something that he himself lacked? Perhaps it was because he had already been cleared and purified, because he had been tilled by joy, that the ground was ready to receive rain, and channel this life

<sup>43</sup> Louis H. Mackey, “Deconstructing the Self: Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*,” *Anglican Theological Review* 71 (1989): 156.

<sup>44</sup> Williams C. Davis, “Kierkegaard on the Transformation of the Individual in Conversion,” *Religious Studies* 28.2 (June 1992): 138.

<sup>45</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 169.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

to others. As the young priest exclaims: “Oh, miracle—thus to be able to give what we ourselves do not possess, sweet miracle of our empty hands! Hope which was shrivelling in my heart flowered again in hers . . . Lord, I am stripped bare of all things, as you alone can strip us bare, whose fearful care nothing escapes, nor your terrible love!”<sup>47</sup> “Fearful care” and “terrible love,” in “the absolute relation to the Absolute”: it is this relation which allows us to overcome the sickness unto death, and thus become most ourselves.

### **The Soil Sees the Sun**

The soil has been cleared and tilled. The ground has been blessed with rain. What more does it need to make it “good?” The M. le Curé de Torcy provides an answer: “I’ll define you a Christian people by the opposite. The opposite of a Christian people is a people grown sad and old . . . Joy is in the gift of the Church, whatever joy is possible for this sad world to share. Whatever you did against the Church has been done against joy . . . What would it profit you to create life itself, when you have lost all sense of what life really is?”<sup>48</sup>

As the rain works with the sun to produce a good harvest, so must the young priest of Ambricourt learn joy. For Bernanos, the best exemplars of joy are children, whose innocence and trust allow themselves to take that leap of faith into the arms of their parents. In a similar fashion, the young priest must learn to become innocent and trusting despite the many mundane trials he faces. The Curé de Torcy reminds him that Mary was a child when the Anunciation happened, and that Mary remained as a child in her trust of God: “The eyes of Our Lady are the only real child-eyes that have ever been raised to our shame and sorrow . . . [Hers] are eyes of gentle pity, wondering sadness, and with something more in them, never

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 18, 20.

yet known or expressed, something which makes her younger than sin, younger than the race from which she sprang.”<sup>49</sup>

The young priest must enter the heart of childhood if he is to discover himself, and his own breakthrough occurs in the most ordinary of experiences. Riding a motorcycle for the first time, he comes to a new understanding of himself: “I saw him [myself] for the first time, I had never seen him before. My youth had passed me by, as many strangers pass so closely who might have become brothers, yet disappear forever. I was never young because I never dared to be young.”<sup>50</sup> As he felt the breeze around him, the country priest arrives at an insight: “I realized that youth is blessed—that it is a risk worth running, a risk that is also blessed. And by a presentiment which I cannot explain, I also understood, I *knew* that God did not wish me to die without knowing something of the risk—just enough, maybe, for my sacrifice to be complete when the time came.”<sup>51</sup>

The theme of childhood runs through all of Bernanos’s work. For Bernanos, childhood is accompanied by a wisdom that is somehow lost as one grows older, and it takes a special kind of effort to recover that wisdom. “Man must seek his rebirth, to acquire again a child's heart, a simple and kind heart capable of enthusiasm. Smirking unbelievers may think his idea is too naive, but Bernanos relentlessly repeats the Christian message which teaches that only those among us who become as humble and simple as little children will enter the kingdom of Heaven,”<sup>52</sup> writes Didier. As Bernanos says: “My deep certitude is that the part of the world still capable of redemption belongs solely to the children, the heroes and the martyrs.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 235–36.

<sup>52</sup> Didier, “Bernanos’ World,” 107.

<sup>53</sup> Bernanos, quoted in Ernst Erich Noth, “The Prophetism of Georges Bernanos,” *Yale French Studies* 4, *Literature and Ideas* (1949): 111.

Why this focus on childhood? As we have seen in the figures of the Curé de Torcy and the Comtesse, joy and love flow only through a heart which opens itself to God in utter dependence. The humility and simplicity of the child, dependent upon her parents for care and succor, reveal the delicate balance in which Kierkegaard's "single individual" relates to the Absolute in an absolute relation. Deede explains this balance thus:

The self must relate itself to itself and the self must relate itself to another, namely the Other which established the relation, by which Kierkegaard means God. Both of these elements are essential to the establishment of the self. On the one hand, the self only comes to itself through resting in God, but, on the other hand, the self must will to become a self in relation to itself.<sup>54</sup>

The crucial relationship here is the relationship with the Absolute, which opens the door for all other relationships. It is the ability to rest in God which allows the relationship with the human other to flourish as well. As Davis remarks, there is a world of difference between resting in God and resting in oneself: making oneself the basis of edification leads only to despair.<sup>55</sup> To a child, resting in God comes more easily, more naturally; for those who have become embittered by the world, however, this rest becomes all the more difficult. The temptation to despair, the sickness unto death, as Bernanos would write, is a "sin against childhood," the creation of "a mean and savage world, dry and cold wherein the genius of childhood is impotent and old age monstrously active and infertile."<sup>56</sup>

To become like a child again, as the country priest teaches the Comtesse, is to have faith enough to love. Faith, Kierkegaard writes, is the antithesis of despair: "The formula that describes the state of the self when

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<sup>54</sup> Deede, "The Infinite Qualitative Difference," 29.

<sup>55</sup> Davis, "Kierkegaard on the Transformation," 156.

<sup>56</sup> Bernanos, quoted by Frank O'Malley in "The Evangelism of Georges Bernanos," *The Review of Politics* 6.4 (October 1944): 408.

despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”<sup>57</sup> Once again, this resting comes easily for the child; for the world-weary adult, it requires constant conversion and reconversion. Faith, for those who have lost their childhood, must be worked out “in fear and trembling,” which nonetheless opens up to joy. After all his travails, the young priest discovers joy at last, but with it the strange premonition that God desired him to learn joy in order “for his sacrifice to be complete.” The country priest sees his end coming, the final benediction on a life that struggled towards selfhood.

If, for Kierkegaard, the sickness unto death is a refusal to die, we find that the young priest overcomes despair at last by allowing himself to die; that is, by allowing his self to be determined by the absolute relation to the Absolute. In this act of trust, he meets himself at last, and despairs of himself no longer. This last blessing comes shortly before the end, as he will soon be consumed by a cancer exacerbated by his austerity. Now that the ground has been cleared and tilled, now that it has known both sun and rain, now that it has learned to yield to its master, it has at last become good. The priest of Ambricourt comes to terms with himself and all of the struggles he underwent, making peace with God. As he says: “I now know that youth is a gift of God, and like all His gifts, carries no regret. They alone shall be young, whom he has chosen to survive their youth.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Selfhood as Good Soil**

The strange mistrust I had of myself, of my own being, has flown, I believe forever. That conflict is done. I cannot understand it anymore. I am reconciled to myself, to the poor, poor shell of me. How easy to hate oneself! True grace

<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 291.

is to forget. Yet if pride could die in us, the supreme grace would be to love oneself in all simplicity—as one would love any of those who themselves have suffered and loved in Christ.<sup>59</sup>

At the end of these reflections, we come back to the question of the Christian hero and selfhood. If, as Kierkegaard describes it, Christian heroism is “to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility,”<sup>60</sup> is the parish priest of Ambricourt a Christian hero? Has he become himself? Has he become “good soil?”

We see in Bernanos’s country priest a figure which accomplishes the overcoming of despair. The sickness unto death is overcome by the strenuous process by which the parish priest of Ambricourt achieves selfhood. That is, in allowing himself to be cleared and purged of self-sufficiency, he realizes his dependence on the Absolute. This purgation also allows him to become a vehicle of grace and joy; insofar as the individual establishes his absolute relationship to the Absolute, it is a relationship that is the axis of all other relationships. As both the country priest and the Comtesse learn, love of God spills over into love of the human other, and the love of the human other is impossible without the love of God. In sum, one might say that crucial to selfhood, according to Bernanos and Kierkegaard, is the ability to be like a child again; to rest in God and therefore become oneself. The young country priest achieves this—or perhaps more correctly, *receives* this—before his demise. Although Balthasar’s criticism of Kierkegaard has merit, it can still be argued that Kierkegaard’s work already contains in it the ground for overcoming despair. Bernanos’s novel would be a concrete demonstration of the process that Kierkegaard describes philosophically.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>60</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 5.

The Curé de Torcy, however, adds a provocative twist to this idea of selfhood: He says that “there are always saints. And by saints I mean those who have been given more than others.”<sup>61</sup>

The key in decoding these strange words lies in the second sentence: “Those who have been given more than others.” But given what? And according to what scale have they been given more? If, as the Curé de Torcy says, we are all called to serve God in our different ways, perhaps we are also all *loved* by God in different ways? Does this not confirm Kierkegaard’s entire model for selfhood? And does this not also explain why to despair of oneself is also to despair of God, and vice-versa?

The “more” that has been given to others is given to all; rain and sun bless all the earth. What is the difference, then? Some soil yields a good harvest, but only perhaps they have yielded more deeply to their master. Bernanos here places a benediction on all things human: We are all called to authentic selfhood, we are all called to be good soil. However, it is only in yielding ourselves to God, as Kierkegaard describes it, are we able to finally overcome the sickness unto death and yield ourselves. The ground must yield in order to yield. Despite its rocks and thorns, it will be cleared. Despite its barrenness, it will be tilled. Despite its weakness, it will be made to flourish by sun and rain. Despite its weakness and fragility, the human self may be turned into good soil.

How little we know what a human life really is—even our own. To judge us by what we call our actions is probably as futile as to judge us by our dreams. God’s justice chooses from this dark conglomeration of thought and act, and that which is raised towards the Father shines with a sudden burst of light, displayed in glory like a sun.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bernanos, *Diary*, 117.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



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