
Excerpt from Sacred Signs, Romano Guardini

STEPS

THE more we think about these long-familiar things the clearer does their meaning grow. Things we have done thousands of times, if we will only look into them more deeply, will disclose to us their beauty. If we will listen, they will speak.

After their meaning has been revealed to us, the next step is to enter upon our inheritance and make what we have long possessed really our own. We must learn how to see, how to hear, how to do things the right way. Such a learning-by-looking, growing-by-learning, is what matters. Regarded any other way these things keep their secret. They remain dark and mute. Regarded thus, they yield to us their essential nature, that nature which formed them to their outward shapes. Make trial for yourself. The most commonplace everyday objects and actions hide matters of deepest import. Under the simplest exteriors lie the greatest mysteries.

Steps are an instance. Every one of the innumerable times we go upstairs a change, though too slight and subtle to be perceptible, takes place in us. There is something mysterious in the act of ascending. Our intelligence would be puzzled to explain it, but instinctively we feel that it is so. We are made that way.

When the feet mount the steps, the whole man, including his spiritual substance, goes up with them. All ascension, all going up, if we will but give it thought, is motion in the direction of that high place where everything is great, everything made perfect.

For this sense we have that heaven is "up" rather than "down" we depend on something in us deeper than our reasoning powers. How can God be up or down? The only approach to God is by becoming better morally, and what has spiritual improvement to do with a material action like going up a pair of stairs? What has pure being to do with a rise in the position of our bodies? There is no explanation. Yet the natural figure of speech for what is morally bad is baseness, and a good and noble action we call a high action. In our minds we make a connection, unintelligible but real, between rising up and the spiritual approach to God; and Him we call the All-Highest.

So the steps that lead from the street to the church remind us that in going up into the house of prayer we are coming nearer to

God; the steps from the nave to the choir, that we are entering in before the All-Holy. The steps between the choir and the altar say to whoever ascends them the same words that God spoke to Moses on Mount Horeb: "Put your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." The altar is the threshold of eternity.

It is a great idea that if we go up even a common stairway with our minds on what we are doing, we really do leave below the base and trivial, and are in actual fact ascending up on high. Words are not very adequate; but the Christian knows that when he ascends it is the Lord that ascends. In him the Lord repeats his own ascension. That is what steps mean.

DOORS

EVERYTIME we enter a church, if we but notice it, a question is put to us. Why has a church doors? It seems a foolish question. Naturally, to go in by. Yes, but doors are not necessary--only a doorway. An opening with a board partition to close it off would be a cheap and practical convenience of letting people out and in. But the door serves more than a practical use; it is a reminder.

When you step through the doorway of a church you are leaving the outer-world behind and entering an inner world. The outside world is a fair place abounding in life and activity, but also a place with a mingling of the base and ugly. It is a sort of market place, crossed and recrossed by all and sundry. Perhaps "unholy" is not quite the word for it, yet there is something profane about the world. Behind the church doors is an inner place, separated from the market place, a silent, consecrated and holy spot. It is very certain that the whole world is the work of God and his gift to us, that we may meet Him anywhere, that everything we receive is from God's hand, and, when received religiously, is holy. Nevertheless men have always felt that certain precincts were in a special manner set apart and dedicated to God.

Between the outer and the inner world are the doors. They are the barriers between the market place and the sanctuary, between what belongs to the world at large and what has become consecrated to God. And the door warns the man who opens it to go inside that he must now leave behind the thoughts, wishes and cares which here are out of place, his curiosity, his vanity, his worldly interests, his secular self. "Make yourself clean. The ground you tread is holy ground."

Do not rush through the doors. Let us take time to open our

hearts to their meaning and pause a moment beforehand so as to make our entering-in a fully intended and recollected act.

The doors have yet something else to say. Notice how as you cross the threshold you unconsciously lift your head and your eyes, and how as you survey the great interior space of the church there also takes place in you an inward expansion and enlargement. Its great width and height have an analogy to infinity and eternity. A church is a similitude of the heavenly dwelling place of God. Mountains indeed are higher, the wide blue sky outside stretches immeasurably further. But whereas outside space is unconfined and formless, the portion of space set aside for the church has been formed, fashioned, designed at every point with God in view. The long pillared aisles, the width and solidity of the walls, the high arched and vaulted roof, bring home to us that this is God's house and the seat of his hidden presence.

It is the doors that admit us to this mysterious place. Lay aside, they say, all that cramps and narrows, all that sinks the mind. Open your heart, lift up your eyes. Let your soul be free, for this is God's temple.

It is likewise the representation of you, yourself. For you, your soul and your body, are the living temple of God. Open up that temple, make it spacious, give it height.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates,
and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors,
and the King of Glory shall come in.

Heed the cry of the doors. Of small use to you is a house of wood and stone unless you yourself are God's living dwelling. The high arched gates may be lifted up, and the portals parted wide, but unless the doors of your heart are open, how can the King of Glory enter in?