

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Consolation

After suffering comes consolation, and the experience of recovery. This is no simple matter, as anyone who has been really hurt will know.

### Damage

Sometimes life hurts us so badly that we begin to wonder how we shall ever recover. The mind and body are together in perplexity, each burdened in its own way. It can happen that a whole area of our life appears to have been stricken almost to extinction, to be bereaved of happiness in a radical or permanent way. We can enter a kind of winter where everything looks blasted and withered and frozen, and the shortened days speak to us of the cutting-off of hope. Bereavement takes many forms, as does weakness, or sickness, or disability, or failure. We can group them together under the word *affliction*.

### Have I Got This Wrong?

Should we ever feel this bad - is it all a touch of the liver, or an imbalance in the chemistry of the brain? I don't think so. I believe that some few people miraculously spend much of their lives in sunshine, and are defended from the mystery of mortality for a very long time. But knowledge of death - which is what we're talking about - is deeply human, and anyone who is ignorant of it is one-dimensional. As soon as that's become clear, you can begin to look on the dark experience with new eyes. If it has the power to lend substance and stature to our humanity, this knowledge of grief and sorrow is not to be dreaded or avoided. If it can bring us closer to one another in our need, it can even recognisably enhance our life. I believe this is where the key word *consolation* comes into play. The experience of care and restoration which lies behind the word is vital to humanity. And indeed it is a very long path that leads to healing, when the wounds have been grave and deep; there is more to be learned on this journey than on the various trips and jollies afforded us by our ease and leisure. No-one could wish to bear the bitter experiences that bring us near to

death. But it can't be denied that in making humanity, there is a passing through fire that we need before our life runs gold. It is a beautiful thing to watch this transformation happen in those we love, and to see them pass from simplicity and youth into the immense mystery of suffering, the crucible where we are tested and purified.

### Humanity Comes Good

The materials are the place of our fear. Will they stand the test through which they are passed? A crucible only works if it is hot enough to fuse its contents. It is a fearful thing to be melted down. Disappointed hopes are the best example I know: people find their career-path blocked, or a relationship cut short, or a death, as we say, "too close for comfort". Often these things can coincide, and it seems the general mayhem is too comprehensive for anything to be salvaged. The pagan response ("The gods are playing with us") is very common: you can read it in the grim countenances of people who do not pray, and who have fallen out of love with life. The suggestion is that we are in the power of a blind force that cares nothing for us. But if these obviously evil things are calling us to a deeper humanity, aren't they completely consistent with the terrible love of a God who calls us to trust and be changed in the fire? The loss of self-confidence - "Everything I do leads to the grave," - is another response which leaves people dead in the water, unable to move from the place of disaster. But the path to the grave is new for a Christian, and in the Gospel it becomes a place of meeting with life, where death had been expected. Christian consolation is not a pink pill or a sticking-plaster to get us through a little further. It is the gift of the Word made Flesh, the glimpse of glory which changes our understanding of humanity, and our view of this passing world. Peter describes the world dissolving in flames and the elements melting in the heat. But he also describes us *waiting and longing for that Day of the Lord to come*. Can we pray, like Peter?

He, at least, is sure that humanity will come  
good at last.

*Fr Philip*