

THE UNCOMPROMISING LOVER

The great attraction exercised by the writings of the mystics on all who sincerely love God is a fact of everyday experience. Richard Rolle in our own country, Ruysbroeck in the Netherlands, Saint Catherine of Siena in Italy, Saint Teresa in Spain, these and a host of others have a numerous and sympathetic following. But there is one exception for which it is difficult to account: St. John of the Cross. Undoubtedly the greatest of them all, he is nevertheless generally regarded by average readers with something akin to fear and repulsion. When they pick up the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* for the first time and become aware of the sacrifices, the detachment and the denudation of spirit which he demands they are filled with consternation and dread. Such teaching seems to lead more to death than to life: and urged by the instinct of self preservation rather than by lack of generosity they recoil from putting it into practice.

This impression, derived solely from the *Ascent*, is, to a certain degree, comprehensible. The relentless logic with which St. John of the Cross drives his principles to their conclusions, the merciless insistence on the absolute validity of certain Gospel truths, the absence of all compromise and indulgence, these and other traits of a like nature strike a chill into the heart of uninitiated readers. They feel that the saint must have been devoid of all sensibility, out of touch with common humanity and limited in his outlook on the world. And they put down the book with the conviction that such counsel is not for them because it is utterly inhuman. Hence St. John of the Cross is known mainly as the counsellor of 'self-annihilation,' the terrible ascetic 'who presents the life of holiness in a grim and repellent aspect,' and whose mysticism is little more than 'a fantastic gloom and passionate severity.'

How mistaken this view is emerges very clearly from Professor Peers's latest book,¹ in which he describes with sympathy, understanding and urbanity the true characteristics of St. John's doctrine. The *Ascent*, the *Dark Night* and his other writings are seen as part of his life, and conditioned by his sufferings, not as mere theories unrelated to experience.

But the main cause of misunderstanding undoubtedly arises from regarding the *Ascent* as an ascetical programme pure and simple,

¹ *Spirit of Flame*, by E. Allison Peers (S.C.M. Press; 6s.).

and employing it as a kind of elementary introduction to the life of contemplation. This, however, is a mistaken view. The process of detachment need not necessarily conform to the analysis that St. John draws up in the precise order in which it is described. It seems rather that the soul starts out from positive ideas and practises detachment as a kind of concomitant. The central truth from which the saint's mysticism radiates is the transcendence of God: the comparative insignificance and worthlessness of the creature follows as a corollary. Attention, therefore, is to be concentrated on God, particularly as dwelling secretly in the depths of the soul. 'It is to be observed,' says the saint in the *Spiritual Canticle*, 'that the Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and Holy Ghost is hidden in essence and presence in the inmost being of the soul. Wherefore the soul that would find him must issue forth, as regards its affection and will, *from all things* and enter within itself in deepest recollection, *so that all things are to it as though they were not.*' Hence the loving attention of the soul on God is accompanied by a complete or partial disregard of creatures which is, in itself, a detachment. As, psychologically, it is not possible to fix the mind on several disparate objects simultaneously, the turning of the understanding and will towards God automatically turns them from creatures: and thus mortification, detachment, or whatever we care to call it, consists not so much in a deliberate crushing of our natural instincts as in a neglect of them. 'Olvido de lo creado': *forgetfulness of creatures*, that is St. John's first condition of perfection. 'Since, then, the Spouse is the treasure hidden in the field of thy soul . . . it will be fitting that in order to find it *thou forget all that is thine.* Withdraw thyself from all creatures, hide in the interior closet of thy spirit, and shutting the door upon thee (that is to say, shutting thy will upon all things) pray to thy Father who is in secret.' This absorption in God and unconsciousness of creatures seems much more natural and easy, and is certainly more characteristic of St. John's outlook, than the frontal attack on the senses.

But there is another explanation of the 'self-annihilation' so evident in the *Ascent*. It was addressed primarily, though not exclusively, to those who had entered, or were entering into contemplative prayer.

For them, progress in prayer would be measured by their degree of detachment. There was danger that in the periods of dryness and darkness that accompanied their state they would be drawn aside by distractions and led to take pleasure in the creature as a compensation for their lack of spiritual enjoyment in the Creator.

The advice offered in the *Ascent* was meant to counteract this temptation. St. John says to them, in substance: 'Do not attempt to alleviate present pain and distress by pleasure in sights and sounds. Seek nothing outside God.' And there follows a detailed analysis of all that is to be disregarded by the soul in this state, including certain devotional aids that people are apt to consider as indispensable for spiritual progress.

Consequently, even in this context, the doctrine of St. John of the Cross points not to the death of nature, but to life in God. It is a positive, not a negative outlook: and the principal emphasis lies not in the cultivation of 'Nada,' not in an inhuman detachment, but in God, all-powerful, all-wise and all-loving. If creatures are to be considered as nothing, it is only in comparison with God's greatness: if they are to be thought ugly, it is only in comparison with God's infinite loveliness. And if our mind is to be directed continually away from creatures and towards God, it is only because two contradictories cannot exist simultaneously in the same place, because *the All* positively excludes *Nothing*, and because the soul becomes assimilated to the object of its seeking. It was this last result, the divinisation of the Christian, that St. John wished to bring about.

He is not then the Doctor of annihilation, but the Doctor of *The All*. He gives encouragement to doubting and troubled souls, pointing out both the goal of the journey and the light of dawn, and making the winding road and the black darkness seem worth while. His luminous doctrine makes it obvious that once a soul is in love with God, the rest is easy. Love that is strong will sacrifice much: love that is perfect will give all. And once the way of detachment has been entered upon it will quickly lead to the purification of the higher intellectual faculties. But not by bodily mortification, so insisted upon by hagiographers: not by any deliberate process of intellectual starvation, but by the exercise of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. What could be simpler? And yet what could be more effective? Faith blinds the understanding: hope empties the memory: charity strips the will of its affection for all that is not God. The soul is thus 'totally despoiled of itself, and will go forth to meet him with an incredible impetus, with its whole strength.'

If it is objected that St. John only appeals to contemplatives and to specially chosen souls and that his descriptions of the higher states of the mystical life have no practical interest for the average man, it must be remembered that his fundamental principles are derived from the Gospel and that they are decidedly applicable to

every Christian. They may be thrust aside: but they cannot be explained away. It is true, however, that St. John of the Cross had contemplatives mainly in mind when he wrote, and it was this which called forth a pleasantry from St. Teresa herself. 'May God deliver us,' she said one day, whilst criticising the explanations she had received of a locution heard in prayer: 'May God deliver us from people so spiritual that they would bring everybody to perfect contemplation.' But she never intended to discourage the ordinary Christian from attempting to pass to the higher states of prayer. She was too aware of the decisive part played in our personal sanctification by contemplation. The mere fact that such a remark should be made points to her recognition of the fact that St. John did not exclude anyone from his invitation to contemplation. He used the word 'contemplation' in a far less restricted sense than did St. Teresa, since he was inclined to hold that the grace of contemplation is frequently, easily and even normally given to souls sufficiently generous to make preparation for it. He recognises that the beginner who prays with fervour and persists in meditation is led little by little to a simplified prayer of loving attention to God in which the soul is enlightened by the action and the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

Hence his writings have a universal appeal. He is a Doctor of the Universal Church, teaching all Christians the spiritual ways that conduce to perfect love and perfect union. If people complain that he writes only for the few, it must be understood of the few who are chosen: not because few are called. St. John disqualifies no man: it is lack of desire, lack of courage, inertia that disqualifies.² And though he describes much that is above our understanding and experience, yet it is but the Christian life in its fulness, its maturity and its integral perfection: an ideal that cannot fail to refine our sensibility by our acquaintance with it. 'No measure,' says St. Thomas, 'should be set to the goal.'

If, then, his teaching is not unreasonable in its demands, if, whilst requiring the highest conceivable standard of detachment from those who have made great progress towards divine union, he makes fewer demands on those who are only beginning to enter into contemplative prayer, we may be certain that he would require even less from those living in the world. His aim is to inspire all souls with a strong spiritual ambition, and he shows them the desirability of a goal higher than they are now attempting to attain. If they

² *Living Flame of Love*, 2nd Redaction, Peer's ed. vol. III, stanza II, p. 153, par. 27. It would please Him (GOD) that all souls should be perfect . . . etc.

will not follow his lead and 'raise their desires above childish things,' this must not be attributed to the uncompromising attitude he adopts in regard to principles, but rather to their own weakness and cowardice. 'Austere and forbidding though his treatises may seem when we merely turn over their pages,' says Professor Peers, 'as soon as we begin to study them in detail we find them full of serenity, beauty and understanding.'

In these days when so many minds are turned to the planning of a world on a purely material basis, when the application of Christian principles seems so inadequate, the logic and the realism of St. John of the Cross are a refreshing reminder that we have here no lasting city, and that our happiness lies elsewhere and in other things.

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