

## MYSTICISM AND THEOLOGY

THE publication of the collected spiritual letters of the late Abbot Chapman<sup>1</sup> reveals a side of his life and work less well known to the outside world. With the exception of one rather long series, these letters are mainly concerned with those stages of the spiritual life which St. John of the Cross has called the Dark Night of the Soul. In their preoccupation with this time of dryness and painful anxiety when no comfort is found either in God or in creatures, they present a rather gloomy view of Christianity. Dom Chapman had formed the opinion that many reach the mystical state without being aware of it, and that for lack of suitable instruction they make no progress. He tried to help, although always refusing to become a "professional director," and disclaiming special knowledge. The letters contain much that is helpful, expressed with originality and vigour.

He first began to take a serious interest in the subject of mysticism when recalled to Maredsous by Abbot Marmion in 1912—indeed his own state of soul seemed "obviously mystical"—and the first of the letters date from that period. Very soon he had worked out for himself a provisional theory, which he explained at length in a letter of April, 1913 (p. 250), and in January, 1928, he published in the *Downside Review* an article "What is Mysticism?" as a theological defence of his ideas. To explain the scattered references in the letters, that article has been reprinted to form the second appendix to the present work. It is exclusively an interpretation of St. Thomas, but it is so novel an interpretation that, put forward with the authority of a great reputation, it requires careful examination. Dom Chapman sets aside the accepted Thomistic doctrine based on the theology of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost ("a harmless doctrine, but unfruitful"—p. 71) and starts again from the beginning. It must be said at once that he showed a surpri-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman*, Sheed & Ward, 8/6.

sing lack of acquaintance with the actual text of St. Thomas on the fundamental questions of grace and the gifts. It is difficult to think that he could have read St. Thomas' treatise on grace in the *Summa* (I-II, qq. 109-114) or the general question on the gifts (I-II, q. 68), and yet have written (*Letter to a literary man*, 26th January, 1925—p. 69-70) that St. Thomas never distinguishes actual from habitual or sanctifying grace<sup>2</sup>, or that the actual assistance required for doing a supernatural act of a virtue "would be, by the moderns, called 'actual grace,' but St. Thomas puts it down to the seven gifts."<sup>3</sup>

Briefly his theory is this: In the state of Original Justice Adam knew God as the angels do, in a purely intellectual way, without the normal human need of comparing universal ideas with concrete images pictured in the imagination (p. 299-301). The mystic's vision of God is a "scanty and rare survival of that which was connatural to Adam" (p. 306). "Neither the faculty of perceiving pure species nor the act of perceiving them is in itself 'supernatural'" (p. 307), but "Mysticism . . . like natural things is used by grace" (p. 308)—it is the "survival of a preternatural way to the supernatural" (p. 309).

Let us first examine the argument by which Dom Chapman attributes to St. Thomas the teaching that Adam in the state of Original Justice knew God in the way that the angels naturally do.<sup>4</sup> After explaining (p. 300) that the soul when separated from the body at death understands in a purely intellectual, angelic manner—without sense-images, which it no longer possesses—he concludes that the soul is radically capable of angelic knowledge, and asks why should we not

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<sup>2</sup> See particularly q. 110, a. 2, but the distinction is used explicitly throughout the treatise.

<sup>3</sup> For example a. 3 concludes: "Therefore the gifts of the Holy Ghost are *habits* which dispose man to give prompt obedience to the Holy Spirit."

<sup>4</sup> On pp. 298-9, under the heading "*The Thomistic Epistemology*," Dom Chapman says that angels know God by means of *species impressae*; it is not St. Thomas' teaching, cf. *Summa* I, q. 56, a. 3.

in this life also understand in the angelic manner. He continues:

St. Thomas explains:

"Man is prevented in his present state from the full and lucid consideration of God's intelligible effects by the fact that he is distracted by sensible things and is occupied with them." (*Summa* I, q. 94, a. 1.)

Adam's Angelic Consciousness. Adam's nature before the fall was perfect, *integra natura*, and his intellect had both powers, the angelic and the human:

"The rectitude of man as instituted by God consisted in this, that the lower (faculties) were subjected to the higher, and the higher were not impeded by the lower. Hence the first man was not impeded by exterior things from the clear and firm contemplation of intelligible effects which he perceived through the irradiation of the First Truth, *whether by a natural or a supernatural cognition.*" (*Ibid.*)

It was in this way that Adam possessed connaturally a clear and direct knowledge of God, such as the angels have by nature.

In the Article from which the passages are taken (*Whether Adam knew God's Essence*), St. Thomas had explained that Adam could not normally have seen the Divine Essence, so that his knowledge was an indirect one obtained through the medium of effects, that is to say a knowledge from God's likeness mirrored in creatures. In order to show that Adam had a more perfect knowledge of God than is possible to us, he had pointed out that the higher, more God-like, intelligible (spiritual) effects serve as a medium for a more perfect knowledge of God. In their context, therefore, the passages quoted by Dom Chapman mean no more than that clear and sustained thought on spiritual effects is not possible for us in our present state, but was possible for Adam, whether he knew the spiritual effects naturally or by revelation. There is no suggestion that Adam could have known without sense-images as Angels do. In the very next Article the one argument by which St. Thomas proves that Adam had not a perfect knowledge of angelic natures is that in the state of original justice he could not understand without sense-images, while in *Qu. de Verit.*, XVIII, a. 5, he explains that knowledge without sense-images, would have been possible for Adam only if he had enjoyed the

beatific vision. St. Thomas' teaching was constant: in the present state of union with the body it exceeds the natural power of man to understand without sense-images.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the whole basis of Abbot Chapman's thesis is that Adam had this purely intellectual knowledge. He infers that Adam's immunity from the distractions of his lower nature alone account for this higher mode of knowing God, and (p. 301) quotes St. Thomas to show that the perfect equilibrium of nature was due to grace:

"It was by grace that Adam in the state of innocence had that mode of vision that the angel has by nature, and therefore he is called a second angel." *Qu. de Verit.* XVIII, a. 1 ad 12.

After the words "by nature," St. Thomas adds "*sicut dictum est*," his ordinary way of referring to something he had just written. The reference is to the *ad primum*, where he makes it clear (1) that Adam's knowledge of God was like that which the angel has by nature in one respect: it was not acquired by discursive reasoning, and (2) that it was a kind of knowledge not merely made possible by the freedom from distractions which grace gave, but itself due to grace—a knowledge by a "spiritual light divinely infused," "above the nature of man." It was one of the *gratiae gratis datae*, whose root and cause was sanctifying grace.<sup>6</sup>

The Abbot argues (p. 301) that since we have fundamentally the same nature as Adam had, we have the same capacity for purely intellectual, angelic knowledge,<sup>7</sup> though its exercise is impeded by our disordered lower nature. He quotes St. Thomas as holding that partially and on occasion grace delivers us from the tyranny of sense, so that:

"In contemplation God is seen by a medium which is the light of wisdom elevating the mind to discern the divine (but not so that the Divine Essence is seen immediately); and thus the divine is seen by the contemplative by grace after the state of sin,

<sup>5</sup> *Vide*, e.g., *Summa* I, q. 84, a. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 100, a. 1 ad 2.

<sup>7</sup> He had already urged (p. 300) that the soul is radically capable of pure intellectual knowledge from the fact that a disembodied soul understands without sense-images. St. Thomas' teaching (*Summa* I, q. 89, a. 1) is that such souls understand in a manner that is not natural to man precisely because they exist in a manner that is not natural.

though more perfectly in the state of innocence." *Qu. de Verit.* XVIII, a. 1 *ad* 4.

This is the only text used to show that St. Thomas identified contemplation with Adam's "quasi-angelic consciousness by infused species." But St. Thomas could only be comparing contemplation with the one kind of knowledge which alone he had attributed to Adam in this Article, that of which grace was the direct cause and not merely the condition. It is difficult to see why the *infusion* of species should be necessary if contemplation is so natural to man that the quieting of the senses is the only condition of its exercise.

Continuing his argument, Abbot Chapman supports the view that it is the disorder in our soul which impedes our angelic mode of knowledge (p. 302) by a passage from St. Thomas (IV *Sent.*, d. 50, q. 1, a. 1) which makes abstraction from the body the condition of our receiving an influx from spiritual substances.<sup>8</sup> In point of fact the passage immediately preceding this points out quite clearly that abstraction from the body is the necessary condition only because our corporeal state makes knowledge through the senses the only possible knowledge in this life.<sup>9</sup>

Assuming then that we have fundamentally the power of angelic vision, the Abbot (p. 303) uses the analogy of prophetic intellectual vision, and from a text of St. Thomas (*Qu. de Verit.*, XII, a. 12) makes a distinction between perception and understanding. The prophet can perceive, but not understand without sense-images.<sup>10</sup> To translate "*perspecta*" by "perceived" implying some kind of knowledge prior to understanding (*intelligere*) would be to make

<sup>8</sup> Dom Chapman is mistaken in thinking that St. Thomas is quoting the words from pseudo-Dionysius.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly in a footnote he gives a confirmatory passage from *Qu. unica de Anima*, a. 15. He should have continued the quotation. In the next sentence St. Thomas says that not until the soul is totally separated from the body will it be able to understand without sense-images.

<sup>10</sup> In the passage *Qu. de Veritate* XII, a. 12 *ad* 2) quoted in the second footnote on the same page (303) St. Thomas' "percipitur" which Dom Chapman has translated "perceived," means "received," as it does in the *ad sextum* of the Article.

St. Thomas contradict himself in this rather obscure passage. In his use of the word, "*intelligere*" means knowledge in its widest sense, usually a simple apprehension. He speaks indifferently of our absolute need of sense-images for understanding (*intelligere*—*Summa* I, q. 84, a. 7), knowing or considering (*cognoscere, considerare*—*Qu. de Verit.* X, a. 2 *ad* 7) or for an intellectual operation (*ad suum actum*—II *Sent.*, d. 20, q. 2 *ad* 3). By this distinction Dom Chapman explains that when on rare occasions, the impeding factors being quieted, some activity of the obscured faculty takes place, and pure truth is *perceived* by the angelic consciousness of man, it needs to be *translated*, or clothed with symbols, before the ordinary consciousness can be aware of the experience (p. 303-6).

Such then is the value of the arguments on which Dom Chapman's theory rests. Mysticism is the "survival of powers of perception and translation disused and atrophied by neglect . . . emerging half-consciously in a few, overpoweringly in a very few; but traceable in a good many" (p. 307). "Neither the faculty of perceiving pure species, nor the act of perceiving them is in itself 'supernatural' " (p. 307), but "God can make them the vehicle of supernatural communication, in fact a 'means of grace.' And so it is that saintly mystics find that it is in this way that God gives Himself to them, granting revelations to prophets, inflaming contemplatives with His charity, transforming the perfect by union" (p. 309).

In the letters there are a few serious theological inaccuracies and much looseness of expression; Dom Chapman was not a theologian. The editor and publishers have done no service to the memory of one who showed outstanding gifts in other spheres.

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