

FIRST GRACES OF THE PROFICIENT

BY

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THE period of 'great business', described by Rolle in the *Incendium Amoris*¹ as the purgative way to 'sweetest rest', has passed, and the obscurity of the night of the senses leads the soul on to this more secure life in Christ. The hermit was perfectly aware of the difficulties of the first period and the progress the devout man had to make to reach this sweetness. For some the progress is rapid and often accompanied by special graces from God.

They that are sickerly ordained to holiness in the beginning of their turning, for dread of God, forsake sins and worldly vanities: and then they set their flesh under strait penance, afterwards setting Christ's love before all other, and feeling a delight in heavenly sweetness in devotion of mind they profit mickle. And so they pass from degree to degree and flourish with ghostly virtues; and so, made fair by grace, they come at last to the perfection that stands in heart, and word, and deed.²

He had himself passed through the normal stages in a matter of three or four years, and it is as well here to note in some detail the way in which God dealt with his own soul as described by his own pen. Each individual will reach this second length of the Christian life in a different way according to God's special designs and his own peculiar character; but the example set before us here will show how God works with those 'ordained to holiness'.

He had already been living some years as a hermit before he was given the opportunity to enter fully into this new way. God allowed him to be tempted in the solitude of his cell by a short and very sharp attack on his chastity. The temptation resembles in some ways that of St Thomas Aquinas in his prison, except that in Rolle's case the woman was a mere fantasy of someone he had loved previously to his adopting the hermit's life. The result of the triumph over this evil was also something like St Thomas's; angelic purity granted him in a special vision. The Gift of Fortitude had evidently been at work in his soul and the Spirit left within him, as a consequence of the triumph, a very sensible and intense devotion to the Holy Name. This may have been suggested by his Franciscan connec-

¹ Chapter 18. Misyn's translation, edited by Comper. pp. 83-84.

² *Incendium Amoris*, c. 28, p. 119.

tions in Oxford, but it only came to life as a special source of grace at the moment of his victory.³ The experience seems to have been almost as strong and lasting as Thomas's being girded by the angels.

It was after this that the heavenly door was opened to him. 'Three years except three or four months were run from the beginning of the change of my life and of my mind to the opening of the heavenly door' (*Incendium*, c. 15, p. 70). The effect of this strange opening of the door was to reveal in some new way the Face of God: and from that day for a year he had a time of peace, tasting the sweetness of the Name and contemplating the Face through the door which remained open. This was a time of quietening of his boisterous nature and the increasing of his desire for God; 'so that, the Face being shown, the eyes of the heart might behold and see by what way they might seek my Love, and unto him continually desire'.

Then, the year completed, Rolle received the special grace by which he is peculiar among the mystics, the heat in his breast which was physical as well as spiritual. This came to him of a sudden while sitting in chapel at meditation, but it remained with him in some way for the rest of his life. After another nine or ten months he received in addition the experience of heavenly song which also remained with him:

Whiles truly I sat in this same chapel, and in the night before supper, as I could, I sang psalms, I beheld above me the noise as it were of readers, or rather singers. Whiles also I took heed praying to heaven with my whole desire, suddenly, I wot not in what manner, I felt in me the noise of song (p. 71).

This was no external physical sound: his *thought* was changed into continual song and he burst forth in joyful melody before his Maker but not so that it could be heard by other ears. Indeed his description of his state might find a modern parallel in that of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity who discovered her special vocation described in the name of *Laus Gloriarum*: 'A "Praise of Glory" is a silent soul, a lyre beneath the touch of the Holy Ghost, from which he can draw divine harmonies. . . . In the heaven of glory the blessed rest not day or night saying "Holy, Holy, Holy. . . ." In the heaven of her soul the "Praise of Glory" begins now the task which will be hers for all eternity. Her chant is uninterrupted. . . .' (Quoted in *The Spiritual Doctrine of Sister Elizabeth*, p. 100.) This passage of the modern Carmelite compares curiously with the account of heavenly song given by Rolle. The latter certainly had a peculiar mystical experience but it was fundamentally associated with the doctrine of

³ Cf. *Richard Rolle of Hampole*, edited by C. Horstman, vol. 1, p. 191.

grace as lived and understood by the former. Although Rolle describes what he felt and heard in terms of the senses it is evident that what he is trying to express is beyond such material things. He distinguishes later between two types of ravishing or rapture; the first takes the soul out of the senses so that 'he plainly feels naught in the flesh', which can happen to saint and sinner alike, and the second is 'the lifting of the mind into God by contemplation', which is the lot of the true lover (Book 2, chapter 7, pp. 161-2). This second type of rapture leaves the soul in possession of, and with dominion over, all bodily faculties; this would make it possible to have sensations such as physical heat and sound, which are associated with the really spiritual experience in the depth of the soul, without distraction or disturbance.

In trying to assess the nature and depths of this mystical experience we must turn to St Thomas on the subject of prophecy and visions, for the angelic Doctor maintains that the pure manifestation of divine truth in contemplation without any emotional counterpart whatever is the highest experience and it is in fact beyond prophecy. He will not admit that to have a counterpart in the imagination or external senses is anything but a lessening of the purity of this mystical intuition (II-II, 174, 2). This may be hard for the humanist to accept, but St Thomas will only agree that things of the senses in this context and in this life are for *use*, for some practical purpose, not for human perfection as such. Later, in heaven, there will be an outpouring from the mind transformed by vision into the lower powers and also into the body (II-II, 175, 4 ad 1), for it is only after the resurrection that man can attain his full integrity. Consequently if there is a purpose in having imaginative or sensible expressions of the inner contemplation of truth he agrees that they should also be present, for the usefulness of the experience will be enhanced by the union of the two.

When a particular supernatural truth has to be revealed by means of corporal images, he that has both, namely the intellectual light and the imaginary vision, is more a prophet than he that has only one, because his prophecy is more perfect (II-II, 174, 2 ad 1). In this sense we might regard the double nature of Richard Rolle's experience as being granted to him as a teacher and master in the way of prayer. The sensations of heat and sound were given him not as part of his own perfection in the prayer of the illuminative way, but in order to lead others to it by the power of the experience. He himself insists that the inner ravishing of the spirit which may be likened to St Thomas's 'intellectual light' is the only thing of importance, confirming 'the shapeliness of the unseen life in the loving

soul' and ravishing him 'to the height of contemplation and the accord of the angels' praise' (*Incendium*, I c. 15, p. 73). In this he is in agreement with all the great saints who have reached the true heights of contemplation and his more external sensations are merely to be regarded as utilities, means of understanding what is meant by love and praise in their fullness, or means of telling other people about these hidden treasures.

In delaying on this outward aspect of Richard Rolle's initial experience we are not suggesting that he is a type to be followed in that particular respect. Every individual has his own grace conformable to his own personality. Grace is not a substance, not even a spiritual substance, poured out by God into rows and rows of souls like empty vases needing something to fill them. Certainly Christ merited by his death grace for all mankind and the Church preserves in her treasury these infinite merits to be conferred upon those chosen and fitted by God to receive them. But a too material conception of grace would lead us to expect the way to holiness to be exactly the same in every individual, as though having filled a hundred barrels one could expect all the taps to be turned on and pour out liquid in the same way. Grace is a habit which qualifies the soul so that each soul is possessed of it in its own individual nature, just as knowledge of the same subject will have its different emphasis and colouring in different men. And the more powerful the grace the more individual does it become; for two great theologians, who have given their minds to the study of the same great dogmas on which they agree, will express themselves in far more differing and variegated ways than two seminarians who have barely assimilated the elements of the science from text books. For this reason the first stages of the spiritual life are more uniform in different people than the later stages. The purgative way is more easily traced in the lives of saints and sinners; but the illuminative and unitive ways become more and more 'peculiar' in their manifestations in each individual.

This fact of the 'diversity of gifts' must be borne in mind when reading the life of any saint, but in particular in reading the personal and somewhat autobiographical writings of holy men and women on the spiritual life. The fundamental truth must be sought in the midst of the personal manifestations. The reader must never be diverted from an ever-growing directness towards God. It often happens that a person will model himself upon someone he has known or read about, someone who was evidently one of God's darlings; and despite frequent warnings he will find himself doing what he thinks his hero would have done in similar circumstances, praying as he imagines his hero prayed, seeking the same special

graces as his hero received. But the hero of course was in direct communication with God so that it is impossible to copy him in truth without in a sense forgetting all about him and becoming more directly in touch with God. So the saints are given to us as our models not so much to be copied, but in order that we may see how God worked in them with their own special characteristics and learn more of the wonderful ways of divine grace in the individual soul. This is, as one would expect, Rolle's own teaching.

Divers gifts truly are disposed to God's lovers: some are chosen to do; some to teach; some to love. Nevertheless all the holy covet one thing and run to one life, but by divers paths; for everyone chosen goes to the kingdom of bliss by that way of virtue in the which he is most used. (*Incendium* II, 6, p. 153.)

It is needful to delay on these matters here, at the outset of the illuminative way, because the diversities of God's ways become more manifest, as we have explained, and many souls are given special assistance from God to confirm them in the right way. But it often happens that a devout Christian who has never had any kind of experience of this nature remains in this second period without knowing at all that he has reached it. One who has been faithful from the beginning, has had no violent reaction from the ways of God but has followed as diligently as might be the light that he has received in faith, will have gone through the purifications permitted by the divine will in a true spirit of union with the Cross, and while regarding himself as still a humble beginner, will in fact be enjoying the special union with Christ or even the prayer of quiet, which is one characteristic of the proficient soul. He must not be disquieted by finding none of the extraordinary graces he reads or hears about in the lives of others.

At the same time God often in the beginning of special periods of development will grant these extraordinary graces, not in any way as rewards for generous cooperation with his will, not as essential in any way to the Christian life, but precisely to encourage and lead the soul on to greater desires and greater heights of union. Visions, significant dreams, unmistakable 'coincidences' or special feelings or comforts at prayer are not necessarily signs of sanctity, though they are often, as in the case of St Bernadette's visions, signs of God's election to sanctity. Someone at the beginning of this second period may hear a voice speaking to him from God, may see the figure on the crucifix move and incline towards him, may have a wonderful light to see all things in relation to God's love, may see a complete vision of heavenly joys or dream of some saint or of our Lord himself; these experiences, if genuine, are not the reality but only the

sweet caresses of God the lover showing his love in order to win the soul. They are beginnings, enticements to enter. They are like the *Gloria* and the angels' appearance before the shepherds or the star appearing to the kings to introduce them to Christ the Lord. No store is to be set by them in themselves; they are almost trivial. At first they seem to be of breath-taking importance, but they are soon gone, merely sweet memories to keep the soul content in times of prolonged loneliness. If Richard's heat and song remained with him for long it was a great exception.

The parallel between this period of second conversion and illumination and the life of the Apostles from the Passion to the Ascension is clearly outlined by Père Garrigou Lagrange in the *Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (English edition, p. 31). Basing the parallel upon St Catherine's *Dialogue*, he shows how our Lord appeared after the Resurrection to draw them into this new way, to console and to enlighten them. It was only the beginning of their life as apostles and the manifestations were tangible, but they did not last for more than forty days. And yet we can picture the subsequent lifetime of complete preoccupation with God spent by the two disciples who went to Emmaus. 'And their eyes were opened, and they knew him.' It is unlikely that those eyes, the eyes of their spirit, were ever closed again; it is unlikely that they ever ceased from thinking of him and knowing him. Still the years rolled on after Pentecost and never again did he so manifest himself. Did they pine and fret at his absence? Their eyes had been opened and they knew; they knew his presence was in the soul, that it did not require the outward appearance of the walk to Emmaus, the sitting down to dinner, the breaking of bread. 'He vanished out of their sight.' He remained with them more intimately than ever before, and he never left them. They could say, as Richard Rolle echoed so many centuries later, that their hearts had been burning within them in his company. But the inner reality of that burning heart never disappeared, though the feeling had gone when he vanished. So the good Christian who happens to have received some extraordinary grace at the beginning of this new way of enlightenment must not pine for its repetition, must not look for it as necessary to his life. It was only the beginning. He may go many years without any more outward response from God. It is strange that this period is often marked more by an apparent deprivation of God than of any consolations or experiences. As we, standing in darkness, see nothing, so in contemplation that invisibly lightens the soul, no seen light we see. Christ also makes darkness his resting place, and yet speaks to us in a pillar of a cloud. (*The Mending of Life*, c. 12. Misyn-Comper, p. 239.)