

So does Holy Communion in the height of its fervour make us 'long to be dissolved to be with Christ'. So great can this longing become that it can not only literally transport body and soul, as it did in the case of the saints, but transport the soul quite out of the body, as it did in the case of Blessed Imelda, who died caught up to God by love in the divine clasp of her First Holy Communion. So did the Blessed Virgin herself die—of yearning to be reunited with her Divine Son.



## THE UNION OF OPPOSITES

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WHEN God gives his graces to a soul, these graces are never restricted exclusively to the individual. They are bestowed also on the whole Body of Christ. No one can hope to receive graces selfishly, nor can he ascend the Scale of Perfection alone. He may look only towards God and seek him alone, as the three kings journeying to Bethlehem following the beam of the star. But when they have reached their goal and have held the Lord of the whole world in their embrace, they may not stay there alone with him. They are sent back to their country by another way. They return transformed, carrying back what they have received to their own kith and kin. When the soul has reached the heights of perfection, she may not rest there; in one way or another she is sent back to her own folk but to take up a new position, as mediator of the grace she has received. In many cases this may be by no visible movement, but simply that the contemplative, hidden behind high walls, draws down the blessing of God upon his own people. To some, however, who have retired altogether from the world, it is given to return by another way. Thus it was for Mother Julian. She had passed the stage of the purified beginner, the illuminated proficient, she had passed into the Cloud of Unknowing. But she was not to stay there. She must go back by a new way of Revelation, given not for herself alone, not as a sign that God was favouring her for her high stage in perfection.

Mother Julian is conscious that her message is for her even-Christian. As a mystic in the embrace of God she is turned outward. The Lord gently turns her head so that she may see the suffering men around her. Thus she writes her visions for the comfort of mankind.

In all this I was greatly stirred in charity to mine even-Christians,

that they might see and know the same that I saw: for I would it were comfort to them. (c. 8.)

He shewed me that I should sin. . . . But by the high, gracious comfort of our Lord that followed after, I saw that His meaning was for the general Man: that is to say, All-Man; which is sinful and shall be unto the last day. . . . For the blessed comfort that I saw, it is large enough for us all. And here was I learned that I should see mine own sin, and not other men's sins but if it may be for comfort and help of mine even-Christians. (c. 79.)

St Thomas teaches that the Apostolic Life is the highest life of all, because it is the perfection of the contemplative. This is proper to a bishop, but shared by all who reach to full contemplation. To preach and to teach the divine truths do not belong to the active life of moral virtues. The life of union in contemplation gradually extends itself from possessing God alone to possessing all things in God. It may be regarded as making explicit something of the implicit treasures possessed in God, or perhaps God making them explicit in the soul. Thus it is not so much a turning outwards once more, as a fuller possession of what the soul already has in God. Seeing the truth of the Incarnation and Redemption for self, becomes expanded into seeing it in terms of 'All-Man'. That comprises the Apostolate, and that is why Mother Julian, who sees always All-Man in herself and herself in All-Man, may be regarded as having reached the Apostolic stage of the Unitive Way.

A revelation which sees all reality reduced to the all-loving changeless will of God must bring great comfort to the suffering, the weary and the disheartened. But we must beware not to snatch too hastily at this comfort, trying to take it in part only and too quickly. The popularity of Mother Julian with the average Christian during war years and with the humanistic 'mystical' writers of our own day suggests that a warning is required. Almost every mystical writer has a tendency towards an idealistic and comfortable monism that reduces evil to a minimum. Soaring as they do into the realms of unity, it is often difficult to see where the individual creature and his sin comes into view. Von Hugel has shown where this element comes into the life of the mystic (cf. *Mystical Elements of Religion*, II, pp. 290 sq.) and we may discover traces of it, not only in natural mystics such as Plotinus, or in quondam suspects like Eckhart, but in St Catherine, St John of the Cross, Ruysbroek or almost any other. The supernatural realisation of the truth expressed in metaphysics as '*ens et bonum convertuntur*', i.e. every being as being is good, becomes so clear and gripping that for the time evil is reduced to its barest nature as privation and is almost lost to sight. Seeing God these mystical writers see Being, the

Truth, the Good; and in longer or shorter passages they express the comfort of this sight.

The modern reader can thus easily misconstrue the teaching of these writers by interpreting them in a pantheistic sense. They bring him great comfort but at the expense of human liberty and even of human nature itself. In an evil world the comfort sought is often an elimination of evil rather than the triumph over it. To make out that sin springs from ignorance and has nothing to do with moral culpability, that hell is a medieval fiction to frighten and discourage people from challenging the Church, or that the evils which befall men are purely chance and can be largely eliminated by human prudence and care together with international institutions and the like for keeping the peace, to ignore evil in such wise is to lay oneself open to its disruptive force not to triumph over it.

On account of this attitude towards the mystical interpretation of human destiny it is necessary to issue a word of warning regarding Mother Julian. The great message of comfort, which she still gives to the world in her continued capacity as the apostle of God's love, is that 'all manner of things shall be well'. This she repeats over and over again. And at the same time asserts that 'sin is no deed' (c. 11, p. 27) and even that 'sin is behovely' (c. 27, p. 56). For the whole of her *Revelations* are set in the background of a most positive and metaphysical conception of being as pouring forth from the creative Being of God in unalterable goodness. Historians of dogma have pointed out how the early Church was saturated with this fundamental idea of the Fatherhood of God in opposition to the constant tendency of Hellenism to hand over material creation to an evil genius. God is Creator of heaven and earth. 'The denial that God is Creator of the temporal world is therefore often regarded as the arch-heresy in the ancient Church (cf. Justin, *Dial.* 35, 4 sqq.) . . . God's sovereignty (*monarchia Theou*) is impugned if anything is assumed to exist that is not absolutely dependent upon him for its existence. God's omnipotence is shown precisely in the fact that he created everything *out of nothing*.'<sup>1</sup> St Clement of Rome is constant in his thanksgiving, his *eucharist*, for all the created being which comes forth from the heavenly Father: 'The heavens are moved by His direction and obey Him in peace. Day and night accomplish the course assigned to them by Him without hindrance one to the other . . . Thou through thine operations didst make manifest the everlasting fabric of the world. Thou, Lord, didst create the earth. Thou that art faithful

<sup>1</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, part 2, vol. 1. English translation (S.P.C.K. 1938, pp. 61-2).

throughout all generations, righteous in thy judgments, marvellous in strength and excellence, Thou that art wise in creating and prudent in establishing that which Thou hast made. . . .<sup>2</sup> This is the full message of the Fatherhood of God which the Son had burst upon the world. The whole Gospel is of course a revelation of divine love and it is not surprising that Mother Julian is in the full tradition of early Christianity. She sees the whole of creation supported in the power of God the Father.

He shewed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked there-upon with the eyes of my understanding, and thought: *What may this be?* And it was answered generally thus: *It is all that is made.* I marvelled how it might last, for methought it might have fallen to naught for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: *It lasteth, and ever shall for that God loveth it.*

And so All-thing hath the Being by the love of God. (c. 5, p. 10.) Shortly before this vision St Catherine of Siena far away in Italy had lifted her eyes to the Father and seen 'clenched in the hollow of his hand the whole universe', and the Father had spoken words of comfort to her closely parallel to those shown to Mother Julian's understanding.<sup>3</sup> Everything that exists, exists only because God making it loves it, and loving it preserves it from falling back into nothingness—such is the vision of these mystics. And they are, of course, supported not merely by some abstract philosophers but by the greatest of theologians. St Thomas, writing for the Moors who had already raised up great Sufi mystics, and going back for his inspiration to the great well spring of Christian mysticism, declares in the *Contra Gentiles* that God's love whereby he loves his own goodness is the cause of creation; as Dionysius had said, 'The divine love does not allow itself to remain without offspring' (cf. *Contra Gentiles*, bk. 4, c. 20).

God sums up this, the warp and woof of all true mystical prayer, in the following words to Mother Julian:

See! I am God: see! I am in all thing: see! I do all thing: see! I lift never my hands off my works, nor ever shall, without end: see! I lead all thing to the end I ordained it to from without beginning, by the same Might, Wisdom and Love whereby I made it. How should anything be amiss? (c. 11, p. 28.)

What more comforting to the Christian whose penetrating gaze of faith sees God's hands always upon his works in all being! This is the comfort afforded by the simple doctrine of 'Creation' and 'Conservation', a comfort brought thus visually before us by the

<sup>2</sup> St Clement's 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, nn. 20 and 60. (Lightfoot's translation, vol. 2, pp. 282 and 303).

<sup>3</sup> *The Dialogue*. c. 18. trans. by Thorold, p. 40.

great masterpieces, not only of Michelangelo but also of medieval statuary such as that in Chartres, showing God the Father drawing Adam out of nothingness with the simple touch of his fingertip or the palm of his hand.

But an over-insistence upon this view would lead to that pantheism of which we have seen so many mystics accused. That is why the reader must beware of being carried away by the comfortable doctrine of God's loving immanence to the exclusion of his transcendence and to the exclusion of the reality of human, wilful evil. In God opposites in various ways unite, and the contemplative who reaches a transforming union with God will be granted some impression of this union of opposites, while remaining unable to express the opposition except in the form of their disunion. That is why these writers always beg the reader to take what they say as a *whole* and not to run away with any part which would inevitably lead to heresy.

Mother Julian in another context warns anyone against taking what she says 'singularly' when what is meant is 'in general' (c. 62, p. 156); and so, while insisting on the universal and creating love of God which rests in all being, she recalls us constantly to the fact that in God there is no extension. God is everywhere, but he is not localised in any place. Indeed he is seen 'in a point' which has no extension. Herein lies the union of one of the great 'opposites' in God. God is in all being. '*I it am that is all*' (c. 26, p. 55). Yet she sees this very ubiquity in terms of the single point:

And after this I saw God in a Point, that is to say in mine understanding—by which sight I saw that He is in all things. (c. 11, p. 26.)

He is in the Mid-point of all thing, and all He doeth. (id. p. 27.)

The pantheism of the false mystics often springs from a too vivid and material image of God's presence in everything, extending the divine nature across the expanse of the skies, deepening him spatially by plunging into the depths of the sea to find him. The mystic who sees God in a point will not be carried into such absurdities. Mother Julian does not picture God as a vast receptacle in which all things are contained, but rather she follows the doctrine of St Thomas when he writes: 'It is true that material things are said to be in something as in a container, yet spiritual things contain the very things in which they are; as the soul contains the body. So also God is in things as that which contains them; at the same time by a figure of speech material things are said all to be in God, in as much as they are all contained by him (I. 8. 1 ad 2). Dante also, as Miss Wallack points out in her edition of Mother

Julian (p. 26), saw heaven and all nature hanging upon this point of God, yet it is not as a wide, flowing garment hitched on to some minute nail on the wall. The point of the circle is equally *present* to every portion of the circumference. The point is in the circle, the circle in the point. When the Christian has rid himself of the shackles of his imagination (and he is more likely to achieve success in this than the philosopher since the ascent of grace includes the purification of images) the simplicity of God containing all things becomes a foundation for prayer, a support for the realisation of the presence of God which provides nourishment to holiness. All the different corridors of the warren of experience lead to the single centre in which all opposites, all distinctions converge into the unity of diversity. Later in her book *Mother* Julian sees the same 'Point' in relation to Nature and Grace, which are so distinct and diverse in the science of God, in the mental sorting out of reality by the analysing human intellect, but which to the one living in the life of union are seen in their common source.

Here may we see that we have verily of Nature to hate sin, and we have verily of Grace to hate sin. For Nature is all good and fair in itself, and Grace was sent out to save Nature and destroy sin, and bring again fair Nature to the blessed point from whence it came: that is God. . . . Thus are Nature and Grace of one accord: for Grace is God, as Nature is God: He is two in manner of working and one in love; and neither of these worketh without the other: they be not disparted. (c. 63, p. 157.)

This unitive view of all things in God is no merely speculative concern of the philosopher. It is essential at this juncture to avoid any 'comfortable' tendency towards a pantheistic or fatalistic view of the world and the movement of life. So St Thomas at the very outset of his *Summa*, after proving the existence of God immediately proceeds to show his utter simplicity and then at once to apply it to his presence in reality. God cannot enter into the composition of things; he is not the soul of the world, nor the formal principle of all things. He is the cause of all being so that all things other than himself are composite, he alone absolute simplicity in which no complexity can ever enter (I, 3, 7 and 8).

This union of all things in God is most important as the background to the paradox which provides the principal theme of the *Revelations*. The comfortable doctrine that 'All manner of things shall be well' since all being is from God and in God, must be reconciled with the existence of evil, with sin, pain and death and the wrath of God. A whole litany of opposites need somehow to be reconciled—and ultimately the reconciliation is to be sought by seeing all things in terms of God, of Being, of the love of God.