

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AS THE PRAYER OF UNITY

J. CARTMELL

IT is with the intellect that we contemplate. Christian contemplation is an activity of faith, and faith is an intellectual virtue. The gift of the Holy Ghost which plays a leading role in contemplation is wisdom, because, as St Thomas says, it belongs to wisdom, according to Aristotle, to consider the Highest Cause; and wisdom is obviously rooted in the intellect.

But contemplation is also intimately linked with charity and is therefore an activity of the will. This is due, St Thomas explains, to the nature of the gift of wisdom; it implies a connaturality with divine things, and this connaturality can come only from charity. He writes: 'Wisdom denotes a certain rectitude of judgment according to the Eternal Law. Now rectitude of judgment is twofold: first, on account of perfect use of reason, secondly, on account of a certain connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge. Thus, about matters of chastity, a man after inquiring with his reason forms a right judgment, if he has learnt the science of morals, while he who has the habit of chastity judges of such matters by a kind of connaturality.'

'Accordingly it belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgment about Divine things after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Ghost to judge aright about them on account of connaturality with them: thus Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* ii) that "Hierotheus is perfect in divine things, for he not only learns, but is patient of, divine things."

Now this sympathy or connaturality for divine things is the result of charity, which unites us to God, according to I Corinthians 6, 17: "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit." Consequently wisdom which is a gift has its cause in the will, which cause is charity, but it has its essence in the intellect, whose act is to judge aright.¹

The contemplative vision is vague and, as it were, dark. This must be so if, by the gift of wisdom, the intellect is to judge

¹ *Summa* II-II, I. 45, a 2 (Dominican trans.).

aright; for contemplation is a prayer of faith, and faith is in itself, says St John of the Cross, as dark as night to the understanding, and it has as its object God, who is dark night to the soul in this life by reason of his infinite transcendence and incomprehensibility.²

But it is not by the intellect that contact with God is made; love is the bond, as St Thomas explains. The reason is that all our knowledge, even the vaguest, is by concepts; and concepts are representations of the thing known; they are not the thing in itself. We must wait for the *lumen glorie* to attain God directly in himself with the intellect. In this life 'knowledge is perfected by the thing known being united, through its likeness, to the knower. But the effect of love is that the thing itself which is loved is, in a way, united to the lover. Consequently the union which is caused by love is closer than that which is caused by knowledge.'³ The contemplative is aware of an intimacy of love with the divine Lover, and in this love he is conscious of the presence of the divine Lover, usually in a general way, but occasionally, if God so wills, by an experience in the apex or 'fund' of the soul, an experience which St John of the Cross calls a substantial touch of God, 'a most subtle touch which the Beloved inflicts upon the soul at times, even when she is least expecting it, so that her heart is enkindled in the fire of love just as if a spark of fire had flown out and kindled it. Then, with great rapidity, as when one suddenly awakens, the will is enkindled in loving, desiring, praising, giving thanks, doing reverence, esteeming and praying to God with savour of love.'⁴

The union of the contemplative soul with God has been constantly described in terms of marriage. The *Canticle of Canticles* recurs in the writings of the mystics to describe their prayer and its experiences. The soul and God are, as it were, two in one Spirit. The divine Spouse is the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Love, the Gift of God, his Kiss. The Holy Ghost makes his abode in all souls in grace, infusing into them grace, the virtues and his gifts. 'The charity of God', writes St Paul 'is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Ghost who is given to us.'⁵ Even in the remiss, provided they are free from mortal sin, he is operative. But his activity

² *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. I, Ch. 2.

³ *Summa* I-II, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴ *Spiritual Canticle*, 2nd redaction, St. XXV, 5. Peers' trans., as throughout.

⁵ Romans 5, 5.

becomes paramount in the contemplative; in him, to adopt St John of the Cross's imagery, the Spirit breathes not only in the garden of the soul, but through it. 'To breathe into the soul is to infuse into it grace, gifts and virtues; and to breathe through the soul is for God to touch the virtues and perfections which have already been given to it, refreshing them and moving them so that they may diffuse wondrous fragrance and sweetness.'⁶ So is the soul made 'patient of divine things', and it becomes a living instrument of the Spirit of Christ.

Clearly, then, contemplative prayer is the prayer of unity with God. Love is unitive, and the contemplative is all aflame with the love of God. This is true, to some extent, even of the lowest form of contemplation, active or acquired contemplation, the prayer of faith. It becomes more and more true, as acquired contemplation passes by God's gift into infused, to develop through various stages until it becomes the lofty mysticism of transforming union, in which 'the soul feels itself to be at last wholly enkindled in divine union, its palate to be wholly bathed in glory and love, and from the very inmost part of its substance to be flowing veritable rivers of glory, abounding in delights'.⁷ This living flame, says St John of the Cross, is the Holy Spirit, the soul's Spouse.

From the intimate union of the contemplative with the Holy Ghost, his position and function in the Church are apparent. For the Church is not just a moral body like other societies, with a common aim effected and exhibited by a visible organization. She is the Mystical Body of Christ, and, as such, she has an inner, living, supernatural unity, having its source in the abiding presence of the Holy Ghost in the Church as her soul. It is a unity of love in fulfilment of Christ's prayer, 'that they all may be one, as thou, Father, in me and I in thee . . . that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.'⁸

He who is the soul of the Mystical Body is the Spouse of the contemplative. The contemplative, therefore, is vital with the very life of the Church. In him the love for which Christ prayed is a living flame; and, since a flame sends out light and warmth, the contemplative cannot but radiate holiness to those around him.

⁶ *Spiritual Canticle*, 1st redaction, St. XXVI, 4.

⁷ *The Living Flame of Love*, St. I, 1.

⁸ John 17, 21, 26.

‘Flammescat igne caritas,
Accendat ardor proximos.’

‘One day, after Holy Communion’, writes St Thérèse, ‘our Lord made me understand these words of the *Canticle*, “Draw me; we will run after thee to the odour of thy ointments.” O Jesus, there is no need to say, “In drawing me, draw also the souls that I love” —these words, “Draw me”, suffice. When a soul has let herself be taken captive by the inebriating odour of thy perfumes, she cannot run alone; as a natural consequence of her attraction towards thee, the souls of all those she loves are drawn in her train.’⁹

The contemplative is thus a centre of unity within the Church. United with Christ the Head, he intensifies unity around him in the members of the Mystical Body. The devotion which he brings to the Mass and Holy Communion engenders in others a like devotion and a readiness to submit to the sanctifying influence of the great Sacrifice and Sacrament of Unity. And the gift of understanding which activates the contemplative’s mind along with the supreme gift of wisdom enables him to enlighten other minds as to the meaning and implications of the Faith. So too the gift of counsel in the sphere of conduct. This is true even of simple souls who by contemplation have been taught of God. Their mysticism does not make them into learned theologians; but they have a capacity of penetration and of unerring judgment which the learned may envy.

In addition to this limited and in a sense spontaneous influence the contemplative exercises also a world-wide apostolate. The great contemplative orders are not escapist, content to enjoy the shelter of the cloister and leave the world outside to its doom. They know that they exist to bring souls to Christ, to spread everywhere the gentle rule of divine charity. It is not an apostolate of preaching or writing, if they are purely contemplative; it is an apostolate of prayer. In solitude and silence they imitate the night-watches of Christ, praying and suffering and filling up ‘those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in their flesh, for his body, which is the church’.¹⁰ Who shall estimate the power of their prayer? St John of the Cross does not hesitate to assign it unrivalled power. He writes: ‘A very little of this pure

⁹ *Histoire d'une Ame*, ch. x.

¹⁰ Colossians I, 24.

love is more precious, in the sight of God and the soul, and of greater profit to the Church, even though the soul appear to be doing nothing, than all these other works (activities in the Lord's service) together. . . . Therefore, if any soul should have aught of this degree of solitary love, great wrong would be done to it, and to the Church, if, even for a brief space, one should endeavour to busy it in active or outward affairs, of however great moment. . . . After all, it was to reach this goal of love that we were created. Let those, then, that are great actives, that think to girdle the world with their outward works and their preachings, take note here that they would bring far more profit to the Church, and be far more pleasing to God (apart from the good example which they would give of themselves) if they spent only half as much time in abiding with God in prayer, even had they not reached such a height as this. Of a surety they would accomplish more with one piece of work than they now do with a thousand, and that with less labour, since their prayer would be of such great deserving and they would have won such spiritual strength by it.¹¹

Zeal, we are told, is to love as the flame is to the fire. He, then, who truly loves God must be zealous for the hallowing of his name and the coming of his kingdom. The love of God and the love of one's neighbour are in reality but one love. To love God is to love those who are made in his image and are redeemed by his blood. Indeed, the love of our neighbour is the touchstone of the genuineness of our love of God; so we are constantly reminded throughout the New Testament. Contemplation, therefore, must of its very nature be apostolic. The great words of Elias, which are the Carmelite motto, *Zelo, zelatus sum pro Domino Deo exercituum*, express the inner meaning of the contemplative vocation, as St Thérèse very clearly understood. With the heart of a missionary, a crusader, a martyr even, like her great Mother and namesake, she realised that she could be all these things, an 'apostle of the apostles', in the hidden life of pure faith. She heard Christ crying from the cross, *Sitio*, 'I thirst for souls'; by a life of utter love—for love, she said, embraces all vocations and is all things—she would quench that divine thirst, by pouring forth the Precious Blood of Jesus upon souls and offering to Jesus these same souls refreshed with the dew of Calvary. This was right in the tradition

¹¹ *Spiritual Canticle*, 2nd redaction, St. XXVIII, 2, 3.

of St Teresa herself, who emphasized to her nuns that the Reformed Carmel existed to save souls, especially the contemporary souls who had been subjected to, or were threatened by, Lutheranism.

There would seem to be two streams of mysticism in the Church—the one theocentric, and represented in this country by *The Cloud of Unknowing*; the other Christocentric, in this sense at least, that it gives much more prominence to the Humanity of Christ, and represented by Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*. But, although differing in emphasis, the two streams are really one. Every Catholic accepts St Peter's teaching that there is no other name than Christ's whereby we must be saved; that, as he himself said, he is the way, as well as the truth and the life. Every genuine Catholic contemplative finds his spiritual life in and through the Church, her doctrine, her worship and sacraments, and her visible organization. Every genuine Catholic contemplative is a Trinitarian. He realizes that he is 'oned' with the Trinity dwelling within him and that his unity with God is the work of grace. We are of course faced with the problem of mystical prayer outside Christianity, in Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists, in the Mussulman, the Hindu and so on. But, in view of the revealed purpose of God to unite all men in Christ, the answer to this problem would seem to be that such mysticism is the work of grace and has as its aim in God's design the preparing of these souls and those whom they influence for the reception of Christ; God is preparing the ground for the harvest within the souls of men as he once prepared the ground externally by the unity of the Roman Empire in a large part of the then known world. Undoubtedly, there is generally no harvest reaped in these pagan souls. *Fides ex auditu*, and preachers have often not reached them; and when they have, their message has not always penetrated their hearers because those hearers, in spite of the gift of some degree of union with himself that God has given them, are too steeped in inherited prejudices or too much blinded by pride and other passions to see and understand.

In any case, both revelation and right reason disprove the view expressed by certain writers on mysticism—the author of *Grey Eminence*, for instance—that a vague mysticism is the only true religion, that it is one everywhere, in the Christian and in the pagan, that it is alien to dogma and institutionalism, which are

accretions, perverting the religious sense and making it impossible for men to free themselves for unity with the Spirit of all things. Such mysticism is not prayer; it appears to be a form of pantheism, besides inculcating that bugbear of all religious effort, indifferentism.

'All mankind', writes St Augustine, 'is in Christ one man, and the unity of Christians is one Man.'¹² And again: 'If thou seekest the truth, keep thou the way; for the same is the way which is the truth. The way thou art going is the same as the whither thou are going. Thou art not going by a way as one thing to an object as another thing, not coming to Christ by something other than Christ; thou comest through Christ to Christ . . . through Christ the man to Christ God, through the Word made flesh to the Word which in the beginning was with God.'¹³ St Augustine was a contemplative, and not a little responsible for the introduction of Neo-Platonic ideas into Christianity. But he saw that union with the One as taught by Plotinus was in Christianity union with the One who is Three in Persons, with all the enriching and deepening of prayer that this involves, that it can only be such a union, and that it must be attained within and through the Mystical Body, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. That is in sum Christian contemplation. In the supernatural order, which is the only order in which we are placed, this is the only full mysticism; other forms are but shadows of it and are meant by God to lead to it. And it is the only mysticism that can be effectively apostolic, by suffering, which is the cross of Christ, as well as by burning prayer helping to spread the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

¹² *Enarr. in Ps. XXIX*, ii, 5.

¹³ *In Joan. Ev. XIII*, 4.