

# Life of the Spirit

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## CARRIED ON THE WINGS OF EAGLES

BY

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WE must often have found comfort in that frequent image of the Psalms, that of the mother-bird sheltering her young ones under her wings: 'He shall cover thee with his pinions and under his wings shalt thou shelter'. We should perhaps find even greater comfort in that image in the realisation that it connotes especially the abiding presence in the tabernacle. For

that image came from the tabernacle of the desert. It was there that it originated. It was suggested by God himself when he bade Moses to remind the Israelites how he delivered them from Egypt, and *walked* with them, *led* them, *carried* them through the wilderness as an eagle carries her eaglets: 'Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob . . . : You have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, how I have carried you upon the wings of eagles and have taken you to myself' (Exod. 19).

That image was embodied in the structure of the Ark itself, in the two cherubs of beaten gold that covered the oracle with their wings. God sat enthroned on these wings (Exod. 25). This is what the Psalmist refers to in Ps. 17, 11.

He rode on the cherub and flew;

He came swooping on wings of the wind.

How apt that image was would have been obvious to anyone who looked down on the encampment of the Israelites in the desert, as their foes often did, and saw their frail, trembling tents nestling close under the shelter of the Lord's Tent in their midst, its giant wings fluttering and flapping in the breeze, and knew what that abiding presence meant to them—instant refuge, sure protection and motherly love and care, throughout all their long, hazardous wanderings in the wilderness. The tabernacle was like a mother-bird sitting on the nest sheltering her young ones under her wings.

The behaviour of the Cloud which accompanied and led the Israelites through the desert also suggested the image of a mother-bird. The Cloud was, of course, a symbol of the abiding presence

of God. 'The glory of God was in the cloud.' God hid his face in the cloud because 'no man could see the face of God, and live'. So is faith unavailing to see God face to face. The alternate resting and lifting of the Cloud over the Tabernacle, according as the Israelites pitched or struck camp respectively, was suggestive of a mother-eagle lighting on the nest to shelter the eaglets or rising from it to carry them aloft on her wings. This is hinted at in Psalm 17:

He bowed the heavens and came down,  
 And gloom was under his feet.  
 He rode on the cherub and flew;  
 He came swooping on wings of the wind  
 He made darkness his covert, his pavilion about him  
 Dark gloom of waters, thick clouds of the sky.

The biblical narrative (Numbers 9) stresses the fact that the movements of the cloud were a signal and 'a command' to the Israelites either to pitch or strike camp. The cloud did not follow them, but they followed the cloud. 'At the commandment of the Lord they marched and at his commandment they pitched the tabernacle. All the days that the cloud abode over the tabernacle they remained in the same place. But immediately it departed they moved the camp.' 'The cloud also of the Lord was over them by day when they marched' (Numbers 10, 34). It was not they who led and carried the cloud through the wilderness, but the cloud that led and carried them—as an eagle carries the eaglets on her wings. The eagle does not merely *cover* her young ones with her wings in the nest: she carries them on her wings. So the cloud did not merely shelter the Israelites in the desert but it carried them through it. God in the Tabernacle did not merely protect the Israelites in the desert or merely lead them on, but he carried them.

'He carried them', as another simile has it, 'in his bosom as the nurse is wont to carry the little infant.' That was how God worded his commission to Moses (who himself was a figure of Christ) to conduct the Israelites through the desert to the promised land; so that when Moses found 'the burden insupportable' it was in such terms that he 'complained to God': 'Why hast thou laid the weight of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this multitude, or begotten them, that thou shouldst say to me: Carry them in thy bosom, as the nurse is wont to carry the little infant: and bear them unto the land for which thou hast sworn to their fathers . . . I am not able alone to bear all this people, because it is too heavy for me' (Numbers, 11). The children of Israel did not carry God in the tabernacle through the wilderness: God carried them. That is the ground of God's touching appeal to 'the house of Jacob' in

Isaias 26 where he contrasts himself with the pagan gods of Bel and Nebo. These idols do not carry their worshippers, but on the contrary the worshippers have to carry them as 'burdens of heavy weight'. But God carries the Israelites 'in his bowels' and bears them up 'by his womb', as tenderly as a mother does her infant. 'Their idols are put upon beasts and cattle, your burdens of heavy weight even unto weariness. They are consumed and are broken together: he could not save them that carried him. . . . Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob . . . who are carried by my bowels and borne up by my womb. Even to your old age I am the same and to your grey hairs I will carry you [as he did of old their fathers through the wilderness]. I have made you and I will bear you. I will carry you and will save you.' Hence also Isaias 64, 9: 'The Angel of his presence saved them. In his love and in his mercy he redeemed them: and he carried them and lifted them up all the days of old.' 'The Angel of his presence' was the Angel, which was a figure of his abiding presence, which God promised Moses would 'go before them and keep them in their journey' through the wilderness (Exodus 14, 19; 23, 20).

The same applies to that other classical image of the abiding presence—the shepherd and his sheep. The shepherd does not merely lead and feed and protect his sheep, but he *carries* them 'in his bosom'. 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. He shall gather together the lambs with his arm and shall take them up in his bosom, and he himself shall carry them that are with young' (Isaias 40, 11).

Moses in his Canticle shows that he did not forget or miss the point of the striking image of the eagle that God had given him: 'He found him [Israel] in a desert land, in a place of horror and of vast wilderness. He led him about and taught him: and he kept him as the apple of his eye. As the eagle enticing her young to fly, and hovering over them, he spread his wings: and hath taken him and carried him on his shoulders. The Lord alone was his leader.' (Deuteronomy, 32). In order to teach its young ones to fly the mother-eagle rouses them out of the nest, which is usually perched in a niche high up on the face of a precipice, so that the eaglets must literally fly for their lives: they must use their wings or be dashed to pieces. But there is no danger of that, for the mother eagle is with them, hovering over them, encouraging and reassuring them by her presence. When they weary and lose altitude and begin to cascade screaming downwards she swoops down under them and lovingly bears them on her stout wings, back up to the nest. It is an image that the heart lingers on!

That was why for forty years the Lord 'led him [Israel] about and taught him' in the desert, 'the place of horror and of vast wilderness', permitting one dire distress upon another to afflict them—to teach them to fly, to teach them to use their wings of trust in him; that they might acknowledge their utter dependence on him, and his power and love to help them. So 'he trained them up as a father trains up a son to walk'—to walk by faith. Hence the admonition of Moses: 'Take heed and beware lest at any time thou forget the Lord thy God . . . who was thy leader in the great and terrible wilderness, wherein there was the serpent burning with his breath, and the scorpion and the dipsas, and no waters at all. Who brought streams out of the hardest rock and and fed thee in the wilderness with manna. . . . Lest thy heart be lifted up. . . . Lest thou should say in thy heart: My own might and the strength of my own hand have achieved all these things for me' (Deuteronomy, 8).

It is for the same reason that God allows affliction to come to us, to try us—to try and strengthen the wings of faith and trust in him. That we might pay his motherly love and care for us the minimum tribute of our trust. That is why he abides close to us in the tabernacle—to be near us in our presence, hovering watchfully over us. It is for our sakes. His omnipresence in nature would not suffice us, would not reassure us adequately; so he comes himself in person—really, truly, substantially—and stays with us. 'I will pitch my tabernacle in the midst of you: and I will be your God and you will be my people. And my eyes shall be always upon you. And my ears shall be ever attentive to your cries. And my heart shall be there for you' (Paralipomenon). 'Let not your heart be troubled nor let it be afraid . . . Believe . . . in me . . . I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you . . . I will come and take up my abode with you.' In the light of the Blessed Sacrament such words as these spoken by our Lord at the Last Supper take on a marvellous significance. 'Be still: know that I am God.' Know that I am here in the tabernacle with you. Know that I am here *for* you. But more eloquent than any words is the silence itself of the real presence, and the felt experience of that presence. Happy are they who know that experience—so beautifully extolled by Psalm 83:

How dear is thy habitation O Lord of Hosts!  
 The sparrow findeth a home, and the swallow a nest  
 where she may keep her young;  
 So would I find a home by thine altars, O Lord of Hosts,  
 My King and my God.  
 Happy they that dwell in thy house ;  
 They can be praising thee all the day.  
 Happy they also whose strength is in thee

Whose thoughts turn fondly to the pilgrims way:  
 For whom as they pass through the dry vale of dearth,  
 springs break forth,  
 And the early rain clotheth it with blessings.  
 Refreshed and strengthened they go on their way,  
 And worship God on Sion. . . .  
 Happy the man that trusteth in thee.

'As the eagle enticing her young to fly and hovering over them. . . .' How appositely illustrative of that picturesque episode of the Gospel where Jesus walked upon the waters! 'As soon as this was done [the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes], he prevailed upon his disciples to take ship and cross to Bethsaida, on the other side, before him. . . . And when he had taken leave of them he went up on to the hillside to pray there. Twilight had already come, and the boat was halfway across the sea, while he was on the shore alone. And when the night had reached its fourth quarter, seeing them hard put to it by rowing (for the wind was against them) he came to them, walking on the sea, and made as if to pass by them. When they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was an apparition [sailors *do wax* superstitious in a storm] and cried aloud, for all had seen him, and were full of dismay. But now he spoke to them; Take courage, he said, It is myself; do not be afraid. So he came to them on board the boat, and thereupon the wind dropped' (Mark, 6). The great calm that came over the waters was no doubt reflected in the great calm that came over their hearts.

The first thing to be noticed about this episode is that it was seemingly all arranged—by the Master! Matthew and Mark significantly concur in stating that: Christ 'prevailed upon his disciples to take ship'. Secondly, we notice that our Lord carefully kept them in sight, in spite of the darkness: 'Seeing them hard put to it by rowing, for the wind was against them'—thanks no doubt to himself! And then, although he came to succour them, yet he did not do so without first trying them sharply, without first making them acutely conscious of their terror. 'He made as if to pass by them', thereby allowing them to think he was a spectre, and cry aloud. It was only 'the eagle enticing her young ones to fly and hovering over them. . . .'

Then Peter besought Jesus to bid him come to him over the water.<sup>1</sup> 'And Peter answered him, Lord if it is thyself, bid me

<sup>1</sup> It is Matthew who gives us this part of the story. He narrates the incident as seen by those in the boat. Mark, who wrote his Gospel at the dictation of Peter, suppresses this item: Peter often suppresses incidents in which he appears as the central figure.

to come to thee over the water. He said, Come; and Peter let himself down out of the ship and walked over the water to reach Jesus. Then, seeing how strong the wind was, he lost courage and began to sink; whereupon he cried aloud, Lord, save me. And Jesus at once stretched out his hand, and caught hold of him, saying to him, Why didst thou hesitate, man of little faith? So they went on board the ship, and thereupon the wind dropped. And the ship's crew came and said, falling at his feet, Thou art indeed the Son of God' (Matt. 14, 28).<sup>2</sup> How like a parent teaching a child to walk! 'He led him about and taught him. . . .' 'As a father trains up a son so have I trained up thee.' It was Christ teaching Peter and the Apostles to walk, to walk by faith. St John's narrative of this event adds yet another detail: When they took Jesus on board 'all at once their boat reached the land they were making for' (John 6, 21). To have Jesus with us is to reach at once the Land that our souls are making for. Where Jesus is in Heaven, even already here below.

But we should miss much of the point of this incident if we did not see its bearing on the Eucharist, if we did not see that it was meant by our Lord to be a live parable of the meaning and significance to us of the abiding presence. The incident happened on the night between (what may be called) the two *eucharistic days* of the Gospel, namely the day of the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and the day of Christ's eucharistic sermon (John 6). That it was designed to be such a parable we learn explicitly from that final and altogether unexpected stroke with which Mark finishes his picture, a stroke which gives us at once the moral and the meaning of the whole incident: 'They had not grasped the lesson of the loaves, so dulled were their hearts'. 'Dullness of heart' is the scriptural expression of remonstrance in parallel circumstances to the disciples of Emmaus: 'Too slow of wit, too dull of heart to believe. . . .' And 'the lesson of the loaves' if it was anything was a lesson of trust in God, the same that was the eternal lesson of the Manna of the wilderness. If the Israelites of old had not learned to know that God was always with them, hovering over them like an eagle over her young, ever able and ever eager to protect and succour and deliver them—if they had not been convinced of that, it was in vain that he had led and fed them in the wilderness for forty years. Likewise was it in vain that Christ fed the five thousand in the desert now, if those who saw the miracle did not believe in his ever-present all-enveloping providence, did not believe, for

<sup>2</sup> The Biblical Commission (Decree of June 19th, 1911, No. VII) regards this as the Apostles' profession of faith in Christ's Divinity.

instance, that he would deliver them from shipwreck that same night! At least that is the (inspired) argument of St Mark. We can well sympathise with the ship's crew if they were not able to reach such a conclusion. How many even of us have reached it yet? No doubt they understood a little better the following morning, having heard Christ's discourse on the Bread of Life, having learned that that bread was no other than Christ's flesh. They understood, yet more after the Last Supper and Calvary; though they did not fully assent to the argument till the Paraclete, 'the Strengtheners of Faith', had confirmed them at Pentecost. The bread that Christ gave was his own Body broken on Calvary for the life of the world. Here fail all images of earthly experience, of a father's or a mother's love, much more of the purely instinctive love of a mother-bird!

The thought of thee, Lord, overcomes my heart.<sup>3</sup>

Christ died that we might live, that we might have wherewith to eat. He died to provide us with bread. That bread was himself, his own Body ground in the mill of the Cross. That was the bread which figuratively he blessed and broke and distributed among the five thousand that afternoon in the desert. Was he who so fed the disciples that afternoon likely to suffer them to be shipwrecked that night? If Christ underwent the Passion for our sakes how will he not protect us now, abiding with us in the Sacrament of that Passion?

In the light of the foregoing we can see the peculiar significance and pathos of the simile used by our Lord when he looked down on the Temple of Jerusalem for the last time. The simile that he used was not new: rather was it very old: it was the time-honoured simile of the desert-tabernacle which he himself had given to Moses on Sinai. And this Temple which he was beholding now, towering majestically over the Holy City, its 'golden' dome flashing back the sunset, was the goal and fulfilment of the transitory tent-sanctuary of the wilderness, the permanent resting-place of the Ark. But this temple in turn was only a transitory symbol of the Temple of the New Testament which would contain the presence of God indeed, in truth and in reality, and which he the true Solomon came to establish. 'But they cast him out'. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, still murdering the prophets, and stoning the messengers that are sent to thee, how often have I been ready to gather thy children together, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings; and thou didst refuse it! Behold, your house is left to you a house uninhabited.' (Matt. 23, 37.) The mother-eagle had come—but the nest was forsaken.

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<sup>3</sup> From the *Adoro Te*.

But yet the image of ages would not be falsified or frustrated. The eagle would build a new nest, and beget a new brood; and he would be to them all that the hallowed metaphor prophesied. All, only how infinitely more, and in how ineffably a sublimer way! He would carry them on his wings indeed, over the abyss, when He would stretch out wide his arms on the Cross. He would be like a mother-eagle indeed, but one that gave her life in defence of her young. And he would feed them, too, but rather as the pelican of the fable did—with the blood of his own breast.

*Pie Pelicane, Jesu Domine!*

The 'complaint' that Moses made in the wilderness of Pharan would indeed be wrung from the true Moses in the anguish of Gethsemane: 'Why hast thou afflicted thy servant? . . . Why hast thou laid the weight of all this people upon me? . . .' (Numbers 11). But it was only a complaint, only a cry of anguish which he could not suppress, only the protest of his lower faculties. He did not refuse, but obeyed and 'unto death, and such a death, death on a Cross'. He carried us indeed in 'his bosom' as the nurse is wont to carry the little infant', carried us in his Sacred Heart up the hill of Calvary, and continues to carry us thus in the Eucharist, the Sacrament of his Passion. Where also he answers for ever our cry for flesh by giving us his own.

O loving Pelican! O Jesus Lord!



## THE SOUL OF A MYSTIC

BY

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**I**T is now time to consider certain charges of unorthodoxy which have been levelled against Mother Julian of Norwich. In the question of sin and the salvation of the elect both David Knowles and Roger Hudleston accuse her of unorthodoxy<sup>1</sup>. They do not of course suggest that her doctrine in general is suspect, but rather that she has fallen briefly and inconsistently into an unorthodox view. The point arises out of her solution of her 'great difficulty' (p. 127) that all can be well and yet men can sin and send themselves to hell. She appears to restrict her understanding of this intuition of all being well simply to the elect, to the predestined who are to be fully graced in the end.

<sup>1</sup> *Revelations of Divine Love* . . . Edited by Dom Roger Hudleston, O.S.B. (Orchard Series) p. xxxiii of Introduction; *The English Mystics* by Dom David Knowles, pp. 144 et seq.