

A FORERUNNER OF ST JOHN OF THE CROSS<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE Golden Age of Spanish Spiritual Theology flowered suddenly, almost as though a summer were to burst upon us without a springtide. Not that Spaniards were ignorant of the subject, either in theory or in practice, but previous to the middle of the fifteenth century they produced scarcely any native writers. The mediæval period proper was one of importation and imitation. Works of foreign authorship were translated, and Spain was long content to draw upon the common heritage of Western Christendom, for her mystical as for her dogmatic theology. Then, roughly half-way through the century, there begins a long line of Spanish writers who have assimilated the masterpieces of other lands, whether in the original or in translation, and are becoming increasingly original, until we reach peak point with St Teresa and St John of the Cross.

However, just because they are themselves, the impression is easily gained that not only was each of these an outstanding genius—as was the case—but that they were more or less entirely independent investigators, owing little or nothing to those who had gone before them. Especially is this the case with regard to St John. Nevertheless, he owed much to his predecessors, even although his own contribution to the subject was to be so outstanding as, one day, to win him the title of a Doctor of the Church.

But if Spain produced no earlier spiritual writers of the calibre of the Victorines, no 'school' of mystics comparable to that fascinating group from the Rhineland and the Low Countries, she venerated and used them all, and St John was as the rest of his fellow countrymen. Not the least important influence upon him was that of the Dominican, Tauler, 'the Enlightened Doctor', whom we know he studied, both from the evidence of his disciples and from

<sup>1</sup> The following article is part of a larger work to be published in the near future by Messrs Burns and Oates.

the internal evidence of his own works. A rather free Latin translation of the eighty-three Sermons which, together with a single letter, are the only extant authentic works of the great German friar, had been made by the Carthusian, Lawrence Surius, in 1548 and was much appreciated in Spain. The so-called *Institutions* of Tauler are merely a compilation made by others, one of whom was probably 'Peter of Nijmegen' (St Peter Canisius), and from them St John borrowed, though they contain more of Ruysbroeck and Eckhart than of Tauler.

The last-named is surely one of the most attractive of mystics. It is impossible to read his sermons without carrying away the impression of a saintly priest and religious, steeped in the spirit of his Order, a gentle, genial person who could yet be very uncompromising when necessary, and one who had personal experience of God's ways with souls, as learnt in his own case and in those of others. He possesses an insight into human nature not inferior to that of the Mystical Doctor himself; his style is often sheer beauty, whilst his homely illustrations and sense of humour are additional attractions.

A Rhinelander, he obviously liked to walk by the riverside and watch the shipping, and he likens a fervent, steadfast soul to 'a ship well loaded with thoughts of the Beloved and devout works, so that her rudder is deep down in the water'—hence she steers well—'and wafted along by the wind of love, which is driving her homeward unto the Godhead, all prosperously and according to her longing desires'. Again: 'There are souls who make as much of small trials as though the Rhine were overflowing through their house'. Elsewhere, the spiritually slothful are likened to 'good-for-nothing hounds, who care nothing for the hunt, but lag behind the rest of the pack and stray away'.

He was born at Strasbourg, probably about 1304, of well-to-do parents, and entered the Dominican priory there sometime between his fifteenth and twentieth birthdays. He was fervent, loved the observance, and was most anxious to 'do everything'; but he tells us he was delicate and, at least in his student years, had to accept dispensations which were a sore trial. (No credit is to be attached to the story of his 'conversion' by a layman. All the facts are against it, and

obviously no conversion in the sense there related was ever needed.) He was sent to the *Studium Generale* at Cologne, and probably returned to Strasbourg afterwards. What is certain is that by 1336 he was already known as an outstanding preacher and spiritual guide, and had much to do with the Dominican nuns, who were instructed and directed by some of the most learned friars in the Province. He lived later at Cologne and for some time at Bâle, where he was associated with the confraternity known as 'the Friends of God'. He probably refers to this sojourn when he tells his congregation at Cologne that he was 'once in a country where the laity are so devout and steadfast that the word of God produces more fruit there in a year than it does at Cologne in ten!' However, he commends the latter city for its devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the practice of frequent Communion, of which latter he was a strong advocate. He died at Strasbourg in 1361.

Space forbids an extensive treatment of his teaching, but a few quotations may be given, as being typically representative and inviting comparison with St John of the Cross. For this reason they are all concerned with the spiritual life and prayer.

He assumes that beginners will use meditation of some kind, especially upon the life and passion of our Lord, but he allows great liberty of spirit. 'Remember that all are not able to pray wholly with spiritual acts of the mind; for many must pray with words. Pray as thou canst . . . then when thou findest any manner of prayer very productive of devotion . . . keep to that, whether it be the sorrowful thought of thy sins, or anything else whatever. Ask of God that prayer which pleases him best, and will serve thy soul's best interests. After having done that, accept whatever devout thoughts are before thee, whether they be of the Godhead simply, of the Blessed Trinity or of the sufferings of Christ.' Beginners should not reject sensible devotion, for it has its purpose, nor should they banish images, i.e. the use of the imagination, prematurely. Tauler inveighs against a plethora of private devotions and vocal prayers, however, when such are not of obligation. 'External and showy exercises of religion prevail greatly nowadays', he remarks—drily, we

feel sure! Nor does he approve of elaborate methods, which were creeping in at his period.

His teaching on detachment and self-abnegation is precisely that of the Carmelite. Hand in hand with prayer goes progressive purifying of one's intention. God must be sought, not the consolations of God; God, and not our thoughts of him. 'The true and faithful servant of God goes ever onward, consolation or no consolation, pleasure or pain, plenty or want, ever straight forward, through all these things, to God's own self.' 'The soul must strive to become a saint for God's sake, and in the degree of sanctity he decrees for it.'

As the soul progresses, its prayer simplifies, and we have the prayer of 'loving attention' of St John of the Cross, later to be known as acquired contemplation. When meditation and the affective prayer which develops from it have done their work, the soul desires 'to betake itself to prayer like a man with water before him, and drinks sweetly without effort, without the need of drawing through the channel of previous reflections, forms and figures. When thou art aware of this drawing, let no pious method or practice of thy own devising hold thee back, but without form or image, yield thyself lovingly to him as an instrument in his hands. If he is allowed his way, then in less time than it takes to say a Paternoster he will sanctify thee, and thereby give honour to himself more than thou canst do by a hundred years of thy devotions in the two former ways.'

But one day the heavens fall and this happy state ends, without the soul being able to account for it. Meditation becomes simply impossible; aspirations fall flat; the soul is aware only of what has been well called 'a dull hunger for God' and, as says St John of the Cross: 'dwells upon God with a certain painful anxiety, fearing that it is no longer serving him as once it did'. Tauler comments upon the same Dark Night of the senses in a sermon on John 10, 22: 'And it was winter'. Having spoken of the 'winter' of a soul in grievous sin, he goes on: 'But there is yet another winter. This is suffered by a really God-fearing man. He is mindful of God, and loves him, and is careful to avoid all sin. But God seems to have forsaken him, as far as his feelings go:

he is dry, dark and cold, devoid of all heavenly consolation and spiritual sweetness.' Again, preaching on John 16, 7: 'It is expedient for you that I go', he says: 'A time comes when God seems lost and gone . . . a state of intolerable oppression of spirit; the soul is desolate, darkened, disconsolate, for God is veiled from its sight'.

And Tauler explains the new situation thus: 'Must I actually be in darkness? I answer: "Undoubtedly. Thou art never better off than when thou art sunk in the darkness of unknowing. When thou hast given up thy own willing and knowing, then does God enter into thee, and then lights up thy soul with his presence . . . and when he thus comes to thee, he will bring with him everything which thou hast renounced for his sake increased a thousandfold, to be known and enjoyed by thee in a new and all-embracing form."'

All readers of St John's *Dark Night* know the chapters wherein he deals with the faults of those whom God is about to purify in the Night of the Senses, classifying them under each of the capital sins. Tauler had pointed them out before him, and in language so similar that it is obvious that there is more than mere coincidence involved. In sermons evidently preached to religious, we hear of the spiritually avaricious, the spiritually gluttonous, the proud, the slothful, etc. We meet the people who 'are forever seeking advice, changing their confessors, ever ready to instruct and admonish their neighbours', though they are the first to resent anything of the kind themselves; those who are continually taking up new devotions, and going in for 'fine spiritual talk'. All are there, just the same in Germany as in Spain!

Time goes on, the faithful soul progresses, and anon there comes the other *Night*, that of the spirit. 'The faculty of love in man thirsts for suffering for the sake of the Beloved, however much one's reason may revolt against it. And hence those favoured souls have a longing to suffer. . . . They thirst for the cross of Christ, and to them every day is, in very deed, the feast of Holy Cross. And their longing is satisfied. God casts upon the soul the most awful darkness of woe, the most terrible sense of abandonment'; and Tauler tells us that the soul is thus ascending to God by the shortest way—the straight, sheer path labelled *Nada* (Nothing) in

St John's famous sketch. Like the Carmelite, again, he explains how the soul suffers from the very brightness of the light of God, from its inability to love him as it would, when the strange words of the Dominican Tertiary poet, Michael Field, seem verified:

And I wonder if love so great  
Will not keep us forever asunder.

Repeatedly, Tauler bids the soul hold on and be faithful to prayer and self-discipline. 'Real devotion is an interior clinging to God himself, with a soul wholly ready to possess all things and to think of all things just as God does.'

And the end is the transforming union. 'Now God comes and with his finger touches the well-filled vessel of his graces. The soul is now united to God without any intermediary, and loses itself in him; will, love, knowledge, all overflow into God, and are lost in him and made one with him. The eternal God loves himself in this soul, all of whose works are done by him.' For Tauler, as for the Mystical Doctor, it is all summed up in St Paul's words: '*I live, now not I: but Christ liveth in me*' (Gal. 2, 10).



## POINT OF VIEW

'SOLITARIUS' is indeed to be thanked for his suggestion that contemplatives in the world can find their desert or cell in the midst of the world itself. Now D.B.S. brings the matter right down to the earth on which our feet stand. This writer, a humble male tertiary on whom a measure of domesticity has been thrust, can recognise the authenticity of what D.B.S. writes. But where is to be found the answer to the Martha-Mary conflict? How to fulfil both the duties of state and the call of God to contemplation, which we are told is given in some measure to all?

In passing we may note that Miss H. C. Graef in her *Spiritual Life for All* has much to say that is useful, especially on the question of making time for God. We may think, also, that such an Order as 'The Grail' may be able to give us pointers from their experience in and out of the world. Nor,