

William of Saint Thierry II: God in Man by Geoffrey Webb

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William's literary personality conveys the impression of a sensitive and rather depressive man, who was very much the perfectionist. He seems to have been tortured by the fact that it was not possible for him, as the abbot of a Benedictine monastery, to achieve precisely what he was looking for in the religious life. When he met Saint Bernard, however, and saw what the Cistercian reform was like, he felt he had found his place at last. Bernard tried to persuade him not to change. William was doing the Lord's work, after all, he wasn't getting any younger, and change was always a risky business. William listened for a time, but eventually he felt he had to make up his mind for himself. He has left an account of his worry in the eleventh of the *Meditativae Orationes*, and again in the 'Nature and Dignity of Love', where he laments that the sons he loves are a perpetual source of anxiety. 'There is still a long climb ahead of us before we reach the top of God's holy mountain . . . Surely an old man is entitled to a little consideration when he no longer has the strength to carry his burden?'

The theme of the *Meditativae Orationes* is a search for the face of God. William is looking for various things, but all together they amount to something like a convincing vision, a view as nearly possible perfect of the reality of God. He sets his mind to imagine the Trinity, and is dissatisfied with his inadequate imaginings. Then he goes off at a tangent with the various pros and cons for resigning his abbacy. The answer to his prayer would be something of God's reality grasped – a clear conception of God's nature, a clear indication of his will in regard to William's vocation. And so the search for God's face becomes more wistful and intense.

In the tenth meditation, on the Incarnation, William is more successful. At least the role of the Mediator is sure. The Trinity is all too difficult to visualize, but not the state of God made man, the manna in the golden vessel. 'The treasure you possess', he concludes here, 'Is Christ in your heart'. The twelfth meditation begins with what sounds like a definite personal discovery and conviction. The foregoing thoughts have been in the nature of an examination of conscience, indirectly. Here we have the confession itself, and a firm purpose of amendment. Possibly the eleventh meditation, throwing light on all corners of his biggest problem, the vocational one, has cleared the air emotionally, and calmed his mind. He

asks for many sins to be forgiven, and wonders if he can claim forgiveness in virtue of the fact of having, like Magdalen, loved much. But how much *has* he loved?

The new scruple needs further demonstrations. At least he is certain that he can say 'I love your love', even though he cannot worthily and with full truth say 'I love you'. Everything proves that he loves Christ's love. His own spontaneous feelings prove it, whenever he thinks of any of the signs and witnesses of the Mediator's life: 'signs of thy power and thy goodness beat and goad my obtuse senses'. And if he has Christ's love in his heart, he thinks he will be satisfied. He will know that all is well with him, and that will be enough. Perhaps this will be the face of God. And yet even here he can only say, if he is to be truthful, 'If you ask me "Do you love me?", I can only answer "At least, I *want* to love you".' What is love after all, and can this be called love that he bears within him, if his sins allow it so little of God's light, and his lack of merit does nothing to draw God nearer to his soul?

This brings us down to a basic definition of love. Normally it can be defined as an intense will, but this cannot apply to God's love which is boundless. Perhaps love could rather be named desire? If this is true he certainly loves, because he is at least sure of desiring. But what joy can be got in such a minimal affirmation? Is desire enough? And yet it seems impossible for him to reason toward any point beyond this uncertainty. There is only the pain of desiring, waiting and hoping, until God shall reveal himself. *Dolorem hunc non mihi relevabit, donec seipsum mihi revelabit*. 'He will not take this pain from me until he reveals himself to me. When I see what I love I shall fully love what I see. But meanwhile, what I only feel in part, I can only love in part. And yet, if I felt not even this little, I should have no love at all'.

Then the meditation moves abruptly to a clear image of something quite unexpected. As one reads the passage, the impression is strong that it actually happened to him, this way, providentially, in the way that such things tend to happen on rare occasions that are never forgotten. One can imagine him wandering around, wondering disconsolately about the state of his soul, and then . . . 'I see your sons, feasting at your table, delighting in your love. And being hungry for your love, I love them intensely, and I embrace them joyfully in my heart for loving you as they do . . . and if I love them in such a way that I only love you in them, whom do I love, in fact, but you my God? I love that love because it is full of you. I love my love for you, because I know it comes from you. Who am I trying to love, whom do I love in fact, whether it be in myself or in those I love – who do I love but you?'

Until such time as Christ shall reveal himself to the soul, who shall do away with the pain of waiting? Obviously, the brethren. They have given the proof of William's love, and it is they who will always be there to

provide that proof. If one is looking for God whom one cannot see, and will not see until the beatific vision, the sensible thing to do is to turn to one's fellow men, in true Johannine fashion. And William was nothing if not Johannine in outlook, with his conception of all things in creation fraught with the capacity for being shone through by the divine goodness and beauty, and gradually turning into the reality that they essentially signify. In the Incarnation man and God are perfectly one – not only in the person of the Mediator, but in the whole sphere of that interim life on earth in which the Mediator's work was performed, and which was in the first place created in that same Mediator.

In his famous *Golden Epistle*, which was designed to teach novices to pray, William begs 'Christ's little tyro' not to separate God from man, nor man from God, when thinking of our Lord. In this way, he will find man in God and God in man, which must mean not only in the person of our Lord, but in the whole sphere of the Incarnation, this ikon-creation by the Trinity, in which everything is marked with the divine impress, everything is there to be used by the Trinity, who will come to take every part of creation to Itself, where it belongs. Man, in this life, is gradually turning into God – 'into a form of beatitude more than human, if less than divine'. The human is all the time passing over into the divine, through the Incarnation, for William, who must at some time have been so deeply struck by the Nativity preface that it became unconsciously his leitmotiv (at least one can be excused for thinking so). *Dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur*. The Incarnation has made God visible, and thus we know him, and through God made visible we are drawn to the love of the invisible, all that 'beyond' of the unfathomable Trinity. By seizing on what God has done in the lives of his brethren, William is drawn towards God himself, and in man¹ he sees God, and knows him and loves him.

More than once William has described them. He refers to them usually as the *simplices*, not because they are simple but because they are uncomplicated. They have become the perfect material for the working of the Holy Spirit, and something of the future glory is in them, even visibly – the way they smile, the way they care for each other, the way they put others before themselves. Most of us have met them, at least one or two of them, in monasteries, and it was always a moving, and slightly overwhelming experience. They were people, to use a *Readers' Digest* phrase, to warm your hands by. One wondered how it could be possible to be so good, and so nice, and so human. One had always wanted to be like that oneself, of course, but now it was quite obvious that the thing was possible, and you could no longer set it aside as a mere ideal.

'Holiness of life and the transfiguration of the inner man become visible in them, and it is evident that their contemplation is a true foretaste of the beatific enjoyment of God, so are their bodies also transfigured in our

sight. Living together as one in God, and enjoying God in themselves, they are no more subject to the contradictions of the flesh, for all flesh has become for them an instrument of good works. Even if they are shaken by its weakness, they are thereby only made stronger, as was Saint Paul. Their senses are aware of grace. They have a temperate ear and a simplicity of outlook. Sometimes, when rapt in prayer, they catch some unknown fragrance, and without physically tasting, they are conscious of a new sweetness. These brethren find that the least touch carries such an incitement to charity that their community becomes a very paradise of spiritual delight. Their transfigured faces and bodies, their holy life and behaviour, their mutual service and devotion, so bind each brother to his brothers that their heart and soul cannot but be one. The future glory, which will be perfect in the life to come, stands revealed in them already.'

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