

FASHION IN SAINTS

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

BY

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O one but a saint should attempt to write about a saint. This is less evidently so in the case of active saints or martyrs, those whose external actions, whose whole lives are in themselves striking or edifying; then a biography can be of interest in the same way as it would be of any other outstanding personality; but of the contemplative saint, the mystic, there is often little to recount in the medium of time and place; very often they are monks or nuns whose entire lives have passed in uneventful routine of religious duties; the drama is interior and hidden.

It is true that St Teresa founded convents, that St John of the Cross was for a time in prison, that St Bernard and St Catherine intervened in the political crises of their times. But these are not the important things about them; these actions, however useful and successful, are accidental, and subsidiary to the true significance of their lives—the union of their souls with God in love, and even in the more specific sense, union through the interior way of contemplation.

And since this interior drama of sanctity, the process by which the soul is transformed into the likeness of God it contemplates, is dependent on supernatural grace, it is essentially a secret and a holy drama, not to be publicised or desecrated by any idle curiosity.

'This place is holy', and 'This thing is holy'. Unless we experience some such reaction, we are failing to apprehend the mysteries that we are prying into, and in so far as we do so re-act, we feel, and rightly, our own unfitness to expound them. We who are full of sin and imperfection, who are unmortified and self-indulgent, wallowing in our 'attachment to creatures', how dare we venture on this holy ground?

... For there are no words to expound such sublime things of God as come to pass in these souls; whereof the proper way to speak is for one that knows them, to understand them inwardly and to feel them inwardly and enjoy them and be silent concerning them.¹

This is, I believe, the usual reaction of devout Christians to St

¹ *Living Flame*, Sta. II, 21.

John of the Cross. These mysteries of God's working in the soul are not to be exploited and popularised; better to say nothing than say too much. Yet we are witnessing today a paradoxical situation; this saint of the Dark Night of the extreme annihilation of self, has become unaccountably 'the fashion'; he has become, in a certain sense, 'popular' and more especially so among non-Christians. What does this mean? How can it be explained?

There are, I think, two important points to note, one general and one particular. The first is that no saint will ever be 'popular' through his real sanctity. He can, through sanctity, be loved and venerated; he can stir multitudes and the hearts of sinners, but this deep dynamism of holiness is quite different from popularity, from being 'the fashion'. Popularity, in the sense we mean it, is necessarily shallow; it suggests a drifting with the current, a being 'in the swim', being 'up to date', having the right reaction at the right moment; it is, as *fashion*, subservience to a group-opinion, however rarified the group.

It is a misfortune for any great man to become the fashion in this way, for it necessarily involves some misapprehension of his greatness, the reduction of his excellence, in whatever medium, to the level of the non-excelling, the making easy of what is hard to grasp. There is something sacrilegious in the exploitation of genius, in whatever field of human action; when it concerns the genius of sanctity, the sacrilege is so much the greater. True sanctity can no more be the fashion than can the Cross. What is seized upon and made popular is always secondary and accidental.

The degree to which a mercenary motive has debased so much popular devotion among the pious is well known. The element of *quid-pro-quo* is often shamelessly explicit; what is venerated in such cases is clearly far less the holiness of the saint, than his 'mana' as a wonder worker. The same principle holds good in many less obvious ways, and this leads us to the second point to be considered, the present cult of St John of the Cross among non-Christians. It is interesting to contrast his *clientèle* from this point of view with that of Ste Thérèse of Lisieux. Being so close in the true character of their sanctity, it is striking that these two great contemplatives appeal to so widely different a public. The 'Little Flower' is hardly known outside the circle of Catholic piety, while within it, she is the most popular of saints, and popular in the most literal sense, as appealing to the simple many. St John of the Cross, her avowed master and teacher, is rarely venerated within the Church; there are no statues of him to be met with, nor is he asked for favours by the crowd; his devotees are largely found in literary or artistic circles to which the majority of the saints are of no interest and

remain little known. It is generally admitted that the popular conception of Ste Thérèse as the insipid *jeune fille* scattering roses, bears very little resemblance to the real saint. Her formidable doctrine is disregarded in an uncritical reliance on the power of her intercession. Because she painted sentimental pictures and wrote, to order, sentimental verse, we take refuge now in sentiment, from the remorseless abnegation of will explicit in her whole life and in her teaching. Much of the popular devotion to her, in fact, rests on a sentimental misconception.

There seems at first no danger of this kind in connection with St John of the Cross. No hagiographer can represent him as offering an easy way to Heaven; for two hundred years, indeed, his uncompromising demands would seem to have so far repelled the general public, that he remained little known outside his Order.

Strive always to choose, not that which is easiest but that which is most difficult;

Not that which is most delectable, but that which is most unpleasing;

Not that which gives most pleasure, but rather that which gives least;

Not that which is restful, but that which is wearisome;

Not that which gives consolation, but rather that which makes disconsolate;

Not that which is greatest, but that which is least;

Not that which is loftiest and most precious, but that which is lowest and most despised.

Not that which is a desire for anything, but that which is a desire for nothing.

Strive not to go about seeking the best of temporal things, but the worst;

Strive thou to desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to that which is in the world, for Christ's sake.²

Such injunctions are not peculiar to one saint; they are the essence of asceticism throughout the ages; *Agere contra* is the one foundation of all personal training in virtue, the necessary preparation for re-birth. But the principle of self-annihilation has never been more relentlessly carried through into all aspects of life; it cannot be glossed over and put aside as irrelevant or accidental. We must divest ourselves, he tells us, not only of every temporal and material good, but even of spiritual goods; even authentic visions sent by God are to be disregarded and forgotten, lest we take pleasure in

² The *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. I, ch. xiii.

the less-than-God. The annihilation of self is total. This doctrine in so unmitigated a form may well alarm the ordinary well-meaning Christian.

In his preface to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St John himself explains that his 'principal intent is not to address all, but rather certain persons of our sacred Order of Mount Carmel, monks and nuns . . . who, as they are already detached from the temporal things of this world, will better understand the instruction concerning detachment of spirit'.

It is not surprising then, that up till recent years, St John of the Cross should have been regarded as too 'high and rare' for average people. What is surprising is the prevalence today of an attitude towards him of easy familiarity among people very far indeed from being 'detached from the temporal things of this world'. If we attempt to take this austere doctrine seriously, not as a poetic *jeu d'esprit*, but as a real guide to real life, it may well daunt our lukewarm and half-hearted aspirations. But it is sounder to be so daunted, to recognise our lack of courage in face of a reality so stark, than to acclaim it without understanding.

Much of the non-Christian enthusiasm for this great Christian teacher may be explained by the difference between the æsthetic and the religious response to what we may call the 'beauty of holiness'. Unlike the Little Flower, St John is not only a great saint but a great poet; and though full appreciation of his verse is clearly limited to Spanish scholars, even in translation, the sheer beauty of his imagery and ideas makes its impact. The distinction between the æsthetic and the religious is often difficult to estimate, and where the 'beauty of holiness' is concerned they may be intimately inter-related. Yet, however combined and synthesised, the two responses are distinct; and in appreciation of a saint, the difference is fundamental.

As connoisseur, as critic, as dilettante, I may appreciate, as a work of art, the saint whose quality has caught my fancy, whether as poet or as romantic figure, as picturesque or as 'intriguing'. I am not from this point of view involved in any claim of teaching or of example; his martyrdom, from such a standpoint, evokes no call to martyrdom in me; no passionate utterance of his love of God need stir misgivings in my tepid heart. At most, I may be moved to paint a picture or write a poem. His life and death and sacrificial witness are not related in any direct way to my own living.

For the Christian, on the other hand, the saint stands in a wholly different relation. As Christians, our appreciation involves acceptance of his witness to God's truth, as mediator and exemplar; As saint, he is, for us, an *alter Christus*, through whom, by means of whom, we too are, potentially, sanctified. If he is martyred, we are

so much the more called upon to prepare for martyrdom. Through contemplation of his sacrifice, we too are called upon to sacrificial living.

Enthusiasm for St John of the Cross costs nothing to the dilettante pagan; but for the Christian, in the degree to which he is in earnest, it must involve the Ascent of Mount Carmel; and, knowing his own weakness, he hesitates.

From the multitude of saints whose heroic virtues have glorified the Church, so very few have influenced non-Christian thought at all; most are unknown, even by name, to the quite educated modern mind. How is it that this comparatively hidden figure has penetrated the pagan fortress? The difference in personal relation may account for the much easier enthusiasm among non-Christians for St John of the Cross, when once they know him; it does not explain the force of his initial impact on such alien and unprepared soil. Although that impact may be largely æsthetic, it does undoubtedly extend, in its own fashion, to his doctrine. The æsthetic enthusiasm is aroused, in fact, not only by the expressions but by the content.

What quality, what special characteristic in this totalitarian asceticism has woken so unexpected a response in the contemporary mind?

Here it is important to distinguish between mere fashion and the deep movement of response which has for some real reason been aroused in more than one contemporary mind. It is essentially the difference between sincerity and imitation, between the spontaneous and the artificial, between appearance and reality. The majority will always be merely followers and conformers, and in this respect the eclectic circle simply reflects in microcosm the mass movements of the world outside; but the real stirring of the *Zeitgeist* is none the less a significant reality.

In times of an extreme materialism, an extreme emphasis on spirit will exercise a corresponding attraction; in times of excessive movement, stillness. Such an assertion as,

'If the whole universe and all that is in it were in confusion, disquietude on that account would be folly . . .'³

challenges the public opinion around us so profoundly that it provokes an instinctive response in certain minds. From a satiety of United Nations of Atlantic Charters and Five Freedoms, it is alluring to escape into what can so easily be envisaged as the 'Immunity of pure spirit'. The flight from matter and time has always been the first reaction from materialism, and many passages from St John's writings, taken out of their context and isolated, lend themselves to such interpretation. The extent to which quotations from the Scrip-

³ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*; Bk III, ch. v.

tures can be chosen to support widely different points of view should prepare us for the dangers of a one-sided selection. In all expression of, or attempts to express, spiritual truth beyond a certain depth, there will be apparent contradiction. The polarity and dialectic of what is in fact beyond expression in words, will manifest itself in paradox, as the Gospels constantly exemplify. Truth is essentially a synthesis of the apparently conflicting, a multiplicity in unity, and this creative tension is implicit throughout the writings of the saint, whose very condemnation of all 'forms' finds expression in the most vivid and glowing imagery. If either element in the tension is over-emphasised or isolated, the whole is falsified, yet this deceptive over-simplification is a universal human impulse. Instinctively we seize those points which seem to answer an immediate need, and overlook the complementary dialectic.

In the case of any single author, moreover, there is, apart from the subjective selection of the reader, always some element of subjective choice in what he has himself picked out and stressed. No individual, however inspired, can apprehend, still less express, the total truth. He, like all other men, makes a selection, and the principle of his selection is influenced by his environment. With many authors of another age, this conditioning by time and place is obvious. We are sometimes checked and disconcerted by the embodiment of the idea in forms which are no longer natural to us, but this is not so with St John of the Cross. With him the spiritual content so dominates the external form, he seems so detached from time and place, that it is difficult to see him in a historical relation; yet for a full understanding of his thought it is necessary to do so. Like all great saints he is both out of time and in time; and his temporal conditions, the time and place in which he lived and wrote, the circumstances of those he was addressing, have a bearing on his principle of selection. For instance, he assumes a world of almost bigoted devotion with which we are not called to deal today, and this alone explains much of the emphasis and the omissions which are so apt to be misunderstood.

If these considerations are ignored, it is not difficult to present the great Doctor of the Church as almost Stoic or Buddhist, or even as the exponent of a supra-doctrinal syncretism. This picture is very clearly drawn in Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*. And here another factor enters in: the reaction against materialism, against an excessive attention to time and place, may be a merely general resistance to a mass-suggestion become irksome; but in certain cases it may be a more personal movement of liberation from a more concentrated oppression. For those who come to St John of the Cross from a background, not of negative indifference but from a positive

dogmatic rationalism, the impact and response may be of a far more dynamic nature. His doctrine, even in part misunderstood, taken as it is almost sure to be, in far too simplified a form, may break upon them with redemptive force. The very intransigence which abashes the more sophisticated Christian attracts and captivates the soul escaping from the bonds of sheer materialism. To such a one the reality of spirit is itself a revelation. It is the password of his liberation; and it may well be that, at such a moment, to press the fuller apprehension of the Christian idea of Incarnation would be not only useless but impeding—let him follow where the spirit leads. To such a reader, St John of the Cross may be in his very intransigence the gentlest and the most persuasive guide to an acceptance of the Christian wholeness. If he will read him, not just once or twice but many times, with a receptive mind, the depth and fullness of his teaching will lead on beyond the first still incomplete reaction into the multiplicity of truth.

From such a point of view we may then see the present cult of St John of the Cross, stripped of its superficial, unreal aspects, as an instinctive movement of liberation from the worship of time and place. Here as everywhere the crucial question will be found to be humility. If the 'discoverer' of St John of the Cross insists on using the saint simply as a means to his own ends, he will profit little by his discovery, but in so far as he can be receptive, ready to listen, he will find his first impression insufficient: a beginning and not an end.

I would then that I could convince spiritual persons that this road to God consists . . . only in the one thing that is needful, which is the ability to deny oneself truly, according to that which is without and to that which is within, giving oneself up to suffering for Christ's sake, and to total annihilation. For the soul that thus denies itself will achieve this suffering and annihilation and more also, and will likewise find more than suffering and annihilation therein. And if a soul be found wanting in this exercise, which is the sum and root of the virtues, all its other methods are so much wandering about in a maze and profiting not at all. . . . For progress comes not save through the imitation of Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and no man comes to the Father but by Him.⁴

In a true apprehension of the saint we must recognise the poet, but it is even more essential, in any apprehension of the poet, to recognise and to venerate the saint.

⁴ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*; Bk II, ch. vii.