

THE CONTEMPLATIVE

BY

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THE Gospel appointed to be read on the feast of the Assumption is the account of the two sisters, Martha and Mary, and the way they entertained Christ in their home. This may seem a strange choice for this feast. Our Lady is not referred to in the narrative; while the one who bears the same name is the great sinner converted into the great lover, St Mary Magdalen—a very different person from the immaculate Virgin whose very perfection of purity seems to demand freedom from corruption. Some will conclude that it is the parallel between the contemplative resting at our Lord's feet and the glorious rest of the Assumption that the Church is anxious to emphasise here. Indeed the glorification of Mary's body reunited to her soul does represent the complete and perfect contemplative state, for our Lady has reached the Vision in which her whole being shares; and that was the heart's desire of the Magdalen.

But perhaps we are meant to look a little further. We are sometimes too quick to place our Lady in our own categories of Christian living, to make slick distinctions and claim the privilege of including even the highest spiritual realities within our limited vision of their meaning. Some will imagine the Mother of God as the perfect contemplative with their minds filled with thoughts of enclosures and the regular life behind the grille. Others will insist that she is the exact model of the active person living in the world, the mother of the family with her daily chores and housekeeping worries, having little enough time to sit at her Son's feet, since it was his body that she had to tend and to make ready for the perfect act of sacrifice. But neither of these views is likely to be correct because our Lady, being supreme in her own order of created human persons, can hardly be reduced to one particular branch of Christian life. And in case such a claim may seem to contradict what St Thomas says about the contemplative life being the highest form of Christian life—and therefore, surely, a form of life to be realised in its perfection in the supreme point of the Assumption—we must decide what we mean by our Lady's contemplation in relation to that of the ordinary mortal.

First of all we should pass over the more specialised meanings of the word. To many people, even now, contemplation means some particular type of prayer, some particular approach towards

God. In this sense it suggests a movement or at least an action on the part of the Christian who wishes to reach out towards God. 'Then turne, O pensive soule, to God' might stand for the act of contemplation as some conceive it. This is the first step towards contemplation, as is explained for example by Richard Rolle's 'no man has ever attained to the contemplation of everlasting Love until he has utterly forsaken the vanity of the world'. But our Lady had from the first moment turned herself to God; the fulness of grace had in fact turned her in that direction from the moment that she was conceived immaculate. This was only the first step.

A more accurate view of contemplation is that of God's action upon the soul—'the simple sight of truth' in which the truth is active and the sight perceptive. This is infused contemplation, the final point of which lies in the mind but which spreads its influence gradually over the whole being of the man who is enabled to pray in this manner. He who rests contentedly at the feet of Christ drinking in his words might be said to be imbibing divine contemplations. This is something done to the soul by God. 'For the goodness of God', says Mother Julian, 'is the highest prayer, and it comes down to the lowest part of our need. It quickeneth our soul and bringeth on life.' But this gift of God is only accidentally and very partially shared, or even realised, by the emotional or physical part of man. 'When the inward and God-seeing man has attained to his Eternal Image'—it is Ruysbroek speaking this time—'and in this clearness through the Son has entered into the bosom of the Father, then he is enlightened by divine Truth, and he receives anew, every moment, the Eternal Birth, and he goes forth according to the way of the light in a divine contemplation.' These realms of light are those of the spirit alone so far as ordinary mortal man is concerned. And all this has been granted to Mary's soul from the beginning; she, the divine Bride, was from the first held in God's embrace. Yet while still on earth her contemplations would have gone further than the man whose flesh is so often leading to the corruption of his morals. The words of the poet might well apply to her in those days:

But felt through all this fleshly dress

Bright shoots of everlastingness.

These our Lady's contemplations sweetly spelt the future embrace of God when the Trinity should gather her wholly to Itself, leaving not a thought, not the rustle of an emotion behind, for nothing in her life strayed from the path of the Trinity. But this was still the beginning, when the Handmaid of the Lord was hearing the Word of God in her divine contemplation.

Again, contemplation speaks of the 'state' or the organisation

of the means which will most directly lead to the act of contemplation. It is in this sense that most writers consider the nature of contemplative life. They do not mean the very life itself, which should be moving always closer to the ideal of a constant gaze on God if the means are well arranged, each helping towards this one goal. 'This gazing at the divine light', says Ruysbroek again, 'holds the man up above all inwardness and all virtue and all merit, for it is the crown and the reward after which we strive, and which we have and possess now in this wise: for a God-seeing life is a heavenly life.' They mean more precisely the 'state' of life which unfolds a rule and a customary—obedience to superiors, silence, prayer, Office, Holy Mass, manual labour, recreation, sleep; the 'state' gathers the most useful instruments together to make it possible thus to become 'God-seeing' more or less all the time. In this state all the active moral virtues are employed in so far as they lead on to the sight of God—patience to bear with Christ our death-like pains, cheerfulness to assist the smooth running of the life of our society. In this state asceticism is directly set to work to clear the way for the divine influx of the Spirit.

But for one with the integrity of absolute innocence there was no need for a special type of organisation to lead thus directly to the sight of God. For our Lady every means was a means to contemplation. Those household duties which so distracted and disturbed Martha were for the Mother of Jesus acts of the moral virtues disposing her soul for the divine touch and holding it ever constantly before God's face. There was no need of cloister or grille at Nazareth nor during that fateful week in Jerusalem when the Jews disfigured and murdered the comely Son she had reared. The world was indeed Mary's cloister, as it still remains her paradise. Charity was so predominantly the form of all her virtues that every action she performed was moved by an act of love and was thus allied very closely to the act of contemplation itself.

It is perhaps interesting to note in this connection that it is commonly held that Mary died in the end through what might be called a burst of contemplation too violent to be contained by her body. Two medieval mystics speak of her death in these terms. St Gertrude was granted several visions during the Office and Mass of the Assumption, 'and it was revealed to her that on the day previous to her assumption the blessed Virgin had been so absorbed in God, from the hour of None until the moment of her happy departure from this world as to have nothing human in her, to live only by the Spirit of God, and to taste in anticipation all those celestial joys which she soon experienced perfectly and eternally in the bosom of God; and that 'at the third hour of the night our

Lord came for her and took her to himself with exceeding joy'.¹ St Bridget, also, saw our Lady in the height of contemplation just as she was about to 'fall asleep'. And she told the saint: 'When on a certain day my spirit was suspended in admiring the divine love, my soul was filled by this very contemplation with such great transports that it could scarce contain itself'. And in that self-same act of contemplation the soul was released from the body. Her friends buried her; but fifteen days later the angels came and withdrew her body also to heaven. Later writers have spoken of this contemplative death as being that of the transports of love which were too strong for the body to support (cf. St Francis de Sales, *Love of God*, 7, 13), an explanation which amounts to the same thing since contemplation is principally the act of charity in its perfection. Our Lady then having reached such a pitch of 'high dalliance' with God that her body could no longer support the divine power pouring through her soul, it was necessary afterwards to glorify the body, re-uniting it with the soul that she might be wholly contemplative in every action and every fibre of her being.

Other mortals, committed as they are to the disparate ways of sin, find that the limitaion of their lives to a particular type sometimes leads to disintegration. It is easy to see that the man who gives himself to activities as though his life consisted in them soon exhausts his physical and spiritual resources and discovers that he is 'played out' and can do no more; he is sometimes disintegrated to the point of the break-up of his personality, reduced, that is, to what is known as a 'breakdown'. But even the man who limits all his energies to the pursuit of contemplative stillness can slip into the wrong attitude of mind and so betray himself to the forces of disruption. For he can easily become introspective—indeed, some think that it is only the introvert who has the correct disposition for becoming a contemplative—and the introvert is soon interested in the processes of his own soul. The man who begins to watch himself carrying out his daily duties, to scrutinise the various colours of his motives, to turn in on himself at prayer, such a man may hold out far longer than the energetic activist, but in the end he too breaks up; for a spinning object sets up a centripetal force and things begin to fly off it. That is why no contemplative 'state' is officially organised without some emphasis on the common life and the need for serving the brethren. Similarly no active 'state' achieves permanence without its setting its course strongly and constantly towards the contemplative ideal of the loving gaze upon God. The Christian action of the moral virtues leads on towards

¹ Strangely, however, St Gertrude avoids the *bodily* assumption, and speaks of the Assumption simply as a happy release from her body.

the peaceful reign of faith, hope and charity, and the Christian in his contemplation pours his soul forth towards God in his brethren. Hence the bishop by his very office is in the state of perfection, for his care is for the perfection (that is the fulness of love, or contemplation) of the Church committed to him. (cf. II-II, 185.)

Thus the introvert needs the two-spliced thong of charity to draw him out of himself towards God and towards the common good, i.e., towards his brethren. He needs the power of charity to command the moral virtues of obedience, of affability, of justice, of liberality or truth-telling, to serve God and the neighbour. Conversely, the extravert who finds it difficult to sit quietly waiting upon the Lord requires an ever tightening bond between these moral virtues he loves so much and the highest of all virtues. He needs to become peaceful in all that he does and to do it in the divine presence. Action is not the contradiction of contemplation, so that it need be no juggling with words to say that the active Christian must become a contemplative 'active' and that the contemplative Christian must become an active contemplative. For we must leave no excuse for the natural introvert to turn away from the common good on the plea of having chosen the better part, nor for the man naturally impatient at standing still to embroil himself in good works.

We have gone into detail on this point because this is the particular message of the Assumption in relation to Martha and Mary. Our Lady has the act of contemplation, and more, she lives the life of contemplation. But there is a constant overflow upon the common good of the Church. Her state in this way is superior to that of the Christian bishop whose life is set in the most perfect state; for St Thomas, following St Augustine, suggests that although the bishop must seek the 'good of the multitude' without withdrawing his eyes from the contemplative love of the Truth, he cannot in fact carry out his duties without in some way, though temporarily only, leaving the perfection of contemplation (II-II, 185, 2 ad 1.) Our Lady is possessed by the beatific vision which is the culmination of all contemplative prayer and the point towards which every life or 'state' is set. But until the resurrection the ordinary mortal's share in this vision is necessarily limited to the soul alone. All the moral virtues of the saints in so far as they demand physical and transitory means for their operation exist only in habit in this Vision, for they have no way of exercising themselves in anything but the end. Charity and Vision (supplanting faith and hope) are the two powers which constitute the contemplative in heaven; the other virtues remain ready in the soul for any use they may be put to when the body, with its emotions

and passions, its feelings and needs, is rejoined to that soul. All these bodily affections and movements will be perfect through the perfection of the moral virtues flowing out from the white-hot fire of charity in the depths of the soul.

But our Lady already has her body. She is a complete and integrated person. Her passions and emotions, in so far as these are both part of an integral human person, have not been destroyed—for then she would have been little more than some strange mummy. Her human life is a full life, but one that is glorified through and through with the preternatural gifts proper to the glorified body, those gifts glimpsed by the apostles on the mount of transfiguration. Thus the moral virtues of Mary, although all held in the perfect unity of love, are in action; for it can be said with a new meaning that she *is* most pure and most merciful. With other saints we say rather that while on earth they *were* noted for this or the other virtue. Our Lady's contemplation then is not simply that of a separated soul absorbed by means of its own proper faculties in the divine union. She may be said to be a contemplative also in the absolute control she exercises now over her body and perhaps too in those activities in which she is engaged in calling the world back to her Son.

There can now be no virtue active in our Lady that is not wholly caught up in God by love and vision. So all her activities which are concerned either with her body or with the world must be considered somewhat as St Thomas considers apostolic activity, namely as the extension of contemplation. But even here we must be careful not to confuse the model with the thing modelled on it. For nothing now can *extend* our Lady's perfect contemplation. She is wholly and entirely possessed by the presence of God in such a way that we have to fall back on St Paul's 'eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man' how this can be. The supreme integrity of Mary is unimaginable, but we do happen to know now for certain that that integrity includes both 'action' and 'contemplation' and that these two aspects are so perfectly welded into one that the body itself is transformed in some way, caught up into the very act of loving contemplation. Thus do both Martha and Mary find in her now their fulfilment.