

# THE PRAYER OF QUIET

BY

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YOUNG enthusiasts for the life of prayer cannot be too frequently reminded of the danger of applying directly to their own persons the doctrines they read about. As they grow older they often become so self-conscious or introspective that they cannot read the lives of saints or descriptions of mystic states without discovering parallels in their own interior lives. This is a weakness not confined to spiritual matters, for we remember the hero of *Three Men in a Boat* who began reading a medical handbook and soon decided that he had the symptoms of *all* the diseases therein described except 'housemaid's knee'. This is typical of those who read spiritual or physical medicine. It is necessary to repeat the warning against this form of introspection before beginning to discuss in detail the more passive forms of prayer and the higher states of the spiritual life. Certainly in general all men are called to these passive ways of the spirit, but by no means all men, not even all who are interested, reach to these states. And of those who are raised to a more passive prayer it may be said that there are hardly two alike, so diverse is the direct action of God upon the soul. Readers, therefore, must be resolutely objective in their approach to the subject. For their own personal problems they should be more ready to refer to their director or confessor who often has a clearer insight into their state than they have themselves. The doctrine of the great mystics, like St John of the Cross or St Teresa, should be read in a wide, more comprehensive spirit by which the reader is led to see how wonderfully God works in the souls of the just, and thus to return indirectly to his own relationship with God. These pages, too, are a study of the doctrine of the English Mystics—a study, not a self-scrutiny. They should be read as the devout theologian reads books and articles about divine things—he is certainly involved personally in them in his life, but his study retains an abstractive character which only *after study* will have its reflex action on his own spiritual life.

The chief characteristic, then, of the illuminative way is a prayer which is caused by God rather than by the free will of man; and it is the consideration of this form of prayer which demands an objective approach, particularly if studied in relation to the very singular manner of Richard Rolle. He needs to be studied rather than copied as a model. Indeed Rolle himself makes this clear:

For I do not say that thou or another that reads this shall do it all: for it is God's will to choose whom he will to do what is told here,

or else another thing in another manner, as he gives men grace for their salvation. For various men take various graces of our Lord Jesus Christ: and all shall be set in the joy of heaven, that ends in charity. Whoever is in this degree has wisdom and discretion to love according to God's will.<sup>1</sup>

This degree in which God works as he wills brings an habitual mindfulness of God. The mind and will must necessarily be occupied with the general needs and activities of life; but even at such times when a person is busied about household duties or the requirements of a livelihood the habit of the presence of God remains. The habit may, and often is, deliberately brought into action by a conscious desire for and knowledge of God present in the soul and in all created things round about. But even when the *acts* of mind and will are concerned with other things God is present as a companion is present in a room with a friend who is concentrating all his faculties on some delicate work of his fingers or some deep mental problem. The friend 'knows' his companion is by his side but does not revert to it by an act of his mind; he is conscious in a passive way of companionship. So too God's companionship pervades the whole life of a man in this degree like an atmosphere. The man requires no words to speak with the divine companion; he hardly needs to make a deliberate act of his will; for all his will is permanently resting in God.

'Rest' is perhaps the key word to this type of prayer. It comes frequently in Rolle's account of the perfect form of life and prayer. It is the mark of 'spiritual circumcision' when all the attachments to this world have been cut off by the purgative way and the night of the senses, and the soul is set apart as the Jew of old from the Gentile.

When a man feels himself in that degree, then is a man circumcised spiritually, when all other business and affections and thoughts are drawn away out of his soul, that he may *rest* in God's love without entanglement with other things. (*Of Delight in God*, Heseltine, p. 105.)

In one place Rolle admits that idleness destroys this heat of God's love which is otherwise habitual; and this we should expect since the greatest enemy to the prayer of rest or quiet is its material semblance the name of which is sloth. But he says also that weariness from travel or immoderate occupation also drives it away, and likewise being 'given without measure to disputation' (*Fire of Love*, Prologue: Misyn. p. 13). From this we may conclude that unnecessary or protracted journeyings and such like activities which employ the mind and will too much with material things are enemies to the habit

<sup>1</sup> *Ego Dormio*. Heseltine. Selected Works of Richard Rolle p. 97.

as well as to the act of this consciousness of God, are in other words contrary to the rest and quiet of which he speaks.

And moreover sleep gainstands me as an enemy; for no time heavies me to lose save that in which, constrained, I yield to sleeping. Waking truly I am busy to warm my soul, thirled [pierced] as it were with cold, the which when settled [in the sense that dregs settle] in devotion, I know well is set on fire. (ib. p. 12).

Yet neither sleep nor any other activity except it be in some sense sinful and turning away however slight from God can break into this rest so as to disturb it seriously.

Afterward truly strongly and well used in praying, and given to high rest in meditation . . . his affection goes up so that the entrance is opened, in the beholding of heavenly mysteries, to the eye of his mind. . . . Nevertheless (his soul) gladly suffers adversity that happens, for sweetly she rests in the joy of eternal love. And all these things that happen can not destroy that joyful song that she had received. . . . (ib. bk. 2., c. 6. pp. 154-155).

The soul that rests in God in this way is evidently borne up by his presence as a swimmer resting from his exertions floats borne up by the deep of the ocean, immersed and yet supported without effort on his part. The resting in God seems to be closely allied to the prayer of quiet which might be called a speciality of St Teresa's. She describes it as the beginning of rest when the soul need not be continually at work. The will, she says, is occupied, has been made captive—'imprisoned by God, as one who well knows itself to be the captive of him whom it loves'. God begins to communicate himself to the soul in a new and unexpected way. (Cf. *Life*, chapter XIV).

As we have seen, this communication from God is the beginning of infused contemplation, and this contemplation lies at the heart of the prayer of quiet. A new kind of rhythm is set in motion in which the sudden manifestations of God ripple across the smooth surface of this restful certainty of God's presence. The soul is constantly mindful of God, and he in his turn brings new treasures of grace to the soul when it is itself feeling powerless and unable to move of itself. The explanation of this state must be sought in the doctrine of the gifts, for it is now that the soul is sufficiently freed from entanglements of venial sin and worldly attachments for the Holy Spirit to be able to use his gifts. Rolle is as insistent as St Teresa that the world must by now be utterly given up, cut away by a ruthless severing of all earthly ties. This is the doctrine which often terrifies, but which is absolutely necessary as a pre-requisite to the full working of the gifts.

St Teresa gives examples of how the Holy Spirit worked through his gifts when the prayer of quiet came upon her. Her feeble know-

ledge of Latin was suddenly illumined so that she could read the Psalter as though it were in Spanish, and further she could penetrate the meaning of the Spanish so that the Psalter began to reveal its mysteries without special study or mental argument. This was the gift of understanding which is the special feature of the illuminative way. Rolle shows that the other gifts are also at work, for example that of Fear of the Lord. This new state of love casts out all fear of any but God, and overcomes pain, so that the soul 'feels no dread of any creature' (*Fire of Love*, i, 26. p. 110). And so a gentle and undisturbing fear of anything which might in any way offend God or remove that sweet and now constant presence pervades the soul and keeps it clear from any new entanglements with the world.

And he greatly dreads lest he be drawn into these things; that the least grieve Him (ib. ii, 6. p. 157).

This is a fear which springs wholly from love and is not the contrary passion which is cast out by love; it is a gift which the Spirit uses at the approach of evil or temptation to keep the soul free from worry or disturbance. A modern analogy might be found in the sensitive cell which is used as a burglar alarm: the slightest shadow cast over it reacts so as to set off the bells; in this way the household may rest untroubled by fears of being robbed unawares. So also the gift of fear helps to preserve the rest and quiet within the soul; it need not be anxious about being taken off its guard or falling unwittingly into evil.

But the principal gift, as we have said, is that of understanding which provides the illumination from which this stage gets its name. St Thomas, in his question on this gift, points out how the unaided intellect of man so often cannot pierce below the superficial appearances of things. We are prone to mistake accidentals for the essential reality beneath, words for their meaning, likenesses and figures for the truth they signify. We need a supernatural light to pierce through the words of the Bible, or to plunge into the divine reality which lies hidden behind all the sacramental manifestations of God's work. This gift, therefore, corresponds to the sixth beatitude—'Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God', not merely because man must be pure and purified before he can sense the divine truth in things but also in so far as the mind itself has to be freed from the bondage of vivid imaginations and purged of obfuscating errors. All this the gift of understanding does once the soul has been freed by various purifications from contamination with merely earthly things.<sup>2</sup> This new light which penetrates into the depths of reality like some new intellectual ray is a perfection of

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologica*. II-II 8, art. 1 and 8.

faith; it does not provide any new kind of knowledge; it is in fact a prompt and penetrating glance into the truths of faith, prompt to the sudden movement of the Spirit.

Rolle says in his prologue to the *Fire of Love* that he is writing not for the learned and scientific men who are in fact so concerned with the superficial things—the simple will 'pass temporal things' and reach this endless rest and all their knowledge contributes to their loving rightly (p. 13). There are in fact many parallels to St Thomas's teaching, referred to above, in Rolle's *Mending of Life* particularly in the chapters where he writes of cleanness of mind and of contemplation. After writing of the mind's eye being taken up to behold heavenly things, yet still as in a shadow and in a mirror, he continues:

Although truly the darkness of sin be gone from an holy soul, and murk things and unclean be passed, and the mind be purged and enlightened, yet whiles it bides in this mortal flesh that wonderful joy is not perfectly seen. Forsooth holy and contemplative men with a clear face behold God; that is either their wits are opened, for to understand holy writ. . . . As one might say all lettings betwixt their mind and God are put back. (*The Mending of Life*, Misyn. p. 239).

Although the gift is a permanent possession of the soul's so that Rolle can write that the mind is 'enlightened with sweet mystery' and that God has 'opened to mine eyes the window of contemplation' (*Fire of Love*, ii, cc. 2 and 5. pp. 137, 151), yet it cannot be used actively like an additional faculty. It does not mean that a person at this stage of life can at will see the face of God beneath the external drapery of words, signs or material creation. The gift makes it possible for the mind to be moved instinctively, with immediate promptitude, to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit whenever the latter chooses to raise the veil leading more deeply into the mysteries. The way is illuminative because of these sudden flashes of understanding rather than from a permanently diffused brilliance. A man must still use logic, reasoning and argument to learn more about divine truths at other times than when the Spirit is in fact enlightening him. In other words the illuminative way with its gift of understanding does not spell illuminism; it does not mean that it creates an élite of inspired gnostics who have been raised to a new form of knowledge where theology would be out of place.

It is interesting to notice in respect of this illumination of the gift of understanding that Richard Rolle employs the simile of the sunbeam which was later a favourite with St John of the Cross. We may compare chapter 28 of the *Fire of Love* (Book i, pp. 119) where he likens this enlightening fire of the Holy Spirit to a sunbeam with the

following passage of St John of the Cross where he is treating of this same state of enlightenment: 'Let this suffice now to explain how meet it is that the soul should be occupied in this knowledge, so that it may turn aside from the way of spiritual meditation, and be sure that, although it seems to be doing nothing, it is well occupied. . . . It will also be realised . . . that if this light presents itself to the understanding in a more comprehensible and palpable manner, as the sun's ray presents itself to the eye when it is full of particles, the soul must not therefore consider it purer, brighter and more sublime'. (*Ascent* ii, 14. Peers I. p. 126). The Spanish mystic has perfected the simile and shows that although meditation and discursive reasoning in prayer may for the most part become impossible, yet the light vouchsafed does not bring an easy and palpable understanding, but is more like the sunbeam shining where there are no particles to make it manifest, shining more penetratingly, more purely, more 'darkly'. And yet it has not yet reached the purity of the light of wisdom. This the highest of all the gifts which proceeds more directly from the intensity of perfect love is characteristic of the way of union. Naturally this gift too has been released by the new freedom from wilful venial sins but it is not as yet the predominant gift. Rolle, however, looks forward to it when he speaks of the ravishings of love:

They also are called ravished by love that are wholly and perfectly given to the desires of their Saviour, and worthily ascend to the height of contemplation. With wisdom unwrought are they enlightened, and are worthy to feel the beat of the undescried light, with whose fairness they are ravished (*Fire of Love*. ii. 7. p. 162).

Another sort of gift begins also to make its appearance at this time, namely a certain assurance from God that the person favoured by these graces will never fall away but will reach the fulfilment of his destiny in heaven. Before this time he will have had nothing more to judge his state from than the general hope shared by all who do what is asked of them and make use of the sacraments. But we often find in the mystics some more personal assurance than this general way of guessing that one is in a state of grace. Evidently it does not imply a Calvinistic idea of predestination and an experience of that special choice. It depends on the co-operative will of the man himself and on his perseverance. But Rolle says that once souls have been strengthened and enlightened in this way, they will be specially comforted. 'And if they at any time begin to err, through ignorance or frailty, He soon shows them the right way, and all that they have need of, He teaches them'. (*Form of Living* 2. Heseltine p. 20.) And he speaks elsewhere of knowing he is in a state of charity which he will never lose and of being confirmed in grace (cf. *Mending of Life*

c. 10. p. 228; *Fire of Love* i, 15. p. 72). But he makes a more special claim on one occasion:

He that has this joy, and in this life is thus gladdened, is inspired of the Holy Ghost: he cannot err, whatever he do it is lawful. No mortal man can give him counsel so good as that is that he has in himself of God Immortal. (*Fire of Love*, i, 11. p. 55).

He quotes in reference to this special gift the favourite text that the 'spiritual man judgeth all things'; but goes on to say that it would be presumption for anyone to think he had this gift, for even the highest contemplatives are not given it, and that it is granted but seldom and to few. He implies, however, that in some way the exceptional man to whom this gift is granted will know of the gift; he seems to suggest even that he, Rolle, had received some such assurance of inerrancy. This is not a claim peculiar to Rolle and we shall find it later appearing in a rather dubious form in Mother Julian. Indeed among those who have reached the stage of prayer of which we write an assurance of this kind, imagined or real, is not unknown at the present time. Yet if it be true it must be kept clear of any note of determinism and it must not interfere with the essential freedom of will and variety of knowledge and judgment in the individual. It may, however, be some kind of special experience in which a very few are privileged to share more deeply in the eternal knowledge of God. Rolle speaks of it here in connection with the gift of counsel; and it might be regarded as a divinely guaranteed prudential judgment.

Yet when such an assurance is given in reality it could only be granted to the one who would not in fact misuse it by turning it into a subject for conceit or presumption. The very fact that he misused such an assurance should prove at once that it was in fact only a subjective fancy and not an objective promise. Perhaps we could discover a parallel to this exceptional knowledge in the inevitability and yet freedom of choice involved in the workings of efficacious grace. In this way it might be some sort of conscious realisation of what is in fact a reality behind the scenes of every predestined soul. It is not impossible for God to make such a revelation; but it would not be, as the Calvinists would have it, an ordinary grace of God. The Church teaches explicitly that no one in this life can presume to claim to belong to the number of the elect. 'For, except by some special revelation, it is impossible to know whom God has chosen for himself'. This is the clear statement of the Council of Trent against the Calvinist position [cf. *Denzinger*, nn. 805 and 826]. But the Council does allow for an occasional peculiar manifestation of God's choice, and it is probably to this that Richard Rolle and other mystics refer. But it is evidently a gift which of necessity must be ignored

even by the very few to whom it is granted.

These are however special graces and do not form the usual furniture of the illuminative way. The Christian who is enlightened now by the gift of Understanding will yet be often plunged in darkness and uncertainty. Aridity of a very deep and penetrating nature is still often the only outward aspect of his prayer. As the aridity had attacked his sensitive faculties in the night of the senses, so his 'enthusiasm' had died, and by now he has come to depend far more on the will of God working in the purity of his own will and mind. With this sensible dryness goes a bitter and burning desire and an intense love which is almost purely a thing of the will. And these last two features of the illuminative way are of course so characteristic of Richard Rolle that they will require another article for their treatment.

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## SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

or GROWTH IN CHARITY

BY

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(Adapted from *Le Saint-Esprit dans la Vie Chrétienne*  
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*The path of the just is a shining light and shineth more and more  
unto the perfect day. Proverbs, 4, 18.*

### I. THE LAW OF PROGRESS



HE spiritual life is the life we live in Christ. We are alive in him because he is the head of the body of which we are living members. From him we get light, life, movement. His ceaseless graces flow from the sacraments, those living streams circulating within the veins of his mystical body. Chief among these graces are the Church's teaching, the Liturgy, and then the words and living example of the saints who share with us membership of the same body which is Christ.

The Church is alive and life-giving and makes alive all those who are its living members: the branches live in and by the life of the true Vine. All the mysterious and wonderful influences that flood the Christian soul have their source in Christ now gloriously alive in heaven. From the heart of his divinity he sends us the Holy Ghost, given to us as an abounding personal gift. Christ is the head of our