

## LANGLAND'S WAY TO UNITY

BY

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LANGLAND'S outlook is really centred in the doctrine of the Mystical Body, though he nowhere employs the term itself. He conceives of the Church and her members in this living corporate way. From the very fact of the Incarnation, all mankind has become related to God in common brotherhood, even those outside the Church.

But my nature shall move me to be merciful to man

For we are brethren of one blood though not in baptism together

are words of our Lord at the harrowing of hell (*Passus XVIII*, 397-8). Men are not only blood brethren because they bear the same nature with the same human blood coursing through their veins, but also because they have been bought by the outpouring of that blood made precious in union with the divinity:

'They are my blood brethren', said Piers, 'for God bought all men'. (*Passus VI*, 212; cf. *XVIII*, 343 sqq.)

And again:

For we are all Christ's creatures, and by his coffer are we wealthy.

And brothers of one blood, beggars and nobles. (*Passus XI*, 201). Those who would avail themselves of this fraternal blood, which links together as blood in the veins joins the cells of a living body, are baptized in the blood of Christ, thus fulfilling their vocation by becoming his 'whole brethren':

But none who are my whole brethren in blood and baptism

Shall there be damned to death everlasting (*Passus XVIII*, 399). Here we have the deepest 'moral' of Piers Plowman, that all men, Christians and Pagans, should enter into Unity. The conversion to Unity here does not indicate the conversion from paganism or heresy to the dogmas of the true Church. He is writing for men who have been cradled in the Church's bosom. The Church appears at the beginning:

'I am Holy Church', she said, 'and you should know me.

I first found you. My faith I taught you.

You brought me pledges to be at my bidding,

And to love me loyally while life lasted' (*Passus I*, 76-80).

All those Englishmen were members of the Church into which they had been baptized within a few hours of their birth. But mere physical membership, almost inevitable in those days, was no guarantee of salvation. This Langland insisted upon particularly for the lax clergy who constructed the Church, but who, like the

Therefore I counsel you clerks, who are the wrights of Holy Church,

Work the works that you see written, and be wary that you come into it. (*Passus X*, 429 et sqq.).

Thus not only do 'holiness and honesty come out of Holy Church through the lives of holy men', but all evils emanate as well from her through the imperfection of her ministers. (*Passus XV*, 95).

The last two *Passus*, therefore, concerning the best form of Christian life, the life of Dobest, insist on a true conversion to Unity in the Church, not merely by physical membership, but by union in the life of grace which has been called the 'life-blood' of the Mystical Body.

With this Grace began to make a good foundation,  
And watted it and walled it with his pains and passion.

With all Holywrit he made a roof afterwards,  
And called that house Unity, or Holy Church in English. . . .

Then Conscience addressed all Christians: 'My counsel is presently

To hasten into unity and hold us within it' . . .

The purification of the people and a pure clergy

Made holiness the unity of Holy Church.

(*Passus XIX*, 330-333, 360-1, 385-6).

The visionary and his allegorical characters are constantly urging all Christians 'to hold themselves in Unity', and that is principally effected by learning to love (cf. *Passus XX*, 241-249). Love, Charity, is the spirit of the Church which gathers together into one all her true and living members and so fashions Unity. (id. 201-210). Learning or religious life are helpless without the bond of union, though the friars may treat them as talismans for salvation. This applies also to 'pardons' and to the sacraments. We shall notice later on how very characteristic this attitude is with all these English mystics, as for example Hilton—'for Christ is head of Holy Church, and therefore he departeth not the oil of grace but to his members, the which are fastened to his ghostly body by truth, hope and charity'.<sup>1</sup>

Before leaving this general view that greets the renewed soul as it goes through the door of conversion we must insist on the one central figure of our Lord as depicted by Langland. The person of Christ seen by the poet stands for the quiet and restrained, austere hierarchic figure of early Christian art and prayer. We find here little of the 'realistic' devotion to the humanity of Christ typical of that day. Naturally he treats the Passion and the Redemption in the terms of medieval chivalry already used by the Ancren Riwele

<sup>1</sup> *Benedictus*. Orchard Series ed. p. 219. Cf. the whole of this passage, and *Bonum Est*, id. p. 209; *The Scale*, ii, 3, p. 182; *Mother Julian*, cc. 9, 31, 34, 51, etc.; *Cloud*, c. 25. Also *Blackfriars*, March 1940, p. 192, *The Clergy Review*, March 1943.

nearly two centuries earlier.<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus should joust for the judgment of knighthood  
(*Passus XVI*, 139).

This gentle Jesus will joust in Piers' armour

In his helm and habergin, *humana natura* (*Passus XVIII*, 23-4). This knight who jousts at the tournament of the Cross, bold and resolute, hardly appeals to the softer human feelings, but judges severely his own contemporaries at the time of the critical trial of strength:

'You are Churls', said Jesus, 'and your children like you,  
And Satan your saviour as yourselves witness . . .

'I find falsehood in your fair speaking,  
Guile in thy glad cheer and gall in thy laughing. . .'

(*Passus XVI*, 168 sqq.).

After witnessing his numerous miracles amid the sick and the lame and after the raising of Lazarus, his followers describe his position on earth as 'the leach of life and the Lord of high heaven' (*Passus XVI*, 164).

One explanation for this awe-inspiring delineation of Christ may be found in the nature of the poem which sets out to turn men from the path of vice; and this requires an element of fear. But that is not the last word, for his insistence on Love in the unity of the Church from another pen would have called forth a more 'devotional' picture of Jesus. The restraint of the Liturgy had certainly a profound influence on Langland, however much he may have sung Lauds for stipends and played bedesman to the nobility. And the newly converted soul should turn directly and without hindrance to that loving figure of the High Priest, and of the Lamb standing as it were slain round whom the whole picture of Christian life centres.

The general manner of living in the Church becomes more distinct as one watches the busy Christians intent on their journey. Standing at the door of conversion we can see nearest to us a group of men and women low down at the foot of the hill making painful and often rather feeble efforts to master the first piece of rising ground, further ahead and higher up there is quite a bunch practically half-way up, and finally a few climbing the steep crags near the summit. The dividing line between each group is necessarily arbitrary and man-made. But, as we have noticed before, the division is threefold among all these writers even though their mode of division differs. Langland's threefold division is very singular and in many ways more profound than the others, with the possible exception of Walter Hilton, who sets out to deal *ex professo* with these ways.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the beautiful passage in the *Ancren Riwle* part vii (Medieval Lib. ed., p. 296) where our Lord is shown as the knight of great prowess, proving his love for the soul in the tournament of the Cross. Cf. also *Piers Plowman* *Passus XVI*, 211-5; *XVIII*, 13-39.

We have seen that the Vision of Piers Plowman is based almost as much as the *Scale* upon the division into the three lives of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest. These have their background, as it were, in the life of the Trinity itself. The principal ground of the first mode of life is God the Father who is Truth and sets the soul in Truth by his grace—here we find the characteristic life of the good *layman*, a converted and supernaturalised Active Life. Dobet is based on the second divine Person, made man and sent to teach and suffer,—here is typified the *priest*, the 'alter Christus', or, we might add, the *religious*, and is characteristic of Contemplative Life. Finally Dobest looks to the Holy Spirit, who infuses the perfection of charity into the soul—this is officially represented by the life of a *bishop*, who is consecrated to a form which blends the active and the contemplative lives as he is the official teacher and administrator of the Church (*Passus IX*, 224 sqq.). This has striking similarities with the scholastic teaching, and with the teaching of St Thomas in particular, on the progress of the spiritual life; and it raises some of the problems which we shall leave to Hilton to settle for us. But here in the first view of the 'Three Ways' we must outline the nature of the division with its consequent problems. Hilton distinguishes between 'State' and 'Life' in the same way as St Thomas. The distinction itself is of great importance for understanding these earlier mystics. It also helps to solve the general practical problem of how to relate the activist type of life which is demanded of most people today and the contemplative ideal. Langland will in fact be useful to us here in broaching the problem, for his theological background reveals a difficulty which until his time had been passed over. If the growth of the Christian soul can be divided in the three ways, how are those three to be fitted into the twofold division of Christian life into active and contemplative (cf. *Passus XVI*, 63 sqq.)? Piers is describing the tree of the Trinity upon which depends the true Christian life. This tree, he tells us, has three kinds of fruit varying in goodness; yet he describes only two main groups, the contemplatives and the actives; the former are inspired by the Holy Spirit and the latter live 'in Nature' according to the flesh. This at once provokes Langland to ask:

'Yea, sire', I said, 'but since there are but two lives

Allowed by our Lord, as the learned teach us,

*Activa Vita* and *Vita Contemplativa*,

Why grows the fruit in three kinds?' 'For a good reason', he answered.

'And now I may take from beneath, if the need arises,

Matrimony, a moist fruit, which multiplies the people.

Then above is a better fruit, though both are pleasant,

Widowhood, held worthier than wedlock in heaven.

But virginity is more virtuous than the fairest thing in heaven . . .'

(*Passus XVI*, 95-102).

These three fruits of Matrimony, Widowhood and Virginitie a few lines before have been classed by Piers as contemplative in so far as they were seeking the Holy Ghost. These wedded men, widows and maidens are contrasted with the people who live in Nature and who follow as the flesh leads—*Activa Vita* (id. 85-94). It would appear from this that Langland classes the three degrees of the Good Life all together as Contemplative. Outside this lies the Active or evil life. This at least seems to be implied in Piers's explanation, and through Piers Langland communicates his deepest convictions.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Langland elsewhere makes other suggestions. 'Clergy' teaches (in *Passus X*, 238) that Dowel is the Active Life of farmers and craftsmen who simply carry out their normal manual work as best they can; Dobet is a life of almsgiving and works of mercy; while Dobest teaches others to do these works at the same time that he practises them himself, and this is the life of a bishop. 'Thought' and 'Wit' both attempt to classify the differences between these three Good Lives (*Passus VIII* and *IX*), and the debauched doctor of divinity endorses the words of 'Clergy' (*Passus XIII*, 215). It may be noticed that all these descriptions are practically limited to the exercise of the virtues which concern the neighbour and are generally characteristic of the Active Life. At the same time Langland restricts *Vita Activa* to a rather mean place when he comes to treat of it at length in *Passus XIII* (238 sqq.); the part is played by a well-intentioned wafer-manufacturer, full of energy and good motives, but besmirched with unwholesome sins.

We may conclude from these descriptions that Langland classed the active life in its lowest form as a purely 'natural' living accord to the flesh and at best as something approaching the well-meaning, busy life usually described by the mystical writers as 'active'. On the other hand his three, Dowel, Dobet and Dobest, are the types of good life, supernatural rather than natural, guided by the Holy Spirit. The first stage may be to some extent identified with the better sort of active life; but on the whole all three could be regarded as Contemplative in so far as they are supernatural and devoted ultimately to God. He does in fact describe three stages of the beginner, the proficient and the perfect in the devout life. This is characteristically active, concerned directly with fellow

<sup>3</sup> This is the view taken by Skeat in a note on C Text, in which alone this passage appears. Others have interpreted only the maiden as the contemplative like the monk or the nun, and deny that Matrimony, Widowhood and Virginitie can possibly stand here for Dowel, Dobet and Dobest. In the A text which is not here included by Wells, Wit treats Dowel, Dobet and Dobest as *states* and points out that perfection does not depend on one's state. This approaches more accurately the teaching of St Thomas on the subject. Cf. Rolle, *The Form of Living*, c. 3. (Heseltine ed., p. 24) and Dunning, *Piers Plowman, An Interpretation of the A Text*. (pp. 173 sq.) And Coghill, *Medium Aevum*, Vol II, No. 2. (p. 126).

human beings though based on God and the love of God. Such an active conception of the three ways was perhaps inevitable in a poem cast in so essentially social a mould. Even in the life of Dobest Langland is concerned with the conversion of England to social justice based on charity. For the purposes of the present work, therefore, Langland's contribution is most valuable in the social and liturgical spheres seen in terms of the first Conversion.

In the description of the way to Truth Langland introduces all the elements necessary for the first stage of the spiritual life—Grace, Contrition, the Creed, and all the moral virtues such as Abstinence, Humility and Chastity. There are warnings too against Pride and Wrath, both stumbling-blocks in the way of the beginner, Dowel, immediately after his conversion. The full state of the beginner is best described by the *Ancren Riwele*. We may therefore conclude with a summary of the characteristics of these three ways in the eyes of Langland. Nevil Coghill (*Medium Aevum* Vol. II, No. 2) has collated the passages which describe Dowel, Dobet and Dobest (fifteen in all), and he sums up the results of this collation:

The life of Dowel is inexhaustible in itself and is sufficient for salvation; it is a life of Faith and Work, the life of the manual worker and layman, to live which he must be humble, temperate, obedient to the Church, honest, compassionate, fearing God and loving men with a warm neighbourly love. He must know and believe in the simple elements of the Christian faith . . . Dobet adds nothing to Dowel except the following: he is a Contemplative or Clerk who teaches, heals and suffers, and lives in accordance with what he professes. . . . The virtues over and above those of Dowel and Dobet are simply these: to exercise episcopal authority, for the protection of the simple, the abashing of the wicked, and the maintaining of the sacramental life of the Church (particularly are mentioned the sacraments of Penance and of the Altar . . .) The life of Dobest is in fact that which cares for the salvation of men through the right administration of the instituted Christian Church'.

In the last passage in which Langland compares the three lives he applies them to the life of our Lord. Our Lord began the life of Dowel when he turned water into wine, for wine stands for law and a holy life; he taught us to love our enemies and was known as the Son of Mary. As Dobet his life was one of the ministry, healing, comforting; and this included the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and he was known as the Son of David. As Dobest our Lord gave Piers authority to bind and loose and instituted the authority of the Church by sending the Paraclete (*Passus XIX*, 106 sqq.). Here he establishes fully the new law of Love—one of the themes of the Whole Vision—where Truth is completely discovered. This law transcends the multifarious laws of the Old Dispensation.

And make a labourer of law, and love shall arise  
 And such a peace and perfect truth be with the nations  
(*Passus* III, 422-4).

That law shall be a labourer and led afield to dunging,  
 But the love of kind and Conscience shall come together  
 And love shall lead your land to your best liking  
(*Passus* IV, 156-7. cf. XVII, 9 sqq.).

Conversion opens the way to love and love to contemplation.

Nearly every line of this great poem will bear much fruit in meditation, and it will lead to a more perfect understanding of the spiritual life. It was written by one whose own experience of genuine conversion was based on a sound theological background. He may have picked up this theological knowledge from the many sermons he must have heard. If so they were doctrinally impressive discourses, and if there are any such today the newly converted soul should seek them out and nourish the new life within him in this same manner.

## SON OF MAN

BY

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F all the titles of Jesus this is the most mysterious, yet also it was the one most used by him, the title of his predilection.

Christ is called Son of Mary; and that is not difficult to understand. She gave him as much as any mother ever gives her child, his body, his features, temperament maybe. Mary must have given all these, for there was no human father. Thus Nestorius was indeed wrong-headed when he refused her the title of Mother of God. We do not say of our mothers 'That is the mother of Charles's body', but 'that is Charles's mother', i.e., the person Charles; so Mary is the mother of the Person Christ, and the Person is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Son of David, likewise we can understand; though even this is not simple, for he was not so by direct male descent. Still, he was sufficiently descended by blood through Mary, and far more deeply so by inheriting the kingdom; and yet again, not the kingdom of the earthly Jerusalem, but that of the spiritual Jerusalem. It was for this reason that David recognised his pre-eminence and called him Lord, being king over a greater inheritance (cf. *Ps.* 110, and *Hebrews*).

But the title of 'Son of Man' was an enigma. Sometimes the phrase was used in Aramaic merely to mean 'I'. So is it used by Christ. But often enough, both in the Old and New Testaments,