

THE FIRST AND THE LAST (*Apoc: i, 17*)

By

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This title of Christ is obviously true in that God is infinite and since Christ is God, therefore Christ is our all. But there is a sense in which it is difficult to reach a happy mean; and it is this sense that we shall now consider.

No one would deny that we love things other than God: creatures, friends, goods, art, power, our own selves. None of these are God, yet there is not wrong-doing in loving them. We need not go into the ordinary theology of the due measure of love to creatures. All our loves are conditioned by circumstance; none are absolute. God alone has absolute dominion over us.

The problem becomes more subtle when we are seeking perfection. Should God be all, and all else nothing? Are we being traitors to our bond by loving God and creatures? Have we not given up all to follow Christ; and to return to creatures, is that not apostasy? The doctrine of the "Nada," St John of the Cross's word for utter self-abnegation, is very logical from one point of view: the less we give to creatures, the more we give to God; but is this what God asks?

St John's apparent doctrine is too well known to require confirmation from his works. We may say in passing that St John could not and did not mean complete self-abnegation in the sense that some of his devotees would have us believe. Nevertheless, there are phrases scattered here and there which might lead the unwary to think that to be his doctrine. Indeed, he is not the only Catholic writer among the saints whose extreme statements seem to get the better of others' prudence. Such a one is Bl. Claude de la Colombière:

"My friends! They love me, I love them; Thou seest it, I know it. My God, my only good, my one love! Must I sacrifice them since thou wouldst have me all for thee? I will make this sacrifice, which will cost me more than the first I made when I left my father and mother. I make this sacrifice then and I do it willingly, since thou forbiddest me to give a share of my friendship to any creature."

"It is our business to withdraw ourselves from all the pleasures of earth, at least to take none from a motive of pleasure, to detach our hearts; and if we cannot renounce it really, to turn it to pain by the ardent desire we would have to deprive ourselves of it for the love of God." (*Notes spirituelles et pages choisies*, p. 33).

What are we to make of such a passage? First, it obviously cannot refer to true love of our neighbour, for that is a command-

ment of God. It must then be that love of our neighbour for our own sake and not for theirs, thus reducing them to the level of any other created thing, means for our own happiness. But without going so far it seems too extreme an asceticism to take no pleasure in creatures. Let us listen to St Francis de Sales:

"Many will tell you perhaps that you must have no kind of particular affection and friendship, because that occupies the heart, distracts the mind and creates envies: but they are wrong in their advice . . ." (He allows that in monasteries particular friendships are unnecessary; and goes on) "Indeed, no one would deny that our Lord loved with a more sweet and special friendship St John, Lazarus, Martha, Magdalene, for Scripture is a witness to it. We know that St Peter cherished tenderly St Mark and St Petronilla, as St Paul did Timothy and St Thecla. St Gregory Nazianzen boasts a hundred times of his matchless friendship with the great St Basil . . . St Augustine bears witness that St Ambrose bore a special friendship for St Monica, on account of the rare virtues he saw in her, and that she likewise cherished him as an angel of God.

But I am wrong to trifle with you in a matter so evident. St Jerome, St Augustine, St Gregory, St Bernard and all the great servants of God have had very special friendships *without detriment to their perfection*. St Thomas like all good philosophers confessed that friendship is a virtue. Perfection then does not consist in having no friends but in only having good, holy and sacred friendships" (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III, c. 19).

Note that he is careful to choose as his examples not saints in the world, but very mortified religious. No one could accuse St Jerome or St Bernard of laxity. But they certainly had their friends.

It may be objected that friendship is a very special form of creature-love, that it need not be self regarding, since persons are worthy to be loved for their own sake; whereas all other creatures can only be loved for selfish motives. To this objection we may reply that a friend, even a saint's friend, though loved for his own sake, is also loved for the joy he gives the saint. This would take too long to prove, but it is quite obvious from every example we know of "sainted friendship," and anyone can examine the facts, e.g., St Benedict and St Scholastica, St Bernard and Robert, St Augustine and St Monica, etc. But even suppose, *per impossibile*, that sainted friendships were purely altruistic, is it wrong or even not perfect to enjoy creatures?

What is wrong is a disproportionate clinging to anything whatever, to food or drink, to friends, to emotions, to knowledge, to sensible devotion to God, even to the "lights" upon God's nature that may be given in prayer. How can we give a disproportionate

attachment to these? By repining if God withdraws them from us, though the natural man is bound to feel it; but feelings are neither here nor there; they are the spiritual climate which we have to put up with and cannot change; by giving too much time to them. This will be clear if they creep into our prayers into our Office, into our spiritual reading, if they dominate our stray thoughts. The natural pleasures are only meant as relaxations, not as pre-occupations, not as the major work of the day for that is seeking God in and through all.

So far this applies equally well to lay people or religious. No one may substitute any created good for God. The difference in this matter between a monk or a nun and a lay person is that the former definitely eliminate certain joys while the latter is content merely to moderate the pleasure. These joys are those of married life, those of possession, those of free will in all the outward acts of life. The reason why the religious does this is not because such things are bad or wicked, but rather the contrary, because they are so good that they get too much in the way of God, whom he now wishes to seek alone. If we were pure spirits, perhaps we might be able uninterruptedly to live in contemplation, but being human some relief is needed, even for religious, even for Carthusians. This asceticism is not an end in itself; it is not an elimination of desire, a real death, but an attempt to put nothing in the place of God.

It is strange that such spiritual wrestling should be needed in order to place the soul upon the road towards God. But fact proves its necessity more than words can. The fact is sin, or that rebelliousness, that blindness and waywardness in us, like ungovernable furies, which snatch us out of our peace and stability in spite of ourselves yet through ourselves. It is we who do it, and yet who stand aghast at what we do. We are ensnared into the narrow cell of self, into that cave full of imitation jewels and from which there is difficult escape, seeing that the word to open the door—selflessness—we have forgotten.

Monks and nuns do make a definite renunciation of certain things, but not of all things. Though God should be enough for us, the human frame is weak and needs relaxation. All men, like St John, must slacken the string of their bow sometimes. So even monks and nuns do not refuse themselves some of the joys of friendship, some of the joys of the senses, music, food, sleep.

In the original state of man, from which we have fallen, these joys were not reprehensible. They were part of the established order. What had to be done gave joy in the doing, because it was good to do it. Therefore we should not abandon joys as though they were wicked, nor exactly because, if we take them, we do not leave room for God; but rather just because they are good we tend to overdo them. We must restrain our urge for them because the urge, since the Fall, is exaggerated. We need to be detached;

and to be detached we must practise abandoning creatures. Therefore St John of the Cross is right to demand "Nada" at the threshold, and St Francis to give back some creature-joys once the sacrifice in the heart has been made.

T. S. Eliot, in his poem "Little Gidding," puts it clearly:

"There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and growing
between them, indifference

Which resembles the others as death resembles life . . ."

These are the three: attachment, indifference, detachment. The first is sin, the second death, the third life.

REVIEWS

SAINT CATHERINE OF GENOA: TREATISE ON PURGATORY; THE DIALOGUE. Translated by Charlotte Balfour and Helen Douglas Irvine. (Sheed and Ward; 6s.)

This is an attractive edition of two great classics of mystical literature. St Catherine of Genoa has become known to a wider English public through Baron von Hügel's *Mystical Element in Religion*; but it may be that his readers thought the two large volumes enough and never attempted to read the original. Yet mystics are rather like poets: though they often need a sympathetic interpreter to explain their meaning, no book about them can take the place of their own works; it can only prepare the way. St Catherine of Genoa is no exception—her *Treatise on Purgatory* must be read and re-read for its depth to reveal itself. For it is not only an unsurpassed description of the purgatorial pains in perfect conformity with the doctrine of the Church, but also a document of profound mystical teaching. Its last chapter is a description of the "Dark Night of the Spirit" in a nutshell, as it were, and all the preceding chapters, which deal with the suffering souls, are easily applicable to the spiritual life on earth, for it was all not only seen in visions but lived through in the depth of her being. The central theme, the core of all mysticism, is the Love of God, which is the cause of Purgatory, for the soul's "instinct to God, aflame and thwarted, makes Purgatory." But as the souls know themselves to be within the ordinance of God, they are happy and contented, despite their extreme pain, "and day by day this happiness grows as God flows into these souls," though their pain is not thereby lessened.

The *Dialogue* that follows the *Treatise on Purgatory* was formerly held to be also the work of the Saint; but Baron von Hügel's opinion that it was written by her disciple Battista Vernazza has