

THE WAY OPENS

BY

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THROUGH the door of conversion we step out on to the way of perfection opening out before us like a rugged path leading up a steep hillside in some enchanted island. Looking up we see the way as strenuous but of incredible beauty. The brilliant greens of the hillside conceal some soft and smelly quagmires on either side of the path, but from the open door the vision appears stimulating and invigorating. The first view is of the general life of the Church, the island populated by a community all working together, helping each other up the side of the hill, marking out the waterlogged patches, stumbling here and slipping there, but not alone, as many helping hands stretch out to pick up the stumbler. They sing, too, and recite as they work together a common song and a common poem of praise to the Lord on the heights. There are many choruses. Some of these men and women have cracked and harsh voices; but they all sing as they go. The door has opened into the liturgical life of the Church.

Brought up in the ecclesiastical tradition, and devoting his whole life to the choir, reciting the seven Penitential Psalms, the Psalter (to 'ding upon David' he calls it in *Passus* III, 436) or the Breviary, attending Masses in those older Gothic or newer Perpendicular churches, following with care the Liturgical cycle, William Langland had naturally a fundamentally liturgical type of spirituality. This attitude is most important for the present stage at which we are now imagining the soul. For having done its best to leave the communal, the social sins of the world, it finds itself living in the communal life of salvation. Its prayer is communal; its approach to God is not isolated or solitary.

For Langland the liturgy was no mere prayer-wheel, by which he gained a living. He evidently tried to pay attention to the words he was reciting. Unlike many friars and clerics of his day who seem to have prayed for money and paid no heed to what they did,¹ he made his own the words of David, of the Gospels, of the Doctors of the Church. Apt quotations from the Psalter, for example, appear on every page.

As Holywrit witnesses when men say their graces:

Aperis tu manum tuam, et implet omne animal benedictione.
Thus he considers the death of the rich who have their reward in this life:

And when they die they are disavowed, as David says in the Psalter:

Dormierunt et nihil invenerunt.

¹ Therefore I am in fear that the folk of Holy Church
Pass over as other do their hours and offices. (*Passus* XV, 414).

And in another passage also:

Velut somnium surgentium, Domine, in civitate tua, et ad nihilum rediges. (*Passus XIV*, 70 and 139.)

We could multiply such quotations indefinitely. While some are obvious maxims from the New Testament, many of the applications are ingenious and reveal an unflagging attention to the meaning of the words recited (cf. for example, X, 70).

The Mass, the Sacraments and the Liturgy are for Langland the first essentials in the life of grace, and without them in the ordinary course the soul remains in sin. When Contrition suggests Friar Flattery as a more comfortable physician for sin than Penance, Conscience replies:

I know no better doctors
Than parson or parish priest, penitence or bishop
Except Piers the Plowman, who has power above all men.
(*Passus XX*, 315-7).

And again earlier:

But we Christian creatures have the cross in honour,
Are firm in the faith, God forbid otherwise,
And have clerks to keep us so and those who will come after us.
(*Passus XV*, 619-21).

The ecclesiastical structure of the Church, made up as it is of external signs of inward grace, provides the necessary basis for the firm faith which begins at conversion. The priests are ministers of the spiritual life and there is no by-passing them. Langland insists on this in the poem which overflows with powerful condemnation of the laxity, simony and lechery of the clergy. He is critical indeed but not anti-clerical, following in this a similar refrain to that of his great contemporary in Italy, St Catherine. No matter what the character of the minister, Langland followed the liturgy celebrated by him with deep understanding and devotion. His most striking vision, that of the harrowing of hell, takes place approximately on Palm Sunday, and the outward ceremonies of the day become almost inextricably mingled with the inner vision. The words of the liturgy constantly burst in:

How the children chanted *gloria laus* to Jesus,
Then Faith cried from his window 'A Fili David'.

(*Passus XVIII*, 8 and 14).

The voices of the turba crying, 'Crucifige', 'Tolle', 'Ave Raby', and the Christ's '*Consummatum est*' (id 40 sqq.) evidently echo the sung Passion of that day. By transforming the liturgy into a vision, the church doors have become the gates of hell, the crowds outside around the crucifix represent the company of Christians round the victorious Christ, and the doors are opened to release the patriarchs and prophets, *populi in tenebris*, to receive the glory they had awaited in bondage 'for seven hundred winters' (*Passus XVIII*, 331-342).

Again, it is after the Offertory when the sacrifice of the Mass has

begun and Calvary about to be re-enacted on the altar that Langland has a realistic vision of Jesus and Piers suffering victoriously on the cross. (*Passus* XIX, 1 sqq.).

The Mass indeed appears frequently as the central act of Christian worship, so that vices at its celebration are particularly blameworthy—Envy is distracted from attention at Mass by Elene's new jacket (*Passus* V, 218) and Wrath encourages wrangling among widows in the pews (id. 277—cp. id. 533 and XIII, 405). To the sacrifice of the Mass the repentant sinner first turns his steps (*Passus* V, 425) and there he finds the most fruitful type of penance (id. 572). Holy Communion for this liturgical Englishman took its place naturally in the framework of the Mass, so that he 'went to holy mass and to be houseled after' (*Passus* XIX, 3). This necessary food for the spirit must be taken by the faithful Christians 'as help for their health once monthly, or as often as they have need' (id. 389 sqq.). The man who has been baptized and shriven in the blood of Christ, 'shall never be stalwart, till he has eaten his body and drunk his blood' (*Passus* XVII, 97):

So God's body my brothers unless it be worthily taken,
Will condemn us at Doomsday as the writing did the Hebrews
(*Passus* XII, 92-3).

When he discusses the extent and means of salvation, he naturally gives supreme importance to baptism, although a pagan like Trojanus may be saved without the physical sacrament through the other types of baptism—by blood or desire (*Passus* XIX, 39 sqq.). For the ordinary Christian the sacrament of Penance is one of the primary means of entering on the spiritual life so long as it is undertaken genuinely with true contrition and followed by satisfaction.

But shrift of mouth is worth more if men are contrite inwardly,
For shrift of mouth slays sin, be it ever so deadly.

Per confessionem to a priest *peccata occiduntur*,
Where contrition drives it down till it becomes venial;

As David says in his psalter: *et quorum tecta sunt peccata*.

But satisfaction seeks out the root, slays it and voids it;

It is unseen and sore no longer, but seems a wound healed.

(*Passus* XIV, 99-105, cf. V, 735.)

It is needful to insist upon this liturgical and sacramental side of English spirituality, for although the mystics, and particularly the later ones, make little mention of it, they necessarily presuppose it as the foundation of the whole spiritual life. Hilton states it briefly thus: 'Therefore it is good for each man to shrive him to our Lord and sing to his name. Shrift goeth before, and song cometh after; by shrift is the soul cleansed and through singing is it kept in cleanness' (*Bonum Est*, c. 1). The same author devotes a chapter to show 'that the certain prayer in speech ordained by God and of Holy Church is best for them that are newly turned to God' (*The Scale*: c. 27). In this point there is a

considerable difference in attitude between these earlier English writers and that of the Spanish Mystics. In the latter part of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* the Doctor of Mystical Theology seems almost to adopt a critical and antipathetic spirit to ecclesiastical ceremonial. In the England of the 14th century the country was already flooded with devotional literature like the *Layfolks' Mass Book*, and *Prymers*, and Guides to Curates; and these writers seem on the whole to presuppose this. Not so William Langland; he is delineating the beginning and growth of the spiritual life in the common man, and so he needs to presuppose nothing. He forms a bridge between the common prayer-book literature and the mystical literature of the time.

CHARLES DE FOUCAULD:
THIRTY YEARS AFTERWARDS

BY

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CHARLES DE FOUCAULD'S silent death at Tamanrasset on December 1st, 1916, was the crowning proof, in a life full of them, of the falsity of that remark of an Arab's to Ernest Psichari: '*Oui, vous autres français, vous avez le royaume de la terre; nous, les Maures, nous avons le royaume du ciel.*' The kingdom of heaven was surely opened to this Frenchman who had lived prepared for such a death; for in one of his notebooks, found after his death, was discovered this sentence, written at the head of the page: *Vivre comme si tu devais mourir martyr aujourd'hui.*

His life is too well known for it to be recounted once again; but it is useful for many reasons to attempt an estimate of the influence of that life, and to try and fathom to some degree Père Charles's intentions and motives, to seek, even, an interpretation of that living martyrdom that was his life.

He died to all outward seeming a failure; yet how often is that the lot of the saints. His diaries, his letters, all record his great desire for some companions to share his solitude. Not that he did not desire a solitary life, but that he would people the Sahara with solitaries, preaching the Gospel by prayer, by penance, by example, by charity.

They never came. Père Charles de Foucauld died alone except for his enemies. But they are in the Sahara, now, his solitaries. He did not die in vain.

Of all Charles de Foucauld's writings—considerable in quantity: they have lately been typed ready to send to Rome in view of the promotion of his Cause, and number 15,925 quarto sheets—two small books will yield a fruitful harvest to the reflective reader who will study them in search of their author: they are his *Évangile présenté aux pauvres du Sahara* and his *Directoire*.