

and historical. And this traditional element, not all the religious genius in the world can ever escape or replace: it was there, surrounding and moulding the very pre-natal existence of each one of us; it will be there long after we have left the scene. We live and die its wise servants and stewards, or its blind slaves, or in futile, impoverishing revolt against it: we never, for good or ill, really get beyond its reach.<sup>18</sup>

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## ‘THE BELOVED’

BY

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INCE God is love, so too is Christ. But what is love? It is not enough to say that love is the giving of oneself as Christ our Lord did upon the cross for this act is but an outward expression of love and the same act could be not love but a crime. What then is love if God is love?

It is not the urge we have for something we do not possess for God has all and more than all. He is infinity, and yet he loves.

Perhaps, to know its nature, we should begin with ourselves, for all our knowledge of God is known by analogy with ourselves. We have such things as qualities. He is these things. Whatever we obtain, that we obtain from him. He is that and more. He is knowledge; he is power, wisdom, prudence, peace, love. We have them as passing gifts but we know them best in our own souls.

### (a) Love of Desire.

What is love in us? We love ourselves. We know we love and yet what love is escapes our grasp. We call it ‘will’ to distinguish it from cold objective knowing; and yet it is in the knowing that love comes. But for knowing we could not love; this very knowing is impelled to act by desire. Loving in us seems mostly a craving for completion beginning with a sense or knowing of our incompleteness, our lack of fulfilment. In all our life, in each part of it, we struggle for entirety, wholeness; in our bodies which but for the vile fall would be a sweet symbol for heavenly things, we seek fulfilment. The two sexes are mutually fulfilling. Nor did St Paul fear to show the parallel when he said that marriage was the symbol of Christ and the Church. Our senses too seek completion, the answer, the echo from without; the ear in sweet-sounding harmonies, the sense of smell in flowers, touch in soft silks, taste in delicate wines and choice meats; and finally the mind, that world in little, that chasm of emptiness hungering to be filled, with such capacity that no

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<sup>18</sup> F. von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol. I, p. 59.

mortal thing can fill it; no created wonder, not all the knowledge of the world. Yet madly men have hoped that in the infinity of the particular that unquenchable thirst can be slaked. But nothing short of infinity does satisfy the human mind, as St Augustine saw and said so nobly through the wonder book, the *Confessions*.

That is love of self, noble indeed, but not true Christ-like love. This love that we have described is the fundamental urge of creatures to reach their perfection. In this life we may delight in God but rarely; for the mists round the high mountain are so thick that we cannot see that God is good, we can only know indirectly that this must be so. It is a roundabout way of knowing and difficult and lacks some of that spontaneity which will only be natural to us in Paradise.

For though I knew his love who followed

Yet was I sore adread

Lest having him, I must have nought beside.

(*The Hound of Heaven*).

Indeed it would be untrue to deny all knowledge of God; we have enough to give us that yearning for the infinite which turns all finite things to ashes. For love is that first tremor of the soul caused by the glimpse of the loved being. It is a new frame of mind induced by that being's presence in the soul. It is a condition of mind which sets in motion the movement outwards towards the loved person and in this case towards God. There would be no love unless the person loved—God—presented himself to us first.<sup>1</sup>

It is the old story of the magnet and the piece of iron. Until the magnet comes near the iron is still; but approach the magnet and the iron leaps out towards that which is drawing it.

This is the case not only of relations between creatures but between us and God also. God must approach us and appear before the soul. By faith we have a beginning of knowledge of God. Before that there is emptiness, a feeling of lack, of frustration; but when God knocks at the door, when he speaks during and after the wild wind and storms of youth, with his still small voice, like a gentle air, then the soul yearns; it knows its home. This is love. At this point there is a movement, a going outwards to reach to God, in desire, in a fear of losing him, in a sadness at not having him, and in the end, when face to face in heaven, delight, the complete fulness of love.

Now at this point, having seen one kind of love, it is not out of place to ask how to account for the gulf that separates the love and the desire for God displayed by the saints and our own tepid

<sup>1</sup> 'Amor dicitur illud quod est principium motus tendentii in finem amatum.' I-II. 26. 1.

substitute? When we consider the gigantic, consuming love shown by a St Benedict in his quest of solitude and God, a Francis Xavier in his heroic travels and selfless apostolate, a St Francis of Assisi and his love of God only, and then straightway glance at our own, the difference seems one of kind rather than one of degree.

In the light of St Thomas's explanation that love essentially is in the first place passive, or a reception by the will of the loved person, and then a spontaneous springing out, our cold and calculating, pedestrian, protesting, ambiguous love seems not love at all. There seems no spontaneity in it, no fire. How explain the gulf of separation?

Perhaps St John of the Cross gives us the explanation in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Bk. ii, c. 7). He says that: 'By seeking oneself in God is meant seeking the prizes and presents from God, but by seeking God is meant not only seeking to be deprived of these things for God, but the bending of oneself to take up all that is most unpleasant for Christ's sake, both from God and from the world and this is the love of God'. And a few lines further on he explains mysteriously, 'For by working at this, all this and more than this is done and found to happen as a result of it'.

If one may dare to comment on so great a doctor, perhaps one might dare to expand it thus: We have the same kind of love as the saints, but it lies dormant because so many other loves occupy the ground of the soul. Clear away this rubbish, this debris, and the majesty of God is self-evident. His lovableness is manifest and the soul flies up as the iron to the magnet. The 'more than this' is the vision of our true goal.

Like so much else in the religious life which at first seems artificial, superimposed, this 'taking up our cross' is intrinsically necessary for perfection. In order to find our life we must lose it; in order that the corn should grow, the grain must die. The old loves must be abandoned and the faculty of love, avid to love, will seek out God and nothing else;

All which I took from thee I did but take,  
Not for thy arms  
But just that thou might'st seek it in my arms.

(*The Hound of Heaven*)

#### (b) The Love of Complacency.

The love so far described is ultimately concerned with self, springing from the urge of self completion. But there is yet another type of love, called also charity, wherein it seems the self gets swallowed up in the thing loved. True, such delight is our perfection and therefore this other love cannot precisely be this delight; rather must this delight be a fruit of it; just as the smile may result from the

sudden comprehension of a truth, it is not the essence of the act but a consequence.

The human mind has this great power that it can see good wherever it may be, and judge it to be good. Seeing that it is good it will desire it to remain so and wish to improve it, if that were possible. This is the essence of charity. Delight is the natural effect of this attitude, just as fear may be if the loved thing seems to be in danger of losing its goodness. We have that spontaneous reaction of the will to the Good as put before it by our mind. This leads to delight and this to further movement in order to be united to the thing loved. This is the final perfection of charity.<sup>2</sup>

God is charity. He has delight in the company of men. He so loved the world that he sent his own son, that they might be redeemed by him. Jesus too is love. He sees man, his creature, and loves him, he goes out to him. There is this difference between our love and Christ's, that whereas ours is not always effective his infallibly is. Is it possible to describe in words the love he showed in act? He loved us to the end. He sought us out in this obscure corner of the universe to draw us up into the life and joy and delight of God. Every scene in the earthly life is impregnated with charity. It is a great mystery that God should have any delight in the sons of men unless perhaps we see some glimmer of light in the words of St Thomas that God is *maxime liberalis*, he gives himself being infinitely perfect. Besides, no love at all would exist were it not that God, being love, created it.

The highest mystery, and the one in which we share almost unknowingly, is the love within the Godhead itself. It is, as it were, rings of love, infinite in scope, infinite in intensity, infinite in realisation; full in content but full without end. The awareness of each Person by each of the others is Love, infinite and complete. There is no movement outward, not because of any impotence but because the union of the two poles is already achieved from the beginning that had no beginning. When, therefore, we consider how intense is human love, even for finite, well defined and clearly limited objects, what must be the intensity, immensity, fire of the delight within the Godhead?

Christ is God, God is love. The intensity and brightness of his love cannot be imagined nor described. But to know that it is infinite and that we are already sharers in it and are benefitting from it should give us joy and peace, which are fruits of charity.

How remote God's goodness seems, how incomprehensible and mysterious. But for the Incarnate Word our understanding of God's

<sup>2</sup> Cf St Francis de Sales. On the Love of God, Bk 1.

goodness would be feeble-minded. As the Preface for the Nativity so truly points out—*Vere dignum et justum est . . . ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur.*

If without Christ we cannot see that God is love—for we cannot have known what God had prepared for us were we not admitted into the secrets of the kingdom of grace—with Christ all is plain. Love is an intense desire for the good of the person loved. God, through Jesus his son, has shown us that he wants, longs for, our good not in this world which is merely a wayside station, but for ever with him in heaven. He went even to the lengths of dying, of bearing with us, of being patient for age upon age so that we in the end, each of us, could learn the lesson of love. We should not love God primarily for ourselves but should rejoice in his goodness for its own sake, long for its fulfilment in his providential activity. This we can do, we little human midgets, by loving Christ and doing his holy will as manifested to us in the Church, that continuation of himself.

Acts of love of God are then contentment and joy in God's loveliness, goodness and perfection. This act and the power from which it flows are raised to a Godlike quality, power and perfection by the gift of grace which modifies our whole being. This power of love is now called in the newness of its nature, charity.

There results from these acts of love of God a natural conclusion that we wish all his will to be obeyed. It is in this way that our life becomes rooted in charity that the motive for doing anything and everything is supernatural charity—the motive, the reason why we obey God's law is that we love God. The only way that we can even appear to give God something is by sharing in the bringing about of the Plan in his creation.