

REVIEWS

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS FOR ALL?

Whether St John of the Cross is for all souls, that is still a problem; and it is not answered by everyone in the same manner. Here in this latest book of Professor Allison Peers is a good statement of the problem and a tentative answer.¹

The book under review contains many other good things: articles upon Ramon Lull and Juan Luis Vives, a series upon Catalan writers of varying merit, one on the late king of Spain, one on Columbus and America, and others. *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* doubtless would prefer me to concentrate upon the first and most substantial of the articles, that upon St John of the Cross.

One of the Professor's theses is that St John wrote for a special audience, the Discalced Carmelites, in that view he has the authority of St John of the Cross himself:

'Ni aun mi principal intento es hablar con todos, sino con algunas personas de nuestra sagrada Religion de los primitivos del Monte Carmelo, asi frailes como monjas.' *Subida del Monte Carmelo* Prologo (section 9). 'Nor is my intention either to speak with all, but with a few persons of our holy religion of the primitive (observance) of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns. . . .'

This, it is to be noted, occurs at the very entrance to the outermost mansion, the beginning of the beginning. For the Ascent of Mount Carmel is the first of the series of his works, in the sense that it describes the beginning of the ascent to God.

Professor Allison Peers then goes on to show that the saint does also give advice to others neither perfect nor 'in religion'. In this he finds sufficient proof. He goes on also to state that even if some of the advice given by St John is meant for his own brethren, yet all can benefit from it, for it inspires us all to greater effort, and so on.

It is also suggested, very tentatively, that the advice of St John, especially this whole-hearted advice to abandon all, is meant for those who have travelled a long way upon the road to perfection. On page 28 we read, 'First it must be noted that such counsels are not given to all, but to those rare souls who have travelled far on the hardest of all journeys'. Then later, p. 29, 'When he has in mind contemplatives who walk on lower levels, St John of the Cross allows a much freer use of creatures'.

It is this use of creatures which may prove a stumbling block to a true understanding of St John. We must distinguish first of

¹*St John of the Cross, and Other Lectures and Addresses.* By E. Allison Peers. (Faber and Faber; 15s.)

all (1) the use of them in ordinary life and (2) the use of devotion, 'sensible' or intellectual, in prayer itself.

(1) St John is speaking for a particular kind of religious who has been called by God to perfection in a special way, the way of complete renunciation in *act* of all things. This is ONE OF THE WAYS to perfection, to God. It is not the only way, and other saints have reached the same goal without doing that. St Thomas More could be cited and St Francis of Sales. Therefore this complete giving up of all to obtain all, which is the motif of St John's ascetical teaching, is not meant for all.

Although we have just pointed out that there are many 'Ways' to God and that in all the 'Ways' a soul is not expected to abandon all for God in *act*, yet it does remain true that any seeking perfection must utterly renounce themselves. It may be necessary for some souls in order to reach perfect union with God actually to give up all enjoyment. It does not follow that it is necessary for all to follow that road. But certainly no soul can attain the goal without being ready to give up anything that God may wish him to abandon.

Perfection, and union with God, are possible and desirable in all walks of life. A husband or wife, mother or father, are not expected to abandon the joys of married life. Such persons who desire to give themselves to God, give themselves to him by giving unselfishly to each other. If they give themselves to each other, to the earning of a living, to their children, for God's sake, they certainly do renounce themselves, even while enjoying each other and being happy in their home and children.

Consequently it seems to the reviewer that St John's advice on abnegation must be taken with caution. His advice is meant for all, religious or those in the world, married or unmarried, all those aiming at union with God; and it applies to them right at the beginning of the way and all the way. You cannot begin without the renunciation. But his advice actually to abandon all is only meant for those who are led that way; in '*preparatio animae*' only is it meant for all true seekers. How much actual giving up must be decided by common sense and obedience, otherwise it is a supreme sample of self-will.

(2) The use of creatures also comes into actual prayer. There St John makes a very important distinction, and he does it with wonderful insight. He says that, in the lower reaches of prayer, men should use the senses and any warmth of devotion that God sends them. However, there comes a time when all these things are a hindrance, and some persons even seek them for their own sake. None of them is God, and God may call the soul beyond them, straight to himself. When this point arrives, **IN PRAYER**, all these onetime aids must be abandoned. In this his teaching is for all men; but specially the marks which he gives for proving whether a soul has reached that state or no.

St John of the Cross might be astonished if, on returning to this earth for a passing visit, he were told to hold a court of all his admirers. Here on one side would be the sentimentalists who love his poetry for its sensuous beauty, disregarding its mystical meaning; with them would be the litterateurs, in astonishment and admiration at his style. There on the other side would be the sincere Protestant who finds little to jolt him in his convictions, such as he would find in St Teresa. And finally the Church which has given us all an assurance, declaring him to be a Doctor of the Universal Church.

Nevertheless, in spite of the Church's official sanction, St John of the Cross is not good for all, particularly the sentimental, the easily discouraged, the timorous souls, nor for the self-righteous, for these would get proud of out-doing everyone else in austerity. Even those who get enlightenment from him should put themselves under a guide and obedience, or all their activity, particularly their mortifications, will be self-will and almost worthless.

It is not things nor circumstances which must be renounced but self and selfishness in every form. This is absolutely necessary for all souls who would attain to any close union with God.

These notes and thoughts upon Professor Allison Peers's book, which are the fruit of some discussion with several persons, will prove to the reader of the review that at least one reader of the book was encouraged to return to St John—a pleasure which he had foregone for a variety of reasons for five years and that at least one reader has been made to think again.

COLUMBA CARY-ELWES, O.S.B.

MARGARET CLITHEROW. By Margaret T. Monro. (Burns Oates; 4s. 6d.)

It must seem ungracious to cavil at any book on this loveliest of martyrs, for surely none could be superfluous. This work, however, does not appear to be a happy addition to what has already been written about her. Its best feature is that it faithfully follows the great authorities, Fr Mush, her confessor, and Fr Morris, S.J. (Troubles of our Catholic Forefathers, III.) Its worst features are a certain cheapness of style and vagueness of aim. Margaret would not have enjoyed facetiousness or slang. It is false to her spirit to associate it with her. (See pp. vii, x, 4, 6, 12, 19, 22, 37, 41.) She would not have thought it quite loyal to point innuendoes at her husband, when she had pronounced on him in the clear-sighted days before her death. Then, if the purpose of the book be to modernise the previous conceptions of Margaret, they do not need it and only suffer by it. If the writer means to popularise the martyr, she does not need that either, for she has never been forgotten or neglected. York Catholics have but recently purchased the house in the Shambles which once was hers; the relic in the Bar Convent has always been venerated. What a new book could