

## THE STUDY OF MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

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With the publication in America of the translation of Father Arintero's great work on Mystical Development in the life of the Church and of Dr Greenstock's work on Christian perfection (both from the Herder Book Company of St Louis) a very important and decisive stage in the journey towards the more realistic attitude to the study of mystical theology has been reached.<sup>1</sup> Father Arintero died, a very holy man, in 1928 in Madrid; yet it is, perhaps, only at this point in the development of the study of mystical theology that his full significance can really be understood. It is therefore fortunate that through the devoted labours of Father Jordan Aumann, o.p., this very useful and accurate English translation of Father Arintero's major work has appeared.

At the time when the book was written in Spanish, the Dominican school, under the special inspiration of Father Garrigou-Lagrange, was fighting to establish the secure and consoling doctrine that infused contemplation and the mystical life are in the normal development of the Christian life towards holiness. Father Arintero was entirely in accord with this teaching and his whole book is based on those very tenets. But this does not mean that the work simply repeats the arguments and exposition of Father Garrigou-Lagrange which are by now so familiar. Indeed, we should say that Father Garrigou-Lagrange has by now made his point and that he may be heralded as a victor. But the approach of these two Dominicans is different, so that the reader need not fear that the publication of Father Arintero's work is just the beating of a dead horse, or a radiogram repetition of his fellow Dominican's work.

Father Garrigou-Lagrange has fought his battle in the realms of speculative theology. To the thomist that he is, the mystical works of St John of the Cross and St Teresa to which he applied himself were as corn to be ground in the schoolmen's mill. He analysed the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Mansions* in the light of the thomist teaching on grace and the beatific vision, and reached his speculative conclusions in the best tradition and with the assurance of a successor of St Thomas's. But of necessity his conclusions remained analytical and were expounded principally in terms of the analysis of the individual in his personal ascent to God.

Something more was required. The next step was to reintegrate the conclusions regarding the normal road to holiness into the mystical life of the Church, that is the life of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church.* By John G. Arintero, o.p. (Herders; Vol. I, £1 13s.; Vol. II, £2 5s.)  
*Be Ye Perfect.* By David L Greenstock, s.t.d. (Herders; 37s. 6d.)

Christian within the Church where his normal life is, of course, lived. It seems clear that when Father Arintero wrote, it was not generally recognised that he was already, as it were, ploughing the conclusions of the Dominican school back into the sacramental, mystical life or life of the mysteries of the Church. Although he was a fellow countryman of the great Spanish mystics and must have shared in something of their Spanish experience of close union with God, he is not very concerned with their writings. He is concerned far more with modern writers who have begun to return to what may be called a liturgical experience of the Christian mystical life, that is, in the sense of the mystical body. At the same time he insists over and over again on man's incapacity to translate the deep experiences of God into the cut and dried categories of human terms. It will be profitable to quote some of this Dominican's phraseology on the point: 'To contemplate in silence the treasures of life and divine science contained in the mystical body of Jesus Christ, and to ponder them in the daring and inspired phrases of Sacred Scripture and the great saints who felt these things keenly, surely this is better than to systematise them, in the vain hope of forcing them into the limited categories of our thought . . . ' (I, pp. 12-13). 'We prefer to imitate as much as possible the method of the Fathers in not abstracting, much less separating, one concept from the others' (I, p. 66). 'This is the great problem which our poor reason will never be able to solve. We can adequately appreciate it by contemplating and admiring it through the sacred symbols of revelation and the sublime statements divinely inspired or canonised by the Church' (I, p. 70).

Such phrases could be multiplied a great number of times. And they do not imply an anti-speculative or anti-theological frame of mind: the whole massive work gives the lie to such a dangerous assumption, as it traces the unity of the ascetic and mystical life to the summit. But at the summit, again, the soul is not left in an isolated union with God; it is reintegrated in the Church's life of union as the whole title of the work reveals. Some phrases will also make Father Arintero's 'ecclesial' attitude clear. 'As the more important members and organs of the Holy Church are increasingly purified, illumined, strengthened, sealed, transformed and adapted for their divine work, so the entire mystical body will be established, rooted and edified in charity' (II, p. 474). 'Christian subordination does not restrict, but it directs, stimulates and encourages. It makes each organ aid rather than impede the rest and it makes all of them continue to adapt and perfect themselves according to their respective destinies' (II, p. 485).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It should be said, however, that this aspect of the mystical life is scarcely developed at all by Father Arintero. The second volume is a more usual treatment of the 'Ascent' with a short chapter at the end on the Church.

These two departures from the usual treatise on the ascent to sanctity (the return to the language of mystery and to integration in the Church) provide in fact the turning point for a complete revolution in the exposition of the part of theology called 'ascetico-mystical'. On account of the necessity for showing this progress towards perfection in its analysed and systematised sections, the course of 'ascetico-mystical theology' has tended to become more and more unreal. Students, perhaps destined to be spiritual directors but as a rule determined to limit any such direction to the limits of the parochial confessional, are led painstakingly through the 'three ways' and the two nights. They have to discuss at length the question of infused contemplation and mystical experience, concluding finally with a profound treatment on the unitive way and mystical marriage.

In their subsequent dealings with Christians earnestly seeking to follow our Lord or simply jogging along in a complacent tepidity, they find that their training here has been next to useless. Very few, or none, of their penitents have reached the higher flights as described in the manuals; and 'mystical marriages' are rightly viewed with alarm if not panic from the other side of the confessional grille. On the other hand, the reluctant director finds a goodly number of people who are living in the bosom of the Church who are distinctly 'holy' and united to God; many others who are being pushed through the sieve of extreme adversity by a loving Providence; and all of them living in some relation to the mystery of Christ-in-us. He is sometimes left with the impression that all the work he did on the manuals of ascetic theology was intended exclusively for enclosed nuns.

Now this is no argument for those who claim that the post-reformation school which has separated the normal ascetic life from the extraordinary mystic life is right after all. That is where Dr Greenstock goes wrong. He accepts the usual 'manual' approach to the subject, but with evident uneasiness because it does not seem to him to fit in with real life. So he does his best to modify the conclusions; but his attempt is still couched in the same old stereotyped and systematised terms of which Fr Arinero expresses such suspicion. For example, Dr Greenstock rightly feels the need to modify the strict application of the 'three ways'. 'It would be a mistake to turn these three stages into water-tight compartments . . . there will be as many grades within each of these stages as there are individuals, because no two will be at exactly the same level' (pp. 166-7).

At this point the author has some very sound remarks recalling us to the reality of the growth of the Christian life. But then he goes on to remove the possibility of the third way from all but the 'chosen soul', having returned to his stages and systematisations. On the one hand we find: 'Even the state of union, that

which we call in general the unitive way, can be reached without infused contemplation'; but on the other: 'Infused contemplation is not merely an end in itself, but is a means to higher perfection, and in this sense we may say that it is necessary for those souls whom God has chosen to reach the heights of union with him—but of course it is necessary only if such is the divine choice of this grace for the individual soul' (pp. 296-7). Dr Greenstock makes a valiant effort to reach back to the real life of the Christian, but at the expense of the hard-won victory of the 'normal way of holiness'. He is forced to identify the rare with the extraordinary in the case of union with God because he is still examining the soul in the isolated laboratory of the school of manualists and has not rediscovered the Christian saint in the unity of the mystical body and hidden within the symbols of the great themes of the Scriptures.

Much useful work has been done in these matters on the continent and it is towards this that Fr Arinterro pointed thirty years ago, and towards which we must look in the future. It is, of course, a question of terminology. Mystical theology is the fullness of Christian life lived in union with Christ and the 'total Christ' of the Church, and lived in such a way that it is experienced as well as understood. Mystical theology, then, is bound up with what was called by the Apostles and early Fathers 'the mystery'—not merely the hidden dogma of faith, but the living mystery of Christ-on-earth being born, living, redeeming the times, and dying day by day in the life of Christians—'No longer I but Christ liveth in me'. But the word for this has disappeared and the *Mysterium* has given place to a systematised form of doctrine and explanation of doctrine which found its life originally in the existence of the Church. 'Sacrament' and 'sacramental' are the nearest equivalents, suggesting as they do the outward sign effecting and bound up with the inner reality of grace. But the word 'sacrament' has become very specialised. Until the end of the middle ages the word 'mysterium' or 'sacramentum' retained something of the original concrete sense, to which Fr Arinterro wishes to return. But now all tends to be lost in abstractions.

The modern mystical theology has forsaken the concrete scriptural and liturgical sign under the mistaken view that such signs and 'mysteries' were only stepping-stones across the brook that divides natural knowledge from the living knowledge of faith. Along with metaphors, similies, analogies, all are treated with some contempt in view of the reality attained on the other side. To give but one example: the bread and the words that consecrate the bread as flesh to be eaten are practically forgotten before the reality of the Real Presence and the defined explanation of transubstantiation. The concrete '*sacramentum*' of bread no longer counts and immediately there appears the inclination

to become absorbed in abstract explanation. The *res* and the *signum* have become divorced.

What Fr Arinterro was seeking, and what these French 'mystical' theologians are now seeking, is not a return to the virgin state of the '*signum*' or mystery in its original meaning. They are not condemning the tremendous edifice of systematisation that has been built up: they are wise enough not to demand a reactionary return to the primitive. But they do believe most firmly that the marriage between the sign and its concrete meaning, the *signum* and the *res*, is absolutely indissoluble and that until the pair are reunited in conjugal fidelity the mystical teaching will remain up in the air. We must remember that every other sentence of St John of the Cross is a scriptural sentence; that with his vigorous insistence on utter detachment went a concrete experience of the 'total Christ' and constant employment of the 'mystical' language of the Bible and also of nature. If we go back to the 'mystical' expressions of the New Testament, we shall find them concrete and not abstract. Man, of course, lives by symbols: he lives in 'mysteries' and to try to rob him of the sign or *sacramentum* and feed him only on 'pure' doctrine and 'utter' reality is not only bad metaphysics, it is also bad psychology.

'The efforts of the mystics to translate [their] mystical experience into intelligible language', writes Fr Arinterro again, 'seems as enigmatic to us who are ignorant as do colours to the blind. Yet such efforts are of greater value and give us a better understanding of the ineffable mysteries of the spiritual life than what could be taught by speculative theology which views these mysteries externally and only through the investigations of reason. "The things also that are of God, no man knoweth but the Spirit of God", and he to whom the Son chooses to reveal them.' (I, p. 18.) This indicates a return to the idea of mystical theology employed by St John of the Cross himself. But there is more to it even than that, for this mystical theology is not to be confined to the individual esoteric experiences of the highly gifted saint, but is linked also with the experience of the 'mystical' body. From the beginning Fr Arinterro grasped the full sweep of this true mystical theology: 'After we have revealed the priceless riches (of the supernatural life) and the perfect continuity existing between the ascetical and mystical life, we shall finally indicate in the third part, how this divine life is developed, manifested and perfected in the mystical body of the Church as a whole' (I, p. 40).

And ascetical theology is not to be omitted. For in the use of real, concrete signs and sacraments, man is only too prone to become tied down to the external material element. He has to be detached and to learn detachment in relation to his 'mysteries'. For example, the neighbour in the 'total-Christ' is part

and parcel of the concrete sign, the 'mystery' of Christ on earth. If a man separate the sign from its meaning, he will be in danger of 'using' his neighbour, climbing over him to reach up to the pure love of God; but if he become too immersed in the 'sign', he will grow so attached to and involved in the neighbour as to be unable to live in the fullness of union. So ascetic theology will teach him to be detached from the visible things that lead man to the love of the invisible. Perhaps it is here that the great advance in systematisation will help to preserve us from too great an immersion in the signs and symbols of the Testaments. Certainly the great achievements of such men as Garrigou-Lagrange will remain to fructify the future teaching of this theology.

Nevertheless, there is an immense work to be done. The translation of Fr Arintero's work can mark only the beginning of this work in which the tasting of the Scriptures and the true *lectio divina* must come into their own again. The numerous categories of the modern treatises with their elaborate 'scales' and stages have to be rethought, if we may use an ugly phrase, in terms of the total mystery of the Word of God. It is possible to foresee an entirely new type of study of 'mystical theology' resembling perhaps a well-planned course in Scripture but keeping always to the one theme of the way to divine union within the total Christ. In order to keep the student in touch with the concrete reality of his subject it will of course be necessary to foster in him the poetic faculty which knows how to use and discriminate images; and this is provided by the Word of God. Fr Arintero saw the need of all this. At times he is not without a touch of the old abstractions and systematisations. But he has set the stage for the revolution.

We may conclude by drawing back a curtain to catch a brief glimpse of the view at which Fr Arintero was gazing: 'Now we can understand, or at least faintly perceive, the inestimable dignity of the Christian who is thus deified in his being, his faculties, his actions, his goal, and in all things. He has in his heart the sovereign Trinity. He is a true son of the eternal Father, a brother and member of the Incarnate Word, and a living temple of the Holy Ghost, who animates and vivifies him as his soul does his body. In him as a member of Jesus Christ, Christ himself is perpetuated through that real bond which is the life of grace; and this bond strengthened through good works and the use of the sacraments, which cause the blood of the Redeemer to circulate in his veins. . . .' (Vol. I, p. 298).