

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

An Historical Approach—III

The Medieval Development

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DURING our study of the 'Patristic Heritage' in the second of these articles on the 'History of Spirituality' we considered the fulfilment of that heritage as reaching to St Benedict (†547), for in St Benedict and his new Western monasticism we can see as it were summed up the ideals of the patristic age on Christian perfection. And with St Benedict we are on the threshold of the middle ages in Europe: the Roman Empire of the West had ceased to be, and the new nations created by the Goths and the Franks were emerging and leading to the Holy Roman Empire that was the political background of so much of medieval Christianity. The 'unchanging East' remained in great measure unchanged until the total disaster of 1453 when the Roman Empire of the East at Constantinople ceased to be: the heritage of the Greek Fathers, summed up by Maximus the Confessor (†662) together with the Eastern monastic tradition preserved by John Climacus (†600) remained largely undisturbed, and, like the Byzantine Rite which has hardly changed since the fourth century, remains so today. Yet in the East there was a sudden awakening with the 'New Theology' of the spiritual life in the Hesychast movement in the fourteenth century, a time of important new movements also in the West: Gregory Palamas was an almost exact contemporary of Tauler and Suso. But the Hesychasts will be referred to again later in this article.

It is natural that with the influence of St Benedict on monastic life in the West we should find the first main developments within the framework of the 'life of perfection' that is monastic life within his Order. Thus it was particularly St Gregory (†604) who breathed into western monasticism the spirit contemplation. Benedictinism has in its constitution a wonderful freedom with regard to the practice of the spiritual life: everyone knows of the eloquent passages in the Holy Rule, where the Father says (in

chapter 20 of the Holy Rule, *De Reverentia Orationis*): 'Our prayer ought to be short and pure, unless it chance to be prolonged by the inspiration of divine grace', and (in chapter 52 about the Oratory of the Monastery): 'If anyone wish to pray secretly, let him go in simply and pray'. It is upon this background of personal freedom in prayer that the Order of St Benedict has given birth to some of the most influential teachers of the spiritual life during the 1,400 years of its existence in the freedom of its various forms of life. Thus St Gregory gave Benedictine life its first turn towards contemplation, inheriting greatly from St Augustine; and with the Benedictine St Anselm (†1109) we find the emphasis on 'affective' prayer built upon the beginnings of scholastic theology, as when Anselm prays to God: '*Fac, precor, Domine, me gustare per amorem quod gusto per cognitionem; sentiam per affectum quod sentio per intellectum*' (Meditation XI on the Redemption: PL 158, 769), a prayer of a theologian who is also a saint: 'Make me, O Lord, learn to appreciate through love what I already appreciate through study, and to understand with my affections what I already understand with my mind'. Again with the Cistercian son of St Benedict, St Bernard (†1153) we find the heights of mysticism reached by that passionate man, and at the end of the middle ages it is in the Benedictine Abbeys of Padua and Montserrat that we find with respectively Abbot Luigi Barbo (†1443) and Abbot Garcia de Cisneros (†1510) the beginnings of the systematic *devotio moderna* that was developed principally by St Ignatius Loyola. And the Benedictine Order has in modern times produced masters (not to speak of the living) in writers like Hedley and Marmion.

Probably the most valuable study of the earlier medieval period from our point of view is the great work of Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism* (1922, second, revised, edition 1927), which traces the development from Augustine, through Gregory to Bernard. (For the later period there is a most valuable sketch in the same author's brief and simple treatise, *Ways of Christian Life*, published in 1932, a most useful outline beginning with St Benedict.)

An important aspect of Benedictine spirituality is shown in St Gregory's emphasis on the union of the 'two lives', the active and the contemplative. For St Gregory, as for St Augustine, the object of the spiritual life is the love and contemplation of God, but at

the same time his great experience as a preacher and administrator (and a great administrator) enabled him to realise that *probatio dilectionis exhibitio est operis* (Hom. 30, PL 76, 1220): 'It is by showing good works that we can prove our love'. It was he, after all, who sent the missionaries to England in 596, and ever since Benedictines have been great missionaries. And moreover active good works will not spoil contemplation, but rather will enrich it, and one of Gregory's most important works is his *Pastoral Care*, dealing with the formation of a good pastor of souls.

Again with St Anselm we have a contemplative who was also a prominent administrator: when he died in 1109 at Canterbury, he had been sixteen years the archbishop. But perhaps Anselm's principal contribution is his union of the speculative theologian with the man of prayer. His intense theological speculations and in particular his preoccupation with the theology of the Redemption—one of his principal works is entitled *Cur Deus homo?*—so far from drawing him away from his contemplation and love of God, by his constant meditation on the problems drew him ever closer to him in love, and the passage we quoted above shows him as man eagerly desirous of experiencing in love, in a strongly personal way, the presence of the God whose mysteries were his daily study. In this way he is a special guide to those engaged on the speculative study of theology.

And so we come to St Bernard. A man's teaching is often best understood on the background of his life, and St Bernard's stern insistence upon penance and humility finds its place in the life of one who at the age of twenty-two entered Cîteaux bringing with him thirty-one friends from the gay and worldly circle of which he was the popular leader. Moreover, he was a man who well knew what love in this world can mean, and hence more than any master before him was able to translate what he called *Armor carnalis* into the *Armor spiritualis* through the action of God's grace. It was he who said that the only limit to the love of God is to have no limit: *modus sine modo diligere*, in his treatise *De diligendo Deo* I, 1. And in all this context it is not surprising to find St Bernard attracted to the Canticle of Canticles, and to find the highest expression of his teaching on the love of God given in terms of that supreme love-song. It is with St Bernard that we find the full exposition of the doctrine that at the summit of the

soul's love of God, through complete conformity to the Will of God the soul is transformed, and in the context (be it remembered) of the Canticle, he speaks of this union as a *spirituale matrimonium* (Commentary on the Canticle 83, 3 and 85, 12-13 especially). Four hundred years later St Teresa was to take up the same image in her description of the 'Seventh Mansion' (*Moradas* 7, 2). Yet St Bernard, not in spite of, but together with, the height of his mystical contemplation, was a man of vigorous action and administration: at twenty-five he was an abbot and at the age of forty-seven he became the most renowned preacher across Europe. Rightly with all his severity has he been called the *Doctor mellifluus*, the great teacher of the sweetness of the love of God.

Within this mystical development of Benedictine spirituality there appears a group of nuns in Germany who were the recipients of remarkable mystical experiences. The first of these is St Hildegarde of Bingen on the Rhine. She had a series of apocalyptic visions which had a powerful influence on the piety of the time, and was called 'the Sybil of the Rhine'. St Bernard himself knew her and was instrumental in getting the Pope's approval of her writings. She was at the same time a most able and practical abbess. She died in 1179 and is particularly important as the first of a line of mystics in Germany. In the same tradition and with somewhat similar mystical visions and experiences are St Mechtilde of Magdeburg (†1280), who had close contacts with the German Dominicans and a consequent influence upon the 'German Dominican School' of mystics (of which more later), and St Mechtilde of Hackeborn (†1298). St Gertrude the Great (†1302) was their contemporary and her visions, like St Hildegarde's, were of a prophetic nature, but at the same time contained much that contributed greatly to the personal piety of the faithful at the time, in particular with regard to an intense personal devotion to our Lord, and more particularly to the adoration of him in the Blessed Sacrament, and it is with her that we find the beginnings of a devotion to the Sacred Heart of our Lord. The year of St Gertrude's death was the year of the birth of another northern mystic and visionary, St Brigid of Sweden (†1373), who should be included here because her visions were of a similar kind to those of the German nuns and her foundations had a similarity to those of the German Cistercian nuns. But her influence on the Church of the time—the Popes were at Avignon from 1309 to 1377—

may be likened to that of her contemporary St Catherine of Siena (†1380).

The above sketch of the development of what may be called in broad terms the 'Benedictine School' has taken us two hundred years beyond St Bernard, and we must briefly retrace our steps to his time. Everyone knows of the conflict that arose between St Bernard and Peter Abelard (†1142), since St Bernard felt that the new philosophical science of which Abelard was the protagonist, and which was to develop into the highly technical system of scholasticism, was the enemy of true piety: it was the old conflict between science and religion. But at the same time there was rising a new school of thought at the Augustinian Abbey of St Victor near Paris, which was to have a profound effect on the thought of the succeeding century. For the Victorines there were three elements, none of which should be in conflict: the profound study of philosophy (and for them it was Platonist), with its application to theology; the *lectio divina* of the monks, or the meditative reading of the Bible; and true piety and mystical contemplation, and here they went back both to St Augustine and to Denis the Areopagite. The three great masters of the 'Victorine School' were Hugh of St Victor (†1140), Richard of St Victor (†1173) and Adam of St Victor (†1177). At the same time they were representatives of a new kind of monastic life, that of the Canons Regular, using the Rule of St Augustine, and combining a monasticism based on St Benedict with active pastoral work. An important book of Hugh of St Victor is the *Eruditionis Didascalicae* (PL 176, 777 ff.), in which this freedom of the universality of science together with true piety is proclaimed: *Coarctata scientia jucunda non est*: 'real scientific knowledge cannot be happy if it is shackled' (col. 800). Study, therefore, meditation, and prayer must make up a single Christian life. One should notice two later writers, also Augustinians, who developed particular aspects of this ideal: the one is the great Flemish preacher B. John Ruysbroeck (†1381), who had a great influence on his contemporaries, especially on the German Dominican mystics, and Thomas à Kempis (†1471), whose meditations entitled *The Imitation of Christ* have become one of the great spiritual classics.

In the century that followed the Victorines a new form of religious life emerged once more, that of the friars, especially the Franciscans and the Dominicans. St Francis (†1226) and St

Dominic (†1221) were friends, and the twin Orders have remained friends ever since, but their preoccupations were often in contrast. St Dominic's instincts were in the direction of scholarship, and his sons from the beginning maintained that tradition. But it was not so with St Francis, who at first mistrusted studies, feeling that they might take away his sons from the pursuit of prayer and poverty. Yet one of his early sons was St Antony of Padua (†1231) who was the most recently proclaimed Doctor of the Church (1946), and St Bonaventure (†1274), the 'Seraphic Doctor', was one of the great theologians of his age. His approach was essentially 'affective' (in the sense we used the word when speaking of St Anselm above), his theology was akin to that of the Victorines and his teaching on mysticism and contemplation related to that of St Bernard, whom he frequently quotes. The well-known prayer after communion, often printed in missals, is typical of St Bonaventure's way of thinking and praying: *Transfige, dulcissime Domine Jesu, medullas et viscera animae meae suavissimo et saluberrimo amoris tui vulnere*: 'Pierce, O Lord Jesus, the innermost parts of my soul with the sweet-bringing health-giving wound of thy love', and stands in Franciscan contrast to the measured phrases of the prayer of St Thomas Aquinas usually printed alongside it.

In the Franciscan tradition we find a remarkable visionary in the tertiary B. Angela of Foligno (†1309), whose revelations, though contemporary with the German Benedictine nuns mentioned above, have, especially in the later visions, the most profound theological content. The highest mysteries of God's being seemed to be somehow manifested to her and 'our poor human words can do no more'. In this state of union, she said, 'I saw God . . . a fulness, a clarity, that completely filled me . . . a beauty, supreme goodness . . . but words fail . . .'. We are reminded of the somewhat later mystic in England, Mother Julian of Norwich, who in her later 'Shewings' had similar experiences of God himself.

There has been a recent new interest in Julian of Norwich (whose revelations occurred in 1373) with the publication of two books in 1958: *A Shewing of God's Love*, being Julian's shorter text edited by Sister Anna Maria Reynolds, C.P., and the fascinating study *Julian of Norwich*, by Fr Paul Molinari, S.J. The mention of Mother Julian and her insight into God's love brings us to mention also others of the 'English School', slightly earlier:

the hermit Richard Rolle of Hampole (†1349) and the Augustinian Walter Hilton (†1396), whose spiritual direction regarding the degrees of contemplation in his *Ladder of Perfection* (which was published among the Penguin Classics in 1957) has a remarkable quality of combining the profoundest analysis with the quietest and most readable explanation.

But once more we must retrace our steps: to the time of the early friars, and in particular to the Dominican contemporary and friend of St Bonaventure, St Thomas Aquinas (†1274). In the realm of dogmatic and moral theology it was the special merit of St Thomas to have achieved a synthesis of the reborn philosophy of his age, particularly the Aristotelian, with Catholic theology, and to have organized with an unparalleled sense of order the general study of theology. Similarly in the realm of the theology of the spiritual life, which he sees essentially as a part of theology, he has indicated plainly the governing principles. One of the striking features of the *Summa* is the position of the treatise *De Religione*, which is placed within the treatise *De Justitia*, as a part of the creature's justice towards the Creator (II-II, 81, 1). Christian perfection, he also explains, is a matter of charity, or the love of God (II-II, 184, 1), and charity grows within the soul according to the three stages, which especially since St Bernard had become classical: the stage of the beginners who are 'abandoning sin', the proficient who are 'eager to progress' in the love of God, and of the perfect who 'cleave to God' (II-II, 24, 9). Moreover a central feature of St Thomas's teaching on the spiritual life is his treatment of the gifts of the Holy Ghost ('qualities or habits, by which a man is made ready to be obedient to the Holy Spirit', I-II, 68, 3), and in particular of the gift of wisdom, which corresponds to charity (II-II, 45, 1), and it is by the action of the gifts that grace is able to build upon nature. It seems likely that St Thomas was given (much later) the title of *Doctor Angelicus* because of his outstanding intellectual perspicacity and penetration of theological problems, for as he explains in his own treatise *De Angelis* it is the unimpaired clarity of understanding that characterizes the knowledge of a purely intellectual being, as is an angel. Yet in the last year of his life, on December 6th, 1273, St Thomas himself had some mystical experience of God himself, which prevented him from writing any more and which made the clarity of even his own writings appear to him as 'so much straw' compared to what

he had seen. He realized what the mystics have repeatedly said (beginning with St Paul in II Cor. xii, 4), that human words cannot fully describe the experience of God. Yet he remains for us a great master, as far as human words can go.

St Thomas's own master was St Albert the Great (†1280), who was associated with the German Benedictine mystics, especially St Mechtilde of Magdeburg, and was greatly instrumental in handing down the mystical writings of the Pseudo-Denis, and particularly in this way had an important influence on the school of German Dominican mystics, of whom the principal were Master Eckhart (†1327), John Tauler (†1361) and B. Henry Suso (†1366), and they in turn were influenced by the Augustinian B. John Ruysbroeck. It was a time of religious unrest in Germany and the rise of several pietistic movements, sometimes of doubtful orthodoxy. Eckhart's teaching on the union of the soul with God, the soul's mystical transformation (a notion already found in the patristic age and with St Bernard, and later with St Teresa), was patient of misunderstanding in an unorthodox sense, and has in fact been sometimes thus misunderstood. His two disciples Tauler and Suso developed his teaching and were preachers with a most powerful influence in Germany, Tauler with the more theological bent, and Suso, who was at heart a poet, with a more 'affective' approach. Suso's *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit*, 'Book of the Eternal Wisdom', is one of the spiritual classics of the period, speaking to the heart with a warmth of the love of God's wisdom.

Almost contemporary with the German mystics was St Catherine of Siena (†1380) in Italy. A Dominican tertiary, and in her last years constantly engaged in public works, she is strongly in the Dominican theological tradition. Her teaching, the direct result of her own high mystical experience, is frequently expressed in exact theological terms, with often the same emphasis as is found in St Thomas, especially with regard to charity being dominant in Christian perfection: *Neuna virtù può avere in se vita, se non dalla carità*, 'No virtue can be alive except through charity' (*Dialogo* 4), and perhaps one of her most important contributions is her emphasis on the nothingness of the creature before God: *Nel cognoscimento di te t'umiliarai vedendo te per te non essere*, 'By knowing yourself you will become humble, seeing that of yourself you are nothing' (*ibidem*). And we are back in the world of the Fathers of the Desert when we read in her *Dialogo* 78 the glorious

passage: *Ogni luogo l'è luogo, e ogni tempo l'è tempo d'orazione, 'Every place and every time is a time and place of prayer'.*

Even so rough a sketch as the above of the medieval period requires a mention of the Hesychast movement in the East. Contemporaneously with western teachers like St Catherine of Siena, St Brigid, Walter Hilton, Mother Julian of Norwich, John Ruysbroeck, Tauler and Suso, in the middle of the fourteenth century—and what an astonishing thing it is when we realise that these were all alive together—in the distant Byzantine East there was an important revival of the teaching of Simeon the 'New Theologian' (†1022) by which contemplative prayer was to be achieved by physical quiet (*hēsychía*) and complete immobility and mental concentration upon allowing the 'uncreated light of Mount Tabor' to enter the soul and transform it. The protagonist of the revival among the Orthodox was the controversial figure of Archbishop Gregory Palamas (†1359), who is still regarded by the Orthodox as a saint and a mystic; but certain doctrinal consequences of his teaching remain an obstacle between East and West. At the same time this primitive quiet prayer, marked by the simplest ejaculations, may include also something which may help our own troubled times.

A quick view like this over the medieval scene has sometimes hardly been more than a catalogue of names. But many of the names are familiar, and such a view may help to place the masters in some framework of historical perspective in that period of so many vital developments. Thus when we turn once more to their writings, we become more aware of their personal contribution to the search of the everyday Christian for a deeper understanding of his vocation as a lover and servant of God.