

# CHRIST THE LIGHT OF THE MIND

BY

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IN all the discussions recounted between our Lord and the Jews in the fourth Gospel we should note that St John the mystic, the lover, gathers up the sharp details of human reasoning, the clear natural replies of the unbelieving mind. And his record of them in the Gospel can be said to clothe them with a certain dignity and finality. They are at least human replies to God, intellectual, rational; no better perhaps have ever been made; and in symbol they stand as the earliest evidence of the human mind face to face with God revealing—two orders, the reason of man over against the revealed word of God. The doctrines Christ announces are truths beyond the natural understanding of men; but they are truths nevertheless proposed to human assent. In the records of his ministry we find him hearing, and we ourselves can read, the questions, replies and criticisms that men, judging by their own intellectual measure, could give in objection to his mysterious dogmas.

The real clue, however, in solving this problem of the harmony of reason and revealed truth is best found in a brief dialogue between Christ and his opponents, which St John omitted from the fourth Gospel, perhaps because it had already been recorded in the three Synoptic Gospels. Towards the end of his public ministry Christ was to hear put to him the most fundamental human question about himself, the implicit criticism that has remained so to say classical in this problem, and within the exact terms in which the problem must always be stated. 'And when he was walking in the temple, there come to him the chief priests and the Scribes and the ancients. And they say to him: By what authority dost thou these things? And who hath given thee this authority that thou shouldst do these things? And Jesus answering said to them: I will also ask you one word. And answer you me: and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men? Answer me. But they thought with themselves, saying: If we say, from heaven, he will say, why then did you not believe him? If we say from men; we fear the people. For all men count John that he was a prophet indeed. And they answering, say to Jesus: We know not. And Jesus answering, saith to them: Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things.' (Mark 11, 27-33). Implicit in these

few sentences can be seen perfectly set out the principles assumed, the chief question arising from them, the culpable unreason of those who evaded the right answering of it, and the complete justification of God illuminating those who accept his authority and leaving in darkness those who reject it.

In the first place it is evident that the chief priests did ask the right question. It was certainly a principle they rightly assumed that the prophet of God, when he should come, would speak truths and so act, as God had sent him; truths and actions of divine order, with their own absolute and divine authority. In face of such truths and actions when they appeared, no created or finite mind could of its own powers presume to criticise or judge their intrinsic and divine content. But the human mind could and should ask for their credentials: that is to say, should ask for some evidence, not of their intrinsic truth, but of their reasonable credibility; and this rational credibility must be intelligible and verifiable by the natural powers of the mind. With this rational evidence of their credibility, the act of faith accorded to them would be an assent of the mind legitimate and justified before the bar of human reason. And from this point of view it is clear how the supernatural statements of the nature and purpose of God could present to the human mind one line of approach by which men could rationally and naturally take hold of these divine truths: as St Thomas phrased it: *sub ratione communi credibilitatis*. The truths themselves revealed were, of their very nature, wholly above their grasp of understanding yet in so far as the utterance of them was accompanied by verifiable, discernible evidence of the authority announcing them, they did then offer to the mind a means of access or approach in complete conformity with the intellectual requirements of man. Men can only be said to accept an authority when their reason tells them it is the right authority; once the reason is assured of this, then the assent of faith by the mind to what the authority affirms is wholly justified, and a refusal of assent is unjustified and culpable morally. The question: by what authority dost thou do these things? amounted to an appeal for this evidence, as though to say: show us thy credentials, give us evidence that thou comest from God, and then will we accept thy doctrine. That is the exact force of their question. A doubt might arise as to whether their question were honest, and whether the priests and scribes asking it were sincere. The sequence was to prove that they were not; but their question was one that Nicodemus himself or even St John might well have asked, and it is one that every intelligent man may well ask of the Church today; the apologists of the Church will have an answer ready for it.

But Christ, then, had to deal not with honest and sincere enquirers, and his reply quickly exposes their duplicity. He does not at once or directly answer their interrogation; though as a matter of fact his deeds and words, his conduct, works and character had already notoriously and more than sufficiently provided a complete reply. But then he is confronted not with sincere and simple seekers after truth, and Christ's question in reply brings out immediately both the culpable unreason in the evasion and the nature of that evasion. Was the baptism of John from God or from men? They, the priests and ancients, had ignored St John and thereby rejected his testimony; yet that it was from God had been evident to all the people who had found more than enough evidence of his credibility in the deeds and words and conduct of the prophet from the desert. What the simple ordinary people had seen clearly enough, they themselves must have seen as certainly. If therefore they admit it was from God, which they could have known quite reasonably, out of their own mouths they would condemn their own unbelief in St John the Baptist. If they answer it was from men, they both feared the hostile judgment of the people who had readily accepted the rational credibility of the Precursor, and at the same time they would, knowingly, have spoken what was false. Therefore they try to evade by replying: We know not; and that itself was a plain untruth. But just as there was no need for Christ to prove over again that the authority of the Baptist was divine, so there was no need for Christ to say again and prove again to them that his own authority was divine. Of such opponents as these it was true that 'neither will they believe, if one rise again from the dead' (Luke 16, 31). After all, their questioning him now was no sincere seeking for true information: throughout all his ministry they had refused to accept the obvious evidence that he and his utterances were credible. Consequently there was sharp irony and awful judgment in Christ's final words: Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things.

From the brief analysis of this dialogue we can then recognise already the necessary validity of one distinction to be kept in mind: the distinction between the intrinsic evidence of a truth, and its extrinsic evidence. Of the divine truths revealed, there cannot be seen by the natural mind of man unaided by grace any intrinsic evidence; and this from the very nature of the case, in so far as their intrinsic evidence is above the cognitive powers we possess. But there can be given extrinsic evidence, and this is not directly of their truth, but of their reasonable credibility. If the gardener tells his small boy to keep away from the hive because bees have stings and they will hurt him, the boy is acting reasonably

when he believes his father's word; he already has evidence of his father's trustworthiness and authority, and of his father's power to know things of which the child has no direct experience; and this amounts to an extrinsic evidence that the bees really have stings and are dangerous when disturbed. The example is but a rough parallel to illustrate the nature of extrinsic evidence. In the case of the prophet or Messiah revealing doctrines which are to be accepted by faith on his authority, which therefore of their nature offer no intrinsic evidence to the natural minds of men, there would be extrinsic evidence apparent enough in the veracity and the honesty of the speaker, especially when these are combined with the signs and wonders, the miracles and fulfilments of prophecy which the Messiah displayed. We have, therefore, from the objective side of the truths revealed one clear element which the human mind can approach and verify.

But within the intellectual nature of man there is also a further quality which while it makes no positive claim towards an apprehension of the hidden nature of the Godhead, yet it does indicate that any revelation of the divine nature would not be incompatible with the receptive powers of the mind. The human intellect is a faculty of knowledge. Its natural range or reach is limited to the created species and natures around it. But from the generic element of its intellectual character, in the adequate extension of its power of abstraction, it can rise above the finite and restricted orders of these natural objects, and can consider and contemplate the transcendental being of which they are but material and finite realisations. In other words the mind of man in its strictly intellectual quality is co-ordinate with universal being; and precisely as such it offers, therefore, to the supernatural enlightenment God might give, an obediencial capacity or receptivity whose fulfilment, dependent entirely upon the revealing activity of God, would mean an elevation of the human mind in entire conformity with its generic quality. Not, from this point, could we prove that God indeed had revealed the divine and mysterious nature of himself; nor, from this point, still less could we prove any positive claim or order to that revelation, since the revealed truth must be, in comparison with the finite and specific nature of the intellect, something entirely gratuitous and exceeding specific human fulfilment. But on the supposition that God willed to reveal the supra-natural truths about himself, then the existence of a receptive capacity not exhausted by the finite but already co-extensive with an analogical infinite, will be sufficient proof that such a revelation is not incompatible with the character of our intellectual nature and is in no way repugnant to the natural powers of the mind. The

revelation bestowed may, by terms of its own, be for a given period in a mode of obscurity; that is, in terms of faith, preparatory on earth to vision in heaven. But even this obscurity would be no derogation whatsoever to the intellectual nature of men: firstly because even obscure knowledge of the divine truths revealed is itself beyond the native rights and demand of the mind; secondly because the revelation under this obscurity is already an added perfection, a gratuitous privilege to the mind; and lastly because the revealed truth is given on earth, not yet as the final perfection of the mind, but as something promissory and prophetic of ultimate intellectual vision, something to be accepted by the mind under the free movement of the will; so that the act of faith is not yet the immediate vision promised in heaven but an assent by the mind given to the truths under the impulse of a good will actuated by grace: the whole a gratuitous and unmerited gift of God asking only the free acceptive consent of the creature. In this acceptance and consent there are realised in action the essential virtues which perfect the creature in true order with the Creator: humility, obedience, subordination; and these very virtues, which are indispensable conditions, possess full intellectual justification. A withholding of them, or their denial, is evidence of that unreason which is always found with the sin of pride, in the refusal to hear and see, in the blindness of heart which remained obdurate even to the coming of Christ, rejecting the approach of his mercy.

Now with these two elements in conjunction, the obediential receptivity of the created intellect on one hand, and on the other the rational credibility which forms as it were the façade of revealed truth, we can realise something of the perfect coherence that by God's gift is possible, when the grace of faith comes to man. There is here no crude antithesis of faith and reason nor any false identification, modernistic in effect, of reason with faith. The words of St Paul recalling the prophecy of Isaias accurately distinguish the corresponding elements: 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him.' (1 Cor. 2, 9). But the unity in conjunction of these two elements is the perfect work which the divine truth revealed by God achieves. Never was Christ heard to depreciate or discredit the needs of the mind. On the contrary, all the divine approach was of such a kind as to call out the full play of the mind: 'Search the Scriptures: for you think in them to have life everlasting. And the same are they that give testimony of me.' (Jn. 5, 39).

'Many good words I have shewed you from my Father. For which of those works do you stone me? The Jews answered him: For a

good work we stone thee not; but because thou being a man, makest thyself God. Jesus answered them: Is it not written in your law: "I said, you are Gods"? If he called them gods to whom the word of God was spoken; and the scripture cannot be broken: Do you say of him whom the Father hath sanctified and sent into the world: thou blasphemest; because I said I am the Son of God? If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not.' (Jn. 10, 32-37). Intellectual play could never be more open and alert than that. Truth could not contradict truth. The Eternal Word which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world, could not have repudiated or stultified the rational and intellectual nature of man whom he had created. All things were made by him, and the noblest power of all he had created was the mind, made to know him. When, then, the Redeemer came he came perhaps chiefly to save and redeem the mind; to rescue the faltering, hesitating, partially clouded intellect of man; to reveal first the Word of God, and by it God's meaning in all things was therefore recalled, understood and honoured. Christ's patient teaching, his preaching, explaining, questioning, disputing, refuting are all so much evidence covering every page of the Gospels that he would awaken and quicken and deepen the thoughts of reasonable men whom his Father loved. No one can seriously read the pages of St John without fully observing this and discovering how Christ enlivened and energised the activities of the human reason. So patent indeed is this that a candid agnostic has said of the Gospels, what has similarly been said of St Thomas's *Summa Theologica*, that out of its pages could be abstracted a fair manual of the rationalist's creed. No doubt an exaggerated or paradoxical remark, at least it bears witness to the truth that faith and reason are not irreconcilable; and it perhaps unwittingly testifies to the further truth that the human mind will only be fully emancipated and truly ennobled when it is dedicated and sanctified by the faith.

This truth is the splendid legacy which the Church, in her infallibility, has so jealously guarded. St Augustine, early in her tradition, declared that the truths discoverable in the writings of the philosophers were to be separated out from the errors and brought into the full light of the faith. When held by those who rejected the Church, they were held as it were in captivity, *tanquam ab injustis possessoribus*. It was the duty of the true believers to rescue such truths, to deliver them from their evil associations (that is: the errors parasitical upon them, or in another metaphor the errors masquerading in the half-truths by which they survived), to bring them to the sanctuary of the Church where they could take their part in manifesting the full evidences of the wisdom and the mercy

of God. And St Augustine's plea must always be foremost in the mind of Catholic tradition. The thesis of the full harmony between faith and reason which was one of Pope Leo XIII's chief contributions to the intellectual world of our time is one to be continually developed and more prominently emphasised. It is central and essential to the Thomist renaissance which that great pope promoted. That thesis must always appear as the particular glory in the vast synthesis of the *Summa Theologica* where St Thomas seemed to gather together a harvest out of all the errors and heresies from all his predecessors in philosophy and theology. By his illuminating and clarifying distinctions he compelled all into the worship and manifestation of the truth. On the clear simplicity of his own brief arguments of articles, there is a perfect and sublime interplay of the human reason with the revealed truths of the Truth. It would not be out of place to remark on the incidental perfection of the mere literature of it. Never was there greater economy of language enshrining a maximum of meaning. Its students must be reminded by it time and again of the marvellous simplicity of the Gospel. The strands of reason and faith are interwoven with an ease and an order that make every article seem miraculous. There is never any confusion. The two orders are always perfectly distinct, by their formal distinction; but the human reason proceeds more simply, more easily, more profoundly and more surely because it is enrolled into the service of the divine science. To be ancillary to the revealed truths of God is to be a maid of honour, not of dishonour; and all the best of human thought is called in for this privilege. Plato and Aristotle of the Greeks, Cicero of Rome; these masters of thought are represented as almost with a special vocation, moving among the Fathers and Doctors of the Church to contribute their part to the harmony of eternal praise. Perhaps most significant of all is St Thomas's use of error. As out of evil the mercy of God draws good, so out of error the wisdom of the saint draws truth. Most errors are found chiefly to lie in disorder, in erroneous transpositions of incomplete truths, or in truths simply out of place. The heretics and sophists had torn up the seamless robe of the eternal Word, taking away their ill-gotten part, isolating it, creating schism where there had been revealed unity. The saint patiently reunited these fragments, gathering them together in their order and harmony; and his chiefest and highest achievement was in the reconciliations he effected of the human mind with his Master of the Crucifix.

A similar work has again to be done now that the humanist era is ending in confusion. The period now beginning needs to remember the wisdom, the patience, above all the prayer of Aquinas; for

the task of the sons of the Church is now again to gather together the sciences, the discoveries, the new worlds won, in their due order and harmony; to penetrate them afresh with the faith; and, in dedicating them to God, to raise them to their predestined nobility.



## ST NILUS, A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF THE FIFTH CENTURY (II)

BY

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**S**AIN'T NILUS'S characteristically balanced view of the life of prayer and action leads him, like St Thomas at a later date, to prefer the 'mixed' or apostolic life. 'A bishop,' he says, 'is a man accomplished both in action and contemplation (*praxei kai gnosei*), more perfect than the ascetics in the desert' (*Oratio ad Albanum*, 704A). It is a high ideal, difficult to attain, and calling for expert guidance. In his *Liber de monastica exercitatione* St Nilus traces the portrait of the perfect spiritual director which is as valid today as it was then. 'Those', he writes, 'who would undertake the guidance of others must first have fought their own passions and prudently stored up in their memory the experiences of this warfare so that they may hand them on to others and thus make victory easier for them.' (*Mon. Exerc.*, 25; 752A). This 'fight against the passions' is a typical conception occurring in many of the Greek Fathers who are influenced by Stoic philosophy. But most of them, and certainly St Nilus, succeeded in acclimatising it to Christian spirituality regarding it as a stage in the spiritual life roughly corresponding to the 'Purgative Way'. The *apatheia* to which it is meant to lead is not the indifference of the Stoic but rather the 'holy indifference' of a St Francis de Sales which enables the soul to listen to the divine voice undisturbed by the suggestions of her sinful propensities. Only if superiors and directors have purged their own faults and attained to a measure of serenity will they be able to 'bear the faults of all with great forbearance, and teach them patiently the things they do not know'. (*Ibid.*, 27; 756C).

'For the man whose duty it is to enlighten others must be solid through and through, without levity or emptiness, bearing the burdens and even the impurities of his subjects as far as may be

<sup>1</sup> The first part of this account of St Nilus appeared in *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, November, 1949, p. 224.