

wonderfull order above the firy heaven, and hast most seemly distributed the parts of the world: Thou, I say, which art called the tru fountain o light and wisdome, and the highest beginning, voutsafe to poure upon the dareknes of my understanding, in the which I was born, the dooble beam of thy brightnes, removing from me darcknes, that is to say, sinne and ignorance. Thou which makest eloquent the tongues of then (them) that want utterance, instruct my tongue and poure into my lips the grace of thy blessing. Give me quicknes of understanding, capacity of retayning, subtilty of interpreting, facility of learning and copious grace of speaking: guyde my going in, direct my going forward, and accomplish my going forth. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

THE DEADLY SINS

(*Ancren Riwle*, Part 4 cont.)

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



HE classical characterisation of this period of the beginner, or the purgative way, is given in the words of St Thomas: *Primo incumbit homini studium principale ad recedendum a peccato et resistendum concupiscentiis ejus, que in contrarium caritatis movent: et hoc pertinet ad incipientes in quibus caritas est nutrienda, vel fovenda, ne corrumpatur.*

'At first it is incumbent on man to occupy himself chiefly with avoiding sin and resisting his concupiscences, which move him in opposition to charity: this concerns beginners, in whom charity has to be fed or fostered lest it be destroyed.' (II-II, 24, 9.) This aspect of struggle against lower nature and the war against vice is therefore the depressing but dominant feature of the age; but this does not mean a purely stoical attitude to self-mastery—it is always that 'charity may the more abound'. The enemies of love must be slain and these enemies are marshalled under seven generals, the capital sins, which are not only the sources of other moral evil, but the directors giving point to other 'wickedness. If therefore these seven are slain, charity will march forth the conqueror of all the rest of human evil; so it is to these seven that a man must turn his chief attention when he begins to follow God. (cf. I-II, 84, 3 and 4.) St John of the Cross begins his *Dark Night of the Soul* with a long analysis of the seven deadly or capital sins in respect to the life of the beginner; and the *Ancren Riwle* fills a good deal of the fourth part with a similar analysis which is however very different in tone.

First, it must be noted how the carnal sins of 'lechery, gluttony, and sloth' appear the worst and most deadly. But in fact they are only foot wounds as compared with the breast wounds of the spiritual crimes of pride, envy, wrath and covetousness (p. 146). This is a common doctrine: but it seldom makes much impression on the generality. Immoral behaviour is still the sole type of immorality recognised by many: pride is as nothing to a sin against the sixth commandment.¹ These spiritual crimes bring complacency and self-satisfaction which is blind to the evil it perpetrates. It might be argued that sins of intemperance are more anti-social than the others, and that therefore, in an age which judges everything by the one criterion of social value, these sins take on an added importance. But this is not true, for pride and envy aim far more effectively at the heart of society, breaking it up into separate and divided units. Above all, these spiritual vices are aimed more directly at God himself, cutting the individual off from the centre of all things; and this centring upon self is a spring whence flows the whole great river of iniquity (cf. I-II, 73, 5).

To begin with the most fundamental of all vices, the 'Lion of Pride' (p. 146) creeps stealthily into a good life, as St Augustine points out in his Rule, and devours every good thing. For a man can easily fall into the habit of watching his own actions instead of watching God. And watching himself he begins to watch his own effect on other people. The enthusiastic beginner can very easily fall into a habit of exhibitionism, as we may see by comparing this stage with its parallel in physical life; for the child is forever being tempted to show off. A little attention will turn the child's head and he will begin to fling himself about in a nonsensical manner. The same happens often in the spiritual childhood of the beginner, described in some detail by St John of the Cross in the *Dark Night* (I, 1) in terms of the usual pitfalls of pride. The pride of the 'spiritually-minded' is indeed a fearsome creature, for it twists people into all sorts of narrow and distorted shapes. The *Rivle* lists the whelps, or daughters, of this capital sin, such as 'Presumption', 'that is one who taketh in hand more than she is able to perform, or meddleth with anything which does not belong to her' (p. 149); Loquacity, Impatience and the like. 'And there are many others that are derived from wealth and prosperity, high descent, fine clothes, wit, beauty, strength; pride groweth even out of extraordinary piety and pure morals' (p. 150). Evidently almost every sinful deed or omission could be ultimately reduced to the self-centred ambition or complacency of pride. Pride in fact stands over against charity: charity is the form of all the virtues,

¹ On this subject Miss Dorothy Sayers has written an excellent essay: *The Other Six Deadly Sins* (Methuen; 1943).

pride is in a sense the form of all the vices. In this way it lies at the heart of every sin and is more than a capital sin (cf. I-II, 84, 4).

To counteract this central evil the beginner must of course proceed with very great care. He may so easily begin to seek progress for progress's sake and so to turn back on to himself, searching into his deeds and experiences in order to find matter for self-congratulation. This type of examination naturally leads to comparison with the progress of others, and so jealousy of their graces is mingled confusedly with the ambition to 'get on' and with the desire that others should know one's own good estate in the spiritual life. A man will thus become 'elated and lofty in heart' (p. 158) and begin to blow his own trumpet which is indeed the devil's favourite musical instrument.

The proud are his (the devil's) trumpeters; they draw in the wind of worldly praise, and then, with vain boasting, puff it out again, as a trumpeter doth, to make a noise—a loud strain of music to show their vain glory (p. 158, cf. p. 148).

The author of the *Riwle* makes it sound obvious and blatant perhaps, but this trumpeting may produce a note apparently low and unobtrusive but which is intended to penetrate the deafest eardrum. It is easy for a man to be self-consciously hoping that others will notice his devout posture and his long times of prayer, his regularity at Holy Communion and his benignity to others. Pride may easily be given a feast of moral actions and pious ejaculations in the early stages of the spiritual life. It feeds heartily on such things.

The *Riwle* has therefore already insisted on the need for secrecy in one's prayers and good works and of the danger of exhibitionism at this time.

Who watcheth well here a little while . . . will shake off her sleep of vicious sloth in the still night when nothing is to be seen to hinder prayer. The heart is often at such a season so sincere; for there is then no witness of any good that we do but God only and his angel who is busily employed in inciting us to good (Part III, p. 110 cf. p. 112).

St John of the Cross says that the devil assists the proud to fall into certain 'states' in prayer when in public places rather than in secret. Their fervour is increased by the tempter so that they may have much 'devotion' in their spiritual works. They hate their imperfections because these 'let them down' in their own eyes and in the eyes of the confessor; so that any imperfection that appears to others will cause much anguish not because it offends God but because it spoils the holy picture they make of themselves.

The chapter of the *Dark Night* (Bk I, chapter 2) which concerns pride should be read in connection with the more picturesque language of the *Ancren Riwe* regarding the Lion of Pride. This vice

is technically an inordinate desire for one's own excellence (cf. St Thomas II-II, 162) and this desire to excel, to rise above one's *real* self and above other people is so deeply rooted in fallen nature that it will appear in one form or another at every stage in the scale.

These seven deadly sins should be recognised for the evil things they are and for the tight embrace with which they grip human nature. So close are they to fallen human nature that to the over facile judgment of the Reformers it seemed as though the nature itself was wholly corrupt. The answer to that heresy is not to ignore their existence and pretend that the faithful Catholic has merely to make an act of faith and fall in love with God for his whole life to be straightened out. They are present all the time becoming more subtle as the soul increases in its attachment to God. They are connected with the primary instincts and appetites of man which will always be operative and therefore always need to be cleansed from the selfish motives which are bound up in them. Thus the appetites for food and self-preservation are tainted with greed and anger from the beginning, the appetite for preservation of the species with lust and so on. And though the first movements of greed, for example, are as crude as the *Riwle* depicts:

The greedy glutton is the devil's purveyor; for he always haunts the cellar or the kitchen. His heart is in the dishes; all his thought is of the tablecloth; his life is in the turn, his soul in the pitcher (p. 162):

later on when these first stirrings of appetite towards satiety have been curbed there will arise a spiritual gluttony which hungers for delicacies of the spiritual palate such as consolations and pleasing experiences in prayer.

Once the reader has realised the evil importance of these capital sins there is no reason to deal here with each individual sin in detail. They are set out in frightening array by the author of the *Riwle*. After the Lion follow the Serpent of Envy which twists the poor soul into terrible contortions (pp. 150 and 159), the Unicorn of Wrath 'which beareth on his nose the horn with which he butteth at all whom he reacheth' (pp. 151 and 160), the Bear of Sloth, the Fox of Covetousness who is the devil's ash-gatherer (pp. 152 and 161), the Swine of Greediness, the Scorpion of Lechery which 'hath such a progeny that it does not become a modest mouth to name the names of some of them; for the name alone might offend all modest ears, and defile all clean hearts' (pp. 153-6. 162). All these are here described with vivid pictures and symbols.

But to anyone seriously attempting to follow in the love of God to the heights of holiness they will not appear so forcibly in his experience. Sloth for example will often creep in under the guise of a

desire to be more passive and to leave God to take the initiative. In this way hours can be passed on one's knees day-dreaming and imagining one's self in high states of prayer. At other times the weariness of spiritual things which bring no pleasing experiences nor the satisfaction that were anticipated will lead the soul to return to purely external forms of prayer and spiritual exercises—the beauties of liturgy and the excitements of activity 'for the Lord'. These are spiritual novelties. 'Many can never have enough of listening to counsels and learning spiritual precepts, and of possessing and reading many books which treat of this matter, and they spend their time on all these things rather than on works of mortification and the perfecting of the inward poverty of spirit which should be theirs. They burden themselves with images and rosaries which are very curious; now they put down one, now take up another; now they change about, now change back again . . .' (*Dark Night* I, iii). St John of the Cross is as graphic here as the *Rivle* which itself shows how spiritual greediness can manifest itself in an excess of fasting and abstinence (pp. 167-8).

Finally with regard to sensuality it must be remembered that direct and conscious sins in this matter, to which modern language has applied the whole gamut of 'immorality', produce a blindness of heart that can resemble a type of insanity until 'they have so lost shame that they are ashamed of nothing' (p. 162). But far away from this state of evident depravity a certain sensuousness may even interfere in the simple love of our Lord in his humanity. It is of course a perfection to love our Lord in his humanity, otherwise the Incarnation would be meaningless. Hilton gives the love of Jesus in his humanity with the help of one's imagination as the second of the three degrees of the love of God. 'The second love is that which a soul feeleth through faith and imagination of Jesus in his manhood.' And he says that 'souls beginning and profiting', i.e. those in the first two stages of the spiritual life, cannot reach beyond this 'fleshy love' of Jesus. It is not the perfect love (*Scale* ii, 30). Consequently the devil does often embarrass the imagination with sensual thoughts even regarding the sacred humanity of our blessed Lord himself. It is possible, too, that the effects of a pure love of our Lord at Holy Communion may so overwhelm the whole being that the lower passions are stirred up into an activity which may dismay the recipient of these graces.

St John of the Cross takes up a very sane and balanced view of this difficulty; and it is worth quoting him at some length.

When the spirit and the sense are pleased, every part of the man is moved by that pleasure to delight according to its proportion and character. For then the spirit, which is the highest part, is moved

to pleasure and delight in God; and the sensual nature, which is the lower part, is moved to pleasure and delight of the senses, because it cannot possess and lay hold upon aught else, and it therefore lays hold upon that which comes nearest to itself, which is the impure and the sensual. Thus it comes to pass that the soul is in deep prayer with God according to the spirit, and on the other hand, according to sense it is passively conscious, not without great displeasure, of rebellions and motions and acts of the senses . . . (*Dark Night I, iv*).

These effects arise therefore from the weakness of human nature wounded by this scorpion of a capital sin; but they are not in themselves sinful as they are against the will of the man who suffers these experiences. It would be to fall into the devil's snare to worry about such thoughts and feelings. They must not be allowed to interrupt the progress towards God and they show the need for greater and deeper purification of the soul to eradicate these seven clinging creepers which would, if they could, sap all the goodness from the soul.

Thus the Christian who would enter the more passive states of the purgative way must be ready to penetrate more deeply into this spiritual wilderness where he will himself run wild yet meeting, too, these evil beasts who may frighten or torment him in his loneliness:

For in like manner as all wild beasts are in the wilderness and will not suffer the approach of man, but flee away when they hear or see him, so should anchoresses above all other women be wild in this manner. . . . Go, however, very cautiously; for in this country there are many evil beasts—the lion of pride, etc. (p. 148).

No man would be able to reckon up all sins separately by their own special names; but in those which I have mentioned all the others are included; and there is not, I think, any man who may not understand his own sins in particular under some of the general heads that are here written. Of those seven beasts, and of their offspring in the wilderness, and of a solitary life, we have spoken thus far—which beasts are endeavouring to destroy all mortals (p. 158).

It would be a mistake to regard this stage as being gloomy and unpleasant, wholly occupied with these poisons in human nature. But it does explain why the literature on this particular phase of the spiritual life can strike terror in one who reads it for the first time. The first book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* quite often shocks the beginner and causes him to abandon the serious pursuit of holiness along that path. It is no solution, however, to explain it away, as

some have done of late years, and try to maintain that the saint intended nothing so ferociously 'negative' or destructive. He does insist on this burning, cutting, crushing, smashing of natural ties and affections in such a way that many a defender of the good things of human nature would not understand. This destructive policy, however, is absolutely necessary at the beginning in order to slay these beasts which lurk under the smallest shrub or tuft of grass. A man must make a wilderness for himself in this absolute way.

And yet it is only one side of the picture. A mere wilderness can only remain a grey and desolate plain under such devastating treatment unless the light of the sun rises over it and shines into its nooks and crevices, lighting up and enlivening every inch of the scene. The remedies for concupiscence and pride, for anger and greed, are not only destructive purges. They must have also the nutritive food which builds up spiritual strength and it is upon these latter positive remedies that the *Ancren Riwle* insists in contrast perhaps with the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. These remedies are dealt with in the final section of the fourth part.

CHRIST THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

BY

COLUMBA CARY ELWES, O.S.B.



ODAY when the world is shattering into splinters like glass to the blast of a bomb, it seems difficult to assume or profess that Christ has been the Light of the World. So many have never heard of him, so many have been snatched from his loving care—so it seems—by the wilful action of militant anti-Christian people, so many self-styled followers of Jesus seem to be following their own desires and not at all treading the path to Calvary, beyond whose brow is illumination and light.

No one will deny that in his teaching and in his life our Blessed Lord and Master has been a shining Light; he taught a way that shines with holiness and love, which could, if followed, lead to peace and joy. Indeed those who truly followed Christ, and follow him today, have been and are at peace and in joy, with a peace and joy beyond all others, and recognisably so even to those who refuse to follow this same light. Why then has not this led to the world flocking to Jesus even from selfish motives?

Christ has won the victory over sin for us by his sweet and bitter Passion, he has won this light for us. God does truly love us, 'Deus caritas est'. The Incarnation, that ultimate condescension of God,