

THE LUMP OF SIN

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If we compare *The Cloud* with Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* or any other of the spiritual writings contemporary with that classic we shall be struck by the impersonal character of *The Cloud*. *The Scale* refers constantly to Jesus, the person, to whom everything returns in contemplation, and even a writer like St John of the Cross is really none the less personal in his approach to the source of faith and love. *The Cloud* does not often use the holy Name in spite of the great popularity of the devotion in those days; it is far more abstract and philosophical in tone.¹ Struck by this difference we might be tempted to say that this latter was a natural, a metaphysician's, approach. A great deal of emphasis is laid on a quasi-metaphysical apprehension of Being as such, which might seem to depend on the personal exercise of the worshipper.

Such a summary would miss the point of *The Cloud* entirely. The author, besides insisting that his words must be taken as a whole, seems to attack the philosophers and philosophical theologians in their speculations, and he says that the work is largely God's work. He describes perhaps more fully the 'human endeavour' of the soul desirous of union; and he, like most medievals, had less to say about the purely passive side of the spiritual life since that is so utterly God's concern.

But the complete denial to the philosophical interpretation is to be found in his doctrine about sin, for that plays no part in the philosophical programme. As soon as he has begun to describe how any thought even of the holiest creature must be put away in order to approach the naked Being of God, he turns to the consideration of sin which breaks into the peace of the cloud of unknowing. Thoughts will come crowding into the mind to distract, and although they may be about good or harmless things in themselves the fact of their presence in the mind and imagination is an effect of original sin—'for it is the pain of the original sin pressing against thy power' (p. 37)—so that their source is tainted. These thoughts must be smitten down at once without hesitation. For as these ideas come

¹ But cf. c. 4. 'Right well hast thou said, "for the love of Jesu". For in the love of Jesu there shall be thine help. . . . Therefore love Jesu, and all thing that he hath it is thine'.

the will begins at once to be engaged with them. They will be either pleasing or unpleasing things—and according to this general division be divided up into the seven deadly sins. In this the author follows the scholastic teaching closely, and this tenth chapter of *The Cloud* should be compared with St Thomas's article on the Seven Deadly Sins (I-II, 84, 4). The Capital Sins are concerned with those things which move men's appetites most powerfully either towards the goods which please or from the evils from which they fly as being displeasing. They are natural objects of the appetites; thus St Thomas says: 'In the first place happiness implies perfection, since happiness is a perfect good, to which belongs excellence or renown, which is derived by *pride* or *vainglory*'. Or as *The Cloud* has it:

If this thought . . . be the worthiness of thy Mind, or thy Knowledge, or grace or degree, or favour, or beauty: then it is *Pride*. (p. 39).

These sins are capital because they are so close to nature, which is fallen, and which is so easily and rapidly moved in their direction if they are pleasing (causing 'some manner of delight') or away from them if they are displeasing ('causing some manner of grumbling').

But *The Cloud* is written for those who have already made some progress, so that the author considers the thoughts from which these desires so quickly spring, rather than the deeds which would follow in an undisciplined life. The difficulty for the man who is really intent upon following God in this way of prayer lies in the naturalness of these thoughts which may concern even his perfection, as St Thomas indicates. However naturally good that thought may be, as soon as

thou resteth thee in that thought, and finally fastenest thine heart and thy will thereto (p. 39),

it draws away from the supernatural good of the end to which the heart must be constantly attached. For the man habituated to serious sins these thoughts themselves may be deadly, because they spring from a heart already fastened completely to these things other than God.

The which fastening, although it may be deadly sin before; nevertheless, in thee, and in all other that have in a true will forsaken the world, such a liking or such a grumbling fastened in the fleshly heart is but venial sin. The cause of this is the grounding and the rooting of your intent in God. (p. 38).

There is danger of their becoming serious if these thoughts are allowed to remain 'unreproved'. In any case to the spiritual man *all* sin becomes so abhorrent that it matters little whether it be venial or deadly. The author says later that no special regard should be paid to the nature or extent of the sin; it is sufficient that it be sin to

let loose the saving flood of contrition. Certainly if there is any special sin accusing the conscience the contemplative will go at once to the Church's well to be washed by the waters of confession; indeed the sacrament of penance is a prerequisite for the beginning of this work (comp. *Cloud* cc. 28 and 35, and *Privy Counsel* c. 2). But a man who has begun to pray in the simple manner of this book will often realise the presence of sin arising from these natural inclinations only as a general state—'a blind root and a stirring of sin' (p. 90).

This general sense of sin with no particular accusation of conscience appears to be the experience of many contemplative people. St Thomas says, 'The infirmity of the flesh which belongs to the "fomes" of sin is in holy men the occasion of perfect virtue' (III. 27. 3 ad 2). Some souls are apparently called even to take a share in the work of Christ in bearing in themselves the guilt of the world; though of course the sense of guilt arises principally from these natural inclinations which have been tainted by original sin,

For it is the pain of the original sin pressing against thy power, of the which sin thou art cleansed in thy Baptism (p. 37).

Some people are dismayed by this strange feeling of guilt on account of which they are led to suspect some serious fault within themselves. They find in fact little of which to accuse themselves and they begin to pry about in their pasts to discover some unconfessed mortal sin. The possibility of some hidden evil of great consequence may not be excluded, but as a rule one who still lies under the burden of a forgotten or unperceived serious sin will suffer from a distaste or dryness in spiritual matters rather than from an overpowering sense of guilt. In any case should such a one be undertaking the work of *The Cloud* he will be led to expect this unspecified sin-consciousness.² The awareness of guilt may be a special grace granted someone by Christ to convey a suggestion of the unimaginable tortures of an unsullied human soul burdened with the guilt of the whole world; but very likely it will be a sign of the beginning of the work of *The Cloud*.

Every sinful act must of course be weighed and judged by conscience; but a man, though he may never be free from some venial sins in this life, must 'eschew recklessness in venial sin' (p. 40), and in this manner with the help of God's grace his conscious, and to that extent deliberate, faults may become rare. For those who use the waters of the sacrament of penance and of the presence of God in prayer it is possible to forget about their 'special deeds' whether they be good or evil, for in both cases the thought is apt to lead to some further sin, or at least to put up a barrier between the soul and God

² For an outline of St Thomas's conception of 'sin as distinct from sins' cf. 'Tasks for Thomists' sect. 4. by Victor White, O.P (BLACKFRIARS, 1944, pp. 105 sq).

at the time of this work of contemplation (cf. c. 31, p. 79 sq). In other words, apart from the times when duty demands a particular examination of conscience, a penitent may be counselled to cover all the past 'with a thick *cloud of forgetting*'. Worrying about past evils is often a great hindrance to the work of God in the soul. There may be reason for it, but frequently these troubles occur during periods of renewed effort such as during a retreat, and instead of progressing under the influence of God's presence the penitent becomes absorbed in the remembrance of details of events which happened many years ago. The principles of *The Cloud* may be profitably applied in such cases as these.

No one should be counselled to forget sin as such, for whereas past deeds may be the occasion of present temptations and troubles, the sense of guilt due to sin will peacefully humble the soul to nothingness before the inconceivable goodness of God. 'Without any means of reading or hearing coming before, and without any special beholding of anything under God', souls may be given 'sudden conceits and blind feelings of their own wretchedness or of the goodness of God'. (c. 36. p. 90). The word 'Sin' is simple and need not be analysed; but of itself it may bring great humility.

Mean by sin a *lump*, thou knowest never what, none other thing but thyself. (c. 36. p. 91).

And because that ever the whiles thou livest in this wretched life, thou must always feel in some part this foul stinking lump of sin, as it were oned and congealed with the substance of thy being. (c. 40. p. 100).

A full realisation of this lump would be literally devastating as it would reveal the very nothingness of one's being. And it is valuable to compare *The Cloud's* description of the true disciple's reaction to this lump—'so oft he goeth nigh mad for sorrow' (p. 107)—with Mother Julian's sudden and very metaphysical conviction that sin was 'no-thing'. *The Cloud* is equally fundamental in its description of sin, but although evil is not invested with any positive substance, the very lack of goodness and of God has such a terrible connotation that he weepeth and walleth, striveth, curseth and denounceth himself; and (shortly to say) he thinketh that he beareth so heavy burthen of himself that he careth never what betides him, so that God were pleased. (p. 107).

Yet this sorrow, concerned as it is with the lump rather than with any specific acts or omissions with their concomitant circumstances, does not disturb the outer contemplative calm—'so that whoso looked upon thee . . . would think thee in a full sober restfulness' (p. 91)—

for the principal reality always bears him up. He never desires to 'un-be'.

For that were devil's madness and despite unto God. But he liketh right well to be; and he giveth full heartily thanks unto God, for the worthiness and the gift of his being. (p. 107).

The sense of the lump of sin coupled with the recognition of dependence on the being and goodness of God lead the soul not to troubled despair but to a placid sorrow. Sin thus removed of its sting becomes a great instrument in the way of contemplative prayer.

Before his description of this general sense of the lump of sin the author of *The Cloud* had already shown the disciple the way to remove its harmful qualities. First and foremost there is the means provided by the Church, the sacrament of penance; this, as we have seen, is taken for granted among those who wish thus to become contemplatives. After that we should expect to find strict, physical mortification, followed by weeping and meditating on the Passion. These indeed play their part; but in the eyes of the man who wrote *The Cloud*, being external things, they are not fundamental means and are liable to misfire.

Fast thou never so much, watch thou never so long, rise thou never so early, wear thou never so sharp. . . Yet will stirring and rising of sin be in thee. Yea and what more? Weep thou never so much for sorrow of thy sins, or of the passion of Christ, or have thou never so much thought of the joys of heaven, what may it do to thee? (c. 12. pp. 41-42).

All these external means are only relatively effective, and may in fact be useless. But there is one work which by itself 'destroyeth the ground and root of sin'. This is the 'blind stirring of love' to be sought in the *cloud of unknowing* in which all creatures, all actions, all thoughts are regarded as barriers between the soul and God. It is in fact the fire of charity which burns up all the guilt of sin. If we turn to St Thomas's doctrine on the effects of the Eucharist we shall find the same doctrine. 'The *res* or ultimate reality of this sacrament', he tells us, 'is charity not merely in habit but also in the fact, which is kindled in this sacrament and by means of which venial sins are forgiven', for charity removes venial sin by its very act. (III, 79, 4 c. and ad 3). A man who is actually loving God with the supernatural love of charity is thereby removing his sins according to the intensity of love's heat. This is in fact the essence of contemplation; the direct and actual love of God which cannot tolerate any obstacles, and so 'in this work a soul drieth up in itself all the root and the ground of sin that will always remain in it after confession, be it never so busy'. (c. 28. p. 75).

Having by this powerful and infallible means rid himself of the stain of sin, the next step towards reaching the general sense of unworthiness which is likened to a lump of sin identified with the very substance of self, is to forget the individual acts and omissions which caused the stains. This method can only be adopted after 'the great rust of sin be in great part rubbed away' by constant contrition over those individual sins in times gone by; and the guides, as in the whole of this work, must be both the man's own conscience and his director who between them decide when it is meet to abandon the past to the mercy of God.³

St Mary Magdalen stands as the great example of the contemplative attitude to sin. It was because she loved much that her sins were forgiven her, and she never came down from that love to pry about into the individual facts related by her conscience.

Came she therefore down from the height of her desire into the depth of her sinful life, and searched in the foul stinking pen and dunghill of her sins, searching them up one by one, with all the circumstances of them, and sorrowed and wept so much upon them each one by himself? (c. 16. p. 51).

Such conduct is unthinkable in that great penitent; for it would have easily set up an occasion for further sin. For her, at least, love was so strong that she had hardly to suppress such thoughts of the past consciously; all was burnt up in the fire of her attachment to God. But for the man who wishes to pray undisturbed while yet weighed down in humility by the lump of sin it is necessary to tread all memories under the cloud of forgetting. If they come crowding in so that it becomes difficult to avoid their presence in the mind the author proposes some spiritual wiles whereby they can be circumvented. The first is

try to look as it were over their shoulders, seeking another thing; the which thing is God, enclosed in a cloud of unknowing. (c. 32 p. 80).

In other words he must ignore these thoughts and imaginations as far as possible and concentrate on his desire for God.

The second device would appear to some to take unwarranted risks, for it might be interpreted as willingly entertaining thoughts and occasions of sin. But it must be remembered that the writer presupposes in his reader real generosity and true desire for union with God, and at the same time a complete honesty; he also presupposes a hatred of sin and the use of all the direct methods of

³ This doctrine should be compared with St Thomas's teaching as to when special contrition is required, and when a general sorrow suffices. Cf. I-II, 113, 5 ad 2; III, 87, 1; *Sup.* 2, 6.

removing its stains. He is speaking here of the thoughts about past sins for which the contemplative is constantly contrite, and, as he says, the device comes almost to the same thing as that of which we have been speaking above: the realisation of the lump of sin in self. This is the wily device he recommends:

When thou feelest that thou mayest in no wise put them down, cower thou down under them as a caitiff and a coward overcome in battle, and think that it is but folly to strive any longer with them; and therefore thou yieldest thyself to God in the hands of thine enemies. And feel then thyself as though thou wert overcome for ever. Take good heed of this device, I pray thee; for I think that in the proof of this device thou shouldest melt all to water. (c. 32. p. 81).

Evidently there could be no suggestion of encouraging or at least accepting evil thoughts. The method is one of profound humility. So many people regard their own natural efforts as being sufficient to overcome temptations. They stiffen themselves against the onslaught; they strain every nerve to rid themselves of bad thoughts and suggestions. But the natural powers are brittle rather than supple; they will often break suddenly and plunge the soul back into actual sins. There can be no true victory or success without the supple power of the Father, who must needs come to the aid of his weak and ailing child. The power of God is invincible; and as soon as the soul fully recognises this she can give up the unequal struggle and retreat hastily into the safety of God's hands. There has been a great deal written from the psychological point of view on the subject of 'relaxation'. Here we may find the theological counterpart of the same truth. If the man who is tempted relaxes not only all his muscles and limbs (which often become taut at times of the attacks of evil) but also his imagination and his mind, and if he lies back, so to speak, completely at his ease in the consciousness of the supporting presence of God, he will find that the evil suggestions depart. He must be conscious of his own nothingness, his own utter helplessness in the face of these evil powers, and conscious too of the supple power of the Spirit who enfolds him.

And this meekness meriteth to have God himself mightily descending, to venge thee of thine enemies, so as to take thee up and cherishingly dry thy ghostly eyes, as the father doth his child that is on the point to perish under the mouths of wild swine or mad biting bears. (id.).

The Cloud goes on to say that these devices may not always prove effective, and that in any case God through the inspiration of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit will teach each one the best devices for overpowering the thoughts of past sin. If they continue to reappear in

one's conscience they must be taken as a penance for the past sins themselves, until God sees fit to remove this pain of sin. The pain of original sin will never be removed and will always remain as an instrument of humility keeping the soul low and constantly beholden to God's mercy. But the pain of actual, past sin may eventually practically disappear so that a man may be almost preoccupied by the goodness of God, or rather by God in himself. (c. 33.)

In conclusion we may see by turning again to chapter 44 (in which we have already seen the principal description of the lump of sin) that all this teaching is embraced in the notion of a true and placid contrition. Perfect contrition is all that is required of the soul to dispose itself for the divine work of infused contemplation. That is to say, a perfect contrition which concerns itself rather with the general wretchedness of the sinner than with his special sins. This 'strong and deep ghostly sorrow' comes neither by strain of body nor by stress of spirit; it is rather 'a sleeping device, all forsobbed [i.e. soaked] and forsunken in sorrow'. It is a sorrow which comes not only from the thought of *what* a man is, but from a realisation *that* he is. It opens the heart of man with a sense of complete and utter dependence upon God himself. This method of perfect sorrow amounts to the last stages of active preparation for the divine gift of contemplation. It may therefore be included under the heading of Acquired Contemplation as one of the chief acts which a man can perform with the help of grace to dispose himself for 'illumination' and union.⁴

And all this is removed *toto caelo* from the purely natural sphere of the metaphysician, who knows nothing of a metaphysical humility based on a knowledge of sin, although it may be expressed in terms of a metaphysical dependence on the Being of God.

⁴ The whole of this 44th chapter should be read with great care.