

'bad' among one's fellows, with a group rather than with all of them, then the declension into hatred can be swift and inescapable and the very direst infamies are suddenly made possible.

The Old Wine is Good

by Simon Tugwell, O.P.

In the great effort of 'ressourcement' in which the Church is currently engaged, while the Dominicans have set themselves to produce a massive new edition of St Thomas, the Cistercians have undertaken a multi-volume series of new English translations of the Cistercian Fathers.¹

This venture is warmly to be welcomed. The Cistercian corpus is intrinsically valuable, and is, historically speaking, one of the major monuments of western monasticism; it is also peculiarly significant as revealing the immediate context for the great theological synthesis of St Thomas Aquinas.

To take this last point first. It is often forgotten just how thoroughly monastic the early Dominicans were. The *De modo studendi* generally ascribed to St Thomas himself is thoroughly monastic. It is curious how Victor White, for all his insight, missed the reference to the Song of Songs in the bit about the wine-cellar—a monastic commonplace. St Bernard, for instance, says that anyone who proposes to teach others must himself have been 'introduced into the wine-cellar', that is to say, must have had personal experience of the intoxicating force of heavenly sweetness. A book written by an anonymous Dominican novice master, and enthusiastically approved by the General Chapter of 1283, leans heavily on Bernard and William of St Thierry. A little later, St Vincent Ferrer's *On the Spiritual Life* teaches the same, monastic, spirituality.

It is this monastic context that shows the kind of experience of life underlying St Thomas' whole moral theology. If we want to see through the apparently dry formulae, the neat ordering of philosophical concepts, and get something of the feel of it, of what it means to gather life together around *ratio* and *prudentia* and *caritas*, it is to the monks we must turn, and not least the Cistercians. Occasionally St Thomas gives the game away. He refers, for instance, to 'the gift

¹Aelred of Rievaulx (No. 2), *Treatises, The Pastoral Prayer*, Introd. David Knowles. Bernard of Clairvaux (No. 4), *On the Song of Songs 1*, Trs. Kilian Walsh, O.C.S.O., Introd. M. Corneille Halfants, O.C.S.O. William of St Thierry (No. 3), *On Contemplating God*, etc. Trs. Sr. Penelope, C.S.M.V., Introd. Jacques Hourlier, O.S.A. (No. 6), *Exposition of the Song of Songs*, Trs. M. Columba Hart, O.S.B., Introd. J. M. Dechanet, O.S.B. (No. 12), *The Golden Epistle*, Trs. Theodore Berkeley, O.C.S.O., Introd. J. M. Dechanet, O.S.B. (Cistercian Publications, Spencer, Mass., and Irish University Press, Shannon, Ireland.)

of the Holy Spirit' being given with charity, not with prophecy. 'The gift of the Holy Spirit' is monastic jargon, referring to a definite stage in one's spiritual growth. This it is that brings true freedom, as William of St Thierry explains (the tradition goes back to Cassian), and St Thomas follows suit, contrasting those who have to be constrained by moral laws, with those who act in the freedom of charity. The monastic writers make clear, and St Thomas, I am sure, takes it for granted, that it is very definite *experiences* being talked about.

It is again the monks who show up how St Thomas is using *ratio*. He is not inviting us to a purely 'rationalist' view of man, but picking up a theme that can be traced from Athanasius to Bernard and William of St Thierry. 'Nature' is, for them, that which God created us to be, that which Christ enables us once again to be. In becoming 'rational' man finds the harmony there was always supposed to be between the various elements in his personality, and between him and his world. And it is an integral part of the deal that this restored humanity should be docile to something higher than itself, and this takes place through supernatural charity. Due to the indestructible Image of God within him, man can never be satisfied or fully happy until, through charity, he transcends himself and comes face to face with God. St Thomas can state far more clearly than his monastic precursors just how this heals and transforms man, and all the social, moral and ascetical implications of it; but the vision implied in his teaching is essentially that of the monks. It is their experience of life, their aspiration, for which he provides the scholastic theory, and his analysis only makes human sense against the background of their lives, their spirituality.

William of St Thierry's *Golden Epistle* (CF 12) was for long accepted, under a false attribution to St Bernard, as a handbook of monastic teaching, and was read by monks of all kinds. Although William's conceptual apparatus is somewhat idiosyncratic, due to his unusual penchant for Eriugena and Origen (from whom he takes the idea that *anima* must mature into *animus*), nevertheless the core of his doctrine is quite traditional. In common with all his peers, he sets charity firmly in the centre, but never at the expense of understanding (that was an unfortunate development of later times). The 'coming into being of *animus*' involves the harmonization of head and heart: 'reason and love . . . become one thing'. 'The will is set free when it becomes charity . . . and then reason is truly reason.'

What the monk aims at is that purity of heart and mind which establishes him in perfect freedom, total inner non-contradiction. He sets about it by humility, sought through self-knowledge, and obedience. He tries sedulously to avoid self-deception, and the more he knows himself, the more he discovers his helplessness before God. As this gets touched by grace, it turns into compunction, accompanied by the gift of tears (which St Thomas, incidentally, still

takes for granted). But above all, he takes refuge in obedience, in surrendering the ordering of the 'outward man' to a way of life determined by his superiors and by tradition. He presents his *body*, if nothing else yet, as a living sacrifice. Realizing that he is sick and cannot for himself really tell what is or is not 'authentic', he is forced simply to trust to the actual *doing*, leaving the mind to catch up when it can. Of course, even here the work of the Holy Spirit is paramount: without that, the only result will be frustration and bitterness. But at this stage, the 'animal' stage, no very positive spiritual enlightenment is expected.

In fact, a kind of breakdown is involved here, in which some loss of identity and sense of meaning may be expected. Aelred, harking back to Elijah, talks of a 'mighty wind, overturning mountains and smashing rocks' coming before compunction, and William's *Meditations* (CF 3) bear witness to considerable mental agony. All kinds of 'grown up' values, like independence, reputation, income, have to be surrendered, the persona of the old man has to be dismantled. The cell is, for William, a 'womb', in which the monk is reborn to a whole new world, a whole new consciousness.

After the body, the heart. Having set the outward man in order, the heart must be stirred to the appropriate affections. Contrary to the aim of later spiritual writers, the Cistercians want to get the emotions *into* prayer. The whole man must become involved. Eventually even the subconscious is drawn into harmony. By following the prescriptions of the monastic life, the monk should acquire a kind of inner peacefulness, which will allow him to be free from mental and emotional preoccupations and anxieties: he can be available for God. And then, in his sovereign freedom, God will visit the soul with his ineffable sweetness. *Vacare Deo, frui Deo*: there is William's doctrine in a nutshell.

Of course, he is well aware of the dangers of spiritual experience (pride, exclusivism, resting on one's laurels); experience as such is not the objective. But in the newness of life which the monk seeks to know, there is a systematic openness, inevitably, to spiritual experience.

But here, above all, 'God is the teacher'. The Cistercian Fathers are very different personalities, and in their teaching there is no hint of any spiritual stereotype. Everyone must follow his own devotional instinct.

With William of St Thierry's *Golden Epistle* we may take Aelred's *Rule of Life for a Recluse* (in CF 2, which also contains the *Pastoral Prayer* and the famous *Jesus at the age of Twelve*). This is in some ways even more traditional than the *Golden Epistle*, and it is interesting as a fore-runner of the *Ancrene Riwe* and all that—recluses, of course, being particularly rife in England.

Aelred re-asserts the old monastic claim that peace of mind is all-important, and everything else must be sacrificed for it, even works

of charity. Martha must not be allowed to harass Mary into losing that singleness of attention which the Lord himself approved. The religious claims the right to 'do his own thing' ('pay attention to yourself', one of the oldest formulae of monasticism, still found, for instance, in the *Golden Epistle*) against all the 'temptations' of responsibility and such like (see already Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*). To this end, he cultivates external poverty, and silence. And the fruit of this is a kind of love, a kind of involvement, which the worldly man cannot even dream of.

There is much good sense in this. Most of us spend most of our time heavily overloading our systems, so that periods of inactivity soon become insupportable. We have so much unfaced, unassimilated matter just below the level of consciousness, that a moment of quiet is liable to confront us with all sorts of things we would prefer not to have to see in ourselves—quite apart from the effects of things further down in the subconscious, giving us nervous tension, headaches, fatigue, and so on. In fact, we cannot bear to 'live with ourselves' (as William of St Thierry says, it is only in God that we can 'enjoy ourselves'). A drastic reduction in external stimulus is a prudent step, if we wish to achieve inner equilibrium and integration—and this is the precondition of genuine sensitivity. Aelred regards the first part of neighbourly love as 'harmlessness' (*innocentia*—I don't see what is gained by insisting on translating this as 'innocence'; but that's my only complaint about the translation. The notes are sometimes officious and silly in this volume). Without some degree of inner stability, we are dangerous creatures. And it is especially important to watch our mental input; Aelred warns the would-be recluse in garish terms of what happens to gossips and chatterers, and he rightly says that it is not only *bad* talk that harms: any excessive talking tends to disorientate us.

The final part of the *Rule*, together with much of *Jesus at the age of Twelve*, suggests 'seeds' of meditation, in a style curiously anticipatory of St Ignatius of Loyola, the aim, once again, being to stir the sluggish heart to *feel* the reality of the gospel message.

The greatest of all monastic theologians is, of course, St Bernard; and his most attractive, and probably most important, work is his sermons *On the Song of Songs*. CF 4 brings us the first volume of these, with a helpful introduction by M. Corneille Halfants. Bernard is notoriously difficult to translate, his Latin is so rich, so 'Latin'. Previous translators have generally attempted an equally fruity English style, leaving the reader bewildered and unimpressed. Dom Kilian Walsh prefers a much simpler style, and even if this inevitably gives us a rather 'thin' Bernard, the result is likely to make him more accessible to English readers than he has ever been before.

St Bernard's writing glows with fervour, controlled in perfect utterance. For him 'one of the worst evils to which men succumb is to be without affection'. Although this is more Aelred's territory

(I look forward to CF 5, which is to contain his *Spiritual Friendship*), Bernard too is far from thinking that human aloofness is conducive to contemplation. Even if he never defines God as being friendship, as Aelred does, his lament for Gerard shows that he had a deep capacity for human affection. Monasteries should be 'schools of love'.

He was an amazingly rounded personality, and his doctrine has a wholeness about it that is perhaps unequalled in the annals of Christian spirituality. This gives him a unique significance for our own times, so obsessed with experience, whether natural, praeternatural or supernatural. His is a spirituality that is at once thoroughly human, and thoroughly supernatural; it can cope with the whole gamut of possible experience, without being dominated by it, so that he still has something to say to the man with no 'spiritual experience'. His focal point is always the reality of the redemption achieved in Jesus Christ, in the union of the divine and human natures in his single Person, and above all in his death for us. St Bernard has a positively evangelical devotion to Jesus his Saviour, and he regards it as a great grace even to have a 'carnal' affection for him—that is to say, a merely emotional attachment to the humanity of Jesus. But he knows that this is not enough. The mind, enlightened by faith, must penetrate further, to what Bernard calls a 'rational' devotion. This does not mean an unemotional commitment; for Bernard no state could be good which left the affections untouched. But in this second stage of love, the emotions are tempered by commonsense and faith (notice already an anticipation of John of the Cross), so that the soul is 'never to exceed the proper limits of discretion by superstition or frivolity or the vehemence of a too eager spirit'. Doctrine, intelligence and spiritual affection and fervour must go hand in hand. For St Bernard theology and spirituality are inseparable: theology must always be able to appeal to and be enriched by experience (he appeals to the experience of his monks, for instance, in sermon 3; and in another place he echoes Athanasius to the effect that anyone can discover quite empirically the truth of the gospel); but experience is always precisely the savouring of the reality expressed in dogma and theology. Bernard does not go in for any kind of metaphysical mysticism, nor is he particularly concerned with an analysis of spiritual states (such as we find in St Teresa, for instance). What matters is that we should enter ever more deeply into the reality of Jesus Christ, whom Bernard especially regards as the Word, expressing the intimate Godhead to us. Starting with a fervent love of Jesus (a devotion we find in Aelred too) he leads us right into the heart of the Trinity, at once deepening piety into mystery, and making trinitarian theology viable and relevant in a way that it usually isn't.

But God is always far more than we can experience or comprehend, and so faith is always primary; those who have no 'spiritual

experience' can rest assured that they are founded on the same rock, and stand to gain the same blessings, as their more mystical brethren.

Although Bernard is very concerned with the individual's response to God, his spirituality is not privatized. There is no discontinuity between the charity that forms our relationship with God, and that which makes our relationships with one another; nor between the graces given to us for our own good, and those given for others. St Bernard has a theology of the charisms (*oleum effusum*, distinguished from *oleum infusum*)—indeed, Bernard has all that the Pentecostals would require: a doctrine of the 'gift of the Holy Spirit' as a distinct experience; an awareness of being led by the Spirit, and a readiness to allow for, even to expect, charismatic manifestations. He clearly intends these very sermons, in fact, to be charismatic preaching (1, 4). But the charisms make nonsense without an inner fulness of grace to match them. Bernard quotes from Ecclesiastes: 'do not be over-virtuous'. In our zeal to do good, especially supernatural good, to others, we can easily lose balance. The outward effects of supernatural grace should be integrally related to the inward. This makes for an authentic involvement in the working out of God's love and providence, and is the surest way of excluding the poison of self-love and self-will.

Bernard and his fellow Cistercians offer us, I think, a spirituality that has much to say to our age, both to inspire and to warn us. Much of the questing of modern man, they have explored before; many of the mistakes we seem bent on making, they could help us to avoid. Above all, they offer us a way of revitalizing, without simply secularizing, theology and dogma; and they show us how to take experience, however mystical, in our stride, without being unhinged or unchurched by it. I sincerely hope that these volumes of Cistercian Fathers will find their way beyond the shelves of libraries, into the hearts and the deeds of men.

Judging from the volumes I have received so far, we can expect a high standard of translating and editing—and, alas, an equally high level of pricing.