

THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT
**ST. GERTRUDE, THE MYSTIC OF THE
 SACRED HEART**

BY

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*Amor meus continuus,
 Tibi languor assiduus,
 Amor tuus suavissimus,
 Mihi sapor gratissimus.*

—Our Lord to St. Gertrude.

Modern devotion to the Sacred Heart is closely associated with the name of St. Margaret Mary and popular practices such as the Nine Fridays and the Holy Hour, and its beginnings are not so well known. Yet it originated not at Paray-le-Monial but in the centres of medieval contemplative life, especially in the Benedictine, Cistercian and Carthusian monasteries. St. Gertrude, the famous mystic of Helfta, is perhaps its most striking representative.

Little is known of her outward life, which is not surprising, for she entered her convent at the age of five, never to leave it. She was long regarded as its abbess, and most pictures still represent her as such. But, according to modern scholars, this view was based on an erroneous identification of her with her namesake, Gertrude of Hackeborn, who governed the monastery during the Saint's lifetime. It is even doubtful whether she was a Cistercian or a Benedictine. The main source of our knowledge of her are her *Revelations*, written in Latin, which, after her death, remained hidden for a long time. One manuscript, however, seems to have been in the possession of Master Eckhart, and the Dominicans were the first to defend her doctrine, and translated her works in 1505. Their devotion was shared by the Carthusians, especially by Justus Lanspergius, who, attracted by her cult of the Sacred Heart, became one of her most ardent disciples.

Of the five books of her *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*, to give it its Latin title, only the second is written by herself, the remaining four are compiled from her notes by one of her nuns. From it we know that her early life, from her fifth to her twenty-fifth year, was spent chiefly in the pursuit of learning. She was of unusual intelligence, knew Latin well, and was particularly interested in the Liberal Arts. But one Advent (probably in 1280), her hitherto peaceful life suddenly became troubled by a strange restlessness and an inexplicable feeling of interior emptiness. This state continued until the Monday before the Feast of the Purification, when, while she was standing in the dormitory after Compline, our Lord appeared to her and placed his hand in hers saying: "I will save and deliver you, fear nothing. With my enemies you have licked the dust and looked for honey among the thorns. Return now, I will accept you and inebriate you

with the streams of my Divine joy." From that time she abandoned her former interests and gave herself completely to prayer and the study of Scripture and the Fathers, especially St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, St. Bernard and Hugh of St. Victor, and she received the gift of instructing others in the mysteries of the faith. At the same time her inner life became a succession of the highest spiritual experiences, centred in the Humanity of our Lord, which made her the mystic *par excellence* of the Incarnation and of the Sacred Heart. Henceforth she lives in the world of Divine charity, in which the smallest action radiates the love of the Divine Heart, and both the joys and the sufferings of earthly life are transfigured and made fruitful by the action of grace.

The life-giving source of this supernatural world, the Heart of Jesus, appears to her under a wealth of images. It is a treasure house in which are enclosed all riches, a lyre moved by the Holy Ghost, a golden censer from which ascend sweet-smelling perfumes, or a lamp suspended between Heaven and earth. Like St. Margaret Mary, she receives the great revelation on the Feast of St. John. On that day, at Matins, the Apostle appears to her and invites her to come with him, that they may rest together on the Breast of the Lord. Then, taking her up with him, he presents her to Jesus and places her on his right side, reposing himself on the left. This he does, as he explains, so that she may drink more easily the consolations flowing from his Divine Heart, for it was the right side that was pierced by the lance. Then, as the beating of the Divine Heart fills her with ineffable joy, she asks St. John why he had written nothing about it in his Gospel, and he replies: "It was my mission to instruct the Church in her earliest age in the mysteries of the Uncreated Word, so far as they may be comprehended. But I did not speak about the sweetness of the Divine heart-beats until these later ages, so that the world that has grown cold may be rekindled by the knowledge of these mysteries."

There is a striking difference between the Sacred Heart as revealed to St. Gertrude and the great visions of St. Margaret Mary. In the life of the modern Saint the Sacred Heart is almost always seen in sufferings, despised by men, asking for love and reparation. We are in the world of the great apostasy which began in the sixteenth century and still continues, imparting to our whole life as Christians a spirit of martyrdom, as it were, that is poignantly conscious of the forces of evil around us. St. Gertrude, it is true, also preaches the necessity of suffering and reparation, but it is a reparation for sinners within the fold of the One Church, within a Europe in which Christianity and civilization are still synonyms. There the Sacred Heart shows itself radiant in glory, loving and beloved, and the mystic responds joyfully, singing "a canticle on the instrument of thy Divine

Heart by the virtue of the Spirit of consolation''. The whole spiritual life of St. Gertrude, dominated as it is by her close union with the Sacred Heart, breathes an extraordinary happiness. For the Divine Heart is, as it were, her home to which she is called by the Voice of her Heavenly Lover: *Veni, mea, ad me! Intra, meum, in me!* Thus he frequently draws her into his heart during contemplation, and this close union produces a delightful intimacy between the Creator and one of his most favoured creatures. It is this intimacy, that may occasionally shock the modern reader, as when the Saint asks our Lord all manner of questions, desiring detailed explanations of his actions. We are so very grown-up that we have almost forgotten that the prayer our Lord himself taught us really means to come to him as children to their father, though he made it so unmistakably clear that this is the only attitude acceptable to him. St. Gertrude had this attitude, and the example of her, who was a woman of great intelligence and learning, may serve to dissipate the prejudice as if the childlike mind required by our Lord were incompatible with high intellectual gifts—a combination, by the way, not unknown in the greatest Doctors of the Church.

This childlike trust in God's fatherly goodness penetrates Gertrude's whole life, and reveals itself especially in her relations to the Blessed Sacrament, so much less approached in her time than in our own. It seems as if devotion to the Sacred Heart necessarily entails the desire for frequent Communion, of which the Saint was one of the most ardent advocates. When she is full of anxiety on account of her unworthiness our Lord himself quietens her fears: "He who communicates from a pure desire of my glory never communicates irreverently". And of one of her sisters who abstained from fear he said: "What can I do for her, since she herself has so covered her eyes with the veil of her unworthiness that she cannot see the tenderness of my paternal Heart".

But this tenderness which the Saint extols is very far from softness. For the close relation between the Divine Heart and the mystic is based on the perfect conformity of her will to the Will of God, and on her profound humility. "When she humbled herself at the remembrance of her faults, our Lord poured forth on her from his Sacred Heart all the virtue and beauty of his Divine perfections." He shows himself displeased when she asks him to restore her health so that she may again follow her Rule, for he wants her to practise the greater perfection of complete abandonment to Divine Providence. Here she already touched the theme that, three centuries later, will be so fully orchestrated by St. John of the Cross: "I know, says our Lord to her, that if I grant what you ask and allow you to assist at these services, I shall be obliged to follow you into the place which pleases you; whereas, if I refuse you this, and you still

continue patient, you will follow me into the place which I prefer. For I am better pleased with your good intentions in a state of suffering than with the sweetness of your devotion that gives pleasure to yourself”.

Thus St. Gertrude, in all the joys of her contemplation, knows the fundamental truth of the mystic life, that the giving up of our own will, however pious its aspirations, is the one great condition of union with God. When she asks our Lord why he so often deprives souls of spiritual consolation on feast days or at the moment of Holy Communion, he replies that he prefers good intentions and humility to sensible devotion, and she is reminded that “sufferings of body and mind are proofs of the spiritual espousals of God and the soul.” Despite all the extraordinary favours showered on her, she is often overwhelmed with sadness, and never ceases to bewail the enormity of her faults. It is one of the greatest puzzles to many Christians how the Saints, in the midst of all the graces given to them, can preserve such genuine humility which is unattainable to those who would seem to have so much more reason for it. This is one of the paradoxes of the spiritual life, but St. Gertrude gives a key to it when she records our Lord’s words: “My graces usually serve to humble you, because you think yourself unworthy of them.” There is a parallel even in the natural sphere. When a man and a woman truly love each other, each will think that the other is far superior, and the more marks of love they receive from one another, the less will they believe themselves to deserve them . . . Now if that happens in the human sphere, how much more in the love of the creature for its Creator, between whom there is an infinite distance, which can only be bridged by the ineffable condescension of the Beloved. Thus in the mystic life, which is the life of love at its highest, humility grows apace with love, for there is no real love apart from it, and St. Paul’s great canticle on charity is at the same time the most beautiful hymn to humility.

This humility, given to Gertrude to defend her from her human frailty, enables her to receive all those high graces which flow from the Divine Heart. Visions and revelations succeed one another, our Lord, our Lady and the Saints speak to her as familiarly as her sisters, and she seems to live continually in the Divine Presence. This close connexion with the supernatural world imparts to her an admirable wisdom, which people of all conditions come to consult. Her rules of conduct, scattered throughout her writings, shows that she possessed the virtue of prudence and the gift of counsel in an eminent degree. When she is doubtful whether some revelations come from God she is given this rule for the discernment of spirits: “Whoever knows in his heart that his will is so united to mine as never to dissent from it, whether in prosperity or adversity, and who acts and suffers in all things only for my glory, may surely believe that

what he learns interiorly is from me, if it is useful to others and not opposed to the Scriptures."

In her life there is no tension, no incongruity between the heavenly world and her earthly surroundings, which, on the contrary, seem to interpenetrate each other, and the rich brocades and precious stones in which her visions and allegories abound, are as perfectly suited to this monastic mysticism as to the tender Virgins and Saints of a Fra Angelico. Nature and supernature are blended into a harmonious whole in the soul of this Benedictine nun, to whom our Lord said that he uses sensible things to make men understand the supra-sensible mysteries, "therefore no one should esteem spiritual things less because they are hidden under corporal images."

Does this teaching contradict St. John of the Cross, who constantly warns beginners to distrust visions and locutions? The great Doctor of mysticism knew well that these experiences have their legitimate place in the contemplative life, and are sources of danger only when they are coveted for their own sake, for the satisfaction of pride and from "spiritual gluttony", not when they are humbly received as marks of undeserved Divine favour and means of instruction used in the service of charity and submitted to authority. For though the "gratiae gratum facientes" are the only ones we are allowed to desire for ourselves, yet it would be ungrateful, indeed, to belittle those "gratiae gratis datae", given to the Saints to strengthen our faith and inflame our love. They, like all other graces, flow from the inexhaustible source of grace, the Divine Heart, which our Lord showed to St. Gertrude under the image of a burning lamp: "Behold, I present to the eyes of your soul my loving Heart, the organ of the Holy Trinity, that it may accomplish in you all the good that you cannot perform yourself."

MADAME ACARIE

By

LANCELOT C. SHEPPARD

After a painful illness of nearly three months there died, at the age of fifty-two, on the Wednesday in Easter week (April 18, 1618), in the Carmelite convent of the reform of St. Teresa at Pontoise, soeur Marie de l'Incarnation, a lay sister, five years professed. Dr. André Duval, who wrote her life, has left some account of the manner of her death. "I arrived at Pontoise," he says, "at about half-past five in the morning . . . when I got to the courtyard I met the turn sister looking for the chaplain to come and give extreme unction . . . they told the prioress that I had arrived, and she sent me at once a surplice and a stole; I went straightway to the infirmary . . . the doctor told me that it was advisable to anoint her and thereupon I began it; as I was doing