

PRAYER FROM GOD

BY

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NYONE who has reached the period of spiritual life known as the Night of the Senses will find that prayer has so changed its character as to be almost a new kind of human activity. Hitherto the time devoted to actual prayers will have been divided up between liturgical practices and private meditations. The Christian will have become accustomed, perhaps through the habits formed during many years, to set about these devotions in a methodical way, always bearing in mind the adage that if he wishes to prosper he must, while leaving all to God in his petitions, act as though all depended on himself. He will have learned a manner of assisting at Mass; he will have recited the same number of *Paters* and *Aves*, acts of contrition and charity, while he knelt beside his bed at morning and night; his rosary or 'stations' will be prominent in his regular horary; and finally his times of quiet at meditation will be organised by a method, interspersed with 'acts' and sometimes predominantly concerned with struggles against distractions and drowsiness. For these many years he may be said to have been trying to *acquire* prayer, to make it his own by his own efforts.

Now God begins to make the Christian's prayers into *his* (God's) own form of spiritual converse. The movement of the spiritual life comes from a divine rather than a human source. The soul finds that it can no longer acquire habits or states of prayer; it is almost forced to leave the initiative to God. The 'acquisitive' attitude gives place to the state of receptivity towards God's actions; the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the infused contemplation springing from those gifts require the soul to be passive rather than active in its way of prayer. We have already quoted the modern writer who has summed up the illuminative way as being essentially a state of infused contemplation, and we have noticed how Richard Rolle grew less comfortable in assisting at the liturgical functions of the Church.¹ The effect of the new gifts God now gives the soul is to make it more than ever desirous of being alone and retiring from the activities, both internal and external, of its former life. For this middle state must necessarily incite a conflict between the active concerns of the earlier state and the quietude of the union towards which the Christian is progressing. It is probable that now the communal liturgical prayers appeal less than at any other stage of the spiritual life. Later, the Christian

¹ Cf *Life of the Spirit*, February 1948, pp. 356 and 357.

strengthened by the power of infused contemplation and nourished by the spirit of quiet, will return to these external forms of worship with a greater intensity and a wider capacity to share such spiritual goods with his fellow Christians. Thus Rolle visualises a time of union when all activities, even the most physical, are gathered into the life of uninterrupted prayer:

We can forsooth if we be true lovers of our Lord Jesu Christ think upon him when we walk, and hold fast the song of his love whiles we sit in fellowship; and we may have mind of him at the board and also in the tasting of meat and drink. At every morsel of meat and draught of drink we ought to praise God. . . . And if we be in labour of our hands what lets us to lift our hearts to heaven without ceasing to hold the thought of endless love?²

This state of union has not yet been reached in the progressive age with which we are now concerned. Then the prayers of the Mass and the Office will be relished in a far deeper, more unified and affective manner. Now the Christian wants to be quiet and away from external preoccupations.

In this respect Rolle's language is borrowed from Isaias who received the burning coal upon his lips. The soul should now be receptive of this infused love of God, coming down from its source in the bosom of the Father. This glowing ember must be allowed to rest in man's heart so that lying there it may soon set fire to that on which it rests; and the words of Jeremias recall the same burning presence of the Word:

By the continuance of prayer the soul is burnt with the fire of God's love: our Lord truly says by his prophet . . . (Jer. 33, 29) 'Are not my words as burning fire?' The psalm (118, 140) also says . . . 'Thy speech is hugely burned'. (Misyn, p. 91).

The insistence on acquiring virtues and habits of prayer, the continued attachment to active forms of devotion, these stirrings which arise from the soul rather than from God only create a barrier to the divine gift; the burning ember is thrown out, not being allowed to rest where it might burn and start a fire:

There are many now that forthwith cast out the word of God from the mouth and heart, not suffering it there to rest in them; and therefore they are not burnt with the heat of comfort but bide cold in sloth and negligence, even after innumerable prayers and meditations of scripture, because forsooth they neither pray nor meditate in mind. (id)

Certainly prayer has to remain active in character until such time as God himself chooses to turn its course aside into this new and heaven-sent way of receptivity. But it is easy to hold on to the innumerable

² *The Fire of Love*, Bk 2, c. 10.—Misyn trans: Comper ed. p. 178. This compares closely with St Teresa's description of the Prayer of Union in her *Life*, c. 17 (Peers ed: I, 102).

prayers at the time when God is striving to effect the change. It may well be an attachment to active prayer which prevents the burning love from descending into the heart.

When St Thomas is speaking of the attention due to vocal prayer he lists three ways in which the mind can be occupied with what the lips are saying—the first is to the actual recitation of the words of the prayer, the second to the meaning of the words. Both these represent an active form of taking part in liturgical prayer as well as in the recitation of private devotions. But it is the third way which is most fundamental and necessary to all prayer; this way is rather by the intention of the will than by the attention of the mind; it may be present in the unlettered and stupid as well as in the most highly elevated soul whose every faculty is absorbed in God and forgetful of all else. The mind here is attentive not necessarily to the words but to the goal of prayer, namely God—*ad finem orationis*, *sc. ad Deum*. (II-II. 83. 13). He goes on to say that prayer in this life can only be 'without ceasing' in so far as it proceeds from the desire of charity, that love which is a gift of God and which keeps every thought and action in contact with this very '*finis orationis*'. 'Prolixity in prayer', he says, 'does not consist in the asking for many things, but in this that the affection for the one thing to be desired is continued'. (id. 14. c., ad 2). This, the heart of prayer as outlined by St Thomas, must be borne in mind in considering the illuminative way in general and infused contemplation in particular. It shows that the prayer itself is only confusedly and even interruptedly in the understanding and that it rests rather in an act of the will in loving God than in an act of any other virtue, even the virtue of religion. This act comes from an infused virtue—charity—which as a gift from God must necessarily reach the soul with a perfection independent of previous activities, a perfect gift coming down from heaven. For the presence of the burning love of God does not of itself depend on the fact that the man has hitherto been making frequent and increasing acts of charity, but rather on the act of God placing that love in the soul, and God's action itself will have no blemish. This means also that the feelings and emotions are not necessarily involved but that the will alone receives at least the principal virtue, the burning gift of love.

These considerations are important when we consider Rolle's language which so often conveys the atmosphere of intense emotional sweetness and delight; whereas the night of the senses has in fact isolated and to a certain extent destroyed these feelings and sensibilities. So that a passage such as the following must be read in the light of this fundamental reality of the '*finis orationis*', the actual love of God springing from the will under divine influence.

Truly the more I am lift from earthly thoughts the more I feel the sweetness desired. . . . I beseech he kiss me with the sweetness of his refreshing love, straitly halsing me by the kissing of his mouth so that I fail not.

But he continues a paragraph later:—

Ghostly gifts truly dress a devout soul to love burningly; to meditate sweetly; to contemplate highly; to pray devoutly; and praise worthily; to desire JESU only; to wash the mind from filth of sin; to slaken fleshly desires; and to paint the wounds and Christ's cross in mind; and, with an unwearied desire, with desire to sigh for the sight of the most glorious Clearness. (Misyn, p. 112-3.)

This is the genuine prayer springing from the infusion of love and remaining independent of the senses and emotions. He clearly states that meditation is turned into songs of joy (id: p. 68) and that the soul must continue to pray and meditate until such time as the 'heart is ravished in prayer to behold heavenly things' so that 'passing earthly things' it may be made perfect in Christ's love. (id. p. 116.) And there is one outstanding passage which we may be permitted to quote at some length as it brings us to the centre of the question of infused contemplation which is the principal characteristic of this stage in spiritual development, and gives a true understanding of this prayer which rests in the will in a more and more continuous act of love: —

The clearer certain the love of a lover is the nearer and the more present to him God is. And thereby he joys more clearly in God, and the more he feels of his sweet goodness that is wont to *inshed itself to lovers and to glide into the hearts of the meek* with mirth beyond comparison. This forsooth is pure love: . . . The sharpness of his mind being cleansed, is altogether stabled into the one desire of everlastingness; and with *freeness of spirit* he continually beholds heavenly things—as he that is ravished by the beauty of any whom he beholding cannot but love.

But . . . ravishing is understood in two ways. One manner forsooth is when some man is ravished out of fleshly feeling . . . [Rolle here describes the effects of the intensity of desire of God outlined by St Thomas at the end of II-II.83.13c] Another manner of ravishing there is, that is the lifting of the mind into God by contemplation.³

Rolle continues to describe the effects of the 'inshed' love leading to contemplation in relation to 'wisdom unwrought' and to the mind passing into stableness which comes from Jesus Christ after the Christian has prepared for it by meditation.⁴ The change in prayer is thus described in terms of the coming of the Word into the heart

³ *The Fire of Love*, Bk 2, c. 7. Misyn-Comper, pp. 161-2. Italics are mine.

⁴ Cf *The Mending of Life*, cc. 7 and 8, same edition, pp. 220-1.

to rescue it from 'the waverings of the mind' and to quieten it. It is the first prayer which may be said to be a direct act of God on the soul not also acquired by the exercise of the mind and will:

Which things are they that allure us to conform us to God's will? There are three. First, the example of creatures that is had by consideration: the goodness of God that is gotten by meditation and prayer; and mirth of the heavenly kingdom *that is felt in a manner by contemplation.*⁵

There can be little doubt that the Yorkshire mystic in these passages is referring to what is now known as infused contemplation and which has been for some years the subject of dispute in comparing it with what is called acquired contemplation. We need not concern ourselves very closely with the modern discussion but it is interesting to note that the distinction between two types of contemplation, or contemplative prayer, had in Rolle's time been already of long standing, having been drawn by one who exercised an influence on 14th century Oxford. This was Richard of St Victor, who had died late in the twelfth century but who had played a great part in the development of St Bonaventure's spiritual doctrine, and St Bonaventure has left his mark on Rolle.⁶ Richard himself had made a threefold distinction of the 'quality of contemplation': the expansion of the mind (*mentis dilatatio*) which does not overstep the limits of human ingenuity and application; the raising of the mind (*mentis sublevatio*) when a certain divine liveliness diffuses the understanding but without carrying it out of itself; the transformation of the mind (*mentis alienatio*) when the divine activity goes quite beyond the powers of the understanding. He says that the first comes from human activity (and must therefore in the modern sense be an 'acquired' contemplation), the third from divine grace alone (and we should call it 'infused'), the second from a combination of the two activities. This second type of contemplation is difficult to analyse for he says that human effort is supported and elevated by grace; but it may well be identified with the fruit of meditation and discursive prayer which leads the soul on to the abandonment of human forms and to this receptive attitude in which it may become subject to the divine influence.

This division, which is echoed by Rolle in the final quotation from the Mending of Life above, would seem to correspond with experience and psychological development. For as a rule a man will not undergo a sudden and complete change over from human discursive activity to an equally complete passivity to the divine form of contemplation.

⁵ *id.* c. 4, p. 208. Italics mine.

⁶ Cf *L'Oraison* Cahier de la Vie Spirituelle, pp. 26 et seq. *L'Oraison dans l'histoire*, by P. Phillippe, O.P. The passage of Richard of St Victor here referred to is *Benjamin Major* 5, 2. (P.L., 196, 170.)

There is a period in which the soul cannot meditate or occupy itself with its own consideration in prayer, but when the divine infusion is only perceived as a momentary actual grace bestowed at rare intervals. This is 'the space of life between' which has been described by a modern writer specifically as 'acquired contemplation', 'a contemplation in which a certain divine infusion comes to the assistance of the soul, so that it may hold itself in the presence of God by a gaze of living faith'.⁷ It is an expression which is of some use in describing the period at the beginning of the night of the senses when 'active' prayer (liturgy or meditation) becomes increasingly difficult and a new type of aridity descends on the soul. The mind and heart together can practise a type of loving gaze on God which is made more practicable by the aridity—the dark night—sent by God. There is here a mixture of activity and passivity which St Teresa calls the prayer of recollection and Richard of St Victor *mentis sublevatio*.

The modern discussion is first of all a matter of names; for 'acquired contemplation' is a term not found among the great mystical writers. But secondly, and more seriously, some of those who use this terminology maintain that the normal route to perfection will lead only to this half active, half passive state in which the heart must be all the time maintaining its effort to gaze at the divine face. They aver that the fully infused contemplation is a mystical phenomenon lying off the beaten track and granted only as an exceptional grace to the chosen few who just happen to be favoured. It will be safer to return to the older terminology and the broader and more integrated view of the earlier teaching as expressed by Richard Rolle. For him, as for St Teresa and St John of the Cross, the word 'contemplation' is used for that perception of the divine 'Clearness' granted by God at first fitfully but eventually with that 'stableness' which gives the Christian a constant inner certainty of the presence of God and a constant outpouring of love. This state, which must characterise the illuminative way, according to Rolle is not a *gratia gratis data* but a stage in the normal development of the soul as its powers are gathered into a closer and closer unity and as God prepares it to be transfixed *wholly* by the fiery dart of his love. He speaks of it, for example, in the chapter on 'Clearness of Mind' in *The Mending of Life*. A man by spiritual reading, prayer and meditation can so cleanse his mind that he can 'have his mind busy to God' (St Teresa's loving gaze of affection)—'for in this degree all the thought is dressed to Christ; all the mind, though he *seems* to speak to others, is spread unto him'. And thus the soul is prepared

⁷ *St John of the Cross, Doctor of Divine Love*, by Father Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen. (London, 1940), pp. 115-6.

both by its own and by God's action for the next step when 'full oft a wonderful joy of God is given and heavenly song is inshed'. (Misyn-Comper, p. 228.)

The soul has been prepared by this cleansing for the activity of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost hitherto bound down by venial sins. The purgative way has gradually overcome the attachment to the slight sins and self-centredness which had prevented the Holy Spirit from working on the soul. The gifts of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and fortitude, these are all there in the first infusion of grace, but the soul cannot be moved promptly and instinctively as it should by their power because it has tied itself to the earth as the Lilliputians tied Gulliver by the thousand tiny threads of venial sins. When however the soul has generously purified herself from these evil bonds, then it is the normal development of the Gifts that the Holy Ghost should begin to work directly and instinctively upon the soul. This is infused contemplation, the essence of the illuminative way and the normal experience of those who are growing in grace. Rolfe sums it up beautifully in the last two chapters of *The Mending of Life*.

A sweet and delectable *light* that is my Maker unmade; *enlighten* the face and sharpness of my inward eye with *clearness unmade*, that my mind, pithily cleansed from uncleanness and made marvellous with *gifts*, may swiftly flee into the high mirth of love; and *kindled with thy savour* I may sit and rest, joyful in thee, Jesus. And gazing as it were ravished in heavenly sweetness, and *made stable* in the beholding of things unseen, never save by godly things shall I be gladdened. (p. 229.)

To me it seems that contemplation is the joyful song of God's love taken into the mind with the sweetness of angel's praise. This is the jubilation which is the end of perfect prayer and high devotion in this life. (id. p. 237.)

Many people are naturally timid about this doctrine lest they fall into some kind of illuminism or quietism. They are reasonably hesitant about relinquishing their hold on their own activities. It is easy to be swept away on the tide of sloth into an ocean of delusion, moved hither and thither on the face of this awful deep by figments of imagination—voices or visions, violent or vaunting devils, voluptuous angels or vainglorious suggestions. Infused contemplation suggests by its very name a launching out into the deep for which they are unprepared and which fills them with the dread of the unknown. Such people must comfort themselves with the assurance that these supernatural gifts and this infusion of divine powers (the virtues—and above all the virtue of charity) do not take place without the parallel preparation and co-operation of the man himself. If the mystical states were all exceptional or extraordinary well might

they fear, for there would be no relation between their own 'acquired' state and the sudden overpowering reality of the divine. But there is a correspondence between the two. The soul must be for ever vigilant and for ever increasing in humility in its surrender to the divine action. Rolle insists on this constant activity, as it were on the threshold of the soul:

It must be taken to with all busyness that we wake in prayer, that is to say not to be lulled by vain thoughts that withdraw the mind and make it forget whither it is bound and always let, if they can, to overcome the effect of devotion; the which the mind of the pray-er would perceive if he prayed with wakefulness, busyness and desire. (*Fire of Love*, I. 22. p. 92.)

There is little danger of a false illuminism, untethered and fickle, which cannot be driven in the shafts with reason and common sense, so long as the Christian is whole-hearted in his penance and generous in his response to the day to day demands of the virtues. He will not abandon prudence, but he will discover that in response to his fidelity wisdom and counsel will descend upon him and perfect his prudence. St John of the Cross may lead the way without being suspect.

When the faculties had been perfectly annihilated and calmed together with the passions, desires and affections of my soul, wherewith I had experienced and tasted God after a lowly manner. I went forth from my own human way and operation to the operation and way of God. That is to say, my understanding went forth from itself, turning from the human to the divine; for when it is united with God by means of this purgation its understanding no longer comes through its natural light and vigour, but through the divine Wisdom wherewith it has become united. (*Dark Night*, II, 4. Peers, 1, 405.)