

we may as our spiritual life deepens recognise the presence of such elements in our outlook and behaviour, but we recognise them as imperfections. As Catholic Christians we meet a person whose authority cannot be gainsaid, and that means that we are called upon to embark on a new life, the principles and goal of which are given by God, and made possible by his power.



## THE LAMB OF GOD<sup>1</sup>

THOMAS AQUINAS

*The next day John saw Jesus coming to him and he saith: Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the world. (John I, 29.)*

**I**N the preceding passage, John had been questioned and had given testimony to Christ. Now he gives further testimony spontaneously, giving the testimony first and then confirming what he had said before, in the words: 'And John gave testimony saying . . .' The circumstances of his giving testimony are described in the first place, followed by his exact words: 'Behold the Lamb of God'; his witness is excluded from suspicion by the words: 'And I knew him not'.

Details of the circumstances are given firstly as to time, where it says, 'The next day', and here the perseverance of St John is especially commended, because he went on giving testimony to our Lord, not upon one day alone, nor even once only, but upon several days and at different times: 'Every day will I bless thee'. (Ps. 144.) His increase in fervour is also commended, for we ought not to allow each succeeding day to pass without variation; it ought to be different from the preceding, which means better, as the Psalmist says: 'They shall go from virtue to virtue.' (Ps. 83, 8.) Other details concern the manner of giving testimony, since 'John saw Jesus'. This implies certainty for an eye-witness is the most trustworthy. Further detail is given about the subject of the witness where the text reads: 'Jesus coming to him', coming, that is to say, from Galilee. (Matth. 3, 13.) This coming of Jesus to St

<sup>1</sup> Translated from St Thomas's commentary on John I, 29, by S. M. Agnes, O.P.

John the Baptist, described here in St John's gospel, must not be taken to refer to that earlier going to St John to be baptised about which St Matthew is speaking in the text quoted. The evangelist of the fourth gospel refers to another visit, after our Lord, already baptised, had stayed some time in the Jordan district and then returned to St John the Baptist. Otherwise the Baptist would not have said: 'He upon whom thou shalt see the spirit descending and remaining upon him, he it is that baptiseth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw and gave testimony', etc. (vv. 33, 34.) So at this point he had already seen our Lord and the Spirit coming down upon him in the form of a dove, as he says further on. One of the reasons for this particular visit of Christ to St John after his baptism is that the testimony of John might be perfectly trustworthy, for he had said of Christ: 'The same is he that shall come after me'. (v. 27.) Now it is possible to be mistaken in recognising someone who is expected to come when that person is, in fact, there present. Our Lord therefore came to St John on purpose to be pointed out by him with the finger, while St John said: 'Behold the Lamb of God', etc. Another reason for this visit is that all error might be removed; for some might believe that upon the first occasion when our Lord came to his baptism, he had come to St John to be cleansed from sin. In order to remove such doubt, our Lord went to him again, after his baptism; whereupon St John said significantly: 'Behold him who taketh away. . . .' etc. Christ had never sinned, but came to take away sin. A third reason is that he might give an example of humility, as it says in Eccles. 3, 20: 'The greater thou art, the more humble thyself in all things'. There is a similarity here with the occasion when the virgin mother of Christ, bearing our Lord in her womb, went up into the mountain country with haste to see Elizabeth, the mother of John. For then John, as yet unborn and unable to speak, honoured Christ and rejoiced by leaping in his mother's womb. So again on this occasion he honours Christ who in humility is coming to him, and breaking forth into words, gives testimony saying: 'Behold the Lamb of God'.

This witness of John discloses the virtue and dignity of Christ, continuing: 'This is he of whom I spoke'. He shows the virtue of our Lord in two ways: by introducing a figure and by explaining it with the words: 'Who taketh away the sins of the world'. In this figure we should note that, as Origen says, it was customary

in the old law to offer five animals in the temple. Three had to be cattle, namely calves, goats and sheep (the sheep including both rams and lambs); two had to be birds, namely turtle-doves and pigeons. All these pre-figured the real sacrifice which is Christ who 'delivered himself for us, an oblation and a sacrifice to God'. (Eph. 5, 2.) But why does John the Baptist, when giving testimony to Christ, particularly call him the Lamb? The reason which we find in Numbers, chapter 28, is that while the other animals were sacrificed at certain other times in the temple, there was daily a morning and evening sacrifice at which a lamb was offered. This was looked upon as the principal sacrifice which was never varied, while the sacrifices of other animals were made in addition. So, by the lamb, the principal sacrifice, is signified Christ, the principal sacrifice. For although all the saints who were put to death for their faith in Christ gain merit towards the salvation of the faithful, their immolation has value only in so far as it is made in union with the oblation of the Lamb, in addition, as it were, to this principal sacrifice. The morning sacrifice of the old law signified that a way was opened by our Lord towards the contemplation and fruition of divine mysteries, which pertains to morning knowledge; by him also we are taught how to use the things of earth without sinning, and this pertains to the evening.

St John calls him the lamb 'of God', firstly because in Christ there are two natures, human and divine. It was by virtue of the divinity that our Lord's sacrifice was availing for the purgation of sin and for our sanctification, that is to say, in as much as 'God indeed was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.' (2 Cor. 5, 19.) Secondly, 'Lamb of God' means the lamb offered by God, that is, by Christ himself who is God, just as the oblation which a man makes is called 'of man'. And thirdly, because 'Lamb of God' suggests 'of the Father' because God the Father himself provided man with a sacrifice to offer as an amends for sin, which man of himself could not have had. So we read in Genesis (22, 7), when Isaac asks his father: 'Where is the victim for the holocaust?'; Abraham replies (v. 8): 'God will provide a victim for an holocaust, my son'. 'He that spared not even his own son, but delivered him up for us all.' (Rom. 8, 32.)

Our Lord is called 'the Lamb', firstly on account of his purity: 'And it shall be a lamb without blemish'. (Ex. 12, 5.) 'Knowing

that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, as gold or silver . . . but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb unspotted and undefiled.' (1 Peter 1, 18, 19.) Secondly, he was called 'the Lamb' on account of his meekness: 'He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter, and shall be dumb as a lamb before his shearer and he shall not open his mouth'. (Is. 53, 7.) And thirdly because of the various and profitable uses made of lambs: 'Lambs are for thy clothing'. (Prov. 28, 26.) They serve both as clothing, in which sense we read: 'But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 13, 14), and as food: 'The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world' (John 6, 52). We read also: 'Send forth, O Lord, the Lamb, the ruler of the earth'. (Is. 16, 1.)



## OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN

GREGORY OF NYSSA<sup>1</sup>

**W**HEN the great Moses undertook to initiate the Israelites into the Divine mysteries which had been inaugurated on Mount Sinai, he did not consider them ready to receive the theophany until he had ordained the purification of the people by chastity and the sprinkling of water. But even so they did not brave the manifestation of the Divine Power, but were struck down by all the apparitions, the fire and the darkness, the smoke and the trumpets. So they turned back and asked the Lawgiver to be their mediator of the will of God, seeing that they were not fit by their own power to draw near to God to receive the Divine manifestation. But when our Lawgiver the Lord Jesus Christ is bringing us to Divine grace, he does not show us Mount Sinai covered with darkness and smoking with fire, nor does he strike fear into us by the meaningless sound of trumpets. He does not purify the soul by three days' chastity and by water that washes dirt away; nor does he leave all the assembly behind at the foot of the mountain, granting only to one the ascent to its summit, which, moreover, is hidden by a darkness

<sup>1</sup> This article is an excerpt from a translation made by Miss H. C. Graef of St Gregory of Nyssa's homily on the *Our Father*, shortly to be published in the series of Ancient Christian Writers (Newman, U.S.A.). It is here printed by kind permission of the publisher and translator.