

THE SOUL OF CHRIST

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



ARDENERS sometimes say that a certain degree of drought strengthens the roots of plants. The grass of a newly growing lawn finding no moisture above the ground in the light and heat of the sun thrusts its roots deeper and deeper into the soil in search of life-giving refreshment. Similarly the soul which is left by God in a dry and waste land abandons the hope of refreshment in the external life of experience and the senses and begins to sink more completely into the reality of God, but in the darkness of the lower soil, in the darkness of faith as opposed to the distinctness of emotional experience.

We have seen Mother Julian left with the externally arid doctrine of God's changeless will, predestination and the wayward behaviour of the predestined. Little light is shed on this problem without a deepening faith which sees things more in God than in their own proper natures. And for Mother Julian this was the way she saw sin and predestination, for God is changeless and all time is eternally present to him. Nevertheless this approach would seem to be rather 'high-flown' and to be concerned almost too much with great ideas rather than with the concrete reality which is so precious to the soul resting in union with God. Indeed such a soul can never long view such deep mysteries without having recourse to our blessed Lord, to the Word who became flesh in order to solve all problems. Thus it is that Mother Julian too, far from being the sort of mystic who recedes from the reality of the humanity of Christ the deeper she sinks in prayer, grows ever closer to him, thrusting her roots always more securely into this sweet Ground of prayer the more difficult the problems appear.

The permanence of the soul who shall be saved can be seen not only in the divine mind, but in the soul of Christ the well beloved Son in whom the Father contemplates the souls of all the just. Walter Hilton had shown¹ how the soul is transformed into the soul of Jesus Christ in three stages:

'There are three manners of transforming of the soul. One is when the soul is made meet and buxom to the will of God . . . for to transfigure, and turn and have in itself Christ's passion, with

¹ And perhaps Mother Julian had heard it from his own lips or read it from his pen.

suffering of all shames and reproofs as Christ suffered. . . . Another there is . . . when his soul is oned with Christ and right homely with him. And the soul hath then great feeling of Christ's love. . . . The third transforming is when Jesu Christ and a soul are so perfectly, so unpartably, and so accordably oned and bounden together, that Christ is in the soul and the soul is in him so fully as if they both were but one spirit, as St Paul saith: "Whoso cleaveth to God, he is one spirit with him".²

Mother Julian in her life of union must certainly have reached this third degree; and in her realisation of this oneness of soul with our Lord she discovers a more tangible solution to her puzzles regarding the love of God as it works out in a fallible and failing world. Objective as always, she sees not so much her own soul as that soul in its identification with Christ. Firstly she takes 'all the gracious comfort' not simply for herself in her own soul but for all her 'even-Christians', understanding the meaning of her vision in general and 'nothing in special' (c. 37, p. 76). This general conception of man's soul remains in the temporal order, so that it is identified with 'sensualite' which though St Thomas regards this as the sensitive appetite is certainly to be understood (as Miss Warrack does) as the 'sense-soul' or as the soul in the time series modified and conditioned by the whole texture of human temporal experience including that of the senses. It is in this soul of ours that the Godhead dwells by grace in spite of the ups and downs of human actions. Here therefore is to be found the divine image of the blessed Trinity imparted by the infusion of sanctifying grace into the soul which thus becomes the '*made-trinity*', like to the unmade blissful Trinity, known and loved from without beginning, and in the making oned to the Maker' (c. 55, p. 133, cf. c. 45, p. 94). But the way in which the soul is made into the Trinity is of course through the meditation of God-made-man, who because he has taken on the very flesh of man himself resides in a special way in the 'sensualite' or sense soul. The substance of the soul, according to what we have seen remains more permanently grounded in God, but our Lord comes to unite in himself the permanent substance of the soul and the ever changing 'sense-soul' or 'sensualite' for he reigns in our human nature.

And as anent our Substance and sensualite it may rightly be called our soul; and that is because of the oneing they have in God. The worshipful City that our Lord Jesus sitteth in is our sensualite (sense-soul), in which he is enclosed: and our kindly substance (i.e. Nature substance) is enclosed in Jesus with the

² *Eight Chapters on Perfection*. A translation made by Hilton. (*Minor Works*, p. 103).

blessed soul of Christ sitting in rest in the Godhead (c. 56, p. 136)³. This 'reforming' or transforming of man's soul into the soul of Christ is, as we shall see, one of the great contributions Walter Hilton has made to the understanding of the spiritual life in its development towards holiness. But it is very interesting to find it taken up by Mother Julian and applied to her own puzzlement and contemplation of God's mysterious love.

For this identification with our Lord is of course of supreme importance for the soul seeking to perfect her union with God. For the soul will never be accepted in the fulness of the life of the Trinity in so far as it is conformed to the image of the Son, hidden so to speak within the hypostatic union and thus drawn almost by a subterfuge into the infinite and immanent action of the Father and the Son (in whom the Christian lies hid) loving one another in the Holy Spirit. In this way the soul, which in itself is a mediation between God who makes it directly and through no medium and all earthly things from which the body is composed, is most closely associated with the Mediator 'twixt the supernatural, intimate life of the Deity and the whole universe. 'The fullest Substance and the highest Virtue is the blessed soul of Christ', with which man is somehow identified on account of the Word having taken on man's nature, and which is itself fully 'oned into God' (c. 53, p. 129), with the result that every human soul is assimilated to the blessed soul of Christ, which itself enjoys the infinite love of God.

Because of this great, endless love that God hath to all Mankind, He maketh no departing in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul that shall be saved. . . . Where the blessed soul of Christ is, there is the substance of all the souls that shall be saved by Christ (c. 54, p. 130).

Although man is therefore in some sense torn constantly in two by the fact of having a part of himself in Christ and a part in the sinful murkiness of the Adam-nature, part in heaven and part on earth, part of weal and part of woe (cf. c. 52, v. 122), nevertheless the presence of our Lord reigning in the centre of the soul gradually gathers together all the disparate parts of a man's life under the domination of the soul, which in its turn becomes more wholly one with the soul of Christ. The division between these extremes will always remain with us in this life. But we are reminded that ever within the perfect unity of Christ on earth there existed a conflict of some sort between the '*voluntas ut natura*' and the '*voluntas ut*

³ The whole of the chapter must be studied. Miss Warrack modernises the first line quoted above as 'Anent our Substance and our Sense-part, both together may rightly be called our Soul'.

ratio', the natural instincts and the free choice. Mother Julian must surely have been thinking in terms of this distinction when she wrote:

Repenting and willing choice be two contraries which I felt both in one at that time. And these be of our two parts: the one outward, the other inward. The outward part is our deadly flesh-hood, which is now in pain and woe . . . and that part it was that repented. The inward part is an high, blissful life⁴, which is all in peace and in love . . . and this part is that in which mightily and wisely and with steadfast will I chose Jesus to my Heaven.

. . . The inward part is master and sovereign to the outward, and doth not change itself with, nor take heed to the will of that. . . . The inward draweth the outward by grace, and both shall be oned in bliss without end, by the virtue of Christ. (c. 19, p. 43; compare St Thomas III, 46, 6).

Since our Lord is everlastingly with us reigning in the soul, in heaven and on earth, his presence has the constant effect of drawing all the threads of our existence together. Before the resurrection it was he who suffered the pains of every man's sins and all the desolation of mankind which he saw in his agony. But 'now he is uprisen and no more passible, yet he suffereth with us' (p. 44). In other words even our sin and suffering is to be associated with God made man in a way in which it could never be associated with God without the incarnation. He has suffered for our sin, and we fill up what is wanting in his passion. In so far as he is Head of the Mystical Body he is in heaven glorified and impassible, but 'anent his Body in which all his members are knit he is not yet fully glorified nor all impassible' (c. 31, p. 63). In fact Mother Julian considers the mystery of the 'Godly will' in man the higher part of his soul and all the mysterious dualism implied in the relation of time to eternity in terms of the concrete reality of the Mystical Body which is Christ himself. The Godly will which we have constantly in God never assenting to sin is to be found in the concrete in the will of Christ 'whole and safe', for he sums up all that is best in man's nature as the 'form' of the Mystical Body, while at the same time being God himself.

The Mid-Person willed to be Ground and Head of this fair Kind (i.e. human nature): out of whom we be all come, in whom we be all enclosed, into whom we shall all wend, in turn finding our full heaven in everlasting joy (c. 53, pp. 127-8).

Consequently it may be said that our Substance is in God, for 'where the blessed Soul of Christ is, there is the substance of all the souls that shall be saved by Christ', though of course our substance remains a thing created—indeed is not the soul of Christ

⁴ Note that Mother Julian often speaks of the soul itself as the life rather than as the source of the life which is the more scholastic attitude to the idea of the soul.

a thing created too? (c. 54). In this one Soul were and are to be found the two parts, the higher and the lower, in which also men share in so far as they belong to the mystical body so that they suffer in their 'sensualite' together with our Lord and they remain centred in the Godhead, oned to the highest Principle in the hypostatic union (c. 55). In this way God himself provides not only our soul's Ground, in whom we live and move and have our being, but also holds the two conflicting parts together as 'the Mean' (c. 56), uniting as he does in Christ both the sensitive and the spiritual natures—'and thus in Christ our two nature's are oned' (c. 57). Finally God—the blessed Trinity—in making the blessed humanity of Christ 'made us all at once; and in our making He knit us and oned us to Himself, by which oneing we are kept as clear and as noble as we were made'; in fact in Christ our diverse paths which are so ready to fall asunder are all held in one (c. 58).

This is the summary of the doctrine concerning man's soul and our Lord's soul as the point of reconciliation between the eternal perfection of man in God and the temporal and successive imperfection and sin of the passing years. In viewing this doctrine we have to remember how dynamic the conception of the mystical body yet remained. For us today the conception of the wonderful soul of Christ is limited to that of an individual human soul, overflowing with perfection and power certainly but nevertheless isolated, unique, unshared. The soul of our Lord is of course the form of this physical body and thus individualised it remains to that extent the source of activity of the single human nature. At the same time the Incarnation is the greatest of Sacraments, so that it is an incomplete and unreal view of our Lord to restrict his soul and his human nature to a more or less material or at least externalised view of the Word made flesh. In this way our Lord himself tends to become exclusively an object of worship and veneration, always high up above us, always expecting our service and respect as *the* holy Thing, the one holy point in the midst of a corrupt and degenerate universe. There is much truth in this view of the Sacred Humanity but it is not the primary or essential reality of the Incarnation, nor is it the one which predominated with the great spiritual writers of the Middle Ages, like Mother Julian, despite her vivid and direct understanding of Jesus as her heaven.

The '*sacrum commercium*' which took place when our Lady conceived the Son of God was a commerce between the whole human race and the one, triune God, not merely a commerce between this one individual human nature. The Son took flesh in order that each man, every one born of woman, should become

the flesh of God, part of his body. The Word enfleshed is an outward sign of inward grace; the physical presence of his historic body is the '*res et sacramentum*', the miraculous Gift which is intermediate between the outward physical, symbolical creation and the inner sanctification of men. Power goes out from him to heal, to make whole, to gather all the broken parts together into himself; he draws all things to himself. He walks through the valley of dry bones not as the only living and holy son of Adam, the admiration of the deathly skulls and skeletons, but as the Life who has come to give these bones his flesh and his soul. From this point of view, which so saturates the teaching of St Paul who finds that Christ at length lives his very life rather than he himself, it is easy to realise that to look at the human soul is to see Christ's soul and to look at his unique soul is to see that of all mankind. 'It was his purpose endless to make Mankind. Which fair Kind was ordained to (adyte to) his own Son, the Second Person' (c. 58, p. 141-2).

It may be partly due to the modern spirit of individualism that we too readily accept a view of thousands of millions of human beings each with a soul, and beside these the very special Being of Christ with his human soul. Each is utterly distinct though receiving in passing a great number of gifts and benefits, especially from the Word incarnate. Yet in the eyes of faith such an individualistic view is insufficient and unsatisfying. Faith sees in every man an image of the Son, the Word Incarnate, so that Margery Kemp wept whenever she saw a man child, for it spoke to her of the Child of Bethlehem. Nor is the image a mere replica; it is informed by the living form of Christ, so that all souls are yet one Soul. In order to grasp this central doctrine we must quote at some length from Mother Julian's sixteenth and last revelation:

Then our Lord opened my spiritual eye and shewed me my soul in the midst of my heart. I saw the soul so large as it were an endless world and as it were a blissful kingdom. And by the conditions that I saw therein I understood that it is a worshipful City. In the midst of that City sitteth our Lord Jesus, God and Man, a fair person of large stature, highest Bishop, solemnest King, most worshipful Lord; and I saw him clad solemnly. And worshipfully he sitteth in the soul, even-right (i.e. straight-set) in peace and rest. And the Godhead ruleth and sustaineth heaven and earth and all that is . . . [and] the place that Jesus taketh in our soul he shall never remove it, without end, as to my sight: for in us is his homliest home and his endless dwelling (c. 67, p. 167).

In this passage, one of the most striking in the book, we may find many of the particular threads of doctrine here considered woven into the true pattern. Looking at the soul with the eyes of faith

one sees a creature, the microcosm which sums up all creation, and the creator making it and ruling; for it is impossible to see the creature wholly without also catching sight of the Creator. But more than that the Soul is seen to reflect the Son become man and Jesus appears to rule and guide it in the depths of its being. Thus he is the bishop of the kingdom of the soul who in consequence must render continual reverence and worship through him to the Father. Yet even this does not express the full unity of the soul with Christ who not only inspires its worship and governs its movements but dwells within it as in his homeliest home for ever. This indwelling of our Lord indicates the identification of which St Paul is so fond of speaking. By grace the mind of a man may become filled with the divine presence as it constantly looks with the eyes of faith at Jesus, contemplating him with such devotion that anything else can only be seen in connection with him. By grace moreover the will becomes occupied, indeed pre-occupied by the love of Jesus, until it can love only Jesus and what Jesus loves. Putting on, therefore, the mind and will of Christ our Lord the soul (whose two spiritual faculties they are) becomes Christ. The identification ultimately is one therefore of Charity.

For in man's soul is his very dwelling; and the highest light and the brightest shining of the City is the glorious love of our Lord, as to my sight (id. p. 168).

Mother Julian declares later that although she was shown God in many different ways both in heaven and on earth she never saw him rest or dwell anywhere except in man's soul. She saw the Incarnation and the Passion; she saw God 'in a point'; she saw him leading us to heaven; but she discovered his delightful resting-place only in the soul (c. 81); for this soul is the microcosm which contains not only all the elements of the universe but, through the Incarnation and its grace and love, the very being of the Trinity.

We can therefore follow the growth of union in terms of this oning of the soul with God in Christ. Every soul since the divine 'commercium' reflects the presence of God made man, but for the soul outside faith it remains only an unrecognised reflection. In the unnatural state of a soul with faith but in sin the reflection has already a new reality in that the mind, at least, is informed by the presence of Christ's soul for his faith touches the dynamic soul of Christ; the divine spark already kindles the soul in some way. With charity of course the soul becomes possessed by the soul of Christ. But here there are degrees; for the soul informed by grace may have a fitful love which dwells uncomfortably with many imperfections and venial sins. As the flame grows in intensity and the dross is burned away so the soul becomes more and more

assimilated to the soul of Christ.

This doctrine is not a sophisticated type of humanism which concentrates on man and his integral perfection. It draws man into the soul of Christ and thus into God; it does not attempt to draw God down into a merely human habitation wherein he is regarded merely as the perfection of human nature. The soul in its faith and love is drawn from creatures to consider itself; but it cannot rest in self because it discovers this blissful reality of Jesus reigning in the soul and so is it drawn up into heaven (c. 78, p. 169). From 'charity made' the soul plunges into 'charity unmade'.

Charity unmade is God; Charity made is our soul in God; Charity given is virtue. And that is a precious gift of working in which we love God, for himself; and ourselves, in God; and that which God loveth, for God (c. 84, p. 201).

The centre is God not man, but that centre is shown to us as God made man, or in other words the centre is the Mystical Body. 'For Jesus is all that shall be saved, and All that shall be saved is Jesus. And all of the Charity of God' (c. 51, p. 118).

The final resolution of the problems of a Christian, of the problems of sin and predestination, of grace and free-will, of time in its contact with eternity, is therefore not to be sought in some abstruse theological *discursus*; it remains within the reach of the simplest and most illiterate Christian. The Christian whether he be the greatest theologian or the meanest peasant seizes on Christ Jesus as his salvation and there he finds all puzzles resolved. In Jesus he discovers the inheritance of all ages, in Jesus he finds the meaning of sin, evil, suffering, in Jesus he is oned by ever growing love. 'He claspeth us and encloseth us for tender love that he may never leave us, and is more near to us than tongue can tell or heart can think' (c. 72, p. 176). The life of the Christian is simply to find all in Jesus. The true saint and contemplative does not reach beyond the Word made flesh; he does not have to stretch out above himself into some remote heaven.

Thus was I learned to choose Jesus to my heaven, whom I saw only in pain at that time: meliked no other heaven than Jesus which shall be my bliss when I come there. And this hath ever been a comfort to me that I chose Jesus to my heaven, by his grace, in all this time of passion and sorrow (c. 19, p. 42).

And she goes on to say that it was the 'higher part' of her soul, the *ratio superior*, which firmly and securely chose Jesus as heaven.