

of the late Pope to be the leaven in the lump, the salt of the earth.

There are throughout the world many varieties of Secular Institutes fully established and approved. Of English foundations, none as yet has received pontifical approbation. (England appears to be about thirty years behind the Continent in any new growth in the Church!) There are, however, several groups struggling for recognition. This depends on the success of their apostolate which in its turn depends on the generosity of souls answering the call to this new type of dedicated life. Let us hope that with an increased knowledge of the nature and ideals of Secular Institutes, will come an increase in vocations to this life 'in the world, for the world, but not of the world'.



## THE SPIRITUAL LIFE: AN HISTORICAL APPROACH—IV

SEBASTIAN BULLOUGH, O.P.

### *Devotio Moderna and the sequel*

**T**HE term *devotio moderna* is used strictly to describe a particular school of piety in the Netherlands which looked to Gerard de Groot (†1384) as its founder: '*totius modernae devotionis origo*'; they were Augustinian Canons, with a famous centre at Windesheim near Zwolle, and many abbeys in the area. Gerard de Groot was in touch with his fellow-Augustinian John Ruysbroeck (†1361), and so with the school of the German mystics. The 'modern' Augustinian school reached its greatest and most lasting renown with the writings of Thomas à Kempis (†1471), whose *Imitation of Christ* is the supreme product of the school of the *devotio moderna*. In the early sixteenth century there was the influence of the current humanism, with for example Erasmus of Rotterdam (†1536), who himself began at Deventer with the Augustinians of de Groot, and then for a time was an Augustinian himself, and the notions of the *devotio moderna* became modified. But above all in the sixteenth century

St Ignatius of Loyola (†1556) was the genius who developed the key-ideas of the *devotio moderna* into something new and conquering, so that the piety of the whole post-Tridentine Church came under their influence, transformed and renewed by his brilliant spirit. And it is this that enables us to extend the use of the term *devotio moderna* to include the sequel, namely the 'modern piety' which has come in some way under his influence, or at least of other masters of the time.

What were the key-ideas of the *devotio moderna*, that in the fifteenth century made it seem so new that it got this name? First and most obvious was the deliberate adoption of systematic meditation as the principal means of advancing in Christian perfection. Secondly, the doctrine of the three ways stood out more boldly than before as the three great stages in the journey of the spirit towards God, and indeed the journey was being mapped in a way that led to the detailed map worked out later by St Teresa of Avila (†1582). Thirdly there was a greater emphasis upon systematic training in the first (purgative) stage, by means of methodical prayer and the careful cultivation of virtue: the well-known first book of the *Imitation* is concerned with this, with instruction to 'meditate on the life of Christ' and to 'despise the world' (Book I, ch. 1). It was this emphasis on the training or ascetic aspect that tended to bring about the division between ascetical and mystical theology, and at least with the original writers of the *devotio moderna* a lessening of emphasis on the mystical and contemplative elements. P. Debongnie in the article *Dévotion Moderne* in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (col. 743) (1955) even speaks of their 'realistic psychology and reasoned mistrust of anything that transcends the normal order of things: nothing here of the youthful exuberance of a Bernard or a Francis . . .'. At the same time, in contrast to their Augustinian forbears the Victorines, the writers of the *devotio moderna* tended also to mistrust scientific theology, or at least to regard it as irrelevant to the question of spiritual progress: 'I had rather feel compunction than know its definition' (*Imitation*, I, 1).

Certain of these qualities have remained and inevitably left their mark on the piety of today, though modified particularly by the method of St Ignatius with regard to systematic meditation and his teaching on the conquest of self (*Exercises* n. 21) and the practice of the particular and general *examen* (*Exercises* n. 24, 32),

by the teaching of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross (†1591) on mystical contemplation, and especially by the placing by St John of the Cross of mystical experience within the framework of scientific theology, and also by the doctrine of St Francis de Sales (†1622), based with regard to meditation and the ascetical aspect on St Ignatius, and with regard to contemplation and the mystical aspect on St Teresa, thus achieving a synthesis and proclaiming that the fulness of the spiritual life is not only open to all, but is the normal fulfilment of the Christian vocation.

Thus it was that the revolution of the *devotio moderna* came to its full development in an age of revolution. The medieval world of St Benedict, with whom we began our study of the medieval development in the previous article of this series, and whose work was built upon the patristic heritage and the Fathers of the desert, was making way for a new world, the beginning of the modern world. World events, usually so closely influencing Christian living, were giving Christian men a new *Weltanschauung*: the Hundred Years War 1337-1453, the fall of Constantinople and final schism with the East 1453, Avignon 1309-1377, the Schism 1378-1415, Gutenberg 1438, the discovery of the new world 1492, the new world in art and letters and the beginning of the work of the reformers, all these things disturbed Christian piety and occasioned the need of finding an interior life within oneself no longer dependent upon the protection of the abbey or the desert. We have already suggested that when St Catherine of Siena (†1380) 'built for herself a secret cell in her heart' (*Legenda major*, I, 4), she was marking the culmination of the medieval world with regard to spiritual teaching and marking the way to the needs of the future.

Yet, like many things which come to be labelled 'modern', the main elements of the *devotio moderna* were not by any means something new that broke upon the world with Gerard de Groot. It was St Bonaventure (†1274) who had principally elaborated the doctrine of the three ways, derived through Thomas Gallus, the Augustinian (†1246), from the Pseudo-Denis the Areopagite of c. 500. Denis had spoken of the three stages of the creature's return to God, as purification (*kátharsis*), illumination (*éllampsis*) and union (*hénôsis*), and from him also St Thomas Aquinas (†1274) derives his three stages of 'beginners, eager to abandon sin; proficient, with a will to advance; and perfect, cleaving to

God' (II-II, 24, 9). A slightly later contemporary, the Carthusian Hugh of Balma (†c. 1290), was probably the first to write a methodical treatise on prayer according to the three ways in his *Mystica Theologia*. But earlier than this we have the anonymous Carthusian's *Scala Paradisi*, recommending meditation as the principal means to perfection. And it was specially to St Bonaventure's teaching on meditation, and to that of the Franciscan David of Augsburg (†1252), that Gerard de Groot and his principal disciple Florentius Radewijns (†1400, aged 50) in his *Tractatus de Spiritualibus Exercitiis* turned for the development of their method. It is important to notice the words 'spiritual exercises' appearing at this time. By the time of Thomas à Kempis the idea of what Père Pourrat calls the '*méthodisation*' of prayer and the '*réglementation*' of meditation was becoming widespread, and even the titles of works of his brethren and contemporaries indicate the trend, such as the *Scala meditatoria* of John Wessel Gansfort (†1489) and the famous *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium* of John Mombaer of Brussels (Mauburnus) (†1502).

It should be understood that these methods of formal meditation, which were being taught by the Augustinian masters of the *devotio moderna* strictly so called, were primarily designed for religious communities, or for a confraternity like the Brethren of the Common Life of Radewijns, and thus there sometimes grew up collections of spiritual maxims or points for meditation in detached sentences, known as *riparia*, and indeed the *Imitation* has something of this style. Such collections became special treasures of religious communities, and many communities became very fervent by this means.

But monastic reform at this time was not confined to the Augustinians of the Low Countries. Within the venerable Order of St Benedict new ideas were afoot during the fifteenth century. Abbot Luigi Barbo (†1443) had brought new life into the Abbey of Santa Giustina, which became the centre of a new congregation and rapidly began to have a widespread influence. The Abbey of Monte Cassino joined the reformed congregation in 1503 and the next year the whole group took the name of the Cassinese Congregation. Today the monks of the family of Prinknash, for instance, who belong to the Cassinese Congregation, look back in filial spirit to Abbot Luigi Barbo of Santa Giustina. Now Luigi Barbo was aware of the needs of the age in that emerging new

world, and one of his instruments of reform was his own book entitled *Modus Meditandi*. He distinguishes three kinds of prayer: vocal prayer by which the attention is claimed, meditation—and set subjects, formally laid out, are recommended and demonstrated in his book—and thirdly, contemplation which arises out of the meditation. Luigi Barbo's idea of meditation can be seen as a legitimate development of St Benedict's *lectio divina*, designated by the Holy Rule (chapter 48) as an integral part of monastic life. The fact is that a new vitality came to the Order through Santa Giustina at Padua, and at the Pope's instance Barbo wrote to the Benedictines of Valladolid to explain his method. And it was in 1492 that García de Cisneros went from Valladolid to Montserrat to become the abbot and to carry the spirit of the reform to that ancient abbey. García de Cisneros (†1510) was probably acquainted with the earlier works of the *devotio moderna* and St Bonaventure's teaching on meditation, and he was certainly schooled in the method of Luigi Barbo. He had established a printing press at Montserrat and in 1500 his own work, the *Ejercitatorio de la Vida Espiritual*, was printed there. (It should be noticed that at the same time he printed another work on liturgical worship, the *Directorio de las Horas Canonicas*.) The *Ejercitatorio* is a most important work, and once more methodical prayer was the principal instrument of monastic reform: every monk was bound to carry out the exercises, which were planned for a three weeks' course with fixed subjects for meditation and considerable mental as well as external discipline, and provided three points for meditation within each subject. The fourth book is concerned with contemplation, or the loving union with God which grows out of the meditation and towards which the method is directed.

It was apparently usual for pilgrims or those who came to make a retreat (as one would now say) at Montserrat at that time to be given the book of the late Father Abbot to read, and of all pilgrims who ever came to Montserrat the most distinguished is St Ignatius, who came here in March 1522 after his conversion from the ways of the world. And there seems no doubt that he read the *Ejercitatorio*, and that the book had an influence on the method which he was to evolve. But it should be at once observed that the work of García de Cisneros, interesting and important as it is, and bearing the impress of the 'modern' devotion, was hardly a book to shake the world: it was for the brilliance of St

Ignatius to develop the ideas becoming current in his day and make out of them a new and original thing that was to affect all posterity. There has indeed been much controversy about the debt of Ignatius to Cisneros, but while there is certainly a relationship, and through Cisneros to the original *devotio moderna*, it must not be exaggerated: Father Brodrick (*St Ignatius Loyola*, 1956, p. 246 and note), outlining the story, says: 'This early connection with the illustrious family of St Benedict . . . is a matter of pride and gratitude for the sons of St Ignatius'.

The *Exercises* are to include 'every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer' (n.1), and the first practical object is the 'conquest of self' (n.21) with the famous opening '*Suppositum*', 'to be more ready to excuse the proposition of another than to condemn it' (n.22). The two main points of method in the teaching of St Ignatius are the technique of the 'particular *examen*', the tracing and methodical eradication of faults (n.24 ff.), and the technique of the 'exercise' or methodical meditation, which he brought to perfection (outlined in nn.45-54): (1) the preparatory prayer, asking God that all my intentions and actions be ordained to his glory, (2) the two 'preludes', first the 'composition of time and place' by means of the imagination, and secondly a particular petition, (3) the meditation on a chosen subject, usually considered under three points (and this very discipline is a special asset of the method), and finally (4) the most important part, the 'colloquy' or conversation with God 'as one friend speaks to another', and here we recognize the contemplative element which we noticed in the same terms with Gregory of Nyssa in the early centuries. Every exercise is to end with the *Pater noster*, and indeed St Ignatius makes special use of this prayer throughout, notably in the second and third methods of prayer (nn.249-260), where the discipline of the meditation is to pause deliberately on each word in turn. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius were based on the notes he began to make in 1522 while staying with the Dominicans at Manresa (and the sons of St Dominic feel that this small connection is 'a matter of pride and gratitude'), and the first publication of them was in 1548 in Rome. They remain the finest fruit of what can be called *devotio moderna* in its wide sense.

At the same time, during the same troubled sixteenth century, two other children of Spain came to instruct the world in the

things of God. When St Ignatius was dying in 1556, St Teresa of Avila was forty-one, and it was in the next year that her higher mystical experiences began (the visit of the Jesuit St Francis Borgia in 1557, recounted in her *Vida*, chapter 24, marks a period in her life), and St John of the Cross was still a mere boy of fourteen. But they were nearly contemporaries.

The two saints, Teresa and John of the Cross (†1582 and †1591), met in 1568 and were the perfect complement to one another, and each with a quite distinctive approach contributed to produce a complete theology of mysticism. She, a strong and practical woman, teaches first through her autobiography and from her own mystical experience: her *Vida* (Life) comes first, then the *Camino de Perfección*, and only later the *Interior Castle* or *Las Moradas*, the stages or 'mansions' of spiritual progress. He, the trained theologian and also the delicate poet, begins with the *Subida del Monte Cármele* (*Ascent*), and continues through the *Noche Oscura* (*Dark Night*) to the *Cántico Espiritual* and the *Llama de Amor Viva* (the *Living Flame of Love*). She has no theory, but a statement of her experience; he is highly speculative and through his own experience by means of his own poetic imagery develops a complete theory. The basic principle of the Carmelites is that perfection consists in a complete conformity to the will of God, which is a working out of the principle already laid down by St Thomas Aquinas that Christian perfection depends upon the union with God which is charity (II-II, 184, 1). An important feature at the same time is that the beginning must be with ordinary prayer, that is, reading, meditation and reflexion (Teresa, *Vida* 4, where she tells us she remained thus for nearly twenty years), and John of the Cross (*Llama* 3, 32 ff.) teaches the necessity, at least at the beginning of progress, of 'meditation, acts, and exercises with the imagination'. St Teresa has a consoling passage for those who, finding prayer difficult, might be tempted to give it up in the earlier stages: *Es la puerta la oración: Prayer is the door by which God is able to enter the soul; cerrada ésta, no sé como lo hará: 'once it is closed, I do not know how he can do so'* (*Vida*, 8, and cf. J. M. Cohen's magnificent translation of the *Life* among the *Penguin Classics*). If anyone were to give up praying because it is difficult, he would be closing the door to God's access to the soul. Thus St Teresa's teaching is full of consoling practical advice. The very fact that St Teresa's first man-



sion is the basic condition of a good life, and the second mansion that of at least some regular practice of prayer, and that her third mansion is that of more intense prayer and taking seriously the affairs of the spiritual life, are notions that bring encouragement to many a beginner in the things of God. For St Teresa the fourth mansion means a state when the soul is wholly open to God's influence, wholly obedient to the working of the Holy Spirit within it, corresponding to the illuminative way, and the fifth, sixth and seventh mansions are concerned with the full union of the soul with God in the unitive way, the highest (seventh) being also described, as with St Bernard, in terms of *matrimonio espiritual* (*Moradas*, 7, 2). Here with the Carmelites we reach the summit of mystical experience, and, as far as theological explanation will go, of the theology of mysticism. And at the same time we have in these great teachers gentle guides through the earlier stages, where they themselves do not hesitate to use the methods which were being taught at the time.

St Francis de Sales (†1622) and his friend St Jeanne-Françoise Frémot de Chantal (†1641) were both born within the lifetime of St Teresa and St John of the Cross. It has been observed that his notion of *la vie dévote* corresponds to the third mansion of St Teresa: namely taking seriously the affairs of the life of the spirit, and in point of fact *elle n'est autre chose qu'un vray amour de Dieu*: 'devotion' for St Francis de Sales 'is nothing but a real love of God' (*Introduction à la Vie Dévote* I, 1), and his first observations on *la vie dévote* are to guide people to *une entière résolution de l'embrasser*: a whole-hearted resolution to take it seriously. His teaching on meditation follows that of St Ignatius (*Introduction* II, 1), with a special feature of his own, namely, the *bouquet spirituel*; 'this is what I mean: when one has taken a walk in a lovely garden, one does not want to leave without taking a few flowers in order to remind oneself of the garden by their fragrance for the rest of the day: thus we want to pick out two or three things from our meditation as a reminder during the day'. In his other great work, the *Traité de l'Amour de Dieu* (Treatise on the Love of God), he follows closely the teaching of St Teresa. Once more, prayer is described as *un colloque ou une conversation* with God (VI, 1), and once more we are reminded of Gregory of Nyssa, and of that wonderful passage of St Teresa: 'We should occupy ourselves, if we can, by gazing at him who is gazing at us



(*en que mire que le mira*), and should keep him company, and talk with him . . .' (*Vida*, 13 near the end, tr. Cohen), and here we are back with the *theoria* or 'gazing' of the Greek Fathers.

Probably one of the most outstanding characteristics of the teaching of St Francis de Sales is his gentleness: *la douceur*. Among the 'little virtues' is gentleness towards others, but even towards ourselves (*Introduction*, III, 8-9): when we have fallen into sin, it is really no good saying to ourselves 'Abominable wretch . . . traitor to God' and so forth, it is more compassionate and reasonable to say '*Or sus! mon pauvre coeur, nous voilà tombés dans la fosse*: Come along now, poor heart, there we are again in the ditch, let us count on God's mercy to put us on the road again!' And a typical story is told about Mme de Chantal in her younger days: 'Madame's first spiritual director made her pray three times a day, and everyone found this a great bore, but now Monseigneur de Genève makes her pray all the time, and this is a nuisance to nobody' (quoted by Pourrat, III, p. 444).

Lastly it should once more be emphasized that the special rôle of St Francis de Sales in the history of Christian teaching on the spiritual life is his insistence that Christian perfection, the love of God, prayer and contemplation are the normal fulfilment of the Christian vocation. He has thus put within reach of all the riches of the spiritual teaching of centuries, and, as Pius XI wrote in his encyclical *Rerum Omnium* in 1923, he is still the spiritual master for the modern world, proclaiming that 'holiness of life is not a privilege of a few, but that all are called to it . . . it is not so involved in difficulties (*fastidiis et taediis*) that people in the world cannot attain it . . . on the contrary sanctity is compatible with every walk of life'.

And the more we look at the succession of masters through the centuries and observe their differences of approach, the more we realize that the Christian heart has been striving, and still strives, to fulfil the Lord's command to 'love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength' (Deut. 6, 5).