

# The Life of the Spirit

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## SPIRITUAL CHILDHOOD AND MOTHER JULIAN

By

S.M.A., O.P.

The doctrine of spiritual childhood is sometimes regarded as the Little Flower's peculiar contribution to the spiritual life of the Church, yet in *The Revelations of Divine Love* it is fully described and practised by an English Mystic living five centuries before the Saint of Lisieux. St. Therese did not so much discover as reinstate in its true, paramount position, a truth of the spiritual life which had been obscured and almost forgotten under the weight of Renaissance Humanism and Jansenistic rigorism. For, so long as man's life and way of looking at life were essentially God-centred and supernatural, the God whom he knew and loved and tried to serve was the God of revelation, the God who has declared himself to be our heavenly Father, and who has raised us to the adoption of sons in his only-begotten Son, Christ our Lord. Consequently a spirit of childlike love and simplicity characterised the piety of both great and small, from Doctors of the Church like S. Thomas Aquinas, S. Albert the Great, and the other theologians to whom heaven was always 'patria' "our father's country", down to "a simple creature who could no letter", such as Mother Julian. But once man had fixed his eyes not on God but on himself, then he tended to regard his Maker not as the Father but as the Creator, the Lawgiver, the Master, the just, avenging Judge sternly demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; the God of Sinai rather than of the Gospel. And so the spirit of Childhood disappeared<sup>(1)</sup> before the Fear of the Lord. Not that this had been lacking in the Middle Ages, but theirs was a reverent dread "that maketh us hastily flee from all that is not good, and fall

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(1) Generally speaking. There were, of course, exceptions, a notable one being the Sulpician school of spirituality, from which Père Joret gives some interesting quotations in "L'Enfance Spirituelle", (Editions du Cerf, 1930).

into our Lord's breast, as the Child into the Mother's bosom, with all our intent and with all our might, knowing our feebleness and our great need, knowing his everlasting goodness and his blissful love, only seeking to him for salvation, cleaving to him with sure trust; the dread that bringeth us into this working is kind, gracious, good and true. And all that is contrary to this is either wrong or it is mingled with wrong" (ch 74).

Another characteristic of mediaeval spirituality was its dependence on the divine action "There is no Doer but He" says Mother Julian. "Ipse est actor vitae vestrae" declares S. Thomas<sup>(2)</sup>. The soul had only to "seek, suffer and trust", and God would do the rest<sup>(3)</sup>. The doctrine of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost as expounded by S. Thomas, and the devotion to the Holy Spirit which was so strong during this period, were the natural outcome of such an outlook; and in return the Spirit testified to their spirit that they were the sons of God, for such indeed are those who are led by the Spirit. But when man became self-centred and self-reliant, so that even in spiritual things it became more a matter for God to aid man's efforts, than for man to co-operate with God's activity, then the Holy Spirit came to be "the forgotten Paraclete", and so quite naturally ceased to give testimony of the adoption of sons. Finally the mediaeval frame of mind was essentially objective and unselfconscious, which is typically childlike, while the post-Reformation spirit is subjective and self-conscious which is normally most unchildlike. Thus, the rediscovery and re-popularising of the way of Spiritual Childhood by S. Therese, may justifiably be regarded as a part of that return to the spirit and practice of the Middle Ages of which the contemporary return to S. Thomas is another symptom, and from which the spiritual life of Catholics in our day has benefitted so much.

Mother Julian deals with the subject of spiritual childhood in her usual brief but comprehensive fashion.

"I understood none higher stature in this life than childhood, in feebleness and failing of might and of wit, until such time as our Gracious Mother hath brought us up to our Father's bliss" (ch. 63).

"Mildness and meekness" which are the mediaeval terms for meekness and humility; mistrust of self, and complete trust in the Mother's love and reliance on her for all and in spite of all, and a fraternal love which embraces all men; these traits are writ large on every page of Mother Julian's revelations, showing clearly that the spirit which she is describing is one which she had already made her own. They prove, too, if proof be needed, that there is nothing soft or sentimental or weak or *childish* in

(2) In Coloss III.4.

(3) cf. Mother Julian, ch 10.

the way of spiritual childhood, which consists essentially in a great purity consequent upon that detachment from things of earth which characterises a child, and a loving attachment to God coupled with complete abandonment to his love, his power, his will—the ego nothing, he all in all. “Father into thy hands I commend my spirit”—there we have the consummation of the way of spiritual childhood. For, as S. Thomas says—“Adoptive sonship is a certain likeness of eternal sonship; just as all that takes place in time, has a certain likeness of what has been from eternity” (III, 23, a2 ad3). Our relations with our heavenly Father are a sharing in those of his only-begotten Son. God is our Father in the supernatural order only because the human birth of the Eternal Son has made possible our spiritual rebirth by water and the Holy Spirit, and our approach to the Father by and with and in him who is the “First born of many brethren”. “Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus”, says S. Paul, and the outstanding characteristic of that Mind was love for the Eternal Father. This perhaps reveals the secret of Mother Julian’s conception of the Motherhood of God; we are adopted children of a Father who is also Mother.

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## MADAME ACARIE (II)

By

LANCELOT C. SHEPPARD.

In a sketch of this nature much must be passed over. Pierre Acarie’s banishment from Paris, the extreme want to which his family was reduced, and the valiant and continued efforts—finally successful—made by his wife for the complete restoration of the family fortunes and the return of her husband, can be but mentioned. Gladly she endured poverty, many insults, and much suffering, so that she might redeem her husband’s good name and property. Yet from the time of Pierre’s return his temper seems to have become sharper. It has been pointed out by some biographers that this change occurred in Pierre Acarie in direct proportion to his wife’s increase in holiness. Without going so far it may be said, perhaps, that Pierre’s increasing ill-humour, caused to a certain extent, no doubt, by his many reverses, the triumph of all that he abhorred, and the upset of his dearest political plans, was used by God in the sanctification of his wife.

Women who sanctify themselves in marriage, as Barbe Acarie did, give to those they love a love which is extremely pure for it is deprived of all element of self. They love, perhaps, no more than other wives, but surely they love better. For, to be able to live “in one flesh”, without that life becoming a veritable prison for the soul requires harmony of spirit. And such