

AN AMBASSADOR FROM HEAVEN

GERARD GROOTE

BY

A CANONESS REGULAR OF THE LATERAN



Thomas à Kempis, in his *Life of Gerard Groote*, can speak of the world of his day as 'ever turning to yet more evil courses', John Busch, the *Chronicler of Windesheim*, and, like à Kempis, one of the earliest members of that Congregation, says, with his characteristic bluntness of speech, that it was 'set already upon the way which leadeth down to Hell'. For it was in 1340 that 'God, looking upon the world with the eye of Fatherly goodness and mercy, saw fit to make ready a light to enlighten the eyes of men and a lamp to show the way to Christ our Lord. This light was that reverend man of God, Gerard the Great, or, in the vulgar tongue, Groote, an inhabitant of Deventer in the diocese of Utrecht'. Endowed with 'wealth, honour, learning and high place', he passed, after brilliant school studies at home, first to Aachen and then to the Sorbonne, where he graduated in medicine and theology, as well as in law. He then returned home and was appointed Teacher in the Chapter School of Deventer, where he soon acquired a reputation as an educator and a leader of youth. He gathered round him scholars from all the neighbouring towns. At this time he was living a thoroughly worldly life, enjoying the revenues of two canonries, besides his own ample private means, 'pursuing the shadow of a great reputation rather than the glory of God'.

One day it chanced that Henry of Kalkar, Prior of a Carthusian monastery near Arnheim, and an old school fellow of Gerard's, had come into Utrecht, where the latter then was, on some business connected with his Order. He sought out his friend, and 'let down the net of exhortation to draw this great fish from the waves of worldliness'. He seems indeed to have indulged in some very plain speaking, reproaching Gerard for his pleasure-loving ways, and putting the Four Last Things so forcibly before him that his eyes were opened and his heart touched. The holy prior was able to return to his community rejoicing over 'this great fish that he had caught with the hook of Christ'. Gerard was indeed a changed man. He resigned his benefices, gave up his gay apparel and his life of ease, and began a new life of humility, austerity and above all of prayer. In the light which now shone round him he saw his own weakness and feared lest

the seed God had planted in his soul should be trodden under foot by men or devoured by the birds of the air, so he fled from the world and sought refuge with his Carthusian friends. He spent nearly three years with the monks, sharing their lives and rivalling them in mortification and fervour, though never bound by their vows. He was thus all unknowingly preparing himself for the mission God had in store for him, learning in his own person that of which he was to become a teacher. For in spite of their love and esteem for their holy guest, the Community realised that Gerard's was not a cloistered vocation. He was a light which was to shine to all the world, not to remain hidden in a monastery. So he left them and returned home, to spend another three years in prayer and study, before going out again into the world, this time as 'God's Ambassador'.

Before he began his public ministry he was ordained deacon (in his humility he never ventured to seek admission to the priesthood), and then obtained licence to preach from Florentius, Bishop of Utrecht, 'a prudent man and a lover of religion'. Armed with these credentials, Gerard began a campaign of intense activity, preaching throughout the country, and attracted large crowds by his eloquence, his fervour and above all by the beauty and simplicity of his message. As the Chronicler tells us, 'he laid the Gospel before the people'. So great was his success that the churches could not contain the numbers who came to hear him. He was forced to deliver sometimes as many as three sermons a day and even to prolong his preaching far into the night. 'Many, therefore both priests and honourable men and women were pricked to the heart and longed most earnestly to abandon the world and faithfully to serve God their Maker in faith, hope, charity and love of the things that are eternal'. But this religious revival could not pass unnoticed by the enemy of souls. Persecutions of all kinds were directed against Gerard. Defamatory reports of his life and teaching were spread abroad, but the erstwhile vain and arrogant young master of the arts and sciences of the secular life was now a master in the science of the saints. He bore all these attacks with the utmost patience and charity. Even when 'by edict craftily obtained' his license to preach was for a time withdrawn by the bishop, Gerard uttered no word of reproach or protest, but humbly accepted the ruling of his superiors, thus giving an example of that loyalty and submission to ecclesiastical authority which was to be so marked a characteristic of the Windesheim Congregation.

Amid all the slander and abuse which now fell upon him there was, however, one voice raised in friendly greeting, one hand stretched

out in brotherly kindness. It is pleasant to read of a certain unnamed friar preacher who now sent him a friendly letter, 'composed in elegant language, by which the master was much strengthened for the work of preaching'. The friar may not have attached very much importance to his action. It was perhaps to him but the literal carrying out of that fundamental precept of fraternal charity upon which his rule—that of St Augustine—is based. But to Gerard it probably meant much more. The sweet odour of Christ had been shed upon his path at a critical moment of his life. May we not think that its fragrance still lingered about him when, on his deathbed not many years later, he was called upon to make a choice which was to decide the whole future of his disciples, and fixed on the rule of St Augustine, pre-eminently the rule of charity, as that which they were to follow?

This period of enforced silence did not however last long, and it was never allowed by Gerard to become a period of idleness. Rather was it a welcome opportunity for the development of a work which had always been dear to his heart—the direction and organisation of his spiritual children into more defined groups. At the moment of his first 'conversion' he had dispossessed himself of his paternal inheritance, reserving for his own use only a couple of small rooms, entirely cut off from the rest of the house. When he returned from the Carthusian monastery, Gerard made over this building to what we might today perhaps call a 'Confraternity'. This was a group of pious women earning their bread by the labour of their hands, bound by no vows, but living together in chastity and in obedience to an annually elected Superior. Gerard meanwhile occupied his own quarters, dwelling in the strictest poverty and seclusion with one companion, his friend and disciple John Brinkerinck . . . and a dog. John Brinkerinck eventually became a person of note among his brethren, and in view of his later strictures upon the keeping of 'little hondakens', one wonders in what light he regarded his master's pet. Did he look upon it as a regrettable weakness in one otherwise so holy? If it was a weakness, we today can only think of it as a very human and lovable one.

There was also another group in which Gerard was interested, the clerics and scholars from the School of Deventer, which was then at the height of its fame. Many of these had placed themselves under his guidance and Gerard, 'seeing that their number was ever increasing, and that they were burning with zeal for the heavenly warfare', arranged regular meetings for prayer and spiritual exhortations. A number of these young men were kept by him in regular employment, chiefly in the transcription of the Scriptures and of the

works of the Fathers, for Gerard was ever a noted lover of books and of holy reading. He moreover allowed such as were willing to live together under the direction of Florentius Radewyn, a priest of Deventer who had been converted by Gerard's preaching and example. One day—it was probably in 1381—Florentius said: 'Beloved master, what doth hinder that I and the clerks whose will is good should put together the gains that we earn each week and live in common?' But Gerard hesitated. . . . 'A Community . . . ? a Community . . . ?' For he knew that such a foundation would meet with much opposition. Then Florentius continued: 'But what harm if we should begin? Perhaps God will grant us success'. Then Gerard, after musing in his heart a little space, said: 'In the name of the Lord, then, begin. I will be your defender and faithful protector'. So Florentius and the clerks of good will made a beginning of the common life, which they held to be the way of perfection, having been instituted in the Primitive Church by the holy Apostles under the guidance of the Holy Ghost. They took no vows, but by common consent agreed to lead this life perpetually, under obedience to Florentius. By the advice of Gerard, a few simple rules were laid down, 'which the Sisters who dwelt in Master Gerard's house' also followed. Thus began the double Congregation of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, or of the New Devotion.

Its history can here be only very briefly resumed. Benefactors came forward, houses were built, and the members multiplied. They devoted themselves first of all to the cultivation of their own interior life, and then to the spread of Christian learning by means of literature and education. The influence of their ascetical writings is recognised by all, notably, for example, that of Gerard of Zutphen, which is traced in the composition of the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius. The controversy over the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ* still continues to spring up from time to time, although it might seem that a very slight acquaintance with Windesheim and its spirit would suffice to settle the matter. The schools of *The Common Life* became famous, and gradually developed into centres for the teaching, not only of the elements of secular knowledge, but also of philosophy and theology. But the brethren did more than merely impart learning; they fostered the spiritual life of their pupils, and became in the true sense of the word, reformers of the clerical and monastical life in the Netherlands and in Germany. The foundation of the University of Louvain in 1425 and the rise of other religious congregations devoted to teaching caused a decline in the importance of their schools, and few survived the double storm of Reformation and revolution which later broke over Europe. But the Brethren of the

Common Life had done their work: they had ploughed and sown. What matter who reaps the harvest, so long as the hungry have bread?

But there remained disciples of Gerard Groote who had no special call to the apostolate either of writing or of teaching. They were, so to speak, the Marys of his spiritual family, more anxious to be fed by the master than to feed others. For these Gerard had long wanted to found a house where they could live a regular cloistered life, but the opportunity had so far been lacking and he had not yet been able to take any definite step. It was while these things were in his mind that he determined to journey into Brabant, to visit the holy Prior of the Canons Regular of Groenendael, John Ruysbroeck, for he longed to see face to face one whom he so far knew only from his books. Thomas à Kempis, from whom we learn of this visit, gives us very little definite information as to what passed. We know of the kindly and courteous welcome given by the aged Prior (to whom the identity of his guest had been divinely revealed) and of a few happy days spent in the monastery, where Gerard was shown over the whole building. He spent much time in intimate converse with his host, from whom he learned many secrets of the spiritual life. We have, however, two pen pictures of the outward and of the homeward journeys from which we can gather an idea of what this visit meant and what it did for Gerard. We see him setting out with his two companions, his great friend, John Cele, Rector of the school of Zwolle, and Gerard the Shoemaker, 'their inseparable companion in this undertaking'. They are all eagerness and animation, discoursing as they go of the edification they hope to receive and of how they can best put it to profit. On coming back Gerard is a different man. He is purified in heart and he is silent, pondering in his heart the things he has heard, things too deep evidently for speech. It was shortly after this that the soul of Blessed John Ruysbroeck returned to God, having, as was revealed to Gerard, passed 'but one hour in Purgatory'.

For Gerard, too, the end was approaching. A short time after the visit to Groenendael, Deventer, Gerard's native town, was stricken by one of those epidemics of the plague, so frequent in the Middle Ages, and his charity and skill in leechcraft were at once put at the service of his fellow townsmen. At the bedside of one of his friends he himself contracted the disease. He knew enough of medicine to realise that his case was hopeless. So in the utmost calm and peace of conscience he set about putting his house in order. He called together all the devout Fathers and Brothers who were with Florentius and spoke openly to them of his coming death. But his message

was one of encouragement and consolation. He promised to continue to act as their Father and Protector in heaven (while Florentius took his place on earth) and foretold, too, the continuance and stability of their Congregation. But to ensure this he advised such as were willing to join themselves to one of the regular Orders approved by the Church. In their fervour they were ready to adopt at his word the strict enclosure of the Carthusians or the austerity of the Cistercians, well knowing Gerard's affection for the members of these two Orders. But his choice for them had already been made: the Rule of St Augustine, which did not differ much from that under which they had been living so long, and it was the Rule of charity and simplicity, the two virtues ever dearest to his heart.

'So, as the day of St Bernard was drawing to its close, Gerard saw his glorious patrons Augustine and Bernard enter in at the door and await the passing forth of his soul from his body . . . and just after the fifth hour of that day he delivered up to God his happy soul, a soul meet to be crowned for ever in the glory of charity with the saints and elect of God.' It was August 20th, 1384.

THE ASCENSION

BY

ST AUGUSTINE¹

Translated by E. J. B. Fry

1. The Resurrection and Ascension fill up the full measure of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. We celebrate his resurrection on Easter Sunday; the Ascension we celebrate today. For us both days are sacred. He rose again to put before us a proof of resurrection; he ascended to give us protection from on high. And Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour, first as he hung on the cross, then seated in heaven. He paid our purchase-money when he hung on the cross; he gathers what he bought when he sitteth in heaven. For when he has gathered all whom, throughout time, he does gather, then, at the end of time, will he come. *God shall come manifestly* (Ps. 49, 3), as it is written, not hiddenly as he first came, but openly. For it was right for him to come hiddenly when he was to be judged, but he will come openly to judge. For if the Lord had first come openly, who would have dared to judge him when he was openly known? The apostle Paul indeed says: *If they had known, they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory* (I Cor. 2, 8). But if he had not been put

¹ *Tractatus Inediti*. Ed. Dom Germain Morin, xxi.