

ACTIVE PURIFICATION

(The *Ancren Riwle* Parts 2 and 3)

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NATURAL division in the purgative way arises from the two types of purification which the soul must undergo before it is ready for its second conversion and entry into illumination. These are first the active and then the passive purifications. The beginner on entry into the way of perfection has the relics of past sin hanging about him like so many rags and pieces of knotted cord. He has to struggle to shake himself free of this foul heritage. The ascetic moral virtues must be brought particularly into play. He must burn away the dross from his senses and his emotions. He must practise, above all, temperance and justice—the caustic virtues that will cleanse him thoroughly if he fears no personal suffering. It is precisely here that a rule plays its first part. The soul needs guidance and also the virtue of obedience, which lies at the root of all sacrifice and of every moral virtue insofar as the virtuous actions are performed, because they are known as God's will. After this active following of a rule and its ascetic influence, God himself begins to apply the knife to the diseases which pass unnoticed in the general bustle of the active life. The soul passes through the night of the senses, God purifying those external contacts with material things, ready for the new lights of the illuminative way.

The second part of the *Riwle* is concerned with *Keeping the Heart*, that is the active expulsion of all its enemies. But the very first step in this life after conversion must be the *Nosce Teipsum*, the knowing of one's self so as to see the evils that have to be expelled. Now this knowledge of self may be derived entirely from the rule or law, entirely from outside. This is the only criterion for retarded souls, not desirous of making progress but contenting themselves with keeping for the most part out of serious sin and for the rest enjoying the material pleasures of life. For such as these the list of an examination of conscience is necessary. They read out the law or its infringements—Have I done this or omitted that which I see written down in the law?—a frequent method of examination in these modern days of tepidity, and one which we might anticipate in a rule of life. But this is one of the valuable lessons a medieval rule has to teach us today. In modern times all 'examens', particular or general,

tend to concentrate on the sin, the fault or failing. But such an exclusive view of what has been done or omitted leaves aside any true criterion for judging these things *as evil*. It is useless for me to recognise that I have been vain unless I can see vanity as an evil thing, as displeasing to God. I must be able to see these sins as obstacles to my reaching God, and in order to see that I must see God, too. A hedge appears to the donkey as a pleasant, if forbidden, eating place with its many luscious green fronds; but to the hunter looking to the chase beyond it is a hurdle to be jumped. The *Rivle* does not leave the soul to look dolefully at sins. The sisters are to examine their conscience last thing at night; but they examine the whole of their conscience, taking the good with the bad. They are contrite and grateful (p. 36). If when you turn in upon yourself you follow the teaching of the Victorines and contemplate the image of God in your soul, you will see at once where that image is clear and where it is smirched. With that objective standard an 'examen', however particular, need never be self-centred, but continue always to be God-centred.

Therefore the author of the *Rivle* insists that his recluses should be introspective, but with this objective bias which brings a perfect balance and prevents any morbid self-analysis. They are to be outwardly blind, shunning all external events; this will allow God to give an inward light to see him and know him. From this comes love of him and despising of the world which shows the wiles of the devil and of their personal sins. When they begin to consider these sins they should think sometimes of hell which they have deserved, but also of heaven with our Lady and her maidens and our Lord above all, the crown of them all. It is dangerous to look at sin and hell without turning quickly to their opposite and dwelling upon grace and heaven in order to kindle desires for these (pp. 69-70, et seq). In this way he avoids the evil type of introspection which leads only to scruples and does not in fact proceed beyond the purely extrinsic measuring of self against external laws. This objective seeking for God in the soul will develop a sensitive conscience which senses sin from its very evilness. For ultimately the rule of the heart rules all things and of itself rules out all evil.

Having begun on the way of self-knowledge the soul sets to work to cleanse away the evil that it sees by this knowledge. The life of the beginner is called the Purgative Way because this cleansing is the main feature of the whole period. That is why the Cross must play such a large part in this period. As the soul grows and develops in the bracing light of grace, the Cross becomes a source of a new sort of joy; the Cross never leaves the traveller in the vale of tears

no matter how noble he has grown. The lives of the saints disclose this love of the wounded Christ. But at first the devotion is hard and burdensome, at least at times. The anchoress may be as a bird flying straight to her maker, but a bird's wings are spread in the form of a cross:

The true anchoresses, whom we compare to birds—yet not we but God—spread their wings and make a cross of themselves, as a bird doth when it fieth; that is, in the thoughts of the heart, and the mortification of the flesh, they bear the Lord's cross (pp. 99-100).

And in their prayers these good women are given what may be called the Little Office of the Cross, or, as we have suggested, an early form of the Stations of the Cross. They must at midday 'think upon God's rood as much and as intently' as ever they can, with the five salutations already performed in the morning before Mass. They genuflect, inscribe a cross on the ground, repeat ejaculatory prayers which are still current and familiar; they stand up and recite psalms and repeat other antiphonal ejaculations. Part at least of all this is obligatory on the beginner; the author concludes the description of these 'Stations', 'Whoso cannot say these five prayers, should say always one; and whoso thinketh them too long may omit the Psalms' (pp. 27-30). And the recluse finally resigns herself to sleep with the following beautifully expressive devotion:

And finally say: 'Christ conquers: + Christ reigns + Christ rules +' and with three crosses, with the thumb up above the forehead; and then, 'Behold the Lord's cross + Begone, ye adversaries; the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David hath conquered. Halleluia'. A large cross, as at 'Make haste, O God to help me', with 'Behold the Lord's cross +'; and then four crosses, on four sides, with these four afterclauses, 'The cross + drives away every evil. + The cross is the restorer of the world. By the sign of this cross + let everything malignant fly away; and by the same sign + let everything that is kind and good be preserved' (pp. 36-37).

So ends the recluse's day, almost literally with the cross stamped upon her very body. Her apartment never allowed her to escape from its remembrance, and as she lay down to rest she may have often glanced at the great black curtain of the grill which cut her off entirely from the world, for upon the curtain was worked a large white cross, reminding her of the pains of her way of purity. The author sums up the whole character of this mark of her life when, speaking of this white cross, he says: 'Pain is always to be understood by the cross' (p. 40). The purgative way is a way of pain. Towards the end of the *Riwele*, the anchoress is shown a glimpse

of a new attitude to this, when the constant pain of their life, a veritable martyrdom, is shown to be a source of joy and gladness. Taking his theme from the 'Sentences of St Bernard', he suggests the three ways of the spiritual life with voluntary crucifixion as the highest. But he says on this occasion: 'I will begin from a higher point' (pp. 263-264, p. 267). 'The beginner must be content to believe that the cross will itself bring this joy and refreshment, but at first he must be ready to endure and to endure actively, voluntarily. He must begin by crucifying his outward senses that are so full of self-seeking passion, those five senses which are 'the wardens of the heart'. 'The heart is a full wild animal, and makes many wild leaps' (p. 39). So in order to keep the heart, these five senses have to be actively purified, an activity which St John of the Cross has described with such precision in terms of the Night of the Senses. St John, in fact, divides this night into two, the one active, the other passive. For him, standing on his great mystical eminence, the really profound night of the senses is the passive one in which God himself cleanses these five wits, so that he treats the active more briefly and with less detailed analysis (cf. *Ascent of Mount Carmel* I, 13). This would account for the great contrast between *The Ascent*, in which the author is concerned with spiritual or even intellectual gluttony, curiosity, luxury and the like, and the *Riwele* with its cruder treatment of the sins of sense. The *Riwele* deals in detail with the earlier and active stage, when the senses are still filled with the grosser elements picked up in this world.

In modern times the danger of the sort of ascetical exercises inculcated in the robust ages of faith, lies in the embarrassment and self-consciousness with which they are likely to be put into practice. With regard, for example, to *sight*, which is the first of the senses to be treated in the *Riwele*, the ruling of which has been called 'the custody of the eyes', a novice will soon find himself ham-strung by the self-consciousness of knowing that he must not look about him. He may find that, having shut out 'worldly sights', he can see only himself; he becomes preoccupied with the possible effect it may have on others; will they know that he is refraining from looking at things that interest him? He grows more conscious of the thoughts in his head, of the very movements of his body. Not so the medieval anchoress. Much was naturally expected of her in her cabin next the church, so that she was asked to keep a very close guard upon her eyes. She had the big curtain to help her in this. She is to refrain even from looking out of the windows, which sound somewhat unhygienically sealed: 'See that your parlour windows be always fast on every side, and likewise well shut' (p. 41).

The principle supporting this extreme mortification in the anchorite cell is applicable to every Christian life, for the eye is the first entrance to the soul, and sins of all sorts force their first entry through these windows. The *Riwle* shows how the first sin of Lucifer and the original sin of Eve began in this way: 'Lucifer, because he saw and beheld his own beauty, fell into pride, and of an angel became a foul fiend' (p. 42). The pride of life and the gross sins of the flesh begin by simple glances which stir the imagination and the passions, so that all the senses both internal and external are involved. 'Thus, often, as is said, "of little waxeth mickle".' The author is most concerned about the chastity of those who follow this eremitical life (his figures and examples are compelling without ever becoming morbid), for the passions, pent up by so much seclusion, may rush forth on the slightest provocation. Thus sights, which would be harmless enough for a man in the world, might become the occasion of some sin of unchastity in a religious. The difficulty is for the religious to remain balanced and objective and to avoid morbidity. The wrong sort of custody of the eyes may lead some to become conscious of the difference of sex as soon as they see anyone, the imagination being stirred and the conscience disturbed. The balance can only be achieved when mortification of the eye is treated, not as exclusively a matter concerned with sex, but as a general form of mortification, particularly in restraining the wanton curiosity which fills so many without their being conscious of it.

In this way the practice of guarding the eye applies to all beginners in whatever state in life. In church at prayer the need is sufficiently recognised, so that staring about the building at other worshippers is universally understood as a distraction by anyone who has begun to follow Christ. But to a certain extent this habit must be applied in daily life outside church, if the soul is to remain recollected. There is so much happening in the modern world of speed and invention that it is easy for the eye to become preoccupied with 'sights' and 'sight-seeing'—one of the most distracting and unspiritual activities for the leisure of present day men and women. Such things have to be avoided when possible. And there are other evils attached to seeing, which are akin to those of the anchoress; the temptation, for example, of the front window of a house on the street. Many such 'pedestrian' forms of mortification of sight may be found without becoming a fanatically morbid recluse.

The more recluses look outward, they have less love of our Lord inwardly. . . . Wherefore, my dear sisters, be outwardly blind, as was the holy Isaac and the good Tobias; and God will give you,

as he gave them, inward light to see him and know him; and, through this knowledge, to love him above all things (pp. 69-70). The sense of hearing requires mortifying with as much vigour as that of sight, particularly in its active form of speech. Again, the anchoress would require special and far more stringent instructions on the custody of the tongue, and yet the principle involved is the same for the ordinary Christian as for her, and the *Riwele's* instructions for the most part are applicable to all beginners. There is need for all to be prepared before they speak, to say if possible some brief prayer asking for the grace of truth, to restrain the impulse to convey news in order to astonish or interest and so obtain an unwholesome glory among the audience. The delightful simile of the hen (p. 52) brings out clearly the need for restraint. It is so easy to fall into the sins of speech, once the tongue has been loosed. Not only are the evil events and deeds tempting food for the tongue; it is often even the good things which befall a person that he is most anxious to tell. That is the point of the hen who cackles when she has laid an egg, or the pedlar who shouts about his wares. The tongue betrays one, not only into uncharitable and unjust remarks about others, but also into vain-glory about one's self. Our Lady was silent when the good news was broken to her; she kept the marvellous events and words in her heart.

The urge of vanity tempts the beginner to speak about any spiritual gifts he may have received. Often this is hidden and unknown to the man himself; he may be enthusiastic to speak of divine things, but even such an enthusiasm may clothe a desire to show forth his wares, to reveal his views on the spiritual life, to let others know that he has indeed progressed in his vision of the way of perfection. This spiritual garrulousness may take on another form in the zealous beginner. He may find himself falling into a habit of delivering exhortations. Perhaps he feels it required of him to insist on his own views on spiritual matters. Such zeal needs to be analysed, for it may easily flow from a subtle form of exhibitionism. Above all the beginner must avoid the habit of preaching in his prayers, rehearsing what he would like to say about certain truths he has begun ever so little to understand. This is indeed a grave obstacle to progress and one which belongs to the devout rather than to the worldly men and women of garrulous temperament. The cackle of the devout 'hen' is almost more tiresome than that of the worldly, and being outwardly about holy things it creates a more serious, because less obvious, barrier to progress.

Nor are you to preach to any man. . . . Many keep in their words to let more out, as men do water at the milldam. . . . But, when

you must needs speak a little, raise the floodgates of your mouth as men do at the mill, and let them down quickly (pp. 55-56).

There is much in this section of the *Rivle* which is applicable to the life of any beginner today. But the most important remarks come toward the end, where the author links up this mortification of the tongue with the theological virtue of hope and therefore with prayer, for the two are interlocked (pp. 60-61). But this belongs rather to the positive benefits of silence, to which he devotes a section of the next part.

Mortification of the ear is closely connected with that of the tongue, and, in fact, might seem to amount to the same thing. But a progress is in fact marked in dividing these two aspects of silence. Thus the first duty of a man in setting forth in quest of the supernatural life of grace is to refrain from the sins that arise from his own talk, backbiting, boasting, swearing, elaborating the truth, or repeating stories the entertainment value of which depends more on indecency than wit. But having placed the iron of the bit in his mouth so that he may be easily reined in by the hand, there remains the difficulty of hearing what others have to say in the same unpleasant strains. It often provides a real difficulty for those who have to work among others. In a factory how are they to remain aloof, untouched by the sea of unhappy talk which surrounds them? The *Rivle* states the law simply:

Against all evil speech stop your ears, and have a loathing of the mouth that vomiteth out poison. Evil speech is threefold—poisonous, foul, idle: idle speech is evil; foul speech is worse; poisonous speech is the worst (p. 62).

But how to stop one's ears? How, for example, to stop the ears against the poisonous speech of heresy, of which in those saner days the author could write: 'Heresy, God be thanked, prevaieth not in England' (p. 63). It prevails now throughout most countries of the world and provides the greatest and yet the least heeded danger to the ear, and from the ear to the soul. A man who has set out on the way and learnt to hold his tongue is often the more easily persuaded by the high words of an apparent authority, by attractive or romantic pictures of spiritual things, by novelties in doctrine. How is he to distinguish? How is the ear to be stopped against the heresy of false mysticism, which has such a hold on some modern dabblers in psychology or the occult? The great gift of discernment of spirits, to which St Catherine of Siena devotes a whole section of her *Dialogue*, is required here under the light of the Holy Spirit. But for the beginner the gifts are still held down by many imperfections, and his only guide will be a firm grasp on tradition, refraining himself from

novelty. That in itself is a very deep mortification, for many new and fresh expositions of Catholic doctrine are good in themselves; but before he can discern, the beginner must submit to the authority of the Church in all things and not allow himself to be led beyond it into the confines where doctrine is developing under the stimulus of modern problems and discoveries.

The *Riwle* is more concerned with the dangers of flattery which flies into the ear and so easily carries off the soul captive. The first type of flatterer, 'if a man is good, praiseth him in his presence, and without scruple, maketh him still better than he is' (p. 65). This is a serious obstacle to one who has turned from evil and set out on the road to God. Frequently flattery will make a beginner self-conscious. He tries to deny what is said, but feels that perhaps there is some truth in it, and so his denials are half-hearted and unconvinced. He begins to see an importance in his actions and habits of life, to discover differences between his mode of living and that of his neighbours, putting himself above them because he is striving for higher things. It has often happened that the unwise word of a flatterer has produced a serious setback in the progress of a soul, lasting many years, or even inflicting a permanent injury. The ear must be stopped against this. Such words are not to be analysed, or considered in any way, to see in what they may be true and in what they exaggerate. Once they are let in on any pretext they will begin to poison the system. It may be difficult neither to listen to, nor to take account of, such words, but the surest way for a man to deafen his ears to such sounds is by truth, the truth of his own standing in relation to God, which if he knows it will prove an impenetrable partition between himself and the utterer. True self-knowledge stops the ears to all such sounds.

Active purification and mortification of these three 'senses', seeing, speaking and hearing, lead to the opening of the spiritual eyes and ears. With the successful overcoming of these subordinate members, the soul receives the first suggestions of the movement of the Holy Spirit, in particular the gift of understanding, a 'swiftness and clearness of sight' (p. 71), for 'the eye of the soul is thus cleared by mortification and prepared for the heavenly vision of God's mysteries after death. But this development of the gifts belongs more properly to a later stage in the growth of the soul.

The most radical of all the outward senses, upon which the others are built, is that of touch or feeling. 'This one sense is in all the other senses, and throughout the whole body, and therefore needs to be the better guarded' (p. 83). Consequently the beginner needs to bring his whole body under subjection by active mortification of the

flesh, lest he be led by small infidelities of a sensuous kind to the greater sins of luxury which take such a firm hold of the body and so completely blind the soul. Sentimentality, a love of ease and comfort, a delicacy regarding clothes, 'luxuriating' in warmth, fondling pets—there are a thousand ways, all apparently distant from the sins of the sixth commandment, and yet these things may be the first steps towards graver evil owing to the all pervasive nature of the sense of touch. That is why the purgative way will be a way symbolised by hairshirts and disciplines, fasts and abstinence. The body treated with a certain rigour and harshness develops well and becomes by degrees responsive to the movement of the soul without its health being impaired.

But the *Rivule*, happily enough after being elsewhere outspoken on the crudest sins, here only touches on the sordid side of sensuality, and takes us at once to the foot of the Cross, where alone we can learn to see the mortification of the flesh in true perspective. Christ's body, torn and bleeding, remains the model to draw the senses from sensuality. Christ's hands are the most perfect subjects of the sense of touch, and 'God's hands were nailed to the Cross' (p. 87). Those hands whose touch cured the sick and dying, those hands whose power broke the loaves to feed the five thousands, those hands which turned bread into the same body of which they were members; the creative hands of Christ have all power; they sustain, they make and they hold together what they make, they embrace every man with utter affection, they tenderly caress the beginner on the journey to heaven—but they are pierced, and through those fissures they support on the cross the whole body. The hands that are mortified are the chaste hands of the stigmata.

This asceticism of the hands, which can play so powerful a part in the first upward movement of many a young Christian today, working in factory or farm, stands for the suffering in all the body and in all the senses which our Lord completed to the fullest possible degree on Calvary, suffering in sight in seeing the tears of his Mother . . . in smell from the foul place on which he was crucified . . . ears and mouth struck by the insensate soldiers . . . gall on his tongue . . . (pp. 80-81). All this is an example to the beginner of the hard life of the Cross, the only instrument which will give him the mastery of his senses. But more important for the generous beginner is the author's insistence on the interior feelings of Christ, the suffering of his inward sensibility. Three spears smote him to the heart—the weeping of his Mother and the other Maries, the betrayal and flight of his own disciples, the evil of those who crucified him (pp. 83 sq. All this section on the sufferings of Christ, which

were the most painful and the most complete of any human suffering, should be compared with St Thomas's treatment of the same subject—III, 46, vi—to which they bear a striking similarity).

It is therefore of special importance that the beginner should mortify the interior feelings he is tempted to indulge at the beginning. Outside Catholicism today the one great test of prayer and devotion is 'religious experience'; if a man does not 'experience' or feel a response to his prayer or meditation, he regards himself as out of touch with God. In truth, it should be the opposite, for at the beginning the soul is often seeking its own pleasure and satisfaction in these experiences. It asks to feel inwardly the sweetness of God's presence, of the beauty of his teaching, the unity of all in him. But such feelings are entirely accidental to the reality of communion with God and easily begin to be sought for their own sake. It is therefore necessary to follow our Lord in the mortification of the interior senses. The soul must not hanker after the feeling of sorrow for sin or of the love of God. Such feelings must be pierced by the nails of suffering and aridity. God himself usually arranges periods of aridity to wean the soul from such attachments, and in that case the mortifications belong rather to the passive purification, the dark night of the senses. But there are ways of mortifying these interior feelings, particularly by means of the most vital and indocile of all the interior senses, namely, that of the imagination. The mortification of this fundamental sense, however, must continue through the illuminative way, for it is there that it is most likely to become a stumbling block. We will therefore leave the treatment of this subject to the next stage of the spiritual life.

We might expect to find under the heading of the active purification of the senses, some references to voluntary physical mortifications. Many at this stage in their life are prone to seek their salvation almost exclusively in disciplines, hair-shirts, fasts and vigils which they choose with personal preference and the exercise of self-will. Their good will and genuine desire for perfection are manifest, but they seek a short cut through external and physical actions. They are in fact tempted to a form of pharisaism; they rely on self-made laws which develop sometimes into very real hindrances to further growth. Life becomes tied up in a severe and loveless legalism, and perfection is measured by physical pain and inconvenience.

The *Ancren Riwele* is a hard rule of itself, and the woman who had taken it upon herself had in fact entered upon a way of great austerity and mortification. But apart from that one act of choice in accepting all the laws, no encouragement is given to seek further

forms of penance. In the last section the author lays down certain rules of conduct which amount to a very severe discipline—two meals only a day between Easter and Holyrood (14th September), one meal for the rest of the year, perpetual abstinence except at times of great sickness, coarse garments and coarse works. But although these are taken on under obedience and are therefore salutary, the author sets very little store by them because they are external:

I said before, at the commencement, that ye ought not, like unwise people, to promise to keep any of the external rules. I say the same still; nor do I write them for any but you alone. I say this in order that other anchoresses may not say that I, by my own authority, make new rules for them. Nor do I command that they observe them, and ye may even change them, whenever ye will, for better ones. In regard to things of this kind that have been in use before, it matters little (p. 312).

He is therefore acting as director rather than legislator and these specifications of an austere life are offered in particular to the three sisters and not in general to all anchoresses. But even so they must not go beyond them without special permission. 'Fast no day upon bread and water, except ye have leave' (p. 314). 'Wear no iron nor haircloth, nor hedgehog-skins; and do not beat yourselves therewith . . . without leave of your confessor' (p. 317-318). In this way their lives are directed so that self-will finds no secret outlet in apparent austerity or in externals which may be empty of the spirit. It would be more advisable to avoid all extra penances at this period of life apart from the ones agreed to by the director as fitting to a normal and generous Christian seeking to amend his ways and to reach more perfect heights of virtue. Obedience to God's will in daily trials and difficulties must be the predominant form of penance and austerity, and that can be encouraged by a strenuous following of an austere way of life, mortifying the senses and submitting to the direction of another. But voluntary mortification beyond these confines should be ignored, except under some very particular inspiration of the Holy Spirit.