

virtue is a 'physical' good (in the sense of our opening paragraphs), not only a principle of morally right activity.⁴⁵ As such it is one sign of what grace is and does.

45 1a-2ae, xlix, 2, 3; li, 1; lii, 1.



THE SPIRITUAL LIFE: AN HISTORICAL APPROACH—II

The Patristic Heritage

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IN the first of these articles it was explained that the series is being written with the conviction that an historical approach to Christian teaching on the spiritual life, an enquiry into the thought of successive masters on the subjects of prayer and perfection, will be a powerful aid to the deepening of our own understanding of what the knowledge, love and service God means to each one of us today.

The roots of Christian thinking on prayer and the spiritual life are to be found with the Greek Fathers of the East, whose teaching sprang in the early centuries from the Gospel itself, forming a great heritage from which grew the medieval development in Western Christian thought (while the East has preserved, and continues to preserve, the treasures of the patristic heritage), and in the West at the close of the middle ages the systems of the *devotio moderna* in turn grew out of the medieval developments. We have called the patristic, medieval and modern periods the three ages of the history of spiritual teaching, and our present concern is with the patristic.

It would be easiest here at once to indicate at what point we are going to see the beginning of Western medieval thought in this connection, and its emergence from the patristic. The history of spiritual teaching has always been closely connected with the history of those who are professedly and primarily occupied with the practice of spiritual perfection, namely with the history of monasticism, for indeed one of the salient features of the *devotio moderna* was the organization of the spiritual life in such a way

that it does not depend any more upon the external profession of monastic life, a 'state of perfection' in itself, but rather builds up outside the monastery and in the world the spirit that governs monastic life, so that in a sense the devout Christian, while pursuing spiritual perfection, leads a monastic life in the world 'nella cella del cognoscimento di sè', as St Catherine of Siena (†1380, near the culmination of the medieval world) says in the first chapter of the *Dialogo*. Medieval spirituality was therefore closely linked with monastic history, and when St Catherine, denied the solitude she so eagerly desired, 'built for herself a secret cell in her heart' (*Legenda major*, Lib. I, c. 4), she, whose life was far removed from external monastic quiet, was paving the way for the spirituality of the modern world. Now the undoubted father of monasticism as we know it in the West is St Benedict (†547), and all monastic institutions since his time are indebted to the Holy Rule. It is therefore interesting to observe in the concluding chapter of the Holy Rule what is the reading he recommends to his monks, for it indicates what he considered to be the heritage on which his work was built. After the Old and the New Testaments and the writings of the 'holy catholic Fathers' he specially recommends the *Collationes* or Conferences (of Cassian), the Lives of the Fathers (of the Desert) and the Rule 'of our holy father Basil'. This was his heritage, and consequently the heritage of the medieval monastic world, and the *Collationes* of Cassian was still the favourite reading of St Dominic (†1221) (*Libellus Jordani*, n. 13).

It was indeed Cassian (†435) who collected the whole monastic tradition of the East in his *Collationes* (PL 49, 477) and his *De Coenobiorum Institutis* (PL 49, 53) and introduced them to the West for his foundations at Marseilles. Thus we are placing the beginnings of medieval Western spiritual teaching with St Benedict, together with its great development under his spiritual son, St Gregory (†604). Alongside the Greek patristic heritage of the East stands the Latin Augustine (†430), whose original and independent thought has probably been the most powerful single influence on all subsequent Christian teaching. It is difficult at first to realize that he was an almost exact contemporary of Cassian.

During the earliest centuries the first precise teacher of the spiritual life is Clement of Alexandria (†216), in his book called the *Stromata* or *Stromateis* (originally meaning 'coverlets or quilts'

of various colours, and hence 'miscellanea'). Here we find the first emphasis on *theōría* or 'gazing at God', i.e. contemplation (this word itself being merely the Latin for 'gazing'). This, he says, is achieved through *gnōsis*, or an intimate knowledge of God, which in turn grows out of faith in him and through love of him (4, 22; PG 8, 1345-8). We are not far here from the Catechism definition of prayer as 'the raising up of the mind and heart to God' (n. 141), that is, thinking about him first of all through faith, and loving him through charity. But for Clement there is no distinction between the life of contemplation and ascetical preoccupations: the 'gnostic man', the man who knows God, is also a man 'of good life, in full control of his passions (*basileúōn tôn pathôn*), a generous giver, and a doer of good works to the utmost of his power both in word and in deed' (2, 19; PG 8, 1040; happily included in the *Enchiridion Asceticum* 82). Thus for Clement, the holy man is a single man, whose contemplative life in an easy and natural way dominates his day-to-day concerns, since 'the man who is permanently in love with God and wholly occupied in this alone, cannot be moved to anger by anything, or to hatred of any one of God's creatures' (6, 9; PG 9, 293; *Ench. Asc.* 88). Such a peace of mind, called *apatheía* or 'unfeelingness', goes together with 'perpetual contemplation' (4, 22); but, as we have just seen, it is far from excluding good works and kindness, but on the contrary should be their very cause. In the teaching of Clement we have the groundwork of the spiritual teaching of the Greek Fathers, and an attitude of mind which is providing a simple inspiration to many people in the complicated world of today.

It was apparently Origen (†255) who first made the conscious distinction between the problems of the contemplative or mystical life and the active or ascetical. He is commenting Ps. 133 'qui stans in domo Domini, in atriis domus Dei nostri', and says 'the contemplatives (*theōrētikoi*) are within the house of God, while the actives (*praktikoi*) are in its courts' (PG 12, 1651; *Ench. Asc.* 122), in other words, the practical matters of *áskēsis* or training of oneself (and the original use of the word is in an athletic context), of preparing for the spiritual combat, such problems are worked out separately from the work of contemplation. And subsequent to his time the early monastic writers are mainly concerned with discipline and conquest of self, the renunciation of the world and

the seeking of solitude, in order to fulfil the Lord's word: 'If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast . . .' (Matt. xix, 21). Thus it was that Anthony the first hermit (†356) sought the desert, and that the convert Pachomius (†346 though a much younger man) came to found the first monastic institute. But it was not all sternness with these monks of the desert: Athanasius in his *Life of Anthony*, c. 4 (PG 26, 845; *Ench. Asc.* 189) tells how 'he was loved by everyone' and how he noticed among his disciples not only their severe and ascetic lives, but also their patience and gentleness, their piety (*eusébeia*) towards Christ and their love of one another. Yet there was little here expressly directed towards *theōría*, apart from a general assiduity in prayer.

But in the latter part of that same fourth century we find the two Cappadocian brothers, who form a perfect complement to one another, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. Basil was the great organizer of monastic life in the East, to whom St Benedict looked back as a father, and whose rule still governs monastic life in the East. Basil (†397) was also a bishop, and for all his devotion to silence and solitude was a highly practical man. His younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (†394), also became a bishop, but was not of a practical turn of mind. There is a well-known and delightful letter of Basil (*Epistle* 215; PG 32, 792) in which he warns a party about to embark on a diplomatic mission that he doubts whether his 'most God-loving brother Bishop Gregory will ever get on to a ship and lead the delegation, for I know him to be utterly incompetent in such ecclesiastical affairs; and what is the use of having someone who is so high above things of this world (*metéōros*) to deal with such everyday matters?' But as Basil was the father of monasticism in the East, so Gregory has been called the father of Christian mysticism. Basil says that 'the ascetical life has one only object: the salvation of the soul' (*Asceticon*, PG 31, 625; *Ench. Asc.* 261), and also in a most practical way that 'the power of prayer is fulfilled in the virtuous actions of a lifetime' (*Homily* 5; PG 31, 244; *Ench. Asc.* 257), going on to recall St Paul's saying: 'Whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all to the glory of God' (1 Cor. x, 31).

But it is with Gregory of Nyssa that the teaching of Clement on contemplation becomes developed. Especially in his *Vita Moysis* we find his mystical approach explained: he considers the mystery of Moses climbing the mountain, there to see God face

to face, and to speak with him 'as a man is wont to speak to his friend' (Exodus xxxiii, 11). 'Theología', he says, 'is a truly difficult mountain to climb . . . and it was only when Moses left behind him not only things of sense, but even the things his natural intellect could understand . . . and entered into the cloud, only then was he able to see when one cannot see (*to ideîn en tô mē ideîn*), which was why St John said: "No man hath seen God at any time"' (*Vita Moysis*, PG 44, 373-377; *Ench. Asc.* 341-2). This mystic experience of the 'cloud' (*gnóphos*), so beloved of generations of Byzantine teachers, is worked out at length, until at the end of the treatise the climax is reached in the purpose of all contemplation: 'to become God's friend' (PG 44, 429; *Ench. Asc.* 345).

Almost contemporary with the Cappadocians was a great teacher of the spiritual life, Evagrius of Pontus (†399), whom we find once more emphasizing the unity of the Christian life of contemplation and action in his famous *Capita practica* or brief paragraphs of spiritual advice (PG 40, 1221 ff.; *Ench. Asc.* 1355 ff.), and the teaching of the Fathers of the Desert probably owed much to him. There are three great collections of stories of the monks of the desert in the fifth century: Palladius's *Lausiaca History* (PG 34, 1013 ff.) (so called because dedicated to one Lausius, a chamberlain at the court), the *Historia Monachorum* in Latin of Rufinus (PL 21, 389 ff.) and the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (PG 65, 72 ff.), and all these formed an important part of the heritage from patristic times and were widely read throughout the middle ages.

In the tradition of Evagrius was Diadochus of Phōtikē, a Greek of the fifth century, whose Greek text has only more recently been recovered and was published by Teubner in 1912. He opens his work (*Capita centum de perfectione spirituali*) with ten simple rules for the spiritual life, which are so typical of the time, combining the monastic-ascetical aspect with the mystical, and also so little known, that we could profitably print them in full:

- 1st Rule, of Faith: a dispassionate (*apathēs*) idea of God [i.e. detached from concerns of this world].
- 2nd Rule, of Hope: a journey of the mind in love towards things hoped-for.
- 3rd Rule, of Patience: he who looks at the invisible as visible with the eyes of the mind is unceasingly patient.

4th Rule, of not loving money [a famous 'monastic' virtue]: to desire not-having as men desire having.

5th Rule, of Knowledge: to know oneself by making way for God. [N.B.—The phrase *to ekstênai Theô* may also be translated 'by being in ecstasy towards God' cf. 2 Cor. v, 13].

6th Rule, of Humility: to forget successes immediately.

7th Rule, of no-anger: a great desire not to be angry.

8th Rule, of Purity: to have the senses always fixed upon God.

9th Rule, of Love: an increase of love for those who insult us.

10th Rule, of perfect transformation: in the delights of God merrily to meet the sadness of death.

Throughout his treatise Diadochus insists that the all-important thing is the love of God, and he explains that contemplation is easy because it is work of the Holy Spirit, but prayer is difficult because it is our own voice speaking, yet praying with words is specially valuable to avoid distractions (c. 68 and 73). Two simple pieces of monastic advice are of use to us all: 'Silence is the mother of the wisest thoughts' and 'Obedience is the gateway to the love of God' (c. 70 and 41).

About the same time as these natural developments of monasticism and mysticism in the East there appeared the important figure of the mystical writer who wrote under the name of Denis the Areopagite. For centuries it was supposed that he really was the Areopagite who met St Paul (Acts xix), and although Erasmus in the sixteenth century had doubts about this, it was not until more recent times that any more definite theories about his identity were arrived at. Two independent scholars, Stiglmayer and Koch, in 1895, reached the conclusion that the works of Denis must be placed between 485 (the death of Proclus, to whom Denis seems to be much indebted) and 513 (the first citation of his works by another author). Denis was the first to make a clear distinction between 'demonstrative theology' by the use of the reason, and 'mystical theology' which is a knowledge of God, God-given, in contemplation. His famous treatise *De Divinis Nominiibus* treats of demonstrative theology (by what names we speak of God), explaining that the counterpart of reasoned theology is prayer, which he describes as 'a shining rope (*polú-phōtos seirá*) from heaven, by which we can climb to God' (*Div. Nom.* 3, 1; PG 3, 680), and that reasoned theology and prayer together prepare for the higher understanding, 'the super-

shining cloud (*gnóphos*) of mystery-teaching silence' (*De Mystica Theologia* I, 1; PG 3, 997; *Ench. Asc.* 1054). Here is strict theology linked with the phrases, albeit in Denis's extended style, of Gregory of Nyssa. At the same time a recurrent theme in Denis's thought is the creature's return to the Creator: he uses the word *epistrophē*, or turning round, or conversion, and he says that this conversion of the creature to God is in three stages, purification (*kátharsis*), illumination (*éllampsis*) and union (*hénōsis*), representing a gradual drawing closer to God. These three stages he then sees as hierarchically related to one another, whence his two works *De caelesti hierarchia* (on the stages of closeness to God among the heavenly spirits—whence the 'nine choirs' of angels) and *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, the reflection of heaven here on earth in God's Church, with the knowledge of God brought to the soul through the Church's Sacraments. The teaching of Denis had an enormous influence throughout the middle ages, especially in the West by means of medieval translations and commentaries, and it probably paved the way for the elaboration of the 'three ways' of the soul's progress towards God, culminating in the soul's union with God in love.

Almost contemporary with Denis was St Augustine (†430), the great lover of God and teacher of the love of God. With St Augustine we are already much closer to our own world of the West. The theological disputes of the time, especially the Pelagian controversy on grace, led Augustine to lay special stress on the absolute need of God's grace for man's spiritual advancement which consists in his growth in the love of God. For St Augustine, the great means to growing in the love of God are the control of the passions, the practice of virtue, and prayer (e.g. in *De perfectione justitiae hominis* 8, 18-19), but these are only means to the end, which is the contemplation of God. In this way we can see so much of what has gone before, ordered and moulded in a theological framework, and the way was open to much greater clarity in spiritual teaching than had existed before. St Augustine, a largely independent thinker, had the greatest possible influence on all ages from his own time to the present.

Thus we can see something of the pattern of the patristic heritage which came to the beginning of the medieval world of St Benedict and St Gregory: the early teaching both mystical and ascetical of Clement, with the clearly different preoccupations of

the practical Basil and the dreaming Gregory of Nyssa, drawn together again by Evagrius and Diadochus and the consequent monastic developments of the fifth century, which Cassian brought to the West to be inherited by St Benedict, and alongside this the powerful mystical elements of Denis in the East and Augustine in the West, leading to a complete body of spiritual teaching at the end of the patristic time. In the East the contemplative spirit continued to be gathered together by the monk John Climacus (†600) and the important work of Maximus the Confessor (†662), who summarized the teaching of the Eastern masters with a new particular emphasis on the Person of Christ, who unites all things in himself, as the Church unites many within herself (*Mystagogia* I; PG 91, 664-5).



THE PERFECTION OF RELIGIOUS

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Translated by Hugh Farmer, O.S.B.

THERE are three kinds of religious. The first refuse their senses nothing. If they are cold, they warm themselves; if they are hungry they eat; if the thought of some diversion comes to mind, they take it without deliberation; they are always intent on self-satisfaction, and do not know what mortification is in practice. They perform their duties without any interior spirit, without relish and without fruit.

These are in danger of mortal sin. Sometimes they are in a state of sin without realizing it, because they never seriously enter into themselves and their examination of conscience is extremely superficial. In this state of inattention innumerable objects pass through their mind each day, their heart is carried away and seems intoxicated with the turmoil of exterior matters; it is ceaselessly deceived by the illusions of nature and the devil, and it blindly follows their impulses.

Such religious can often be in greater danger than layfolk. The latter know very well that they sometimes fall into mortal sin and so they distrust themselves; their very fear makes them cautious. But religious trust to their state of life, they rely on the false presumption that mortal sin is very rare in the religious