

A JOURNEY IN THE MIST

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SPEAKING of the life which aims at full union with God in prayer, one who is a 'master' in the knowledge and practice of such a life said, with a rueful smile: 'The interior life has many disadvantages'! He did not refer to the self-evident disadvantages, as they might be called, which are the natural result of giving up certain things incompatible with the life of the spirit. He meant rather 'disadvantages' that are part and parcel of the interior life even for those who willingly embrace it. Such disadvantages imply, for example, the absence of certain consolations; the lack of any certainty of real progress and of any personal satisfaction in advancing along the way to God.

So often, those who are really striving to start out on the way which seems to lead to union with our Lord apparently get lost on the road; they seem to be held back from making progress by a kind of 'mist' which surrounds them and dispels the clearness of vision experienced when they started out. The traveller is uncertain now where to go or how to start again, for the mist seems to block the road in front and on either side and even behind, leaving only what lies under his feet. The feeling of being lost and the seemingly complete absence of any help from our Lord gives rise to spiritual confusion and to the fear that something must be wrong.

It is difficult for the poor traveller to realise, at first, that all this apparent darkness and confusion really *is* the Lord. Union with him must always imply dis-union with everything else that is not him: anything that belongs too closely to *self*. Our Lord demands complete and unlimited surrender of self, and all implied in that surrender, from all who desire or whom he has specially called to union with himself in the life of the spirit. In other words, he demands from us the sacrifice which he himself offered for us upon the cross. In this sacrifice his whole life on earth was summed up, for that life on earth was one long act of self-surrender to his heavenly Father. To be *complete*, this sacrifice must imply that nothing be left for self in which to seek satisfaction—not even the

satisfaction arising from consciousness of getting on, making progress, corresponding with the divine will which seems so justifiable as a desire, or at least as a hope. We must remember, too, that self-surrender is not something that can be effected once and for all: it is an affair of long and constant endeavour, the work of a whole life-time, and needs constant renewal. Fortunately for us, God is ready to accept intention and desire and does not wait for perfect fulfilment. But the intention and desire must persevere, in spite of difficulties that may seem insurmountable, in spite of circumstances often entirely against it. The life of the spirit, in fact, is not a matter of 'plain sailing'. In order to help us to be humble—*never* in order to depress or discourage us—our Lord permits our lapses in generosity, even if we have followed the bad example of the sons of Heli and have taken back from the altar what we had offered there. (1 Kings 2, 12-17.) Nothing, in short, is more difficult, nothing takes more time, nothing seems more like fighting a losing battle than striving after complete self-abandonment. And yet, the whole 'business' of the inner life may seem to us to consist in this battle alone. In one of his homilies, St Gregory the Great tells us that, while it is comparatively easy to give up family, home and possessions, it is *very* difficult (*valde difficile est*) to give up one's own self. At the same time, let us remember that while it is certainly very difficult, it is not impossible, or God would not ask for it, since he never demands from his creatures (whose weakness he knows better than they themselves, or anyone else) anything which they are really unable to give him. He is Justice itself, and all his actions, in reward or punishment, are just.

The principal cause of difficulty and weariness in the way of the Spirit is that, however bravely and generously the sacrifice of self is offered, however readily its effects are accepted by the offerers, the Divine acceptance of the sacrifice is rarely made clear to those who, like their Master, are the victims also of the sacrifice. To the ordinary human judgment, it seems to be only 'fair'—to be even a right—that God's acceptance of our attempt to offer him all that he asks from us ought to be made evident to us, or at least that we should be able to judge that our efforts are appreciated, that we are truly making progress along the way. All the same, experience shows that it is evidently by no means necessary for the success of our efforts that we should be conscious of it—that we should feel

that we are advancing along the way. On the contrary, it seems that it would be neither a good thing nor at all helpful for us to be given this consciousness. The satisfaction of self, once again, might so easily take the place of God's satisfaction in us. He alone must be the end and object of the journey upon which we started—not self-satisfaction, nor self-improvement, nor self-seeking of any kind, even the most apparently justifiable. The traveller can have real consolation in God's will alone, however it may be shown him. Not only must union with God be sought for, but union with him in *his* way and according to his ruling, and in his time also; not as we ourselves think best.

Self-seeking in one or other of the many usually hidden ways in which it takes possession of poor human nature is *the* enemy, and one far more subtle and difficult to fight against and overcome than the 'enemy of mankind' himself. How well Satan knows this, too; he is always only too ready to make use of every means in his power to hide his own attacks against the soul's progress towards God. He finds none so effective as the human tendency to seek self, even in the highest and holiest things.

So it is that the journey towards God can be described as a 'journey in the mist'. Imagine walking along a road in the country surrounded on all sides by a thick white mist. All that can be seen is the road itself under foot. Behind, in front and on each side, nothing is visible but the mist weaving trails like wisps of silvery gauze which seem to add to the general obscurity. Occasionally there may be a rift in the surrounding mist and an uncertain glimpse of a shadowy presence ahead; sometimes, too, the mist may open and a glimpse be obtained of a smiling, sunny country on beyond. More often, however, it is only possible to keep the eyes of faith fixed upon the road under foot, looking neither to right nor to left; neither in front nor behind—least of all behind—and so, go steadily on. There will be many slips, even perhaps heavy falls, upon that hard, rough road. Nothing, however, can actually prevent the traveller from continuing the journey but lack of courage, lack of confidence in the Leader, who is always just ahead.

Any lightening of the mist that may come to the traveller depends entirely upon the will of our Lord, who knows the capacity and the needs of each soul so much better than the soul itself, or than anyone else on earth. There can never be any real

comparison between the ways of God and the ways of man and there should never be complaints against them. But the 'loving complaints' of those who have already accepted fully the Divine will in their regard are not despised by our Lord. So we hear of St Teresa of Avila gently complaining to him, after the many heavy trials and sufferings she had bravely endured on one of her journeys in his service. When our Lord replied to her complaint: 'But that is how I treat my friends'; she answered at once: 'Yes, Lord, and that is why you have so few of them'. 'Authentic or not it may be', says Professor Allison Peers, 'but it is highly characteristic'.¹

Our Lord is never outdone in generosity: he will not allow poor human nature to be overwhelmed by difficulty or suffering in his service. Besides this, he gives to all who strive to follow him with courage along his own Way of the Cross the gift of joy in his service. This joy may not be on the surface of the soul, it may not be expressed in actual feelings of happiness and delight; but it will always be the underlying support in trial and pain. Does not the apostle say to us, in words used by the Church on the third Sunday of Advent: 'Rejoice in the Lord *always*; again I say to you, rejoice' (Phil. 4). This joy is the supernatural 'joy in the Lord', far more real and satisfying than any merely human joy. It is God's own gift: it can never be lost as long as faith and love in him remain in the soul.

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¹ cf. *Mother of Carmel*, p. 136. (S.C.M. Press.)