

Contemplation and the Modern World¹

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The obliteration of familiar landmarks and the destruction of an old and accustomed order seem to produce a twofold effect. The majority of those who come afterwards seems quickly to adapt itself to the new outlook and new ways, while a minority clings with determination to what it can remember of the days gone by, and, filled with an intense desire to preserve the values of the past, canonizes both the bad and the good in the old order. It was thus with the Reformation. The forces which produced it had slowly been gathering for centuries. The scandals of the late medieval church were but the manifestation of far deeper ills, of which perhaps the most deadly of all had been, in practice, an almost complete loss of the sense of the oneness of all Christians with the triumphant and risen Christ. In consequence, a spirit of gloom and insecurity, coupled with an unconstructive puritanism in morals, had prevailed among the devout and had tended to make salvation depend almost entirely upon the precariousness of subjective intention. The theological virtue of hope was no longer conceived of as a triumphant assertion of a certain attainment, but, at best, an almost artificially constructed optimism, an attempt to try to make oneself believe that all was for the best despite all that human experience seemed to show. No longer regarded as integrated and made significant in the divine life of Christ, the forces and impulses which make up man's relationship with others and with his environment each tended to go its own way. A profound fragmentation followed. The sacraments became ever more divorced from ordinary human experience, and this was particularly true of the mass at which the congregation considered themselves for the most part to be merely passive spectators of something that was being done for them. And if the sacraments became divorced from human experience, so also did prayer, which came to be thought of rather as the search for a God not yet attained than the enjoyment of the presence of a God already possessed.

On all sides this disintegration and division appeared; human love

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and divine love, human knowledge and divine faith, began to be separated one from the other by ever deepening chasms. To the minds of many, religious symbolism and, therefore, sacramental ritual were seen merely as the subjective working of fancy attempting to give a fictitious significance to the 'real' or 'ordinary'; the 'hard fact' in human behaviour, the 'literal meaning' of the scriptures, the 'rational' operation of the human mind and intelligence in prayer—these were seen as the only valid and real bases of spiritual progress, all else was considered to be but the embroidering of a fancy that could quickly lead to dangerous delusion.

Yet if many, perhaps the majority, thought in this way, there were always present those who probed more deeply and both inherited and transmitted more ancient traditions. Indeed, from the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth, there was a period in which mystical and contemplative prayer—both in its study and in its practice—reached a height unattained in earlier times. Under the influence of men such as St John of the Cross, St Francis of Sales and, in England, of Fr Augustine Baker, and of women such as St Teresa of Avila and St Jane de Chantal, the pursuit of the prayer of pure faith with its searching purgations was traced for all time in terms of theological accuracy and supernatural insight. We know how this movement petered out. The exaggerations and facile simplifications of a Molinos and a Mme Guyon brought discredit upon any form of prayer which appeared to the superficial to undervalue the well-worn practices of Christian devotion. Impulsive souls had tried to outstrip the work of God and to attain by mere human effort states of prayer which are the free gift of grace, and it was not unnatural that spiritual directors and writers tended to urge the devout to keep to what were considered to be safer paths.

Again, there was at this time an apparent division between the practice of pure prayer and the liturgy of the Church. This state of affairs was not so much the fault of those who advocated mystical ways, but rather of circumstances which had transformed the liturgy into an elaborate ritual at which the congregation were mere spectators, a ritual which in the seventeenth century had become formalized and elaborated to a degree with all the baroque additions of musical counter-point and unfunctional ceremonial.

Finally, from the fourteenth century onwards, there had been a gradual loss of the fullness of the theology of faith. On its material side, faith is the adherence of the mind to revealed truth, but it must be

remembered that that very adherence springs from that 'putting on of the mind of Christ' which takes place when the Christian is baptized. However faith may operate on the psychological level—and schools of theology differ sharply on the matter—it is, as a direct consequence of union with Christ, the incarnate Knowledge of the Father, a share in that very Knowledge itself. By faith we know God, obscurely and darkly, it is true, but with the knowledge of Christ. All mystical prayer, then, is based on the growth of faith in the depths of the human soul until the spirit reaches out to God beyond the scope of considerations, beyond the limitations of logical concepts and beyond the powers of the discursive reason. In mystical prayer the soul reaches out to and is made one with God; nothingness is made one with existence, feebleness with omnipotence and mortality with unending life.

But it is obvious that if faith be regarded merely as the adherence of the mind to revealed truth, be considered in terms only of material rather than of formal causality, the patent fact of the experience of mystical power must force theologians to induce the existence of a special and unusual grace by which God is known in a higher mode and in a fresh way from that enjoyed by ordinary good souls, as if a new supernatural intuition were added to the powers of the soul. Granted this hypothesis, it is not surprising that there were very many who viewed with suspicion the apparent claims of some to attain to God by means higher and more specially bestowed than by those of faith, as they understood faith. The notion that contemplative prayer was something very special, granted to the very few, became more and more widespread. Those who practised such prayer were often frustrated by well-meant but ignorant advice, and sometimes in their turn they themselves began to give the impression that they were members of some kind of supernatural *corps d'élite* which possessed knowledge denied to the ordinary workaday Christian. Sometimes, therefore, it was the contemplatives themselves who were the enemies of their own cause; but more often, perhaps, they fell victims to that resentment which a more perfect way of life sometimes arouses in conventionally good people who fear higher and more exacting standards lest God should seem to be asking more of themselves.

I have dwelt at length upon some of the difficulties which led to the doldrums of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when there were fewer persons, perhaps, than at any other time to champion the cause of real interiority in prayer. A few there were, like the Jesuits

Père Grou and Père de Caussade, but for the most part the tradition had become faint. In the nineteenth century, however, the great religious revival included within itself a revival of interest in the practice of interior prayer. We have only to think of the Dominicans of France, of great directors like the Abbé Huvelin and, in England in slightly later days, of men like Baron von Hügel, Abbot Chapman and Fr Steuart, to realise that new forces were at work.

What of the present moment? It is a fact that forces which have been at work slowly and almost imperceptibly for several decades, have, during the last fifteen years, come together to make the present situation one of peculiar interest and promise. Perhaps the earliest and most important of these movements has been the remarkable revival of the Pauline doctrine of the oneness of Christians as members of the mystical body of Christ. This, one of the most fundamental consequences of the redemption, had been so forgotten in practice that it is not even mentioned in the 'Penny Catechism', and its 'rediscovery' has consequences that are very direct and very profound where mystical prayer is concerned. Briefly speaking, we may put it like this: if, by baptism, all Christians are so made one with Christ that—as St Paul says—Christ's life is more their life than their own natural life, three results at once follow.

First, if each Christian live in Christ and Christ in him, then each Christian must in a very real sense live in each other. The life of Christ forms a bond of union between Christians by which they are bound together in the closest possible relationship, not only with Christ but with each other. Each Christian is—to use a metaphor which is less than the reality—a cell forming part of the great body of the redeemed. 'It is not good for man to be alone'; what affects one, affects all.

The second effect of such a union with Christ is that the redemptive work of Christ is not only something that was wrought some two thousand years ago in the Near East, but is something in which each Christian actually participates, 'filling up', as St Paul says, 'what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ'. Everything, therefore, in the life of the Christian that is not selfishness and sin—his joys, his sorrows, his work, his recreation, his actions whether important or unimportant—participates in the actual redemption and sanctification of the created world of men and things. Everything that is not sin, because seen, heard and handled by the Christ in men and by men in Christ, achieves significance as an actual sacrament of God's presence.

The third effect relates directly to the subject of prayer. The epistle

of St Peter asserts, in a daring phrase, that by baptism we have become 'sharers in the divine nature'; our prayer, therefore, is not merely the uprising of the mind and heart to a distant God by means of the precarious action of purely human intention and goodwill, but, as the prayer of one sharing in the very nature of God through Christ, an articulation in the depths of the soul of the Eternal Word, a valid expression of that voice of Christ which the Father cannot fail to hear. It is that voice which alone can interpret to the Father all that human nature cannot express, that speaks to God in terms above and beyond the limitation of intellectual concept, that gives utterance to those yearnings which the human heart cannot even begin to formulate—those ineffable groanings by which we say: 'Abba, Father'. In prayer, then, we are not striving to reach out to a God whose possession has not yet been attained, we are as it were exploring the riches of that possession itself, like the householder bringing out of his treasure things new and old. In God and with God in Christ, we are joining in the very prayer of Christ, in the upraising of a mind that is one with the eternal Word itself, and of a heart which alone is in the full sense sacred.

We have seen, then, that three consequences follow from the fact that we are members of the body of Christ, consequences that must vitally affect our attitude to prayer. We are one with each other, our prayer cannot, then, be a mere selfish individualism; our lives are, save for selfishness and sin, integrated into a single and effective purpose through the sacraments of Christ; prayer cannot, therefore, be separated from ordinary life and living; finally, our prayer, because the prayer of Christ within us, is something sure, certain and effective.

There was, however, another revival, almost parallel with the revival of the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ, which we cannot overlook. This movement, which is still suffering from growing pains both in its thinking and in its actual practice, may roughly be summed up by saying that it represents a return to an actual and corporate participation of body, mind and spirit—of human experience—in the rites and sacraments of the church. Without denying or attempting to deny the fact that the sacraments are something wrought by the power of God for us and in us, there is an increasing consciousness that the words and actions of the sacramental rites are something which invite, and even demand, from the faithful a positive human response and participation. Discussion about the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, reforms in the ceremonial, means by which the congregation does more and says more, these and all the other manifestations of this new litur-

gical consciousness are attempts to interpret the sacramental life of the Christian in ordinary human experience and to elicit from him a positive human response.

When we put together these two revivals—that of the consciousness of the oneness of the Christian with Christ and that of the Christian's active participation in the sacraments by which Christ's life is given and renewed—we can see that in the realm of prayer the consequences must be momentous. And this is particularly true of contemplative prayer.

In the first place, a great many of the complexities of our theorising about the matter must disappear. If we understand that all prayer is the prayer of Christ, we can see that its mode is not something which radically alters the character of prayer but is rather to be considered as a change in the method of its articulation. It is true, and must remain forever so, that there is an endless process of refinement, under God's grace and guidance, by which the articulation becomes less complex, words die away under the consciousness of a possession which they cannot express, cogitations and considerations about God drop off as mind and heart become, to use the very phrase of Christ, 'drawn by the Father', and the deepest realms of knowledge are seen to transcend the activities of reason while the most profound depths of love are discovered to lie beyond the scope of inducement. Nevertheless, concentration upon the fact of prayer rather than upon its mode, a concentration so immediate that the differences in articulation seem so very secondary in the face of a truth so great, must make for a simplicity unknown perhaps for many centuries. That all prayer is at root mystical prayer and that contemplation does not imply a new form of knowledge but is rather the revelation of what lies behind phenomena, that there can be no valid reason for an ambitious desire for 'higher' forms of prayer, that what God in fact wills us to have is revealed by the touchstone of empirical experience—all this makes for a singleness of purpose which should do much to put an end to anxious striving and tortuous complexity.

In the second place, there must now also tend to disappear the distinction which has sometimes been made between directing our attention in prayer either to the manhood of the incarnate Word or to the pure divinity of uncreated being. A full realisation of what union with Christ must mean and that it is precisely in him that uncreated being is made one with created human nature working in time and place and thus, therefore, it is through him—who is 'the way, the truth

and the life'—that the human spirit reaches through the incarnate Word to the uncreated Trinity. In Christ the notions of 'beyond' and 'through' do not and cannot conflict. Here again, theological rediscovery has made for greater simplicity in prayer.

In the third place, the liturgical revival should enable us to do away with another anxious complexity of thought. There has been for centuries a tendency to divorce liturgical prayer from contemplative prayer, for the contemplative to regard liturgical rites and forms as something more external, more peripheral, than the wordless prayer of the mystic. As we have seen, there are two factors which have been responsible for this. One is the late medieval notion that the congregation should be more or less passive spectators of something that was done for them, and the other is the theory of the earlier liturgical revivalists that the liturgy is something so transcendently holy of itself that a reverent attendance can almost automatically sanctify. Both of these attitudes were inevitably bound to make those who followed the path of interior prayer feel that they enjoyed a union with God deeper than the mere externalism of word and ceremonial. We are now trying to achieve a deeper understanding of the sacramental mysteries, to see that liturgical words and gestures have, the more they are understood and participated in by us, a validity which reaches down to the depths of the human spirit. We are now beginning to see that we are not rehearsing antique rites but are simultaneously engaged in the sacramental extension of Christ's kingdom both by our words and actions and by our understanding of them deepening our knowledge of that kingdom within us.

Starting off with the consciousness that, as St Augustine says, 'when we pray we both hear and speak' and that therefore the words of the psalms and introits and graduals at mass are the words of Christ speaking to the Father through us, we can by degrees—under the leading of the Holy Spirit—achieve an ever deeper understanding of those words. As we concentrate more and more upon 'hearing' what we speak, the words achieve an ever deepening significance which is based now, not so much upon their rational meaning, but upon a consciousness of who is speaking. This process is one of almost infinite refinement until the moment comes when words have completely been absorbed by the accents of the speaker and heart has spoken to heart in the silence of the rational intellect. Seen thus, there can be nothing in the forms of liturgical prayers that can put any obstacles in the path of the deeper movements of the spirit. Indeed, at high mass itself the liturgy sets

aside a special moment for this silent prayer: the gradual and alleluia sung to elaborate music by a few singers (as they have been from the earliest days) give us time to pause and rest upon the words of Christ now so slowly being articulated. St Augustine tells us that the alleluia is thus so protracted through many notes precisely because the moment has arrived when words can no longer express that ineffable reaching out of Christ to his eternal Father in which we participate.

With regard to ceremonial action—singing, standing and going in procession—we have to remember that the activities of the human soul cannot be divorced from external expression, for it is thus that the movements of the human spirit express themselves in action. There is much that certain would-be mystics might have learnt from Pascal's warning that he who tries to make himself into an angel only ends by becoming lower than a beast. We are not disembodied spirits, just as Christ himself was not; the soul and the body make up the one human being and the movements of the soul together with the movements of the body—mental or physical—are both needed to express the human personality. If our human personality is fully to be integrated, these two movements must work together in complete harmony. In the earlier stages of the path of prayer the soul may be conscious of a kind of alternation between the one and the other; natural temperament may incline it to tend towards the active movements of mind and body or to the passive movements of the soul, but as the soul progresses and becomes more and more transformed into the image of the eternal Word, these two movements become ever more a single movement, the complete response of the personality to the single movements of grace in the human mind, heart and spirit. Seen thus, activity of word and gesture in the liturgy leads on to the more passive motions of the soul, just as the wisdom learned in silence gives meaning and significance to such activity. The whole man participates in a total offering.

We can see then, that as a consequence of movements in the contemporary church, there is an opportunity for a sane and simple cultivation of contemplative prayer which has not existed for centuries. A deeper understanding of sacramental theology, particularly that of baptism, and a more profound comprehension of the relationship of liturgical prayer with private and silent prayer, must lead to a far greater simplicity of outlook with the resulting abandonment of a departmentalisation of the activities of grace. Souls should be less deterred by complexities and problems which have, for the most part, been the result of an imperfect realisation of the inner meaning of

sacramental grace. Activity should be less likely to be pitted against contemplation, discursive prayer against 'pure' prayer, mental prayer against vocal prayer.

Nevertheless, there are possible dangers in the present situation. The force and impact of vital movements of the human spirit are always likely at first to bring exaggerations in their train. In the present liturgical movement there is, in some quarters, an undoubted tendency to activism, to the view that the only response of value is an active one; that people must be saying or singing something all the time and that listening is to be confined to the active hearing of instruction in the form of epistle, gospel and sermon. We hear in some quarters the view expressed that the singing of the gradual and alleluia is 'holding up' the mass and it is implied only too often that unless a person is almost feverishly 'doing something' the mass is passing him by. It is perhaps an inevitable reaction from the excessive passivity of earlier times, but we should, I think, not forget that 'there is a time to speak and a time to be silent' and that if we are 'to be taught of God' we must have moments in our lives when 'we await in silence the salvation of God' and God speaks to us and we to him 'without the sound of words'. The turmoil of the modern world may, if we are not careful, so stir us that we shall begin to forget that prayer is the most potent weapon in the whole armoury of the church and those who dedicate their lives to prayer—whether in the solitude of the heart or as members of choirs of monks or nuns—do more for the spread of the Kingdom of God than any activity, however useful and valuable.

Another possible danger is that the corporate character of Christian worship becomes so over-stressed that we forget that the body of Christ is composed of individual persons, loved and known by God before the world was, each unique and each uniquely able to present Christ in this world of time and place. If our prayer be the prayer of Christ and is thus intimately bound up with the prayer of all the redeemed, we must not forget that our prayer is also our own. A beautiful landscape is made up of unique objects; no two blades of grass, no two leaves, no two grains of earth are the same, and it is the blending together of such difference and distinction which is precisely that which gives beauty to the whole. So it is with the redeemed in Christ; each individual is in a unique relationship with God, and the growth of the body is made through the growth of each unique cell. Our prayer, then, partakes of this unique character and, in and beyond all that binds us together corporately in prayer, there is for each of us

a unique personal relationship with God. If we forget this our prayer will be greatly impoverished.

Finally, we have always with us the spirit of rationalism, the spirit that would make all things fully comprehensible in terms of rational propositions, that measures all things by their power of being expressed in formulae devised by the discursive intellect, the spirit that equates function with utility and the mysterious with the nonsensical. The rationalist finds it hard to take seriously the fact that the deeper the level of the human consciousness—and this is particularly true of the experience of God in prayer—the less it is patient of being explained in precise and exact terms. Rationalism, therefore, and especially when allied with an over-emphasis on bustling activity, can be a powerful obstacle to the pursuit of prayer in the deepest sense. The rationalist would insist upon a liturgy in which every word is capable of bearing a precise meaning comprehensible to the most superficial side of human intelligence, upon a ceremonial exclusively directed to what has immediate and practical utility and upon prayer that can be translated completely into terms which have an immediate relevance to the practical problems of everyday life. To the rationalist—as to the activist—silence is a hiatus in living and abstraction the deliberate evisceration of the real from the concrete situation. Nor, indeed, are those who fear the dangers of rationalism aided by the reaction of some of its opponents who, rushing to the opposite extreme, confuse mystification with mystery, unreason with profundity. There is a kind of dreamy romanticism, a refusal to accept the concrete facts of life and living which arouses the justifiable irritation of the rationalist.

We have, then, very briefly and very superficially looked at both the opportunities provided by modern theological and liturgical movements for a deeper and more simple understanding of contemplative prayer and also at some of the obstacles which a too activist or too rationalistic outlook may present. It is, as it has ever been, no easy task to express the great truths handed down from the past in terms of contemporary modes of expression without, on the one hand, being held back by a reactionary spirit which clings to the old merely because it is ancient and tested, and, on the other hand, by throwing away the accumulated insights of the past in the naïve belief that novel methods and new schemes will automatically provide the answer to every human problem. To the unaided human intellect, so prone to err in the one direction or the other, the problem is a grave one and it is just here that, yet again, the necessity for prayer makes itself felt. It is the Holy

Spirit alone who can guide us in this matter, who can teach us to know when the novel outlook and the fresh method are real and valid re-interpretations of old ways, who can give us that obedience to God and his church, the 'reasonable service' of which the liturgy speaks, which submits to the voice of God wherever and whenever heard and yet does not use such a submission as the excuse for a merely human passivity and inertness, a false passivity that can so easily become a substitute for active co-operation with the dynamic force of the will of God. We are at the parting of the ways, and there are movements and stirrings of life in the church to a degree unknown for centuries. That these great awakenings should not degenerate into a pre-occupation with means over ends, into an impoverishment rather than an enrichment, that is, in the last resort, to be decided by souls at prayer. If at the heart of all activity—both as individuals and as members of the church—the soul is learning of God in prayer, then there will ever be present those deeper insights which reflect the true light 'which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world'. 'Upon thy walls, Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; day and night they shall cease not to praise the name of God'; it is the contemplative in his watch-tower upon the walls of Jerusalem, the ramparts of Christ's church, who peers through the darkness without, watching and waiting for the coming of the Son of Man. Around him and about him, as the scripture tells us, 'the stars blaze in their endless eternities'.

Encounter with God in the Old Testament—II

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In a previous article¹ we considered the Old Testament theme of 'pilgrimage, encounter, communion' from its initial instance at Sinai to its later eschatological developments. At the root of this theme lies the idea of the *kabod*, the visible manifestation of Yahweh's holy presence

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