

THE GROUND OF UNION

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



E have seen that all true prayer is in Christ and is in the form of petition or desire, the 'ground of our beseeching' being the Incarnate Word who is *semper interpellans pro nobis*, making unceasing petition on our behalf. In order to recognise the full import of this healing doctrine we must go deeper to discover the

ground of the whole spiritual life, particularly the ground of the full Christian life of union. And when we come to consider this ground we have always to insist on its subjective element. Of course the ground of the Christian life is Christ, of course it is life *per Christum in Trinitate*; and yet it is possible even with this realisation to be carried away into a misty conception of the spiritual life which is really no more than some high poetic, or perhaps neo-platonic, yearning for the One, the super-essential Being in whom we live and move and have our own being. Therefore it is necessary to purify this objective conception of the Christian life of union with the subjective: in other words the ground of all Christian life and all Christian experience and perception is the Faith. Nothing, neither visions nor experiences, neither the gifts nor the heights of prayer, can supersede in this life the faith which alone puts us in direct relationship with the intimate life of the Godhead. It is easy for people to be led on to the practice of a particular form of Christian living through attraction to what is called 'mysticism' or 'contemplation', but it is more difficult to make the complete, and often apparently uninspired, submission of the whole soul which is demanded by living faith. It is the faith which preserves the soul from falling into any esoteric gnostic fancies which are often so enticing.

From the very beginning Mother Julian with all her visions and illuminations keeps the faith before her as the only firm foundation for all that was to follow: 'for in faith, with hope and charity, our life is grounded' (p. 17). The Shewing, she realises in the very first revelation, only confirms or teaches what is already possessed in faith; 'and thus through the Shewing it is not other than of faith, nor less nor more' (ibid.). She tells us that the faith of Holy Church was continually in her sight and that everything she understood from her visions was in some way subject to the faith and one thing with it (p. 21). The desire to penetrate beyond the veils

of belief to some sort of vision of the reality of God is often seen in people who have had a suspicion of what the truths of religion may mean that a strong temptation arises to find some special and extraordinary method of getting to know these wonderful secrets. This is the cause of a great deal of delusion and false mysticism. The faith itself offers the only sure guide to prevent the wayward mind and heart from running after the false gods of illuminism and gnosticism. The faith, according to Mother Julian, brings with it all the infused virtues and plants us securely in God.

For it is naught else but a right understanding, with true belief, and sure trust, of our Being: that we are in God, and God in us, whom we see not (p. 131).

The act of belief is one that places us in the hands of God, bringing us a certainty and security which is to be found in no religious experience. It is the root of infused contemplation which in that state of union, to which such people as Mother Julian attain, constitutes the principal act of their lives. 'The greatest mystics', writes Fr Garrigou-Lagrange, 'such as St John of the Cross, always say that infused contemplation is eminently an act of living faith, and it is easy to see that they are speaking of faith united to the gift of wisdom and to a high degree of this gift. . . . Cajetan, Bañez and many other commentators of St Thomas think that contemplation is an act which proceeds from the gift of wisdom or from that of understanding as from its formal and proximate elective principle, while proceeding at the same time from the infused virtue of faith as from its radical principle.'¹ Faith in these intuitive heights of prayer is always being perfected but never superseded.

We have already seen how at first there seemed to be some conflict between the faith and the 'revelations' granted to Mother Julian. She was worried because the faith taught her that the wicked should be punished in hell for ever and at the same time she understood by the experience of her vision that all things were to be well (cf: in particular c. 32). Faith had been, and in fact remained, for her the foundation of her life. In fact she puts forward a curious suggestion that faith is in some way part of man's very nature:

Our faith cometh of the natural love of our soul, and of the clear light of our reason, and of the steadfast mind which we have from God in our first making. (c. 55, p. 132).

And this idea she repeats several times. It is clear however that she is speaking of the blind, obediential potency of the soul, which it has of its nature, to receive this great gift from God. It means that from the moment when a man comes into being until that

¹ *Perfection Chrétienne et Contemplation*. vol. i. pp. 410-11.

time when he meets God face to face his very existence is intertwined with faith, first the capacity to receive the word of God, then receiving it as the seed which grows into a great tree with its wonderful fruits. Nature from the first is in God, but it needs to be made conscious of this.

The next Good that we receive is our faith in which our profiting beginneth. And it cometh out of the high riches of our nature-substance into our sensual soul, and it is grounded in us through the Nature-Goodness of God, by the working of Mercy and Grace. And thereof come all other goods by which we are led and saved. (c. 57, p. 136-7).

She lists among these goods the Commandments, the Sacraments, the virtues, the gifts, and above all the Incarnation.

The faith, then, is perfected not superseded, and the apparent conflict between what she had previously accepted as God's word and what she saw and heard in her revelations became for Mother Julian an occasion of increase and development of what she had always believed. This increase does not come through mere argument and trying to discover the reason why of mystery which will never deliver up its why or how this side of eternity.

*It was not my meaning to make proof of anything that belongeth to the faith . . . but my meaning was that I might have seen, for learning in all things that belong to my faith: whereby I might live the more to God's worship and to my profit. (c. 33, p. 67).

The acceptance of God's word becomes stronger; it is unshakeable. But the illumination of faith does not make the truth clear but more certain and more unified. The many articles of the Creed, the great variety of apparently conflicting aspects of God's activity in the world, all these things are gradually drawn together in the unity of faith, preparing all the time for the unity of vision which is Beatitude. All is accepted as proceeding from the unique being of God and from the unity of the Truth and the changeless all-powerfulness of the divine will, as we have seen. Consequently the faith rests more and more securely on this foundation. God's design and purpose, his eternal decree, is not comprehended or explained, but it is accepted with complete submission.

This is the great Deed that our Lord shall do, in which Deed he shall save his word and he shall make all well that is not well.

How it shall be done there is no creature beneath Christ that knoweth it, nor shall know it till it is done. (c. 32, p. 67).

The 'deed' or complete work of God according to his eternal decree can be distinguished into the particular deed which he did in the Word incarnate (this is the greatest act he has performed on earth and one 'ordained as well as God might ordain it', p. 49) or the

particular deed in each individual person who notwithstanding his sins is redeemed and brought to heaven ('it shall be worshipful and marvellous and plenteous and God himself shall do it; and this shall be the highest joy that may be, to behold the deed that God himself shall do, and man shall do right nought but sin', p. 74) and into the 'Great Deed' in which the whole work of creation and redemption is completed when God through Christ fulfils all in all.

There is a Deed the which the blessed Trinity shall do in the Last Day . . . and when the Deed shall be and how it shall be done, is unknown of all creatures that are beneath Christ, and shall be till when it is done. (c. 32, p. 65).

Not until the whole decree of God is fulfilled when Christ presents his Bride unspotted to the Father will the full meaning of 'all manner of things shall be well' be made manifest. Until then the soul rests in the faith that that Deed is in process of fulfilment and it sees every aspect of life in this one great act of God's will.

It is clear that the faith which grows up into the infused contemplation of the unitive way is not the mere act of intellectual assent to truths of revelation; it might almost be considered as an act of all three theological virtues concurring in a single 'deed' of the soul. It is certainly trust in the merciful will of God, the theological virtue of hope which is informed by God's will of mercy, and in this sense it is identical with the faith or *fiducia* about which our Lord spoke so much. The virtue of hope, depending as it does on the divine assistance (*divinum auxilium*) rather than on anything man can do of himself, serves to pacify as well as unify faith, making the soul more ready to acknowledge God's deed. Commenting on a phrase in the Gloss, St Thomas says: 'hope is said to be the "gate of faith", i.e. of the thing believed, because through hope one is led on to the sight of what one believes; or it can be understood as "the gate of faith" because by hope a man enters into what is stabilised and perfected by faith.' (II-II, 17, 7 ad 1). Hope rests peacefully on the assurance of eternal happiness, not questioning what it may be, not fussing into the nature of this great Deed which is perfect bliss, but leaning the whole weight of the man's being on the divine purpose of God (cf: II-II, 17, 2). The passive purification of the spirit which leads on to the high state of union perfects a man's faith by means of the pure hope he gains, hoping against hope, resting only on God's help, looking only with assurance to the perfect state of union in heaven which is God's purpose in purifying the soul.

But most of all charity is at work in the purified faith, a charity which has become all the time more passive in its acceptance of God's love. The perfect abandonment inspired by faithful hope is

given a positive content by the faithful love which is the essence of union with God. The faith is the light which supports us in the nights of the senses and of the spirit, but all the time that the purifications continue charity gives increasingly to faith the perfection of co-natural knowledge, the instinctive understanding which comes from love—*affective knowledge*.

Then I saw that our faith is our light in our night: which light is God, 'our endless Day. . . . The light is Charity. . . . Thus Charity keepeth us in Faith and Hope, and Hope leadeth us in Charity. And in the end all shall be Charity. (cc. 83-4, p. 200).

In other words the secure knowledge of faith is perfected and made whole by the gifts of the Holy Spirit who grants this instinctive knowledge of Wisdom, Understanding and Knowledge through the infusion of a high degree of charity. The soul is thus made to judge according to a divine and unified mode what it knows by faith. Infused contemplation is not an activity which a man undertakes as he wishes; it is not as though he can contemplate in this way in the same manner as he can make acts of faith at any moment he chooses. This contemplation is directly in the gift of the Holy Spirit, coming to illuminate the soul by this marvellous awareness of God and his Goodness.

Mother Julian refers in one place to this activity of the Holy Spirit:

But our good Lord the Holy Ghost, which is endless life dwelling in our soul, full seemly keepeth us; and worketh therein a peace and bringeth it to ease by grace, and accordeth it to God and maketh it buxom. (c. 48, p. 100).

Elsewhere she refers to 'softness' in the working of the Holy Spirit, particularly where she shows how Fear and Love are united (c. 74), and although she seldom mentions the Gifts of the Holy Ghost as 'gifts' these words 'soft' and 'buxom' (or pliant) are typical expressions among the English mystical writers of her day for describing the passive promptitude of the soul to the movements of the Spirit which is the characteristic of the gifts. The mind and will are softened by spiritual dew of the infused theological virtues and having been purified by the torments and trials of the nights the soul can be led in a flash to understand truths, held previously by a firm faith, but not tasted, not seen in their context of the living dogma of the Trinity. It is when the soul has progressed sufficiently to rid itself of practically every deliberate sin, however venial, and grown up into a full exercise of the theological virtues that the Holy Spirit can begin to work freely through his gifts. For it is only then that the soul is soft, malleable, pliable enough to be 'prompte mobilis'. The faith without the gifts will be hard and

unresilient — as is often observable when the 'political' or 'rationalistic' Catholic prides himself on having possessed himself of the Truth, despising all his opponents—he will often fail to recognise the faith when it is presented to him in a humble guise and he will be quite impervious to any mystical interpretation of the word of God. But the spiritual man is moved, says St Thomas, not as though principally from his own will, but he is inclined to things by the instinct of the Holy Spirit. (in Rom. 8, 14).

We have to turn to the great *Doctor Mysticus* for the best description of the working of the Holy Ghost in the realms of faith in the highest states of union with God. Never does St John of the Cross suggest that the illumination of the gifts reaches any point of vision as though outside the realms of faith. Yet he shows how perfect the understanding by faith can become when the soul is thus worked upon by the Spirit of Love. 'The understanding . . . is now under the influence and direction of another principle and of a higher illumination of God, and leaving aside the senses it is changed into the divine; because by means of the union it is one with the understanding of God.' And Father Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen commenting on this passage of St John of the Cross says: 'The divinisation of the entire operation of the soul lies in submitting to, and remaining under, the action of the Holy Spirit. Such is the reason why, according to St John's teaching, the spiritual marriage corresponds to the full maturity of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. It is truly a breath of the divine life which passes through the soul, enveloping its own proper life, which is thus absorbed so that the soul does nothing but give its consent (*St John of the Cross, Doctor of Divine Love*, Eng. trans. p. 98), 'This most subtle and delicate knowledge', the Saint says elsewhere, 'penetrates with marvellous sweetness and delight into the substance of the soul, which is the highest of all delights (cf: *op. cit.* p. 101).

In this union and in this infused contemplation, therefore, we find the perfection of our faith, not its destruction. This fact alone places the great saints and holy people like Mother Julian in the same category as ourselves, for all are growing up in faith. It means that those who have enjoyed this wonderful delight of knowledge and understanding do not belong to a little coterie who happened to have discovered some sort of alchemy, some secret formula of knowledge and experience. All true mysticism is born and grows to maturity and perfection in the simple act of faith whereby a man submits himself to the word of God. It eventually becomes passive, of course, and is worked upon by the power of the Holy Ghost but it is not another thing, it is not the entry into another life. No Christian therefore can relegate these great

saints and spiritual writers to some separate establishment where God grants special and out of the ordinary knowledge and graces. All is included in the infused virtue of faith—the living virtue which implies also hope and charity.

For this reason Mother Julian is writing for all of us and not for a clique.

For notwithstanding our simple living and our blindness here, yet endlessly our courteous Lord beholdeth us in this working, rejoicing; and of all things we may please best wisely and truly to believe, and to enjoy with him and in him. . . . And when the Doom is given and we be all brought up above, then shall we clearly see in God the secret things which be now hidden to us. (c. 85, p. 201).



OF THE HOMELESSNESS OF GOD¹

BY

IDA FRIEDERIKE GORRES



THAT we are having to go through during these years, so full of war's unprecedented waste, drives us to seek ever more closely for the meaning of such happenings. However many and varied the answers which are given, one thing stands out clearly, that there is discernible in these events not only a world-wide

call to reflection and repentance but a special message from God. Bearing upon the present, lighting up the past and foreshadowing the future, this message lays bare the causes of what is happening and so points out the way to victory, just as the keen-eyed doctor looks at the symptoms of sickness in order to come upon the cause of the evil and the means of healing at the same time.

It might appear to many, then, as they gaze upon the sufferings and trials of our time, that humanity is actually decomposing from a dread disease which is shaking us in its last, horrid convulsions. They look at the sickness which has seized the whole earth and ask whether these are nothing but the external signs of an evil lodged in the very pith and tissue of human existence. The very pith of this existence lies in relationship with God, for our ties with God are even closer than those of the unborn child with its mother; in him it is that we live and move and have our being; we are created in his image and likeness to sound in unison with him from

¹ A translation of an article which appeared in *Wort und Wahrheit*.