

THE UNION OF GOD WITH THE SOUL OF MAN

BY

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DEAR FRIEND,—Know thou well that the end and the height of perfection lieth in a true union of God with the soul of man in utter love. This end, then, is verily achieved when the powers of the soul are reformed by grace to the dignity and condition of their first state, that is, when the mind is firmly fixed in God and in spiritual things without shifting or wandering away and when the reason is cleared of all worldly and fleshly contemplations or imaginings and of the figures and fantasies of men and is illumined with grace to behold God and spiritual things, and when the will and the affection are purified and cleansed of all fleshly desires, natural and worldly loves, and are inflamed with burning love for the Holy Ghost. But this marvellous union may not be perfectly and continually and wholly reached in this life, by reason of the corruption of the flesh, but only in the joy of heaven. Nevertheless, the nearer that a soul can come to this union in this life, the more perfect that soul is. For the more it is reshaped by grace to the image and likeness of its Creator here in this wise, the more joy and bliss it will have in heaven. Our Lord God is Being, endless without change, almighty without decrease, sovereign wisdom, light, truth without error or darkness, perfect goodness and love and peace and sweetness so that, then, the more a soul is united, fastened, conformed and joined to our Lord God, the firmer and stronger it is and the more wise and bright and good and peaceable and loving and the more virtuous. Thus it is the more perfect. For a soul that hath, by the grace of Jesu and by dint of long and bodily travail and spiritual exertion, overcome and destroyed concupiscent passions and irrational motions within itself and without in the senses, and hath clothed itself in virtues—as in meekness and gentleness and righteousness, in continence, in wisdom, in truth and hope and charity—is as perfect as it can be in this life. It receiveth much comfort from our Lord, not only in the inward man, by virtue of the union with our Lord that is apparent in the knowing and loving of God, in the light of spiritual burning for him and in the transforming of the soul in the Godhead, but also, after our Lord hath vouchsafed to visit his creatures here on earth and after the soul hath profited thereby and grown in charity, in many other comforts and delights—sweetness and wonderful feelings in divers ways. That same soul, by virtue of the love that God giveth to it, is so cleansed that all

created objects, all that it heareth or seeth or feeleth by means of any of the senses, turn to comfort and gladness for it, and the senses receive a new relish and sweetness from all creation. And just as previously the desires of the senses were fleshly, vain and sinful, because of the pain of original sin, so right now are they made spiritual and pure, without bitterness and gnawing of conscience. And this is the goodness of our Lord—that since the soul is punished in the senses and the flesh is partner to that sorrow, afterwards the soul is comforted by means of the senses and the flesh is fellow with the soul to that joy and comfort, as it was to the tribulation and suffering, but now spiritually, not carnally. This is the freedom and the sovereignty and the dignity and the honour that a man's soul hath over all other creatures. The which dignity he may receive by grace in this world so that every created object delights him because of its essential being, namely when by grace he seeth or heareth or feeleth God alone in all creation. In this way a soul is made spiritual in the senses by an abundance of love in its inmost being.

Also, our Lord comforteth a soul by the song of angels. But the nature of this song cannot be explained by likening it to anything in this world, for it is spiritual and above all manner of imagining or human reasoning. It can be perceived and felt in a soul but it cannot be described. Nevertheless, I will speak of it as it seemeth to me. When a soul is cleansed by the love of God, illumined by wisdom, made firm in the power of God, then is the eye of that soul opened to behold spiritual objects, such as virtues, angels, the souls of the saints and heavenly things. Then, because of its purity, the soul is able to feel the touching and the speaking of the good angels. This touching and speaking is ghostly, not fleshly, for when the soul is lifted and raised out of the senses and out of the contemplation of earthly things it may hear and perceive the heavenly music made by the angels in praise of God, if our Lord so granteth it. Not that this song is the sovereign joy of a soul but, because of the difference that there be betwixt a man's soul in his body and an angel by reason of impurity, a human soul can only hear it by an excess of love and needeth to be thoroughly cleansed and exceedingly filled with great love before it is able to hear heavenly music. For the primary and essential joy lieth in the love of God alone and for his own sake and the secondary lieth in the communion with and the beholding of angels and spiritual beings. For just as a soul, in the understanding of ghostly things, is oftentimes touched and instructed by the human power of the imagination or by the workings of the angels (as the prophet Ezekiel saw the truth of God's secret parts in his own

imagination) even so, in the love of God a soul is ravished out of the contemplation of earthly and fleshly things into heavenly joy by the presence of angels and, according as its love is more or less, to the hearing of angels' song and heavenly music. Now, then, it seemeth to me that there can be no soul who truly perceiveth the angels' song or the music of heaven unless it be possessed of perfect love. And therefore not all that are in perfect love have perceived it but only the soul that is purged in the fire of the love of God so that all earthly delight is burnt out of it and all the things that stand betwixt the soul and the purity of the angels are broken down and put away from it. Then truly may it sing a new song and truly may it hear the joyful music of heaven and of the angels, without deceit or pretence. Our Lord knoweth where is that soul who, because of an abundance of burning love, is worthy to hear the angels' song. Whosoever, then, wilt hear the song of angels and not be deluded by any feigning or by his imagination or by the illusion of the Enemy must have perfect love, and that is when all vain love and fear and joy and sorrow are cast out of the heart so that he loveth nothing but God, feareth nothing but God and neither joyeth nor sorroweth in anything but in God, or in anything except that which cometh from God. Whosoever can go this way by the grace of God shalt not err.

Nevertheless, some men are deceived in this matter by their own imagination or by the illusion of the Enemy. When a man hath travailed long in body and in spirit in the destroying of his sins and in the acquiring of virtues and hath perhaps gotten by grace a little rest and peace of conscience he at once abandoneth prayer and the reading of Scripture and meditating on the passion of Christ and the thought of his own wretchedness and, before he is called by God, he assembleth his powers to seek and behold heavenly things by violence and, before his eyes are made spiritual by grace, he overworketh his wits by imagining things. By such indiscreet effort he upsetteth his brain and ruineth the powers and senses of soul and body. Then, for very feebleness of mind, it seemeth to him that he heareth wonderful sounds and songs and it is truly nothing but fantasy caused by the disturbance of the brain, just as a man in a frenzy seemeth to hear or see what nobody else doth, and all is but vanity and a fancy of the mind or else induced by the working of the Enemy who maketh such a sound in his hearing. For if a man presumeth in his fantasies and in his exertions and thereby falleth into foolish imagining, into a delirium as it were, and is not taught or ruled by grace or comforted by spiritual strength, then the Devil entereth in by false illuminations and false sounds and sweetness and deceiveth a man's soul. And from this false ground springeth

errors and heresies, false prophecies, presumptions and false boastings, blasphemies and scandals and many other mischiefs. And therefore, if thou seest any other man who is spiritually occupied fall into any of these sins and these delusions or into frenzies, know well that he hath never heard nor perceived the songs of angels or heavenly music. For verily he that truly heareth the song of angels is made so wise that he will never err by fantasy or by folly or by the cunning of the Devil.

Also, some men feel in their hearts a spiritual sound, as it were, and sweet songs of divers kinds and this is generally good, but it may sometimes turn to deceit. This sound is known in this way. A man setteth the thoughts of his heart only in the name of Jesu and steadfastly keepeth it thereto and in a short while it seemeth to him that that Name becometh a great comfort and sweetness to him and it appeareth to him that the Holy Name soundeth in his heart deliciously, as though it were a song, and the strength of this delight is so great that it draweth all the powers of the soul to it. Whosoever may experience this sound and this sweetness truly in his heart, let him know well that it is from God and as long as he is humble he shall not be deceived. But this is not the song of angels but it is a song of the soul, by virtue of the Holy Name or the inspiration of the good angels. For when a soul truly and humbly offereth itself to God, putting all its desires and trust in him and busily keepeth him in mind our Lord Jesu, when he wilt, purifieth the love of that soul and filleth it and feedeth it with the love of himself and maketh his Name to be as honey and song and anything that is delectable in the feeling of that soul. So that it pleaseth the soul evermore to cry 'Jesu, Jesu' and it hath comfort not only in this but also in psalms and hymns and the anthems of the Holy Church, so that the heart singeth them sweetly, devoutly and freely, without any exertion or bitterness of soul, to the time and tune used by Holy Church. This lieth in the love of Jesu, by which it is fed and enlightened by such manner of song. Nevertheless, in this way of feeling a soul may be deceived by vainglory, not at the time when the affection singeth to Jesu and loveth Jesu in his sweetness but afterwards, when the experience ceaseth and the heart cooleth in its love of Jesu. Then doth it enter into vainglory.

Also a man is deceived in this wise. He heareth it well said that it is good to meditate on the name of Jesu or on any other holy word of God and then he straineth his heart mightily to that Name, and by habit he getteth it always near to his thoughts. Nor doth he therefore feel sweetness in his affection or the light of knowledge in his mind by so doing but only a naked thought of God or of Jesu or of Mary or of any other holy word. Here can be a deception; not

because it is bad to name Jesu in mind, but if he thinketh of something and holdeth this meditation, which is only his own habitual exercise, as a special visitation of our Lord and thinketh it more than it is. For know well that a naked thought or a naked imagining of Jesu or of any ghostly thing, without sweetness of love in the affection or without light of knowledge in the reason is but a blindness and a way to deception if a man holdeth it to be more in his own sight than it really is. Therefore I consider it safer that he be humble in his own feeling and keep this thought in no esteem until he can, by the habitual use of this thought, feel the fire of love in his affection and the light of understanding in his reason. Lo! I have told thee a little of this matter as it seemeth to me, not affirming dogmatically that this is sufficient and that it is the truth, for if thou thinkest it to be otherwise or if any other person enjoyeth by grace the contrary to what I have written here, I will stop speaking and give place to him. So long as I have truth to live with it is enough for me: I need not feelings.

*Translated from the Thornton Manuscript
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ALPHA AND OMEGA

BY

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ALPHA AND OMEGA—these, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, are used to signify that Christ included within himself all. He is the beginning and the end, the sum total of all things, from which all creatures derive, to whom they all tend. This title is true of Christ because he is God from whom all creatures derive and towards whom they all tend. God is the sum total, the beginning and the end. But he is not the sum total or the beginning and the end in the Eastern sense that creatures are an emanation from God, that history is the slow return into God of all that came out.

We all derive from God as things made from nothing by the act of his power, we tend towards him as creatures who behave as he designed us to behave, and as godlike men with grace who will see God as he is in himself.

There is, however, a heresy rampant, derived from false ideas of the beginning and end of man. It takes the form of a false mysticism identifying us with God; it would also eliminate all use of the senses in its approach to God, eliminate even the incarnation. It is an attractive theory, firstly because it flatters us, and secondly because it seems to be the sublimest culmination of existence. What