

VISIONS AND SHEWINGS

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



QUITE normal people sometimes experience strange communications from a realm beyond their ordinary comprehension. Perhaps once or twice in their lives they will have a very vivid dream or a waking vision in which they see Christ himself, or angels or saints. These experiences are often inexplicable at the time, but they bring with them a certain assurance of having a real meaning, particularly when they are so unusual and unexpected. Such would seem to have been the experience of Mother Julian in her Revelations. But it is always necessary to examine such experiences critically and no one should readily accept them as of heavenly origin without a diligent testing of their nature and origin. St John of the Cross's writings make all this quite clear.

Let us now scrutinise more closely the happenings on that celebrated eighth of May. Were these shewings historical facts of divine origin or merely the dreams of a sick woman? This raises the question of the natural basis of mystical experience. In the heights of the spiritual life, as at every other level, natural temperament and physical predispositions play an important, if material, part. Extraordinary graces do not descend on souls like some ready-made thunderbolt. Grace is received and modified according to the nature of the recipient. A child receives the same faith as an adult at baptism but in a different way according to his natural capacities. The literal-minded man of rosary beads and charitable institutions will receive the same graces but in a different mould from the natural mystic who will himself easily be moved by divine locutions and other manifestations.

Mother Julian must have had natural dispositions to mystical experiences. But she was evidently unaccustomed to them. This was probably her first experience. For she is not credulous and does not accept them without question. She goes so far as to say she had been merely dreaming or 'seeing things' under the influence of a neurotic illness. 'Then came a Religious person to me and asked me how I fared. I said I had raved today. And he laughed loud and heartily' (c. 66). She quickly repented of this infidelity; but there is no doubt that her illness had played some part in the experience. She had been ailing for about a week; her kinsfolk thought she was on the threshold of death, and arranged for her to receive the Last Sacraments. Some sort of paralysis then attacks her; her body

is 'dead from the middle downwards'. She is propped up in bed and by the time the curate arrives is speechless and finds it difficult to raise her eyes. Everything then goes dark; all she can see is the Crucifix held before her. There is a sense of great evil, as of 'fiends', in the darkness about her; and then the paralysis begins to creep upwards, leaving her almost breathless and insensible. It is in the sudden, apparently miraculous, release from this extreme pathological state that the visions begin, woven round that crucifix and continuing for five hours while she is without sensation of pain. Five of the Shewings were directly concerned with what she had before her eyes, the others were derived from that—as when our Lord on the Cross leads her to look into the wound in his side and see the delectable place and the heart cloven in twain (c. 24). And after they have ceased the pain returns, though she is in fact cured of the paralysis, and very painful feeling returns to her body. She sleeps a bit, and in the evening suffers from violent dreams of the arch-fiend throttling her, his red, lean face, freckled with black spots, pressed close to her own (c. 66). This, as she declares, was the only vision that came in a dream.

All this suggests an acute neurosis, induced perhaps by an over-enthusiastic life of penance and solitude. But she appears to have retained consciousness throughout, except in the final dream. She is aware of those around her during the visions. It must, however, be admitted that extreme forms of physical weakness induced either by long illness or exceptional penances, fasting and bodily sufferings, are often the occasion of, and the physical predisposition for the extraordinary forms of religious experience. That is why the Church demands great care in ascertaining the genuineness of such revelations. St Thomas points out that imaginary apparitions may be induced by animal spirits and moods (I.111.3). But in the end hysterical neurosis can be detected by the unbalanced state of the subject. St Teresa, who has been accused of hysteria, could distinguish between the unbalanced hysterical state and the states of ecstasy and true 'shewings'. The body is often a more fitting instrument for the increased perceptivity of the sanctified soul when it has been thoroughly subjected by austerities and sickness. The true balance may in fact only be achieved in such physical weakness. This may be confirmed by the lives of almost all the Christian visionaries. There is a final test in the nature and message of the visions: for many of them are their own justification. No one thought that Mother Julian had raved, and the religious person who laughed when she told him that, became serious and impressed the instant she told him the content of her 'raving'.

It remains now to consider the exact nature of these revelations. Granting that they are not purely neurotic ravings, were they objective manifestations, or purely in the imagination of this sickly Norwich nun? From St Augustine to St Teresa, mystical writers have drawn clear distinctions among the various types of visionary phenomena. There have been lights and voices such as struck St Paul to earth on his way to Damascus. There have been secret and inexpressible touchings of the soul by God, as experienced by St John of the Cross, and there are many types between. St Thomas has drawn up a handy and rational scheme into which to fit them all. Beginning with the most objective, there is the external, corporeal apparition—*mediante sensu exterius . . . formae sensibiles*—impressing themselves on the external senses. (Apparitions that affect surrounding material things, leaving footprints or bending bushes, may be judged as external.) Then there are the visions which are subjective, residing within the imagination of the visionary. These may occur in sleep or while awake, and may be new forms, not experienced before and impressed by a divine agency, as perhaps the apparition to Bernadette at Lourdes, or forms already seen in real life and used by God to instruct the soul, as the appearance of St Scholastica to her brother St Benedict at the moment of her death. St Thomas remarks here that words are more perfect than images for they are more spiritual and not so bound up with sense. So that the final and most perfect vision is the intellectual one, independent of the senses, either external or internal, and impressed directly on the human mind by God; and this either by a special light on a truth already known in a larger way, or by a new species (*species impressa*). Such an intellectual vision is evidently possible only in the advanced stages of the spiritual life when the gifts of the Holy Spirit are free to influence the soul.¹

Mother Julian's revelations are not restricted to any one of these types; she seems to have experienced them all during the course of these sixteen shewings. She is not unaware of the distinction; and this is one of the many indications of her thorough grounding in theology.

All this was shewed by three ways: that is to say, by bodily sight, and by word formed in my understanding, and by spiritual sight (c. 9. cp. c. 73).

In so far as the shewings begin in the figure of the crucifix held before her, she considers them to be 'bodily' and external. What

¹ Cf. II-II, 173. 2; 174. 3. St Thomas discusses a little later (177. 1 & 2) the nature of the '*Gratia Sermonis*', and asks particularly whether womenfolk are capable of receiving it!

she sees is very vivid and very material.

I saw the bodily sight lasting of the plenteous bleeding of the Head. The great drops of blood fell down from under the Garland like pellets, seeming as it had come out of the veins; and in the coming out they were brown-red, for the blood was full thick; and in the spreading-abroad they were bright-red; and when they came to the brows, then they vanished (c. 7).

The vision was, as she says, 'quick and life-like, and horrifying and dreadful, sweet and lovely' (id.); and its realism would almost incline us to believe it was in fact external. But at other times the Shewing was not so clear, it was 'so low and so little' (c. 10); so that we may conclude that they were all, however vivid and clearly defined, subjective images, conjured up by some means, natural or supernatural, in her 'mind's eye'.

In the imaginative visions St Thomas says that the forms may be naturally induced, accepted from what one has experienced in one's natural life. And these are disposed by God for his own purpose, to convey his own meaning. Or they may be divinely induced, coming directly from his agency. In this way the natural predispositions may play a considerable part. It would be no argument to deny the significance of a man's dreams merely because he had caviare for dinner and was naturally dyspeptic. The important fact was not that there were dreams, but what the dreams meant. God uses natural secondary causes universally; he dispenses with them only by way of exception. He can dispose the material of dreams or imaginings to bring about his own designs; and is more likely to do that than to insert entirely new images from without. Mother Julian's bodily shewings, therefore, may be derived partly from her psychological state; partly from what she had read or imagined about the Passion; and partly from her intense desire to know more of the Passion and to suffer more with our Lord, which was the occasion of the whole affair (c. 2). It matters little where these images come from; God at least ordered and disposed them for his own divine purposes.

Some literal-minded people have asked whether her visions were true to fact, whether they represented what actually happened on the Cross. They have been impressed by the apparent accuracy of such revelations as those of Catherine Emmerich who saw all the details of the Holy Land though she had never been there. They then turn to the very literal description of our Lord's dying body in the Eighth Shewing (cc. 16 & 17), and wonder whether these also represent the truth of fact. Some are inclined to deny their historicity. Such discussions are more futile than any hair-splitting of decadent scholasticism. Even had these visions been

thoroughly external, taking place objectively on the Crucifix before Mother Julian, it was and is quite irrelevant whether they show what happened on Calvary or not. The meaning of these Shewings, as of any genuine revelation in dreams, imaginations or ghostly forms, is not literal in a material sense but spiritual. The Mexican of Guadalupe does not ask: Does this figure before me show our Lady as she really was at Bethlehem or Nazareth? As though a photographer ought to have been introduced to let us know the exact truth. Our Lady appears as a Mexican lass to tell him truths about herself and her Son—the spiritual meaning. Mother Julian understands this quite clearly.

The bodily sights are not given to teach a literal historic truth that may be found with as much clarity as necessary in the gospels themselves. The 'spiritual sight' to which the bodily sight leads her is the important feature. The question always uppermost in her mind is not: What do I see? But: What does it mean? The external things of religion in all its aspects are always signs of internal grace, be they scriptures, sacraments, miracles or private revelations. The clearest example of the relationship of these two 'senses' of her visions is in the celebrated shewing of the Lord and the Servant.

Which sight was shewed doubly in the Lord and doubly in the Servant: the one part was shewed spiritually in bodily likeness, and the other part was shewed more spiritually without bodily likeness. For the first sight, thus, I saw two persons in bodily likeness . . . and therewith God gave me spiritual understanding (c. 51).

The Lord takes her into the inner sense of what she sees, not leaving her simply to stand and marvel at it as a fact without significance. The spiritual meaning of what she sees in our Lady comes out very clearly too.

In this Shewing He brought our blessed Lady to my understanding. I saw her ghostly, in bodily likeness; a simple maid and a meek, young of age and little waxen above a child, in the stature that she was when she conceived. Also God shewed in part the wisdom and the truth of her soul. . . . (c. 4).

The purely physical sight of the crucifix and the passion, or of our Lady, is never left to stand on its own; it always stands for something deeply hidden. For visions are symbols.

Many of these Shewings do not come from imaginative pictures at all, but have the more perfect form of words spoken. Here in fact it may be we pass over from the imaginative locution to the intellectual vision which is impressed directly on the mind itself, or which comes in the form of a new light in which the mind sees

what has been presented. For Mother Julian tells us that the words often were formed in her understanding without any humanly-formed locution, exterior or interior:

And after this, ere God shewed any words, He suffered me for a convenient time to give heed unto Him and all that I had seen, and all intellect that was therein, as the simplicity of the soul might take it. Then He, without voice and opening of lips, formed in my soul these words: *Herewith is the fiend overcome* (c. 13 cf. c. 68).

When she is anxious for a clearer bodily sight of what was before her, she is answered in her reason: 'If God will shew thee more, He shall be thy light: thou needeth none but Him' (c. 10). Although she still uses the terminology of words, she is very emphatic that the shewing comes rather by impression on the soul itself which is led to understand. There are occasions when she understands in this way properties of God and virtues of our Lady's soul. 'Christ sheweth me His Father; in no bodily likeness, but in His property and in His working. That is to say, I saw in Christ that the Father is.' (c. 22 cf. c. 25). She calls this often 'ghostly sight', and she speaks of the Lord opening her spiritual eye. All this would suggest some direct intuition of truth resulting from infused contemplation. Père Garrigou-Lagrange writes of the extraordinary graces which sometimes accompany this infused contemplation, and among these graces stands out the *simplex intuitus veritatis*, the divine touch on the very substance of the soul. We learn of this most strikingly from St John of the Cross who also uses the terminology of words—substantial words impressed substantially on the soul.² Mother Julian's language is closely allied with that of the mystic doctor: 'All this was shewed in a touch' (c. 27); 'I had in partie touching and it is grounded in kynd: that is to sey, our reson is groundid in God, which is substantial kyndhede'—which Warrack edits as 'I had, in part, experience of the Touching of God in the soul, and it is grounded in Nature' (c. 56). However we may explain some of these individual experiences, there can be little doubt that several of these visions were of that extraordinary type of substantial touch which reveals the Gift of Wisdom and Understanding operating in a very special manner.

The difficulty in analysing the nature of these shewings lies, not in her own description, which is unwontedly explicit, but in the transition of years between the first visions and her final understanding of them. Much of what she saw was at first quite beyond her, they passed her wit and all her understanding and all her

² Cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Perfection Chrétienne* II 559; St John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* II 31; *Living Flame* st. 1 vl. 2. st. II v. 4.

powers (c. 26). There were obstacles in the way of her visions, either by sins or by an untoward anxiety over their meaning. Reason is a good faculty and she never despises it; but reason can be impatient of the truths which are beyond its reach, and can fuss in an arrogant manner, thinking to analyse all truth. 'The more we busy us to know His secret counsels in this or any other thing, the farther shall we be from the knowing thereof' (c. 33). The blindness and ignorance that prevent our knowing the hidden things of God (c. 34) will often arise from this busy-ness of reason, when we should be aligning ourselves to divine truth by love and submission. The whole style of the revelations, however, suggests that the mysteries were presented precisely as mysteries that the soul might always be seeking more understanding, or, becoming more passive, might be open to further manifestation. Often the Lord leads forth her understanding to greater perception, but still 'every Shewing is full of secret things left hid' (c. 51 near the beginning). They make the letters of an alphabet, which, when put together in different ways, can teach all manner of truth (id. & c. 80). So with the advance in holiness, and the purification of her sins, Mother Julian learns to see more and more in what was revealed to her. Quite clearly the Holy Ghost is at work, leading her forth into the understanding proper to the Unitive Way.

Her progress is in fact quite marked in what she tells us of her experiences. She had set out on the quest of the contemplative life, which she describes in terms of 'the creatures that have given them to serve our Lord with inward beholding of His blessed Goodness' (c. 76). Like many beginners who are too idealistic and are impatient to be at the End before they have taken the means thereto, she was anxious to die to escape the world and to find her Lover. The world is full of woe, heaven is bliss, so why wait here: 'This made me to mourn and eagerly to long' (c. 64). She was evidently overflowing with holy desires, but they needed to be purified. And the beginning of that final purification came with her sickness and her Shewings.

Some people may be inclined to think that visions and the like are evidences of sanctity. They recognise that so often these heavenly manifestations have been granted to those afterwards raised to the altars of the Church, such as St Catherine or St Bernadette. But though there is a close connection between the holiness of the subject and the divine revelations, not infrequently it marks the beginning of real progress, as with St Bernadette who could lay no claim to sanctity when our Lady appeared to her. Mother Julian is humbly conscious of this: 'Because of the Shewing

I am not good but if I love God the better . . . for I am certain that there be many that never had Shewing nor sight but of the common teaching of Holy Church, that love God better than I.' (c. 9.) At the very end she seems to be conscious that what had been begun by heavenly visitation was still incomplete. 'This book is begun by God's gift and His grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight' (c. 86). She is conscious of her shortcomings, and in particular is she constantly sorrowing over her infidelity when, for a brief moment, she spurned these revelations, saying she had raved. But our Lord seems not to have upbraided her for her doubts, but later comforts her and assures her that the Shewings were of God. At another time she seems to have regretted having asked for the grace to suffer with Christ (c. 17). But these are brief infidelities, due more to the first movement of nature than to any deliberate choice, and it must be admitted that the evidence of the book suggests she had already reached a fairly high state of perfection when that eighth day of May dawned in 1373. The intellectual visions and understandings of what she had seen could only come to one already experiencing infused contemplation. And we have her witness that the Lord never really left her, in spite of her infidelity.

In all this blessed Shewing our good Lord gave understanding that the Sight should pass: which blessed Shewing the Faith keepeth, with His own good will and His grace. For He left me with neither sign nor token whereby I might know it, but He left me with His own blessed word in true understanding. So the holy maid grounded in faith, learnt to grow always more responsive to the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, growing into the Life of Union.



ON THE EXCELLENCE OF THE SOUL

BY

BOSSUET¹

MAN'S soul is so wonderfully elevated above the condition of the body that it might be said to approximate more closely to the God who made it than to the body to which it is attached, and it is true that in the soul, alone of all created things, can be traced certain traits and lineaments of God's perfections. It is spiritual like God, and like God it is incorruptible and everlasting. It is free, it is able to foresee and provide, it has

¹ From '*Doctrine Spirituelle*'.