

# Life of the Spirit

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FOR FIFTY YEARS

BY

THE EDITOR



FIFTY years ago, as September was giving place to October, Sister Thérèse Martin, a Carmelite of Lisieux, gave up her soul to God. Only twenty-seven years later she was raised to the altars of the Church as Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus. The speed with which she was canonized was indicative of some special mission given to her by God in the work of salvation of souls, a mission which has been increasingly revealed in this last half-century. For by God's grace this saint has carried out a great apostolate and has raised innumerable Catholics up to a level of true prayer and holiness.

In this latter work of a guide to the interior life she has been almost unique. Many modern saints have been pointed out to us by the process of canonization for our veneration and inspiration; but for the most part they represent a practical and active form of spiritual life, concerned mainly with the poor, the sick, the uneducated. It is clear that the present age is not an age of what we might call 'mystical saints'. And this is understandable because with the advent of man-centred humanism a concentration on the mystical elements of religion can easily side-track the soul into a natural mysticism which may be identified with poetic inspiration with a noble and religious motif. This is evident in the type of mysticism which flourishes today outside the Church. God seems therefore to have insisted on the holiness of men such as the Curé d'Ars and Father Damien the Leper, and women of the calibre of Mother Duchesne, rather than upon any modern Saint Catherine or St John of the Cross.

But the one outstanding exception, as powerful in her example and influence as a host of contemplative saints, is this Saint of Lisieux who died only fifty years ago. It is true that she is reputedly not a mystical saint in the commonly accepted sense of the term. But it is precisely in this that she has such a great advantage in the modern world. We must agree that she lacks some element which is to be found in the medieval and Spanish mystics. Elsewhere in

this issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT it is shown that St Teresa of Lisieux was a true disciple of St John of the Cross and it will be found on close analysis that she lacks nothing of the elevated spirituality of those earlier saints. Her life of heroic virtue is just as much a life of the union of love and is built up on infused contemplation just as firmly as the best of them. Her childlike simplicity had the fulness of the graces and gifts as its source. With the gifts of fortitude in her sufferings were joined the gifts of wisdom and understanding in the appreciation of that suffering, so that peace and joy were her characteristics as they are of every true contemplative growing in those gifts. We can say quite certainly that all the supernatural ingredients of the mystic were hers and in such a marked degree that she has been able to pass them on to the simple who follow today in the footsteps of her Spouse. The last paragraph of her *Autobiography* reveals that such was her great desire—'To make known the secrets of thy love'.

But she is not claimed as a mystic in the more general sense of the term partly because she received no peculiar supernatural favours such as ecstasy, visions, prophecy, stigmata. This, however, is not of much consequence from the point of view of true mysticism which does not itself *consist* in the extraordinary. On this subject Père Petitot has written:

Divine Providence willed to show us, by an illustrious example, that charity is a gift far higher than all visions, ecstasies, prophecies or miracles, and that at the bottom it constitutes all sanctity.<sup>1</sup> But there is a further reason why she differs from the Spanish mystics of her own Order and their like: they had a natural faculty—we may call it poetic vision—upon which these other supernatural graces grew. The mystic in the full sense of the word as applied to John of the Cross implies not only these high supernatural graces from infused contemplation to transforming union, which are in the normal way of sanctity, but also a certain natural awareness of the synthesis of Being, which is to be found in great philosophers like Socrates and great poets like Dante. The poetic vision is analogical to the vision of the Christian contemplative, and the two can co-exist in the same person to make the full mystic. St Catherine and St Teresa of Avila had this poetic gift wedded to all their supernatural gifts.

Now it seems that this natural gift was not part of St Teresa of Lisieux's temperament. She wrote verse but she was not the poet that St John of the Cross was. She had not the philosophico-poetic appreciation of the Unity or Supra-Unity of Being in God which can be seen in the Pseudo-Denis, Eckkhart or the author of the *Cloud of*

<sup>1</sup> *St Teresa of Lisieux*. By Henry Petitot, O.P., p. 113.

*Unknowning.* The natural genius, if he is given the special graces of contemplation, will after some struggle use his natural gifts to express his supernatural experiences, and indeed, since the supernatural works in and through the natural and is to that extent modified by it, his own experiences will differ from those of the unpoetic saint.

Now Thérèse brought a good, stolid French nature to the font of grace. She had a strong will of her own with a touch of the peasant's stubbornness upon which God worked to make a powerful instrument of love. She was endowed with a delicate sensitiveness which later helped to detect the movements of the Spirit though at first it hindered her detachment. Might it not even be added that the fundamentally sound 'sentimentality' of a pious Catholic French family became a further instrument of grace, especially in the souls she was sent to help, the millions brought up in industrialised Europe where poetry has so largely been replaced by sentiment?

However this may be, the humanistic cult of natural mysticism which is the inevitable consequence of the rejection of true religion in favour of the religion of mankind, cannot use the saint of Lisieux as it uses the mystical saints and writers of a previous era to preach indifferentism and the cult of the True, the Good and the Beautiful in human terms. . . . For one thing, she insists on the Catholic Church in a way that has produced many converts and has put her out of favour with the neo-mystics. She is disliked by those outside the Church who admire the poetry of John of the Cross and the Cloud, who seek a way in these writings which is not the way of Christ. St Teresa of Avila obviously appeals as 'the Eagle', but in 'the Dove' there is 'something infuriating about the imagery and phraseology we encounter as nauseating as a surfeit of marsh-mallows'.<sup>2</sup> That is the effect of the writing of the Little Flower of Jesus upon the modern poet, and we may be grateful to Providence that it is so. It is only by giving us the purity of the spirit without the added glory of the full human psyche—the poet—that the highest spiritual teaching can reach so many who would be barred by the now unfamiliar poetic-symbolism of earlier writers.

We may conclude then that St Teresa of Lisieux is not a mystic in the sense of one who experienced extraordinary favours, nor is she a mystic in the natural order of the poetic genius; and by both these limitations her influence on the 20th-century world is far more extensive. So that when we add that she was a mystic in the realisation of the highest effects of grace which is sanctity with its accompanying gifts of contemplation and union, we can begin to understand the importance of her work in these last fifty years.

<sup>2</sup> *The Eagle and the Dove.* By V. Sackville-West, p. 146.

'Love attracts love, and mine as it darts towards thee would fain fill to the brim the abyss that draws it; but alas my love is not even a drop in that ocean. To love thee as thou lovest me, I must borrow thy own love—thus only can my desire be satisfied. O my Jesus, it seems to me that thou couldst not have overwhelmed a soul with more love than thou hast poured out on mine, and that is why I dare ask of thee to love those thou hast given me, even as thou lovest me'. (*Autobiography*, c. 12.)

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## A DISCIPLE OF ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

BY

ROSALIND MURRAY



HERE can be few saints more unlike at first sight than St Teresa of the Child Jesus and St John of the Cross. Their personalities, their 'ways' of perfection, their appeal, are outwardly at the poles of recognised Christian spirituality. And this first impression seems confirmed by a glance at their respective cults, the extreme difference of their 'clientèle'. How few, how very few, of the real devotees of either saint extend at all the same devotion to the other!

Yet both were contemplatives, both Carmelites and, more than that, the teaching of St John of the Cross was formative in a special degree, explicitly, in the spiritual life of the 'little' St Teresa.<sup>1</sup>

'Ah que de lumière n'ai-je pas puisées dans les œuvres de St Jean de la Croix'.  
she herself writes; and again:

'A l'âge de dix-sept à dix-huit ans je n'avais pas d'autre nourriture'. Nor was it, as the last sentence might suggest, a passing phase; throughout her life, right up to the last weeks, we find passages from his writings interspersed constantly with the recurring passages from the Scriptures in her writings and her 'sayings':

'Il est le saint d'amour', she used to say; and it is the 'Doctor of Divine Love' rather than of the 'Dark Night' and 'Mount Carmel' that she venerates most explicitly; but the entire doctrine is included, under deceptively different imagery, in her 'little way'.

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<sup>1</sup> The influence of St John in St Teresa is often obscured by the external dissimilarity, but Père Philipon, O.P. draws full attention to it: 'On peut dire qu'après l'Evangile aucun maître n'eut sur l'âme et la doctrine de St Thérèse une influence égal à St Jean de la Croix'. (*St Thérèse de Lisieux*, p. 31.)