

ABBOT CHAPMAN'S THEORY OF CONTEMPLATION

THE theory of contemplative prayer put forward in Abbot Chapman's Letters was examined in the June, 1935, issue of BLACKFRIARS, but since then certain passages in the letters themselves have been the subject of controversy. The question of the soundness of a widely read book of spiritual instruction is obviously an important one, and it merits some further consideration. One learned writer has recently suggested that, since we have nothing but incidental phrases by which to judge the Abbot's correctness in stating the problem of contemplation, it is unnecessary to assume that he intended to express general principles in the passages that have caused misgivings. This view does not accord with the fact that one of the published letters, dated as early as 6th April, 1913,¹ explains fully the theory of mysticism which the Abbot had worked out for himself. The same theory appears in his article on Catholic Mysticism in the *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, published in 1917, and it is further elaborated and defended in the *Downside Review* article of 1928, which is reprinted as an appendix to the Letters. This theory, then, and its practical implications must claim attention.

The Church has had no occasion to make a solemn judgment on the nature of contemplative prayer, but two pronouncements of her ordinary magisterium require careful consideration by anyone who would study the subject. The first is the Encyclical Letter *Divinum illud* of Pope Leo XIII (9th May, 1897), a document that was clearly inspired by, and well sums up, St. Thomas's general teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, as indeed the teaching of St. Thomas sums up and explains the Catholic tradition, scriptural, patristic and liturgical. The Holy Father wrote:

Among these gifts (of the Holy Ghost) are those secret warnings and invitations, which from time to time are excited in our minds and hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Without these

¹ *Letters*, p. 249.

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there is no beginning of a good life, no progress, no arriving at eternal salvation. . . . More than this, the just man, that is to say he who lives the life of divine grace, and acts by the fitting virtues as by means of faculties, has need of those seven *gifts* which are properly attributed to the Holy Ghost. By means of them the soul is furnished and strengthened so as to obey more easily and promptly His voice and impulse. Wherefore these gifts are of such efficacy that they lead the just man to the highest degree of sanctity; and of such excellence that they continue to exist even in heaven, though in a more perfect way.

St. Thomas teaches that these quite special helps which the Christian receives from the Holy Spirit are above and beyond the divine assistance, or actual grace, required for any exercise of supernatural virtue; if they are necessary even for salvation, it follows that they are much more necessary if a soul is to reach a high degree of sanctity, and it is by them that St. Thomas explains contemplative prayer. The seven Gifts are supernatural habits which impart docility to the intellect and will, making them respond promptly to these movements and inspirations. Mystical contemplation is an intellectual act (of the mystic himself) resulting from the illuminating movement of the Holy Spirit to which especially the Gift of Wisdom has made the mind docile and receptive—such an act as would in the natural order correspond to an act of wisdom strictly so called. Further, since the theological virtue of Faith is the foundation of our supernatural knowledge, and Faith is inspired by Charity, the act produced under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is essentially an act of the virtue of Faith inspired by Charity.

This doctrine of St. Thomas receives further authority from the words of the present Holy Father. In a letter also addressed to the universal Church, the *Studiorum Duce*m of 29th June, 1923, the Pope says:

Nor is his (St. Thomas's) ascetical and mystical science any less noble. He reduces the whole of moral discipline to the virtues and gifts, and he excellently defines the same method and discipline for various states of life, whether for those who follow the ordinary Christian life or for those who strive after consummate perfection, whether in a contemplative or active order. Therefore if we wish to understand the first Commandment and its extent

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and how charity and the accompanying gifts of the Holy Ghost increase, if we would know all the many states of life, for instance of perfection, the religious life, the apostolate, and in what they differ and what is their nature and force, if we are seeking to know these and such points of ascetic and mystical theology, we must first of all approach the Angelic Doctor.

If, then, the Church has an authorized doctrine on the nature of contemplative life and prayer, it is surely that of St. Thomas whose teaching is here commended. Abbot Chapman clearly intended to base his teaching on that of St. Thomas, but his writings show that he was not really acquainted with St. Thomas's thought; indeed he rejected the whole doctrine of the Gifts as it is theologically formulated because he could not deduce it exegetically from the Scripture text which tradition chose as best expressing its teaching.² His own theory is that contemplation is not essentially supernatural at all but preternatural, by which he meant unusual³: contemplation, or rather the power to contemplate, is a natural but unusual faculty which may be used for supernatural purposes.⁴ How far this differs from St. Thomas's doctrine needs no emphasis.

Again, according to St. Thomas, the Gifts are infused into the soul together with Sanctifying Grace, and they grow proportionately with the growth of Grace. Souls which advance in Grace and Charity by the Sacraments, merit and prayer, advance at the same time in habitual docility to the Holy Spirit. This increased docility gives no strict right to the intervention of the Holy Spirit which is all that is then necessary for contemplation, but it could hardly be the general rule that the Holy Spirit dwelling within the soul should not intervene; so it is that Thomists teach that contemplative prayer normally accompanies growth in the spiritual life.⁵ Contemplation, therefore, cannot be isolated from the other supernatural activities of the soul. Of course

² *Ibid.*, p. 297; cf. also pp. 69-70.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 306-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 308-9.

⁵ The suggestion (p. 71) that Dominican theologians "are inclined to look upon 'Mysticism' as some freak on God's part" is hardly a happy one.

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St. Thomas takes account of the fact that some are by natural disposition more disposed for a contemplative life, but he points out that even those of a more active nature can, by their very active work, prepare themselves for the contemplative life.⁶ According to the Abbot, however, it would seem that while God may make use of the "mystical faculty" as a means of conferring Grace, the actual exercise of the faculty needs at the most to be only indirectly due to Grace. He tells us that the preternatural mystical powers are impeded by the rebellion of our lower nature, and that mortification and the practice of the Christian virtues by Grace ought, by quieting our lower nature, to facilitate the exercise of contemplation.⁷ But of the faculty itself he writes:

I suggest that this faculty of perceiving pure truth (i.e. of contemplation) may be compared to that faculty of grasping numbers, for want of which some highly talented people cannot do more than the simplest sums, while a few individuals have a gift for mathematics which makes all easy. Besides these, an occasional freak is found—a calculating boy—who can multiply instantly in his head seven figures by seven figures.⁸

But there is another departure from the doctrine of St. Thomas, which perhaps explains the passages that have caused misgivings, and is of even more practical importance in a book of this kind. There is a fairly common form of contemplative prayer, it would seem, of which the contemplative himself is not conscious even when he is exercised in it. The Abbot's theory being that contemplation is an act of "pure intellect" (which he understood to be an act of the intellect alone without the concomitant use of the imagination normal in human knowledge), he held that mystics are ordinarily conscious of this pure knowledge only if they can *translate* it, or express it with the aid of the imagination; and as many are unable to do this, it follows that they are "unaware that they have had an experience at all. . . . There was only an uncomfortable and disturbing stupidity,

⁶ *Summa.*, II-II, q. 182, a. 4 ad 3.

⁷ *Letters*, pp. 301, 309-10, 315.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

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accompanied by involuntary distraction."⁹ He writes at length of two ways in which this unconscious contemplation may be recognized: first, it hinders some of the natural activities of the soul such as meditation or vocal prayer, "there is the distraction *without any consciousness of what is causing the distraction*"¹⁰; secondly it produces an increase of love which is manifested by the more earnest service of God after prayer is over.¹¹

In the light of this theoretic explanation the meaning of a passage that has been controverted seems clear: "it (thinking or reasoning out something during prayer) simply stops prayer dead; so that thinking is more disastrous than sleep." The words should mean: thinking, i.e. what is ordinarily meant by thinking, conscious thought, or thought (whether simple apprehension or discursive reasoning) in

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 306. He speaks of the unconscious character of contemplation in the letter already referred to, and in the *Hastings Encyclopedia* article writes: "This lofty angelic knowledge is utter ignorance (until it is perhaps symbolically and tentatively translated) to the intellect itself, but it inflames the will with intense love and desire. The soul loves and desires without understanding; it longs for and partially enjoys it knows not what. This is the 'ray of darkness' of Dionysius, the wisdom which is ignorance, the 'cloud of unknowing,' the obscure night of the spirit, the anagogical way to the unseen and incommunicable."

¹⁰ *Letters*, pp. 316-7. In his reply to Archbishop Goodier (pp. 7-8) Dom Hudleston quotes passages from Père Poulain's Chapter on the *Ligature*, which apparently say very much the same as Abbot Chapman about the quasi-impossibility of making "additional acts" during contemplation. Père Poulain, however, had given an earlier warning against any exaggerated idea of the incomprehensibility of the mystic states which would imply that the soul itself did not know that it was in communication with God, or even that it was praying — *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, London, 1912, p. 119.

¹¹ *Letters*, pp. 317-8. Here the Abbot sees a solution of the difficulty that mystics commonly experience more love than knowledge; the love, he thinks, is greater than their conscious knowledge of God, but not greater than their unconscious knowledge (cf. also p. 72). He curiously misunderstands St. Thomas's doctrine on the point (p. 318 footnote). The question has several aspects. In the article Abbot Chapman quotes St. Thomas is pointing out that knowledge is the condition rather than the cause of love; the cause is the goodness or loveliness of the object itself. A very lovable object may cause perfect love even when it is incompletely known. By Charity God is loved perfectly, i.e. above all things, although the knowledge of Faith is imperfect.

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which the imagination plays a concomitant part, is disastrous; it stops prayer (unconscious thought) dead, for "the intellect is unaccustomed to do two things at once."¹² Does not the Abbot's theory also require us to suppose that he meant what his words imply throughout the Letters in such phrases as: "this contemplation is so obscure that it is unperceived . . . subconscious"; "superconscious"; "there is *no perception at all* if the prayer is pure—one might call it an act of ignorance or a sensation of idiocy"; "the intellect is facing a blank"; "the mind seems vacant and stupid"; it is the "contemplation of nothing at all"; "the infinite reality of God is unconsciously contemplated"; "I suppose one 'contemplates' without knowing it"? In a footnote on page 59 the Editor says that Abbot Chapman's words must be understood in accordance with the teaching of Catholic theologians who have used similar language, and he quotes as a vivid description of the same state of prayer a fine passage in which the Abbot Blosius tells of the mystic's experimental perception that God is infinitely more than all he can see or know. It would follow that when Abbot Chapman says "there is no perception at all," we are to understand that there is no perception at all of what God is in His glory, but there is an experimental knowledge of God's transcendence and incomprehensibility. This would surely be to suppose a divergence between the Abbot's theory and his practical direction. As a fact Dom Chapman himself rejects the explanation on page 73: the object of contemplative prayer is the transcendent, unimaginable Godhead, not as known but as unknown.

Since the two criteria the Abbot gives, for judging whether in a particular case there had been prayer at all, might both be due to other causes, natural or supernatural, it is necessary to ask—waiving the question whether unconscious intellectual knowledge is not self-contradictory—what evidence is there for the existence of this prayer at all. In his "apology" to theologians Abbot Chapman answers the question mainly by appealing to the authority of St. Thomas.

¹² *Letters*, p. 317.

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I have elsewhere shown that the appeal is not justified,¹³ and that the Abbot's interpretation of St. Thomas's thought is not a possible one. It remains to consider whether St. John of the Cross, whom Dom Chapman frequently quotes, differs on this important point from St. Thomas. Although the aim and point of view of these two Saints were quite different, recent studies have well shown the essential harmony between St. John's psychological descriptions, expressed with all the hyperbole of mystical language, and St. Thomas's abstract, theological explanations, expressed in precise technical terminology. It seems certain, indeed, that St. John of the Cross followed at Salamanca the theological course of the Dominican Mancio of Corpus Christi, who expounded the *Summa* of St. Thomas, article by article, in accordance with the commentaries of Cajetan.¹⁴

The language of mystics is necessarily halting and obscure, since they attempt to describe an experience which is indescribable, and the key to St. John's teaching on the contemplative's consciousness of his prayer lies in the meaning he attached to the traditional pseudo-Dionysian phrase "the perception of darkness," and other kindred expressions, such as the blinding of the reason by contemplation. In early seventeenth century Spain, where illuminism was still rife, it was partly the Saint's abstruse and seemingly exaggerated language that was responsible for the denunciation of his writings to the Inquisition on more than one occasion. The defence of the orthodoxy of forty propositions, extracted from the 1618 edition of his works and presented for condemnation, supplies evidence of St. John's true meaning on the point now in question. The defence was written, within thirty-one years of the Saint's death, by a professor of theology of Salamanca, the Augustinian Friar Basilio Ponce de León.¹⁵ The use of the *via negationis* in the abstract, philosophical knowledge of the Divine Nature is a commonplace. To know that God is infinite is not

¹³ BLACKFRIARS, June, 1935, pp. 434-9.

¹⁴ *St. John of the Cross*, by Fr. Bruno (London, 1932), p. 38.

¹⁵ It is printed at the end of Professor Allison Peers' recent translation of St. John's works.

thereby to know what God is in Himself, but only that He is not finite; thus, according to the aspect considered, it can be regarded as knowledge (the knowledge of what God is not), or as ignorance (the ignorance of what God is). In his defence of the second proposition Friar Basilio shows that the same double consideration is possible of the act of Faith: the assent of Faith to a revealed Mystery is the assent to a truth which the natural reason cannot understand. In this way he explains St. John's vivid words: faith "deprives it (the rational part of man) of the light of reason, or to speak more clearly, blinds it." "Through faith," he writes, "man . . . knows and knows not. He knows through the testimony of God and he knows not because he sees not the things he believes to be . . . and likewise through natural reason he attains not these things. . . ." Now to speak of the act of faith in this sense as an act of ignorance or as a blindness of the light of reason is quite clearly not to mean that in the act of faith the intellect is not conscious of its own activity. The point is capital, for Friar Basilio goes on to point out that it was in this same sense that pseudo-Dionysius called contemplation an interior union with God by ignorance, or again a ray of divine darkness. The explanation agrees perfectly with that given by St. Thomas in his *Expositio super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus* (c. 7, lect. 4): contemplation is darkness to the mind, or is knowledge by ignorance, only in the sense that the mind does not perceive positively what God is in Himself, but negatively (and intuitively—by union with the "superluculent rays of the Godhead") that God is above all things that the mind could understand; there is no question of knowledge of which the mind is not conscious. Abbot Chapman has not understood this point which is so important for the right interpretation of St. John of the Cross, and he regards the "ray of darkness" as being unconscious knowledge.¹⁶

In the passages of St. John of which the Abbot makes use there are two cases to consider, contemplation at its purest, and contemplation in the incipient stages. With regard to

¹⁶ *Letters*, p. 72; cf. *sup.* footnote, 9.

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the first he several times quotes St. John's comparison between the spiritual light of contemplation and a ray of sunlight, which, entering a room by the window, is less palpable when it is freer from particles and atoms, and is invisible when there are no objects to reflect it.¹⁷ He interprets the comparison by his own theory that the spiritual light is "pure" intellectual knowledge, knowledge of which the subject is unconscious when it is purest, i.e. when it is untranslated, or not expressed with the aid of the imagination.¹⁸ But St. John's explanation is that when the spiritual light is purest it "becomes darkness . . . and then the darkness is more clearly perceived and realized"¹⁹; that is to say God is not perceived positively as He is in Himself (the *light* is not perceived), but negatively as transcending all particular images or knowable things (the *darkness* is perceived and realized). Abbot Chapman's conception of contemplation at its purest, or of the very nature of contemplation, explains his interpretation of St. John's words about the beginnings of contemplation, when discursive meditation becomes distasteful to the soul and quasi-impossible. He makes St. John attribute this impossibility to the commencement of an imperceptible and unconscious contemplation.²⁰ St. John's words are:

It is true, however, that, when this condition first begins, this loving knowledge is hardly realized, and that for two reasons. First, this loving knowledge is apt at the beginning to be very subtle and delicate, and almost imperceptible to the senses. Secondly, when the soul has been accustomed to that other exercise of meditation, which is wholly perceptible, it cannot realize, or is hardly conscious of, this other new and imperceptible condition, which is purely spiritual.²¹

Thus he is not speaking of a kind of prayer which is by its nature unknowable, but of a prayer which at the beginning

¹⁷ *Ascent*, II, c. 14, no. 9; *Night*, II, c. 8, no. 3—all references are to the Peers translation.

¹⁸ *Letters*, p. 250.

¹⁹ *Ascent*, II, c. 14, no. 10—this with the exception of a phenomenon he calls "a great forgetfulness"—"which happens very seldom, *ibid.*, no 12.

²⁰ *Letters*, pp. 254, 317.

²¹ *Ascent*, II, c. 13, no. 7.

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is so weak, to which the soul is so unaccustomed, that it can hardly be realized until the soul becomes more used to it by ceasing to strive to meditate. A Thomist would explain that at the beginning the influence of the Gifts on the act of Faith is very slight. Elsewhere St. John speaks of it as "the beginning of a contemplation that is dark and arid to the senses: which contemplation is secret and hidden from the very person that experiences it,"²² but his own later explanation of the secrecy²³ shows that he does not mean that the mind is unconscious of the contemplation. It is secret and hidden from the work of the understanding in the sense that it is produced by the direct action of the Holy Spirit on the soul, and not by any previous process of reasoning.²⁴

Abbot Chapman frequently expressed the hope that his doctrine was theoretically sound; one feels that he would have been the first to regret the publication of the letters. They cannot but prove misleading.

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²² *Night*, I, c. 9, no. 6; cf. *L. Flame*, Stanza III, 30 sq., *passim*.

²³ *Ibid.*, II, c. 17.

²⁴ *A gratia operans*. St. John says contemplation is also secret in that it is indescribable.