

Life of the Spirit

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INEXPRESSIBLE EXPERIENCE

BY

THE EDITOR



RECENT BOOK with the sub-title of 'Revelations of the Mystics'¹ gives us the opportunity of resuming the theme we opened in the August issue, the nature and meaning of mysticism. The book itself is a delight for anyone interested in spiritual literature; it contains many treasures, some familiar and many rare. The title of the book, *The Spear of Gold*, is taken from the exalted experience of St Teresa when the angel pierced her heart with a flaming spear of Love. The whole anthology, for such it is, is divided and subdivided so that it may lead from the first leap of desire in the natural heart of man to these high transports of love. But the editor sets aside the usual treatment according to the three stages of spiritual progress. He believes this treatment leads too steeply to the heights; but the result of his anthology is that its order is difficult to follow, and is more usefully used simply as an occasional book. The individual items even at the beginning are so imbued with the whole perfection of the life of grace that they cannot be regarded as mere steps in the development of the theme. The 41st Psalm, for instance, begins one of the early sections entitled 'The Restless Heart'; but it might well have come much higher up in any account of spiritual progress. The passages quoted however encourage, as the editor intended them to encourage, the reader to turn to the sources themselves; though the lack of any references except to the Scriptures is disconcerting for anyone who tries to continue his reading of Augustine or Symeon the Younger, Newman or Hopkins. With these qualifications the anthology is representative of a very wide range of literature and will be the source of enjoyment and profit to many.

But the point of interest here lies in the fact that the editor has intentionally included texts which are 'not mystical in the strict sense'; and these range from Plato to Léon Bloy, the Breviary and Missal to Don Luigi Sturzo. He uses Gerard Manly Hopkins as a means of introducing us to the meaning of St Augustine or St

¹ *The Spear of Gold*. Edited by H. A. Reinhold. (Burns Oates; 16s.)

Teresa; and he implies that the great experiences of nature are the material from which the real mystic experience arises. The very title of the book reveals that the editor intends the full mysticism of the Church to be understood in terms of experience. And here he would appear to agree with our August editorial which was taken so severely to task in the October issue by Fr Scott James. The latter accuses us of making the misunderstood word stand for 'feelings'. This was of course far from our intention as it is one of the first principles of the spiritual life to distrust feelings and to become detached from sensible consolation in prayer. It is also dangerous to insist too much upon the experimental element in the ascent to God owing to the unfortunate insistence, since the reformation, on religious experience as the ultimate test of prayer and religion. Nevertheless, once these points have been properly understood, we must agree with the editor of this book in regarding some sort of experience as necessary to mysticism.

This experience, as we have said, has no necessary connection with feelings and sensations, though it will often spill over into the physical world and affect the body in one form or another. Sometimes the Christian at prayer will feel a curious sense of elation, at other times it will be a stillness, at others even the burning sensations which were so characteristic of Richard Rolle. There are a thousand ways in which the senses are stirred by the inner experience of the spirit. But these are all purely accidental, and can appear and disappear without altering the reality within, except perhaps in so far as they provide a potential temptation to distract the mind from that true reality. Years of aridity and involuntary distractions are often necessary to keep the soul from running after these ornaments and temporal rewards. In the state of grace before the fall, no doubt, these feelings would have always been present because the perfect man would always recognise their true worth and never desire them for their own sake.

There are other experiences which sometimes accompany the ascent of the soul towards God. These are the unusual phenomena which are even more often wrongly identified with the essential mystical experience. Dreams, visions and locutions, ecstasies and levitations and such like, all these quasi-miraculous happenings are in no sense essential to the life of a saint, who by definition is understood to have reached the heights of mysticism. There are many saints who have had practically no extraordinary experiences of that sort, though in the nature of the case such saints are either very active or almost unknown. The active saints like St John Bosco or Cottolengo work miracles but they are not noted for the miracles, as it were,

worked on them by God who in the more 'contemplative' saints often produces such phenomena as ecstasy and stigmatisation. And the retiring contemplatives upon whom God does not bestow these abnormal effects do not usually make a name for themselves in the world.

But the true and essential experience of which we speak is common to all who grow up in saintliness. The importance of this book of mystical snippets lies primarily in the wide area covered by the editor's scissors. For he shows by his selection that the desires and experiences of the naturally good pagan such as Plato or Plotinus are not entirely divorced from the reality. The natural desire of the soul for the Almighty so profoundly expressed by these pagan writers should be the ground upon which the seed of grace is sown and which sustains that grace until it reaches the harvest home of Paradise. Again, the Scriptures so evidently play their part in this approach to the greatest experience that man could suffer, the experience of the beatific vision. They contain the first true images of that vision and consequently appear frequently throughout the book and conclude with such passages as

There will be no more night, no more need of light from lamp or sun; the Lord God will shed his light on them and they will reign for ever and ever. (Apoc. 22, 5. p. 369.)

It is strange that the editor has to say that the passages from the Bible are 'not mystical in the modern sense'; for, though the Scriptures are all too often left out of account in the treatment of the growth of the soul in grace, there can be no surer guide to the true experience of God than the Word of God as given to us through the authority of the Church.

Another feature of this anthology is the frequent appearance of quotations from the liturgy, both Eastern and Roman, which has also been often neglected in dealing with mysticism. There can be no true mystical experience without some reference to the Sacraments and the Mass, at least in regard to their spirit and inner meaning. And the true liturgies which continue the work of prayer and sanctification have been protected and developed by the Holy Spirit in such a way as to provide some of the most inspiring spiritual texts. There is for example the Responsory for the first Sunday of Advent:

Looking from afar, behold I see
the power of God approaching and a mist
covering all the earth.
Go forth to meet him and say:
Tell us if thou art he who as king
shall rule the people of Israel. . . . (p. 23.)²

² The only reference given to this is 'Roman Breviary'.

It would seem to be one of the great opportunities of the present age to be able to link up all the ancient heritage of liturgical devotion growing as it does out of the central doctrine of the mystical body of Christ with the more modern 'specialisation' in mysticism which is really of the same Spirit but which has appeared to be not only distinct but separate from the former type of spirituality. 'The texts in this book will show that the greatest of all mystics are those who rise to union with God and leave behind that aspect of mysticism which intrigues the world. Just as mysticism takes different forms in all its initiates, so it varies often from age to age, from mind to mind. . . . (The Preface, p. xix). But the central theme runs through all the genuine spirituality of Chistendom. 'On God's part, I see Paradise has no gate, but that whosoever will may enter therein' (St Catherine of Genoa, p. 25). It is the universal vocation of mankind to ascend these heights and to walk into the open City which has only the steep ascent round it to protect it from the entry of the unworthy. On the summit of the mountain the heavenly city is open and free to all. And it is their home.

You will go home the sooner when

You find how small's the world of men

(Heinrich of Lauffenberg, p. 49).

In that homely city there must be experience of some sort. An experience which comes from God as a gift, which is not sensible, which is not merely 'extraordinary', and which can be received through the sacraments and Mass, through the reality of Christ's presence in his Church, through the heights of prayer. Some have described this as a 'touch' from God on the essence of the soul—perhaps it was to this that Fr Scott James was referring in his letter last month. There in the essence of the soul 'God will touch thee with his most simple being, without medium or similitude', says Tauler (p. 295). It is very difficult to describe what is beyond sense and beyond image. Those who have received the precious gift of infused contemplation know that it is inexpressible and yet experienced, an awareness of God which they cannot recall at will but which impresses itself upon them apparently without a close relation with the state of the conscience or their own virtue. St Jane Frances de Chantal describes the difficulty of expression:

There are souls among those whom God leads by this way of simplicity, whom his divine goodness strips so extraordinarily of all satisfaction, desire and feeling that they had difficulty in enduring and in expressing themselves, because what passes in their interior life is so slight, so delicate and so imperceptible, being all at the extreme summit of the spirit, that they do not know how to speak of it.³ (p. 214.)

A man can be aware of the presence of God in this new way without changing outwardly and while retaining many of his own personal defects and weaknesses of character. Divine movements such as 'touches' and infused contemplation are thus a law unto themselves, unpredictable and inexpressible.

Experience itself of course is not a test of true spirituality, because experience is an individual thing which depends on the unique make-up of the man who experiences. The same doctrine and the same grace will have very different effects upon the imaginative man and the lethargic man, upon the poet and the prosaic man. That is where the poetic inspiration can play such an important rôle in the type of mysticism which finds its way into books, bringing an awareness which is more human while remaining as divine; that is why, for example, the majority of texts quoted in *The Spear of Gold* are of a poetic flavour and are not simply the bare bones of the doctrine of the spiritual life. The mystical graces are received by all these men and women in different ways. In so far as they are poets they have something in common in their appreciation and awareness of the experience; but in so far as they are saints individually the touch of the divine presence on the soul is a different touch upon each individual, as the kiss of a man given to his wife differs from that given to his child or to his friend. The reality in itself can only be understood in terms of the nature of grace, of the presence of the Three Persons in the Blessed Trinity in the soul, of affective knowledge working in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and in all the rest of mystical theology. That theology analyses the union of the soul with God and guarantees the truth of the experience. It does not bring that experience, however closely it be studied; but it does provide the tests. 'The revelations of the mystics' convey, in so far as it can be conveyed, the reality of the experience of the soul in its ascent to God, and that ascent provides a good and firm foothold all the way up to the heights. The foothold should be always resting on a realisation of a good; from the natural good of the pagan philosophers and mystics, upon the good of the liturgy, the doctrine of the Church, the Scriptures up and up to the heights where 'there is a death in fruition, and a melting and dying into the Essential Nudity, where all the divine names and all conditions and all the living images which are reflected in the mirror of divine truth lapse in the Onefold and Ineffable, in waylessness and without reason'. (p. 312. Ruysbroek).

³ Some of the passages have been given rather inappropriate titles. This one is called by the editor: 'Human Frailty'.