

'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

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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.)

'Rester petit enfant c'est reconnaître son néant'.

Occasionally, though very rarely, the imagery itself recalls him:

'Pour que l'amour soit pleinement satisfait, il faut qu'il s'abaisse jusqu'à néant, et transforme en feu ce néant'.

No doubt the Classics of the Order form a prescribed diet for Carmelites whether to their taste or not, but there can be no mistaking the real fervour with which these passages are cited. They have become her own, they are a natural expression of her own thought, as are the Gospels, and the Psalms and the Prophets. It is moreover very noticeable that though the works of the 'great' St Teresa must have been as formally offered to her, and though she refers with all due reverence, occasionally, to 'Our Mother, St Teresa', the ideas of the *Interior Castle* play no equivalent part in her own thought.

The 'little' St Teresa is in fact, beneath her camouflage of flowers and baby angels, far more the daughter of her austere father than of her namesake. Once this paradox has been recognised it becomes always more evident as we study her, and increasingly illuminating.

Those on whom St John of the Cross makes an unparalleled impression, who find themselves, as he would say, 'enflamed' to greater love of God by means of his fire, must sometimes ask themselves with misgiving how far it is the poet, and not the saint, who is in fact making his impact on them. To suggest that his Christian framework hampered his freedom of creative genius<sup>2</sup> is extravagantly absurd, it is to distort the truth grotesquely; but it is probably true to say that, had he been a Moor or Jew or Pagan St John he would still be, not indeed what he is as christian saint, but still a poet, and an outstanding personality. And when we fall under his spell it is (or may be) nature as well as super-nature that makes its impact, an æsthetic as well as a religious response with which we are inspired and enkindled.

With St Thérèse there is no parallel complexity; indeed to an æsthetic taste at all developed her 'style' raises a formidable barrier, and to many the barrier has proved too formidable to surmount or penetrate. The 'little' saint remains shut off, enclosed behind her barricade of flowers and cherubs. But once that challenge has been fully accepted the impact of her sanctity when it comes is all the stronger; it is pure holiness and nothing else that conquers our resistant minds and wills in 'little' St Teresa of the Child Jesus. Apart from her holiness she is nothing: that is the essence of her message to us, and we recognise its truth. 'Rester petit enfant, c'est reconnaître son néant'.

<sup>2</sup> This is the line taken by M. Baruzzi in his otherwise interesting study of *La Mystère de St Jean de la Croix*.

With every saint we have to recognise the element of external circumstance of time and place which modifies, or at least conditions, the eternal truth they show us, but with some the accidental medium is more abstrusive than with others. In the case of St Thérèse of Lisieux the external medium through which she speaks to us and acts upon us is the more disconcerting for being near in actual time and place.

To some people the differences in medieval outlook estranges them from many great saints; to others the idiom of 17th-century Spain impedes contact with the 'great' St Theresa and St John, but there are many to whom the language of the *Dark Night* and the *Living Flame*, the Caverns and the Lamps, and rushing torrents is far more readily assimilable than the *petit bourgeois* culture of provincial France 80 years ago.

In making contact with St Thérèse of Lisieux, or rather in allowing her to make contact with us, we have to keep quite consciously aware of the Lisieux of the 1880s. We have to visualise a milieu in many ways as alien and unknown as the 'great world' of the 'great' St Theresa, and to those outside it far more distasteful. We have to envisage an idyllic family life so narrow and restricted in its outlook that the reading of any newspaper—even *La Croix*—was forbidden to the grown-up daughters, where the only 'treats' conceived of were religious celebrations, and admission to the 'Children of Mary' stands out as a momentous event. Yet it is not the simplicity of the peasant, but an artificial simplicity. There is no access to great art or literature beyond the purely religious, and yet there is the constant pressure of a falsely conceived 'artistic culture'.

According to almost any psychologist, life in the Martin family should have produced violent reaction and rebellion. We should expect to find its products among the militant anti-clericals, common enough in the France of that time. But instead all five surviving daughters became nuns, and the youngest, on whom the greatest weight of pressure was focussed, became a saint! What can the child guidance clinics say? How do the psychologists explain it? Perhaps the only answer is again that 'The ways of God are not our ways'. The psychologists do not perhaps allow for holiness. The child guidance clinics seldom meet it.

However that may be, this specific and very positive social setting has to be reckoned with and allowed for in our approach to St Thérèse. A girl who should describe herself today, habitually, as 'a little white flower', would be both sentimental and self-conscious. She was neither.

The baby-talk, the perpetual diminutive, in all its applications, flowers, angels, even the 'baby Jesus' produces in the mind trained in a wider culture, however religious, at first an almost nauseating effect, and this is inevitably accentuated by the popular devotion which has seized on just those elements for its cult—mistaking the accidental for the essential. The real saint seems in danger of being lost under the welter of this mass-devotion. But she will not be lost, we need not fear.

She used the idiom of her time and place and social setting, a narrow *petit bourgeois* circle in which a deep and pure religious feeling would normally find expression in forms repugnant to a more highly developed æsthetic taste, but what is striking, as we read her further, is not that she should use her native idiom, but the extent to which she did transcend it. The transition from the littleness of childishness to the littleness of the creature before God.

The greatness of the 'little' saint breaks through the sentimental terms and forms of thought time after time, and as the history of her soul moves on it is astonishing to see how the maturing of her sanctity finds for itself more adequate expression. By the end we find her speaking to us with a dignity and authority that have quite left behind the mannerisms of a time and place.

The Little Flower is herself no poet, no artist, no scholar. But the fire of her love has given her words comparable to those of her Father, St John of the Cross.

'What then is to become of me? Must I die of sorrow because of my helplessness? Oh no! I will not even grieve. With daring confidence, and reckless of self, I will remain there till death, my gaze fixed upon my divine Sun. Nothing shall affright me, neither wind nor rain; and should impenetrable clouds conceal from my eyes the Orb of Love, should it seem to me that beyond this life there is darkness only, this would be the hour of perfect joy, the hour in which to urge my confidence to the uttermost bounds, for knowing that beyond the dark clouds my Sun is still shining, I should never dare to change my place. . . .

O Word! O my Saviour! Thou art the divine Eagle whom I love and who allurest me. Thou who descending to the land of exile, didst will to suffer and to die, in order to bear away each single soul and plunge it into the very heart of the Blessed Trinity—Love's eternal home. Thou who, returning to thy realm of light, dost still remain hidden here in our vale of tears under the semblance of the white Host to nourish me with thy own substance. Forgive me. O Jesus, if I tell thee that thy love reacheth even unto madness, and at the sight of such folly what wilt thou but my own heart should leap up

to thee? How could my trust know any bounds? . . .

I am filled with the hope that one day thou wilt swoop down upon me, and bearing me away to the source of all love, wilt plunge me at last into its glowing abyss, that I may become for ever its happy victim'. The paean of love and triumph to our Lord with which she ends the history of her soul recalls indeed the ecstasy of the *Living Flame of Love*.

To offer oneself to love is to hand oneself over to suffering; love only lives by sacrifice and when one is wholly handed over to love one must be ready to be sacrificed without any reserve.

Sacrificial love is indeed no secret peculiar to these two saints alone. It may be said that every saint has, as saint, the same message; that all are bound to lead us through suffering and the Cross to God, through an ascetic purgation to fulfilment; but the differences in mode and manner can be as significant as the likeness. St John of the Cross and his little disciple are alike both in the intransigence of their negation and in the ecstatic fire of their love: they are complementary in their difference.

Leaving aside the accidental forms of time and place and personal temperament, the essence of their difference can be seen as one of difference in emphasis on the Persons of the Trinity.

For St John the 'Beloved' is the Holy Ghost pre-eminently and in a special way; for St Thérèse it is always our Lord—sometimes to a disconcerting degree, a personal and human Jesus.

If St John's devotion is criticised sometimes for being too little incarnational, too abstract and impersonal in its texture, that of St Thérèse on the other hand can almost shock by its concrete anthropomorphism. And the same difference prevails throughout their teaching and their lives. Yet both are one. To confront them one with another in opposition would be as futile as to oppose the Word Incarnate to the Holy Ghost. They supplement and reinforce each other.

St Thérèse has suffered badly at the hands of her admirers. The presentation of her mental image, her teaching, her 'way', has undergone the same process of vulgarisation to which her actual physical portrait has been subjected. There is, so it would seem, a desecration inherent in the very touch of the crowd as such. We need only see a London park on the day after a Bank Holiday to realise this strange destroying force in the very enjoyment of what is good. The crowd as such cannot love and enjoy, without degrading the object of its love to its own level—and even saints, as far as they are human beings, are subject to this process of degradation. And yet the very crowd that vulgarises consists of individual human souls; and such is the paradox of our lives that individually each may aspire to the same

height which in the mass-mind it is desecrating.

The saint whose aspiration was to be ignored, unknown, forgotten, has blazoned out into a world-wide flame and in the process of her glorification has paid the price of all such popularity. We cannot doubt that she pays that price gladly 'for the salvation of souls' that has gone with it, through it, or in spite of it—who can say?

She herself is 'trodden underfoot' more painfully than in the oblivion she aspired to, but her charity is without any doubt sufficient to sanctify this further sacrifice.

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' SO LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE  
BEFORE MEN '

A MEDITATION ON MATTHEW 5: 16 UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF ST THERESE

BY

H. C. GRAEF



HE who called himself the Light of the World said to those who followed him: 'So let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven'—and from that day to this the light has been shining in the hearts of men.

What exactly is this light that shines in the disciples of our Lord, that, very near our own time, shone with such splendour in the great little saint of Lisieux? Though Jesus calls it 'your light', it is not a light that is ours by the very fact that we are human beings, as is our memory, our reason or our will; it is something that we have received in a very special way, for it is the divine gift of faith. And this light of faith that is in us our Lord bids us not to hide under a bushel but to let it shine.

It seems an easy command. When a man has been given a beautiful thing he quite naturally loves to show it to others. Yes; but there is a wrong way of showing it. The Pharisees, too, had received great gifts: zeal for the Law of God, for the purity of their religion, for austerity of life; and they lost no opportunity of showing them to men. Yet our Lord severely rebuked them. For though they had received much light, it was not the Light they caused to shine—it was their own little achievements which they 'showed off'. Our Lord means something very different when he tells us to let our light shine. Light, indeed, shines of itself; its very essence is to shine—but only if it be not obscured by a dark object blocking its passage. If we place it under a bushel, the light will *not* shine.