

## THE PURGATIVE WAY—CONCLUSION (*Ancren Riwele*, Parts V-VIII)

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URIFICATION continues to be an unpleasant part of life up to the very last breath, however advanced in holiness a man may be. The first stage in the way of perfection is called 'purgative' or purifying only because that ascetic activity is the predominant one at the beginning. A man has to struggle to abandon vice when he turns to God and sincerely tries to follow him. And so he purifies himself and opens his heart to the purifying action of God in the ways already suggested in previous articles. God himself also cultivates the soul as the farmer first cultivates the soil with plough and harrow. But at the point we have reached we come to the first outstanding transformation; the Christian soul is about to be converted once more and to enter upon a new form of life, fuller and more fruitful. He begins to enter another kind of asceticism, a dark night of the senses in which the spirit becomes far freer than before.

The *Ancren Riwele* which we have been following as the best English work on the Purgative Way draws to its conclusion on this note. But first it perfects its teaching on the abandonment of vice by a lengthy and detailed disquisition on the sacrament of penance and on the personal practice of penance. The chapter on confession, the 'most necessary' of all the remedies for sin and temptation, is almost like a section from a manual of moral theology, dealing with six properties of the sacrament and twelve qualities of the penitent in a very practical manner. But the reader must study these for himself; it is more important here to follow the clever transition of the sixth and seventh parts in which the author gradually unfolds the fuller life of love. As he says:

After confession it is proper to speak of penance, that is, amend-deed, and thus we have a way out of the fifth part into the sixth part. (p. 262.)

And in the latter the theme of the war upon vice and temptation is modulated to one of suffering for our Lord's sake, so that at the end of this sixth part he can say:

I think we are now come to the seventh part, which is all of love which maketh a pure heart. (p. 290.)

The final stages of the first 'way' remain penitential but the

general character changes. It is the first appearance of a 'dark night' in any real sense of the word. Before this stage in spite of difficulties and temptations there are usually considerable periods of happiness when the sense of God's presence is easily felt, when meditation brings with it a happy feeling of following Christ or of recognising his Mother; the mysteries of the rosary bring with them at least occasional sweetnesses which convince the soul that she is on the right way. In all that sensible devotion however there is bound to be a considerable amount of self-seeking. And the contrast with the bitterness of temptation or the hardship of penance is very sharp, like going from a dry warm room out into a cold and soaking storm of rain. Penance and prayer in this manner are easily divorced. Penance is one thing, prayer another. Penance is merely unpleasant though necessary, prayer is attractive because of the warmth of devotion. This fact may account for the ease with which people respond to the call to prayer, but neglect the penitential side of that call.

The dark night of the senses begins to heal this breach. There is to be no penance without prayer and no prayer without penance. For all the sweetness in prayer disappears; there is no delight in devotion, kneeling down in the presence of God is indeed a bitter hardship because God seems to be remote, the presence has become for the senses an absence. A man will feel as though he is talking day after day to a blank wall. This is penance indeed. One could put up with the tossing and tempestuousness of temptation when one could go back to God and receive encouragement if not congratulation. But now the successful dealing with a personal weakness or a temptation is answered by a stony silence from the one who used to make his pleasure at such things felt. This new bitterness is sometimes mistaken for acedy and a man will be disturbed in thinking that all spiritual things are now distasteful to him because they are bitter.

But he should not despond for it is not all penance now. In the dark night of the senses this penitential life takes on the new aspect of being itself joyful, not an alternative to joy. Obviously this joy is not a thing of the senses, because the senses could not at once be full of the bitterness of mortification and the joy of satisfaction. The joy is a new thing generated in the dark night, a joy which does not need the light of sensible pleasure but only a new and far more spiritual attachment to God.

There are many different degrees in the way a man may suffer and do penance. Of these the author of the *Rivle* selects three.

The elect of God on earth are of three kinds: one kind may be compared to good pilgrims, another to the dead, the third to men suspended voluntarily upon the cross of Jesus Christ. (pp. 263-4.)

These are Good, Better, and Best. The good give up pleasure and suffer in order to keep straight towards heaven, practising the virtues, overcoming vices, leading the hard life of the pilgrim in order to get to heaven. The Better are they who are dead to the world and hid with Christ in God. They have ceased to be conscious of the allurements of the world.

Worldly speech, worldly sight and every worldly thing findeth me dead; but whatsoever relates to Christ that I see, and hear, and do as one who lives. (p. 266.)

Already identification with Christ is beginning. This death to the world is painful enough; but the end of the pilgrimage is no longer seen as years ahead; the end is present in the presence of Christ. It is possible now to find some consolation in these pains by referring them immediately to our Lord who himself died to the world in such agony. There is not yet joy in suffering but only joy in spite of suffering; in other words this joy still remains proper to the normal state of the beginner dependent as he is on consolation; it does not yet spring from the fuller freedom of the dark night.

The best are they who glory in the cross of Christ. The author begins this chapter of the *Rivle* by saying that the anchoress must be of this nature—all joy must be in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

He that is on the cross, and hath delight in it, turneth reproach to honour, and sorrow into joy . . . such are they who are never glad-hearted except when they are suffering some grief or some reproach with Jesus on his cross (p. 127).

Such a statement might sound like a wretched callousness or even a strange type of masochistic perversion, but it is in fact the fully released kind of penance which springs from love: 'for this is the greatest happiness on earth when anyone can, *for the love of God*, bear reproach and pain'.

In all the different ladders, scales and degrees, in St Bernard's degrees of humility, in the steps of the ladder of Ruysbroek, in the Scale of Perfection and the Ascent of Mount Carmel, there always occurs the stage at which a strange delight in suffering appears. It is a delight not so much in self-inflicted punishment as in the more spiritual and more intense sufferings which come from outside. In particular the suffering caused by misunderstanding, unjust reproach, ignominy unmerited. In the unpurified soul these afflictions coming from the attitude or the tongues of others stir up a strong if not violent reaction of anger, self-righteous anger which insists upon justice being done for self. It is a natural instinct of self-preservation and self-assertion. At first it causes constant disturbance and anguish to deal with this, and as a general rule God does not allow it until his son or daughter has become more at home in the spiritual

atmosphere of prayer and the supernatural virtues. But it will come eventually and it is particularly connected with the night of the senses because at first the sensible satisfaction of just wrath and self-assertion have to be removed. So gradually the pain and contempt inflicted by others come to be accepted not merely with interior repression which cannot be good for any soul if long endured, but in the expanding influence of joy. Joy in misunderstanding, joy in ignominy, joy in contempt, this is the chief character of the dark night of the senses, because it is a new joy not bound to the senses at all.

Many might be willing to suffer in some measure bodily hardships, and to be meanly accounted of, but not to endure ignominy. He is only in part upon the Cross who is not ready to endure them both. Contempt and ill-usage; these two things, ignominy and pain, as St Bernard saith, are the two arms of the ladder which reach up to heaven, and between those arms are fixed the staves or steps of all the virtues by which men climb to the blessedness of heaven (p. 268).

The author of the *Rivle* is quite certain that anyone who takes the spiritual life seriously will certainly have to go through ignominy and contempt from others, and often unjustly.

The joy that springs up from such a stony ground is certainly not caused by the arid rocks of injustice, which of itself can only bring bitterness. The joy comes interiorly from the knowledge that the ignominy and injustice are permitted by God so that the soul can be finally purified from sensible attachments. But such denudation does not come of itself alone. The dark night is not a mere pagan state of non-attachment of which the delight is a self-delight in freedom and untrammelledness. It is a Christian detachment and the joy does spring literally from the Cross of Christ. This ignominy, first borne for the sake of our Lord, copying him in his attitude to the unjust accusations which brought him to an unjust death, grows into the very ignominy of Christ himself. The Christian becoming more identified, his sufferings become Christ's sufferings. The strange identification of the soul with Christ which occurs in the mystical body brings a new kind of joy in suffering as the soul expands under its influence, because the suffering of Christ brings a new meaning altogether to suffering. Pain apart from him remains meaningless, a mere curse somehow inherent in the present state of our being, a thing to be escaped, a terrifying privation of human happiness which can bring no delight with it. But the Christian looking at the crucifix first of all sees that pain and ignominy have some meaning and he tries to follow our Lord in his way of acceptance—that is the character of the major part of the purgative way. Then he grows

more united to the cross as the union of the mystical body becomes more real in him personally.

Following St Paul and quoting the Gloss, the *Rivle* states it clearly:

'God shed his blood for all men, but it is efficacious to them only who abstain from carnal pleasure and mortify themselves'. And is that any wonder? Is not God our head, and all we his members, and is not every member pained when the head is in pain? His member, then, he is not who hath no ache under such a painfully aching head (p. 272).

The secret of this interior delight which can co-exist with external bitterness is love. Later we shall see how Mother Julian says of our Lady that the greatest sorrow that a lover can have is to see the beloved suffering. It is the love of our Lord in his sufferings which unites the soul to him, gathers it more securely in his embrace, hides it in his open wounds upon the cross. It is something to follow Christ and to try to accept hardships and mortifications in the way he accepted his own; but it is far greater to become engrossed in the love of Christ crucified so that his own very pains cause us anguish as they did to our Lady at the foot of the cross. This love of *Christ's* sufferings is the hallmark of the saints. All the saints have been engrossed primarily in that meditation under one of its aspects. And it can easily be seen how the Mass, which is the reality of the crucifixion actually presented to us, should play a central part in this stage of spiritual development. We should recall the early part of the *Rivle* where the vocal prayers centred round the holy cross and the blessed sacrament are described in detail; those daily actions are to be understood as the essential background to the whole treatise, especially this last section. The sacrifice of Calvary is represented in such a way that we can all assist at the offering standing at the foot of the cross with our Lady and St John. If this is true, as we believe it to be, then our love for our Lord hanging in anguish on the cross, should grow with every celebration of the Eucharist. Particularly the Christian who is entering the dark night of the senses should keep his eyes fixed on the reality of the Mass. Christ the victim becomes increasingly the reality of daily life; the desire to become a co-victim with Christ grows powerful and dominates this stage. Consequently one who feels that such a stage has been reached should be insistent upon regular assistance at Mass.

The author of the *Rivle* here introduces a charming analogy with the three Marys who came to anoint Jesus's body. Mary means 'bitter' and there are three degrees of bitterness in the way of approach to our Lord. These are the remorse and sorrow for sin, and

the wrestling with temptation; but finally the most refined and perfect bitterness is the longing for heaven,

when one is of such exalted piety that his heart is at rest with regard to the war against vice and he is as it were in the gates of heaven, and all worldly things seem bitter to him. This bitterness is to be understood by Mary Salome, the third Mary. For Salome signifieth peace, and they who have peace and the repose of a pure conscience, have in their heart bitterness of this life, which detains them from blessedness which they long for, and from God whom they love (p. 283).

If we understand this of the cessation of the war against vice in terms of the external type of temptation and sin of which he has been so often speaking, this final bitterness gives a fair notion of the dark night of the senses. Consolation is withdrawn from the senses, but inwardly a new type of peace and freedom of spirit is born. The approach to our Lord, which is signified by the going with the Marys to anoint Jesus, gives this tranquil sorrow, a sorrow at the sight of Christ's wounds and a sorrow from the desire to be wholly his, but a sorrow which does not disturb or distract the mind and will. Christ himself comes close and envelops the soul with his own contemplative and redemptive sorrow which is almost wholly derived from love.

Those sufferings are 'coming to anoint' our Lord which we endure for his sake. He stretcheth himself towards us as a thing that is anointed, and maketh himself tender and soft to handle (p. 285). Our Lord the lover 'cometh leaping *on* the mountains, leaping *over* the hills'. The mountains are the highest life of love and contemplation upon which he leaves the imprint of his feet, impressing on them the footmarks of the pain he suffered on this earth. So the happiness of the true lover lies in the fact that he bears in his body 'the likeness of Jesus Christ's death'. The bitterness is there most painful and yet it is joyous. 'Nothing is ever so hard that love doth not make tender and soft and sweet' (pp. 287-9).

St Thomas in his treatise on Charity devotes a long 'question' to 'The Subject of Love', that is to say the faculty wherein it resides and how it does reside there. This demands a detailed and subtle discussion on how charity increases and diminishes; and in that discussion are to be found all the principles of the 'way of perfection', of the three degrees of the spiritual life, for this is nothing else than the increase of charity. Each step up the ladder means a new and fuller manifestation of the love of God. "Charity of 'the way' can be increased", St Thomas begins this part of the question, 'for we are said to be "way-farers" in the sense that we are making for God who is the final end of our beatitude or happiness. We advance along

this "way", however, to the extent in which we draw close to God; and we approach him not by striding with bodily limbs but by the affectionate movements of the heart. This closeness to God, then, is brought about by charity, since through charity the soul cleaves to God' (II-II, 24, 4). These struggles therefore of the purgative way should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the essential work of perfection is the approach to union through love. Perhaps there are times when the overcoming of vice and resisting temptation obscure this fundamental principle, but certainly at the end of this stage it becomes clearer and clearer that purification is finally achieved by the purifying fire of charity. It is love that purifies the heart and uses all the other virtues as instruments in this cleansing process. The author of the *Rivle*, who never loses sight for a moment of the fact that the final rule is that which regulates the heart, the rule of love, begins the seventh part 'Of Love' in this way:

St Paul witnesseth that all outward hardships, and all pains of the flesh, and all bodily labours, are as nothing when compared with love which purifieth and brighteneth the heart (p. 291). This pure heart begins to reveal itself in the period of darkness when the soul is approaching the illuminative way. The distressing complexity of motives which have been one of the disturbing stumbling blocks of the first stages is now becoming simplified, and the Christian begins to realize that his motive has become more single as the intensity of the desire to die and be dissolved in Christ increases into the bitterness of the dark night. By this time it should have become clear that one's reason for being kind to a friend or saying an extra rosary or spending an extra ten minutes at prayer is not principally self-advertisement, spiritual ambition, or concern about what others should think. These other-than-holy motives may still remain to some extent in the intention, but all their cruder manifestations will have disappeared with the growth of their opposing virtues. In this way the purity of intention grows clearer and the purifying love makes everything more distinct; there are fewer hesitations and complexities of conscience. This is the purity of motive for which the beginner is so often too impatient, but which appears as the desire increases for God in himself and alone. This desire is indeed the true manifestation of the pure love of God, as it is also the source of peace.

Now as the soul takes her departure from the love of worldly things and becomes purified and single of purpose, she begins to experience the perfecting of the law of charity. At first the spiritual life is one of rule and obedience to rule. Obedience is in many ways the principal virtue and can become, as already suggested, in some sense the form of the other moral virtues. The good Christian begins to



lead the life of Christ on earth because it is God's will. I begin to tell the truth not so much because it is an intrinsic and natural good of mind and speech that I should do so but because God wishes me to do so. I seek justice for others because I know God wants it so; I remain patient under hardship and trial because it is his will. All things are done under obedience to counteract the disobedience of original sin. Should I be doing these things for the intrinsic good in them I might easily be doing them largely out of self-will and self-expression—the good pagan already mentioned frequently in previous articles. But progress has gradually eliminated this danger of self-will and self-perfection. Obedience is a virtue which crushes self-will, grinds it to powder and makes it 'tender, soft, and sweet' so that it can be moulded into any shape by God himself. The will thus crushed by obedience takes on the form of God's will; the desires of God become the desires of the obedient will. In this identification of the human will with the divine is to be found the ground work of the union of love. For the union of love is the union of wills in the things which one will shares with the other. 'If you love me keep my commandments'—this is the first aspect of love and obedience. The hardships of the victim obedient unto death are the effective sign of the perfecting of the union of the soul with God. If one wishes to love God he follows the rule of obedience until his will has become identical with God's will and he wakes up to discover that he is established in the love of God. So that the answer to 'If you love me keep my commandments', is the correlative phrase of St Augustine's 'Love and do whatever you wish' (p. 292); because by now what you wish has become what God wishes, and you cannot love him and be ready to offend him.

Thus the limited universality of obedience, which remains on the lower level of the moral virtues, gives place to the true universality of charity.

Pureness of heart is the love of God only. In this is the whole strength of all religious professions, and the end of all religious orders. 'Love fulfilleth the law', saith St Paul. 'All God's commands', as St Gregory saith, 'rooted in love' (p. 293).

This part is indeed the climax of the whole *Rivle* because the author has never lost sight of the perfection of all laws and regulations which can only be the love of God and without which his rule would lead to legalism and the life of the Pharisee. And necessarily this perfection is the work of God's love of man. It is God's love for us that overcomes the limitations of law and brings the freedom of spirit of a soul in love with God. This period in the spiritual life as the external light wanes and the night of the senses descends is marked by an increase of the passivity of the soul which receives God's infinite



love shining upon it with a new interior light and the soul like the moon reflects this obscure light coming from behind the universe (cf. pp. 303-4).

The author of the *Rivle* uses the allegory of the Lord wooing his Lady and with it he pens what is certainly the most moving passage in the whole book. Christ wooed his Lady first by sending ambassadors and letters ahead of him to his Lady. In the Old Testament these letters were sealed and could not be understood by her, but at last he came himself bringing opened letters, the Gospels, 'and wrote with his own blood salvation to his beloved as a love greeting to woo her with and to obtain her love' (p. 294). 'The Lady is besieged by her foes in an earthen castle; she is weak and poor; but this King stops at nothing to free her and so to win her heart and wed her. This allegory in the age of chivalry was familiar, but here it is so simply and strikingly told that it gathers the whole doctrine of the *Rivle* into those few paragraphs. 'This love is the rule which regulates the heart. . . . This rule is the lady or mistress. All the others serve her, and for her sake alone they ought to be loved' (p. 311).

This might seem to point to an even higher stage in the life of the spirit, when God draws the soul into such close union that he first offers his hand in betrothal and then finally transforms the soul by the union of spiritual wedlock. But in fact this wonderful state, although far distant, can already be glimpsed in the growing domination of love at the end of the purgative way, and we have in fact reached no further than this transition stage when the Christian first looks for the new illumination brought by love. This period is still under the purifying sign of the cross.

My dear sisters, you have now heard how, and for what reason, God is greatly to be loved. To kindle this love in you rightly, gather wood for that purpose, with the poor woman of Sarepta, the town the name whereof signifieth kindling. 'Lord', saith she to Elijah the holy prophet, 'behold I am gathering two sticks.' These two sticks betoken that one stick which stood upright, and that other also of the precious cross which went athwart it. With these two sticks ye ought to kindle the fire of love within your hearts. Look often upon them. Think whether ye ought not joyfully to love the King of Glory, who so stretches out his arm towards you, and bows down his head as if to offer you a kiss (pp. 304-5).