

THE THREE DEGREES

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

MANY treatises have been composed to reveal the intricacies of the way to heaven in terms of the 'three ways'. The division is hoary with age and inescapable in its simplicity. Wherever there is life there must be a beginning, it must grow and develop, and finally it must reach its fulfilment. The beginners, the progressing or proficient and the perfects make the ground plan for the purgative, illuminative and the unitive ways, and for all the other methods of measuring the supernatural growth of a soul in the life of God. But the majority of the treatises, which analyse the stages of the growing Christian, are devoted to one single aspect of Christian life. They are written in terms of the 'soul' rather than of a whole human being, and they consider rather the individual, isolated spirit of a single man than the nature of man in its context of creation. This is no error or lack of vision on the part of the authors of these works, for they are specialists dealing with a particular aspect of holiness and its attainment. What they say is of the greatest value, and is based on the writings of all the great theologians and saints from St Augustine through St Thomas Aquinas to St John of the Cross.

Yet this division needs to be put into a wider context, for it is realised on three distinct levels of Christian life, and these three levels are unhappily too often divorced from one another when they need to be closely bound together if man is really to grow normally holy instead of so often tending to become an abnormality.

The first level is that of nature itself taken as a whole of which man finds himself a part. In this sphere man is forced to enter into a world-wide rhythm of beginning, growth and fulfilment in union with the animals, the plants and the earth itself. This rhythm is for man, his human birth, his growth to maturity and his completed decline to the grave, a develop-

ment which spans the normal life of man. But he has to fit this development into a quicker pulse—that of the single year of spring, summer, winter, in the orderly succession of which seasons he finds his livelihood, and plays his part in the movement of creation as a whole. We know that these seasons themselves are linked with the regular movements of the sun, the earth, the moon, the stars. In short, the 'three ways' in nature are fundamental to the movement of the whole universe and all the invisible natural powers of radiation, gravity, cellular fission and the rest.

In the past man recognised the part this movement played in his life. He recognised how completely dependent he was upon the rain, the wind and the sun, upon the way the day and night behaved according to their regular movements. Whether he was a herdsman or a tiller of the soil he recognised that these powers and their orderly behaviour must be respected, and that if he was to live the orderly life of three score years and ten that he desired, he must live in harmony with spring, summer, winter, with day and night, with sun and moon, with rain and dry air. So he paid his respects to this 'whole' in which he lived by performing all the movements essential to his own life in conscious relation to the movements of the whole. His food was germinated in spring, reaped in summer, and fulfilled his being by sustaining it in winter. His religion and his art were centred round the festivals of sowing, harvesting, and gathering into barns—spring festivals, harvest festivals, and turn-of-the-year festivals. His bringing forth of children and all their natural development to puberty and wedlock and finally to paternity again were all effectively linked to this same cycle of the movements of the heavenly spheres. The contamination of blood, disease and death was something out of harmony with the cycle of life; the powers of nature that led to maturity and perfection had to be placated in order that man might once again take his part in the normal cycle. This was done by purifications which converted the evil into a good, so that even the corpse became a relic, and the departed entered into the perfection of the venerated ancestors.

Thus all the natural life of man was plotted by the motion of the spheres. Feeding and reproduction were understood to be bound up with the seasons and the phases of the moon, and

it was from these movements that the social and intellectual life of man was regulated and developed. In other words, the second level of human life sprang from the first; man necessarily lived a liturgical and ritualistic life following the same rhythm as nature around him. At first it was the need for rain to raise the seeds of corn to full life that led to the new year and spring festivals. Everywhere throughout the world the turn of the year, the spring and the harvest were celebrated ritually, because man cannot simply leave nature to take its course as the birds and the cattle do. Man is an intellectual part of the rhythm of the world and he has to take his part intellectually in this movement or he would be failing in his duty and upsetting the harmony of the spheres. It was in fact essential to the proper functioning of the seasons and of the cycle of life and death that man should have his ceremonial festivals.

When we go behind the scenes of these dances of the stars and dances of the dervishes and discover that this ordered movement proceeds from the unmoved Mover, and that the Creator has set this Nature to work compounded of these milliards of natures each working in its appointed way and playing its ordained part in the eternal cycle, we can realise what the movement means. If God has made this 'Nature', then the men who play the human, intellectual part within the whole, who pay their respects to the powers and harmonise the tribe with the hidden sources of life, are worshipping the Creator in a way consonant with the whole universe. These festivals are fundamentally wholesome in their conception despite the terrible abuses to which they were sometimes put by human sacrifice or torture or taboo. And we can find a ready confirmation of this fact by turning to the history of the Christian ritualistic life of the sacraments and the liturgical year. For the Christian liturgical year of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost was built upon the Jewish year of 'Tabernacles', Pasch and Pentecost, which in its turn derived from the nomadic and agricultural festivals of the herds and the soil—New Year, Spring and Summer; birth, growth and fulfilment. To understand the full significance of Christmas and Epiphany we must see them in terms of the turn-of-the-year, or Easter in terms of spring. It is not that these festivals of ours are merely elaborations of primitive pagan rites; but they have

natural roots, for man worships naturally, in harmony with the rhythm of nature which God is making—or he should be so worshipping however supernatural and perfect his worship may be. The revelation of our Lord's unique way of worship did not destroy the natural rhythm; it perfected it.

The same may be said of the sacraments around which the Christian liturgical life is fashioned. St Thomas has shown how the sacramental 'system' is devised on the same plan as the system of a man's natural life, birth into a human society, growth, purification and perfection. This is not a mere metaphor to explain the sacraments. The soul and the body make one man and both are born, both need to be cleansed, both have to be fed and sustained. The significant Eastern ceremony of having the corn ground and the flour baked by a local deaconess for the celebration of the Eucharist shows how closely this greatest of sacraments is linked with the natural rhythm of seeding and harvesting. In this way the supernatural ritualistic level of Christian life is supported by the understructure of the natural life, harmonised as it is with the music of the spheres. The great stream of Christian art, musical, sculptural, pictorial, architectural, flowed out from this combination of natural and supernatural. This wonderful heritage of Christendom which we see all about us in Europe would never have possessed that vigour had not the stones of the Cathedrals been raised up from the rock of the countryside, and had not the Easter pageantry transformed the ancient fertility rites of the spring. The Christian ritual was not simply imposed on a Europe converted from paganism; the peasants remained as dependent as ever upon those 'gods of nature', the sun and the moon, the rain and the drying wind, and the Church showed how the wind was the breath of God, the sun shone from his face, and the Mother of God stood in the crescent moon. The natural and the intellectual and the ritualistic or ceremonial moved forward together from birth to perfection.

But there is a third level of Christian living which is more easily separated from and set at variance with the other two. This is the realm of the 'spiritual life' to which the scheme of the 'three ways' is nearly always limited. Here the soul, as we have seen, tends to become the exclusive object of interest. But in fact the birth, growth and perfection of the spiritual

life are dependent too upon the ritualistic and so upon the naturalistic foundations that we have been considering. And that development itself should not be limited merely to the individual soul, for the *whole* Christian and the whole of his Christian society proceed according to the same three ways. The growth in perfection certainly can proceed independently, or rather it can by its own vigour dominate all the outward circumstances. A man may reach sanctity in the squalor of a slum as well as in the even but energetic existence of the peasant. Yet where there is no contact with the natural rhythm of life the spiritual growth is more difficult and the final achievement is likely to be less complete and balanced. The Church has been provided by her Founder with the means of leading her members to perfection; the initiation of the spiritual life and its purification, which are 'purgative' and belong to the stage of the 'beginner', are granted through Baptism and Penance; the development by way of 'illumination' is provided for the 'proficient' by Confirmation, Matrimony and Holy Orders; and the ultimate union of the 'perfects' in the unitive way comes to them through the Eucharist. These sacraments are administered in the liturgical cycle, as already noticed, and are themselves rooted in the movement of the seasons and the natural progress of a man's life, as a member of society as well as a child of the Creator.

* * *

In the present state of civilisation these three sections of a man's Christian life have been almost entirely dislocated so that they have little connection one with the other. Always in a decadent civilisation the second and the third sections become dissociated from one another so that the truly moral life has little to do with the ritualistic life of priests and sacrifices. This was so in the time of our Lord when the Jews lived one sort of ceremonial life and an entirely different spiritual life. Our Lord was constantly pointing out how the two had fallen apart for the men who washed the outside of the cup only. The same dislocation may be observed in any religion where the more 'mystical' elements develop into a movement more or less in opposition to the official religion of the 'gods'—witness the majority of the Persian mystics or even the more platonic leaders among the Greeks before the time of our Lord.

But however divorced the inner life was from the outer, official, worship of the country, the latter was usually respected precisely because it was itself still securely tied to the natural basis of religion in the seasonal life of the world. Now, however, the great majority of people have lost touch with the sense of the seasons as of any vital importance to their lives. They have become scientifically interested in the way the weather works, but they do not accept and respect their dependence on the hidden powers that produce the weather in its seasons. Men for the most part have contact with the soil only through the pavement or the 'tar-mac' road. The spring is something to be observed through a convenient gap in the hedge as they speed, shielded from wind, rain or cold, on rubber tyres from one city to the next. The summer means little more than sand and sunburn. There is no recognition of a rhythm here, still less a protestation of dependence. Every wholesome society must have its roots in the soil, sustained in life by the day and night, the summer and the winter. Not that everyone must work on the land: the roots are hidden, the trunk and branches and leaves are more noticeable—but the roots must be long and tenacious of Mother Earth, clinging to her breasts to sustain life.

That natural rhythm has been broken and consequently the rhythm of the liturgical year and of the sacraments no longer bears relation to what should be its true source and foundation. Easter and Pentecost do not look at the mysterious power of God at work in spring and summer for the foundation of their symbolism. In the southern hemisphere people are content to celebrate Christmas at midsummer because they have not recognised the inconsistency implied in celebrating the turn of the year at that time. Moreover, the sacraments are administered at any time, and the material used for them is not gathered locally from the vines or olive groves, from the wheat fields or even the local springs of living water. The Mass is the sacrifice of the day, but no one now is concerned as to what time of the day: is it a morning sacrifice or an evening? Has it any connection with the rising sun and the movements towards its zenith of the sun's power? Such a question might today be regarded as foolish if not somewhat indecent. But it does represent a dislocation in the Christian's

life, that such questions seldom occur to his mind. Again, to the man who lived in respectful dependence upon the hidden power of God in nature, such rituals as blood sacrifices and the offering of victims had a very profound relation to his manner of life. The blood of circumcision or of childbirth was not merely a medical fact but something connected with the natural development of his life. For such people the eternal sacrifice of Calvary was of immense significance. It was to them the eternal purification, the purgative way achieved for all men, for every tribe and family. But today it becomes increasingly difficult to explain why the outpouring of this Precious Blood was required by the Father of his beloved Son.

The result of this divorce between the ritual level of a man's Christian life and its natural level shows itself in a great number of ways, particularly in the impossibility of achieving any truly Christian art and culture (without the natural *cultus* of the soil, 'agri-culture', the other cultures disappear). But for practical purposes the most important effect is that the ritual level of man's life has become wholly artificial. It is perhaps for this reason that the average man finds little appeal in the ordinary liturgical functions, and why there has to be so much artificial encouragement for people to enter into the spirit of the liturgy. Moreover, as a general rule the sacraments are seen simply in relation to 'salvation' and not as part of the daily life of a Christian in a Christian society. This also may account for the fact that all the modern difficulties surrounding married life, with its concentration on 'sex', has little connection with the mysterious source of supernatural life flowing out from the sacraments.

Finally, the growth of the individual soul has now become equally artificial, and the perusal of the majority of books on the spiritual life leave one with the sense that it all has very little connection with the life of the ordinary man in the street. The people who consciously set out to wade through the mud-flats of the purgative way in order to reach the green banks of infused contemplation are almost universally regarded as being 'out of the ordinary' and in some way 'not normal'. They seldom link up their individual life of perfection with the liturgical cycle, or treat the worship of the Church as anything more than one source from which they can get a few helps in

the spiritual life. Purgation, illumination and union—these divisions have become almost unreal—and the reason would seem to be that the whole way of perfection as outlined in the 'three ways' has become separated from the other two levels of Christian living. The Cistercian way of life still remains after a thousand years one of the supremely wholesome ways of reaching heaven precisely because it links all three into close association. The Cistercian follows our Lord into the realms of contemplation by devoting his life to the liturgical cycle of the life of Christ in the mystical body, and at the same time this life grows up from a close contact with the seasons and the soil. Members of modern religious orders often confess that there come times of tension when the whole system of life seems to become unnatural and almost unbearable. At such times one of the surest remedies is to go out into the garden and dig or pull up weeds. The purification of the soil will provide a purification of the soul.

• The purpose of this article is to make a diagnosis, not to suggest remedies. The finding of some way back to the unification of these three sections of the Christian's birth-to-death cycle presents one of the greatest problems of the day. In more primitive times these three layers were taken without thought as essential to life. It was an exception for a man to ignore the phases of the year; it was equally exceptional for him not to take part in the religious expression given to these phases in the ritual life of his society. But in those times the ritual was as much part of the divine movement of the spheres as the rising of the sun. Now we have to persuade man to adopt a set of symbols and to take part in a series of ceremonies which appear to him entirely concocted by his own predecessors. It is rather like asking a man to take part seriously in some piece of play-acting invented by his grandfather in the Victorian age. And if that is so in the case of the liturgy, a man is even more artificial when he takes up the mystics. The reason is surely that both have become divorced from the fundamental cycle of life and the movement of ritual (the liturgical movement) in their proper setting, with their source welling up from the bowels of the earth. The activities of mystics or liturgists at least should be co-ordinated and they should try to abandon the excessive specialisation into which everyone has fallen.