

William of Saint Thierry (VI):

by Geoffrey Webb

Saint Benedict's Rule, which was the most basic piece of government in the lives of thousands of medieval Christians, visualises the good life as a return to paradise, a return made possible through the merits of the Redeemer, and essentially an imitation of His life. The lost image of God was found again when the novice heard the voice of his master, calling clearly for the first time: 'If today you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts'. The Redeemer has put everything at the novice's disposal in the church and, more specifically, in the monastery. The monastery is a quintessence of the church in its life of community, its consecration to the one thing necessary, and its gradual preparation for the fulness of the beatific vision.

The ideal groundwork for Saint Benedict's theology of conversion was already in existence, already a tradition, in Augustine's teaching of a divine image deformed at the fall, and in constant process of reformation until the final union with God whose image the soul is. There is a catena from Saint Paul . . . 'Be not conformed to this world, but be reformed, so that the image may be reformed by Him who formed it.' 'When the vision of God is perfect, the soul's similitude to God will be perfect also. Now we see in a glass darkly . . . We are transformed from glory to glory in the same image. This is happening from day to day in those who strive after God.' 'Now we bear the image, not yet in vision but in faith. We bear it in hope, not yet in full reality.'

The image of God for Augustine, as for the tradition that stems from him, is to be found in the trinity of man's spiritual powers, memory, reason and will. Adam's fall meant a change in all three of these powers, with memory forgetting God, knowledge becoming knowledge of error, and love turning into lust. Paradise, in Augustine's extreme view of the situation, was completely forgotten. Beatitude was *penitus oblita*. And for this reason he visualises the first step of Redemption (in general) and conversion (in particular) as a restoration of the *memory* of God by holy scripture, those 'letters written by the prophets, telling of the happiness of Paradise', which are to be believed on the authority of God the revealer.

In the Benedictine school, where this doctrine of the little trinity became a hallowed commonplace, it is interesting to note that the pessimism of Augustine's total trauma was replaced by a much

more cheerful proposition, namely the awakening, rousing voice of God, shaking the soul out of sleep. Seen in this light, the fall was more like an intervening bad dream, and the joyful awakening brought back a clear remembrance of the soul's first happiness. Conversion begins with a truly Platonist doctrine of reminiscence.

William of Saint Thierry writes in his early *Nature and Dignity of Love* . . . 'When the Trinity created man by breathing into his face the breath of life (that is to say his spiritual and mental powers, and the powers of life, growth and movement), God placed in his head the faculty of memory, so that he might always remember the goodness and might of his creator. Then, without any interval of time, memory generated reason, and from memory and reason proceeded the will. Thus the memory possesses and contains in itself the term to which man should tend. The reason knows that he should so tend, and the will actually tends toward the term. These three faculties are a unit, although they are three efficient powers. In the divine Trinity there is one substance but three persons. God the Father generates God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit proceeds from them both. Likewise memory generates reason, and from these two proceeds the will. Now in order that the rational soul created in man may cleave strongly to God, the Father claims the memory for His own, the Son takes the reason for Himself, while the Holy Spirit who proceeds from them both, claims the will.'

The Father claims the memory for his own because it contains the term to which man should tend. It contains God, because it remembers God. The memory, as Saint Aelred says, has a share in God's eternity, just as knowledge shares his wisdom, and love tastes his goodness. God is not completely forgotten at the fall. The image is not destroyed, only damaged. It is basic to Cistercian thought that the image of God, whatever it is placed in (free will, or love, or a trinity of faculties) is not lost through Adam's sin. It is only the likeness or similitude that is lost. Here an important distinction was made from the Vulgate *imago* and *similitudo*, although the Hebrew parallel does not, of course, allow any such distinction to be made. However, the theology is complete enough in itself to be considered quite independently of the springboard terminology.

Since, after the fall, memory remembers only *less* well, and has not completely forgotten its original home in paradise, the vindication of memory by God the Father is more of a reminding process, a recalling of the half-forgotten and the unaverted-to. In the same way, as we shall see, William visualises the Holy Spirit's vindication of the will as an adjustment and correction of human love. Love does not have to be taught all over again, as it were from lesson one. In almost any conversion process, one imagines, grace must come as a reminder of a host of truths about God, either basic in the natural law or taught Christianwise, which have never impinged so much as

at the moment of realising that here is God, and – incredibly but convincingly – he wants me.

William of Saint Thierry's *ex professo* treatment of the recollection process is in his unfinished commentary on the Canticle. The images of wine cellar and breasts make him think of the refuge and consolation that the scriptures are. When we remember how, for the monks of his period, the bible was staple spiritual food, the only other authors in the library being scripture commentators, and a few representatives of pagan antiquity, we can see how sincerely and how un fancifully he makes his comparison between the breasts of the mystic bridegroom and the two testaments, 'from which is sucked the milk of all the mysteries accomplished in history for our eternal salvation, so that we may come to the food that is the Word of God, God with God'. The breasts of the bridegroom give nourishment in the wine cellars, meaning that the mysteries are understood in the scriptures. The first giving of nourishment from Christ to the soul is the beginning of understanding. 'And when she (the bride, the soul) ponders over what she has understood, those breasts are brought to mind. She remembers, and their presence returns to her.' 'Look for God in simplicity' is William's reminder, 'try to have Him always in the memory. Loving Him, you will know and understand Him, and this understanding will make you love him more. You will experience His goodness, His eternity.'

What happens here is simply a reversal of what happened at the fall, which we all share in our facility for disobeying God. 'Wandering away from God because of the wrong kind of love, the wrong intentions . . . the memory is so deeply impressed by things of the flesh, that even when these things are absent, their images are still present to the mind. After the fleshly act is done, the love of it lingers. Voices are silent, but the soul can still be tormented by remembered words. Only cleanse yourself, and you will find the kingdom of God within you. Recognise your dignity, for the image of God is in you, and see how His portrait shines in your soul.'

Implicit in this theology of memory is an opposition between absence and presence. It can be taken in the first place to mean the absence of God to the soul before it turns to Him, and the presence it finds when God reveals Himself in the memory. Or, as we more often find it, it means that the presence of God enjoyed in the soul is but a presage and a pale image of the presence yet to be enjoyed in the beatific vision. And so this presence of God in the soul on earth is, by comparison with the presence hoped for, a kind of absence. The whole effort of life then becomes a concentration on making that partial presence of God in the soul ever deeper and more satisfying. Fully satisfying in this life it can, of course, never be, and so the soul has a perpetual incentive to look for something deeper, something further.

When William comes to comment on the line ‘My love is a bundle of myrrh’, he recalls that myrrh is supposed to have the virtue of strengthening the memory. ‘What does this mean, if not that the articles of faith are a bundle of myrrh to be placed between the breasts, in the heart, that is to say, in the secure seat of memory, in the tenderness of a truly loving soul? This is the bundle of myrrh, the dispensation of Our Lord’s humanity, with all the many benefits which come of it for us. After the gift of wisdom and the grace of eloquence, there is a gift of sweet perfume, so that the bride may always have a devout memory, with perpetual sweetness, of the Lord’s suffering and death, forever breathing forth charity. There is a consolation in this myrrh, strengthening the memory, reminding the lover, helping him to think on Christ’s goodness and the reason for His suffering and the sweetness of his love.’

And so we find that the traditional *memoria* of God the Father and creator, becomes a *memoria* of His Son, the bridegroom, the soul’s lover in the flesh, who offers body and blood to prove His love for man. We find the same kind of development in Saint Aelred’s ‘Mirror of Charity’, where he begins traditionally enough with the doctrine that ‘memory can share in God’s eternity, knowledge can share His wisdom, and love can taste His sweetness’, but develops the thought so that the emphasis eventually falls on the second person of the Trinity. ‘Jesus Christ the Mediator . . . has made peace with the Father for us by His sacrifice on the cross. He repairs our memory by the teaching of Holy Scripture, our reason by the mysteries of the faith, our love by the daily increase of charity.’ The Cistercian school perceives, in other words, and perceives in a thoroughly experiential way, how Our Lord sums up both testaments in Himself, the old and the new, and as Mediator embodies God for man’s salvation – a salvation that is essentially an encounter with, and an experience of God, in love and faith and the hope of beatitude.

‘Mindful, therefore, O Lord, not only of Christ’s blessed passion, but also of his resurrection from the dead and his glorious ascension into heaven . . .’ . . . to remember the life of Christ is to be brought into His real and living presence as in liturgical prayer. A meditation on the gospel, for the Cistercians, was a prolongation of the experience of mass, if we can take the little work that Saint Aelred wrote for his sister as a guide. ‘Here are His wounds, like holes in the rock which is His body, welcoming you as a dovecote welcomes the dove. Kiss each wound until your lips, like those of the bride in the Canticle, are like a scarlet lace, and your words, like hers, are sweet.’

Inevitably a devotion so tender and so affective was bound to decline in some quarters toward sentimental imaginings and hallucinations, but in its XII century setting it was still objective, still rooted in a scriptural and patristic culture. It emphasized the necessity of experience, certainly, with feelings, tears, the whole

psychological endowment of man, but it occupied itself with *facts* – the mysteries of faith, which are the realities of love, and the substance of what a Christian hopes for, and therefore holds fast with conviction.

Forty-five Years Ago

'No one's life is safe, however innocent; no one's home is secure from raids by day or by night. Cruelty begets cruelty, and there is no limit to the lawlessness of the auxiliary forces even in the most peaceful villages. Proceedings are so reckless that individuals are frequently attacked or even killed in mistake for others . . . Is it surprising that in many quarters peace talk is regarded with incredulity? True the greater portion of Ireland is utterly sick of violence and longing for peace and security, but there can be no hope of peace if Mr Lloyd George assumes that Sinn Fein is a broken and discredited party to whom terms can be dictated. On the contrary, the Government must first give some tangible proof of their changed attitude – such as the withdrawal of the Black-and-Tans – in order to overcome the deep-seated suspicion with which over here all English promises are regarded. The Irish have been tricked and cheated so often that we have forfeited all claim on their confidence. None the less the Sinn Fein leaders must know that today they are up against the whole military strength of Great Britain and that they cannot prolong the struggle indefinitely. Where they have won at least a moral victory is in convicting England, in the face of the whole world, of being unable to rule Ireland save by force and terrorism in opposition to every principle of government she professes to hold dear. England in her turn, cannot afford to allow a position so humiliating in the eyes of the world to continue.'

(*Blackfriars* January 1921)

(In the first 11 months of 1965, 1,100 Americans, 33,682 of the Vietcong and 10,041 South Vietnamese have been killed—*The Times* December 18th.)