

I am not good but if I love God the better . . . for I am certain that there be many that never had Shewing nor sight but of the common teaching of Holy Church, that love God better than I.' (c. 9.) At the very end she seems to be conscious that what had been begun by heavenly visitation was still incomplete. 'This book is begun by God's gift and His grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight' (c. 86). She is conscious of her shortcomings, and in particular is she constantly sorrowing over her infidelity when, for a brief moment, she spurned these revelations, saying she had raved. But our Lord seems not to have upbraided her for her doubts, but later comforts her and assures her that the Shewings were of God. At another time she seems to have regretted having asked for the grace to suffer with Christ (c. 17). But these are brief infidelities, due more to the first movement of nature than to any deliberate choice, and it must be admitted that the evidence of the book suggests she had already reached a fairly high state of perfection when that eighth day of May dawned in 1373. The intellectual visions and understandings of what she had seen could only come to one already experiencing infused contemplation. And we have her witness that the Lord never really left her, in spite of her infidelity.

In all this blessed Shewing our good Lord gave understanding that the Sight should pass: which blessed Shewing the Faith keepeth, with His own good will and His grace. For He left me with neither sign nor token whereby I might know it, but He left me with His own blessed word in true understanding. So the holy maid grounded in faith, learnt to grow always more responsive to the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, growing into the Life of Union.



## ON THE EXCELLENCE OF THE SOUL

BY

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**M**AN'S soul is so wonderfully elevated above the condition of the body that it might be said to approximate more closely to the God who made it than to the body to which it is attached, and it is true that in the soul, alone of all created things, can be traced certain traits and lineaments of God's perfections. It is spiritual like God, and like God it is incorruptible and everlasting. It is free, it is able to foresee and provide, it has

<sup>1</sup> From '*Doctrine Spirituelle*'.

its will of which it disposes. Does it not appear to enjoy the privileges of eternity, when it looks into the future, makes the past live again and disposes of the present?

But never does it seem more like to God than when, soaring above all that is created it loses itself in the vast abyss of his infinite perfections, and, realising that it cannot comprehend them, is content to remain lost in them forever with no desire to return. Seeing it in this state, one would say, 'Here is a God rather than a creature'. It is when it returns that it seems lost, being no longer in its adorable centre. It seeks nothing any more but only God. In short the soul is so great and so wonderful that it knows not itself. Saint Augustine, speaking of the soul, cries out as if ravished out of himself: 'I know not what thou hast given me, O my God, my Creator, in giving me such a soul! It is a marvel known to thee alone. No other person can comprehend it, and if I could do so, I should see clearly that after thee there is nothing more grand than my soul.'

We might never have known the nature of this precious gift of God, nor have noticed the great esteem in which he holds it, if Holy Scripture, in order to accommodate itself to our way of understanding, had not made use of a metaphor where, under the veil of six words, it both hides and reveals to us six great marvels in the creation of our soul: '*Inspiravit in faciem ejus spiraculum vite*' (Gen. 2, 7), 'He breathed into his face the breath of life'.

Weigh well each of these words. First we are told that our soul was brought forth by the breath of God; not indeed that he has a mouth to breathe with after the manner of man, but to make us understand that he esteems the soul and holds it dear as the breath of his own life. It is true that he brought it forth out of nothing as he did the rest of creatures, but Holy Scripture, in telling us that it is a breath from his bosom, would explain that he draws it forth with an affection so special and tender, as though breathed from the region of his heart—'*inspiravit*'! Even more, Holy Scripture does not tell us that God produced our soul with his hands as he did our body, nor that he created it by speaking, as with the rest of beings—but by breathing, almost sighing, that we might understand it is as though he had given birth to some most dear conception that had lain in his bosom from all eternity—as though it had issued from the very centre of his Being, like a breath. And that like the inspiration of air which goes to the heart, leaves it but for a single instant and then returns immediately to refresh it again and keep it in life; even so our soul only goes forth from God in order to return. He breathes it forth only to draw it back anew.

It would seem to be a relief to his heart when the soul goes forth from him, yet somehow he is refreshed and consoled when it returns to him again by a loving aspiration.

Oh, if we could know what our soul is to the heart of God! It knows not how to live without him, and he is not satisfied without it. It is incomparably more than respiration is to our heart. Whoever would prevent my breathing would stifle my heart: may I not believe that I do violence to the heart of God, when my soul refuses to follow the divine inspirations that attract it lovingly to repose in his bosom?

Yet with all this we shall not reach the depth of the mystery hidden in the words 'He breathed into his face the breath of life'. I believe they are pregnant with tremendous truths which would be brought forth in our spirits were we capable of understanding them, for they seem to tell us that our soul is a spirit put into us by God, and brought forth by way of *spiration*.

What marvel is this?

Remember that God has only two ways of producing everything within himself. In one he speaks, and he produces his only begotten Son whom we call his Word. In the other he does not speak but he breathes, almost sighs, and produces from his heart, that is his Will, his divine Love which we call the Holy Spirit, and this adorable Spirit is the term and accomplishment of all his interior activities. Considering whether God acts similarly outside of himself, he would seem to have produced all creatures in two ways, by speaking and by breathing. First of all he created all the beings which make up the great universe, and this he did by speaking—'*Fiat lux, fiat firmamentum*' (Gen. 1, 26), and when after everything else he came to create the human soul, it was not by speaking but by breathing. Thus Holy Scripture speaks. Then it adds that this bringing forth of the soul was the term and accomplishment of all the works of God outside himself, after which he rested as if in divine complaisance over so beautiful a work.

Where is there a soul so little enlightened as not to be transported with joy contemplating the wonderful relationship and bond that God has willed to establish between his Spirit and our spirit? The Holy Spirit is a sacred breathing from the heart of God filling him with infinite joy in himself, while our soul is a breathing from the bosom of God causing him complaisance outside himself. The Holy Spirit is the last of the ineffable productions of God within himself, while our soul is the last of all the admirable works of God outside himself. . . .

*Translated by C. R.*