

FATHER STEUART, S.J. 1874-1948

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IN the following issues of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* there will appear a series of Fr Steuart's 'Meditations' on the *Our Father* given as closely as possible in the same words as they came from his vital and magnetic personality. The *Our Father* was his favourite topic, and indeed it must be so for us all. One of the greatest questions addressed to Christ by his apostles was 'Teach us to pray', and one imagines the whole world waiting in intense expectancy for the divine answer. And it comes: 'Thus shall ye pray, "Our Father".'

It was a maxim of Father Steuart's for young preachers that if they wished to succeed they must be in a white heat of desire to convey the truth they are teaching, and that this of itself would ensure both attention and response on the part of their hearers. Fr Steuart himself was a perfect example of this. He never embarked on a sermon or conference in an easy nonchalant sort of way, but always with that sense of responsibility, and even at times anxiety, which sprang from this sincerity and conviction.

For deep spiritual conviction was the characteristic of Fr Steuart's teaching. And this is in no way incompatible with the self-revelations quoted by Fr Martindale in his Memoir. In the intimacy of these private notes, Fr Steuart expresses in no measured terms the sense of failure and frustration he so often felt.

The notes are usually the results of self-examination following the making of a retreat. They are consistently gloomy, a depressing record. He wrote in 'a key of continuous lamentation' or of 'recurrent melancholy', as Fr Martindale says. He was a failure in the Society, in everything he set himself to do. 'I am the cold, negligent, unspiritual, worldly, self-indulgent, idle, prayerless priest that I thought it possible—barely possible—that I might become.' This was written at Stonyhurst in 1913, and it is significant that two years later he emerged as an army chaplain of whose courage and devotedness everyone spoke the highest things.

About the time that he was appointed Superior at Oxford, December 1921, there is another burst of self-condemnation. 'My weak, inconstant, ease-loving, muddle-headed, extravagant nature unfits me completely for the charge of anything.' Yet this was the period when, according to those who knew him well at the time, he was to begin that deeper spiritual growth which fitted him for his finest work of dealing with souls in retreats and in direction.

In 1924 he writes 'with shame' because people have begun to have a good opinion of him whilst he thinks of himself as 'without principles, virtues, strength, courage, honesty', and much more: a comprehensive catalogue of shortcomings, failures, sins, with no ray of light or hope to be found in it. Yet in 1926 he began, during his nine years as Superior at Farm Street, what are generally acknowledged to be the most fertile, fruitful years of his life.

How then is it possible to reconcile Fr Steuart's strong spiritual convictions, his ever-recurrent theme of God's love for *me*, together with the success of his apostolate, and this other side of deep gloom amounting almost to despair?

Yet was it not this alternating experience of darkness and light, of despair and hope which made him a master director of souls, one who knows at first hand the weakness of human nature, and who has learned through this very knowledge to cling to God?

In a conference given to Religious we find Fr Steuart himself throwing light on the problem. 'I am afraid', he said, 'when I think of the account I may have to render. Why do I not do what I was called to do?'

'Then on the other hand I am comforted because I see that our Lord has entered into every detail of human experience. He allowed himself to go to the very edge of human despair; he allowed himself to feel the sensation of fear. He permitted it, so that even in our fear we see that God is with us. It may be perhaps that the sort of suffering we are going to be called to is personal fear and terror at our own failure and inadequacy.'

He is aware that 'the Christ-life in us always expresses itself in pain. Not because there is any as it were "chemical" virtue in pain itself, but that the life of union with God,

which is the Christ-life, is proved by his human history to mean inexorably that we must suffer as he had to. When one sees this and bravely accepts it, it becomes paradoxically sweet to us, though none the less "hateful"?

The reviewer of *The Two Voices* in THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT makes an interesting suggestion:

'In reading this memoir one may be led to question whether the Ignatian system was quite suitable to this Scot. It is possible that with a different sort of training the pre-occupation with the ideal of holiness which stands out as the impelling positive theme of the life of this great man would have borne fruit even more quickly and more abundantly.'

As against this opinion there are those who would emphatically reply that a character like Fr Steuart's needed all the discipline and self-searching of the Exercises and spirit of St Ignatius, not merely for his spiritual growth, but for the very safety of his soul.

Be that as it may, it is clear that Fr Steuart learned to draw largely for himself and for those whom he directed, not only from his Father, St Ignatius, but also from the Carmelite school.

As one might expect, the structure of his retreats was always based on the Exercises of St Ignatius. From them he drew valuable advice on prayer, especially in its early stages. His hearers during retreats were taught, for instance, the 'Second Method' as it is called, by which one dwells on each phrase of a prayer for as long as possible in peace and recollection.

Then later he would pass easily to the teaching of St John of the Cross, explaining the three signs given by this master of prayer for moving from discursive meditation to contemplation. One needs only to compare Fr Steuart's teaching with much of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* to see how deeply he had absorbed it. One almost hears the voice of St John of the Cross in the cry which seemed to come from the depth of Fr Steuart's own soul: 'How hard, how terrible, how almost unbearable is the way of the soul whom God leads through this illuminating obscurity, more and more into nothing, and nothing, and nothing'.

Hilda Graef, in her book *The Way of the Mystics*, com-

compares the two schools. She writes in reference to St Francis de Sales: 'It is the Dominican emphasis on the Divine action that penetrates, though not consciously, Teresian spirituality; it is the Jesuit stress on human co-operation that gives the Salesian doctrine its peculiarly "modern" flavour'.

If we accept this idea, we can see in studying Fr Steuart's writings and conferences that he drew from both. He almost despaired at not being able to rise to his ideal of co-operation with God, and in doing so, he soared in spite of himself into heights of confidence and hope. That was why he was so well able to instil this same confidence and hope into the most depressed of his penitents.

'People setting out on the spiritual life', he said, 'think what it is going to involve: a long frightening vista of mortification, self-denial, humility, charity. What a labour in the saints! What marvellous perseverance and courage and faith and hope had to be brought into play every instant of their lives; and I am discouraged and say "It can't be!" One has heard of people saying they wished they did not believe in God because it was torment to think how perfect they ought to be, and how frightfully difficult it was.'

'And so, looking forward to growth in holiness, getting closer to God, I always have the idea that it is on my part, that I have got to labour for it, and that God is there but I have got to shorten the distance between us. Well, if instead I get this idea of God eagerly getting to me! If I think of Christ's idea of the Father, I know that God is labouring to get to me; and why he has to labour is because it is I who make the obstacles! "If only you'd 'be still' and let me come to you!", one can imagine God saying. . . . No one ever suggested that the Christian life was an easy one—that sanctity was easy to attain. The "Our Father" shows us the closeness and immeasurable love between us and God—God who loves us as a Father loves his children; who will not let us go; up to the limit of our free wills drawing us.'

It was this lesson of complete trust which he passed on to those he directed more perhaps than any other; it was this that lay at the root of his teaching on the *Our Father*, and of all his teaching; it was this that changed words of despair into words of sublime hope.