

THE MYSTICISM OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

ABOUT the year 1528, the parents of St. John, Gonzalo de Yepes of Toledo and Catalina Alvarez of Toledo, were married in the village of Fontiveros on the plateau of Old Castile. It was not a *mariage de convenance*, but undeniably a love-match. Spanish biographers of the Saint tell us that, whilst Gonzalo was of 'rich and noble parentage,' Catalina was of parentage that was not noble nor perhaps reputable. But these same biographers, as if to soften Gonzalo's misdemeanour in marrying beneath the family, take care to add that the young girl he loved was of rare beauty and virtue. As was to be expected in the Spain of the mid-sixteenth century, Gonzalo's choice of a wife was never forgiven by the family. But, on the other hand, it was never repented of by Gonzalo; whose simplicity of mind seemed to think that a wife not only good but good-looking had the makings of a successful life-mate for himself and mother for his children.

We are not to take too seriously what the biographers say about the nobility of Gonzalo's family. Their noble Castilian blood did not forbid the Yepes family from making their money by trading in silk. When Gonzalo's marriage with Catalina meant his dismissal from the service of his silk-mercator uncle, love and poverty became the abiding guests of their home.

The most recent biographer of St. John has wisely drawn a picture of this home into which the doctor of Mysticism was born.

'The young couple who were without means set up house at Fontiveros and from Catalina Gonzalo bravely took lessons in weaving wool and silk. Henceforth he nobly wore the livery of the poor. Catalina like a true Toledan was scrupulously clean. Her clothes were poor, but she took such care of them and wore them with so much grace that long after she had left that district three old ladies still spoke of her as a person of quality.

'The young people had a hard time of it, for they could rely only on the work of their own hands. The Creator blessed this home, so like the home at Nazareth.'¹

Into this Nazareth, Juan Yepes was born in 1542. He was the last of three children, all boys. With the birth of the future Saint, death entered the little family. Shortly before the child was born, his father sickened of the disease that was to mean two years of nursing for the mother of the babe. From his cradle he seemed to be predestined 'John of the Cross.' We shall not enter into the mysticism of the Saint if we do not understand the sufferings of this wife and mother, who is at once suckling her babe, nursing her dying husband, caring for her boys Francisco and Luis, earning the family livelihood by weaving and—shall we not add?—playing a Monica part to the Augustine of Mysticism.

If, later on, the little Juan, called 'of the Cross,' has plain words about detachment from one's kindred, it was at once hard and easy to write as he wrote. It was easy to preach such detachment when he recalled the hard-heartedness of his father's people, of his uncle, the Archdeacon, who ignored them, and his uncle the doctor, who exploited them. But when he recalled his mother who faced long foot-journeys and insults and want for love of him, detachment became the hard offering of what is best in human life for what is best in the life Divine.

It seems certain that twice in early boyhood Juan tasted the asceticism of famine. The Saint's schooling was thus of the highest. The Saint's teacher, his mother, was the best. As his biographer says:

'His family circle soaked him in true Christianity. Catalina was most charitable. One day she picked up a poor child at a church door and kept it as her own until it died.'² 'When Francisco had married a poor wife worthy of him, he endeared himself to his younger brother by bringing

¹ *St. John of the Cross*. By Fr. Bruno, O.D.C.; Edited by Fr. Benedict Zimmermann, O.D.C. (Sheed & Ward).

² *Ibid*, p. 7.

THE MYSTICISM OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

up foundlings, because he loved poverty and begged it from God as a favour.³

In this school of what our English mystics call 'wilful poverty,' Catalina put her last-born, unsuccessfully, to learn craft after craft. Thus he was placed in turn with a carpenter, a tailor, a wood-carver and a painter. If, later on, the University of Salamanca did not stampede his quiet mind, it was because a hard training in the University of life had prepared him for the hard temptation of the University of letters. No doubt the undersized, underfed boy, whose craft was to be in practising and singing Divine love, was not likely to be of much use to master-joiners or master-tailors or master-painters with their heart on the yearly balance-sheet. Yet the dark-eyed boy with the broad, high forehead carried from these crafts something that he used—as indeed he used all his powers—to help souls to God. At Duruelo, in 1569, St. Teresa visited the first poor priory of the Reform. But whilst its poverty drew tears from two Medina merchants, her companions, Teresa was filled with admiration at the spirit of devotion that reigned there.

' . . . There was, in particular, a little wooden Cross which Teresa never forgot. It was placed beside the Holy Water stoup. Father John—it must have been he—had pasted on the cross a paper picture of Christ crucified which inspired the mother with greater devotion than any work of Art. John carved crucifixes and made sketches of Christ in His agony that are heart-rending.'⁴ His days with the painter enabled him to give a sketch of the Mount of Perfection which formed the theme of his masterpiece, the Ascent of Mount Carmel.

A page from the story of the Saint's priorship at Granada recalls his early training in the poverty of hand-work. 'John did not disdain to work himself; he mixed lime and sand with his own hands and made bricks.'⁵ (His brother) Fran-

³ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 87.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 240. The present writer would almost willingly exchange the Ascent of Mount Carmel for one of these saint-made bricks!

cisco de Yepes came on from Castile and, as was known, helped with the mason work. John used to introduce him to noble visitors with: "Sir, this is my brother whom I love most of all in the world."⁶

'The monastery was in . . . a severe solitary locality, with nothing to attract the senses. "I believe, Father," a visiting Provincial said jokingly, "that you are a peasant's son, since you love the country so much." "Why, no," replied John, "I am the son of a poor weaver."'

From his mother more than from his father he had drawn a body whose almost dwarfishness was mated with unusual powers of endurance. In this, as in so much else, he was akin to the little tent-maker of Tarsus. Years of acquaintance with most forms of human want and suffering had steeled his will into a heroic self-control. Like the Castilian plains and mountains where he dwelt, his outlook was a contrast of the brightest sunshine and the deepest shade—day passing at a stroke into the depths of night. So blended and united became everything in his life and soul that he himself could not say and would hardly enquire where the mysterious frontiers between nature and grace lay in his soul. A boy of nine who deliberately makes his nightly bed on vine twigs presents a problem in psychology explicable only by the paradox of St. Bernard, 'all is attributable to nature; and all is attributable to grace.' Again, there is psychological as well as historical truth in the story that, when his boyish game of throwing sticks into a pond was nearly costing his death by drowning, Our Blessed Lady appeared to him, saying, 'Give me your hand, child, and I will take you out!' If, in a dramatic challenge to his contemporaries, Juan Yepes came out of the slough of wealth and glory that was sixteenth-century Spain, it was because his hand was taken by the poor maid whose name is Mary of Nazareth.

The young silk trader who had given up his wealth and kindred to wed a penniless weaver seems to have passed on

⁶ P. 240.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

to his son the poetic cast of soul. St. John, even if he had never penned a stanza, would have proved himself a poet almost by every line of his unstudied prose. It is not so much in what a man writes or says, as in what he sees, that he proves himself a poet. His highest gift will always be to see where others see nought—to see much even in the least—to see all roses in one rose—and in pale moonlight to discern the sun. In his fullness of insight he is as one

Who feels the infinite must be
Best said by triviality.

Supreme poets like Francis of Assisi and Juan de Fontiveros go back to things primary—to the divine simplicities of vision and desire and to the human simplicities of a language that out-dates and out-soars Art. To enter into their song we must not forget what set them to their singing. It was after a sleepless, vermin-harried night that the blind Francis sang his Ode to the Sun. It was after long months of harsh solitude in a prison cell that this Spanish brother of the Poverello sang of the Dark Night that leads to God and the steep Carmel Sierra crowned with perfection and perfect vision.

This poetic power was fitly mated with an intelligence we can only call architectonic. We should not be surprised if some of the Saint's fellows in the Salamanca schools of theology were minded to call him 'the Dull Ox of Fontiveros.' But if there was any slowness in the Saint's assimilation of the highest truth, it was because he realised that truth was not merely to be tasted but assimilated, so that the word might become flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone.

The masters of this mind were some of the foremost Spanish minds of the day. His few years of daily attendance at the College of the Society of Jesus brought the lad into daily contact with the young Juan Bonifacio, who had a full helping of the Jesuit genius for combining the apostolic life with an accomplished humanism. No doubt the keen-witted shrimp of a boy who was expressing his soul in terms of a vine-twig mattress was not untouched by the

prayer crusade of his fellow-Spaniard, St. Ignatius. But though such a boy would have had no difficulty in finding his way through his Jesuit school into a Jesuit novitiate, it was the Carmelite novitiate at Medina that received the Saint in his twenty-first year.

A year later, as a professed brother of the Order of Carmel, he takes his place in the Carmelite house in the University city of Salamanca. It was during the four years of his student life at Salamanca that the intelligence of the future Doctor of Mysticism may be said to have had competent and sufficient masters. These masters led him to their common master, St. Thomas, whose unique synthesis of Reason and Faith was nowhere more valued and taught than in the schools at Salamanca. Any student of the two doctors will see that the young Carmelite student was a philosopher of first water. The future writer of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* realized that, if all Science is the knowledge of things in their relations, then the knowledge of things in their relations to the Absolute or Highest Being is the Absolute Science. Hardly a line of his writings fails to create the conviction that during every hour of the Saint's University life he was instinctively and expertly relating the class-teaching of the schools to his First Cause and Last End. This ultimate act of human intelligence moved and guided by Divine love was the philosophy of philosophies.

Moreover, it is evident that even in the most mystical of his writings there are few lines that did not owe much of their doctrine to the accurate Thomism of his Salamanca masters. He was the model pupil for whom a master's teaching was but a living seed cast into a prepared and fertile soil.

There came a moment of that pupil's mind and soul when he questioned whether he had not already learned more than enough. If the Truth Himself said: 'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life,' it was clear that perfection—of which his artist soul dreamed—must mean not merely truth believed, but truth lived. Already Salamanca's crowded schools had taught him more than its stir

and din would allow him to live. Once his mind had reached this conviction, it turned naturally to the ideal of a purely contemplative life in another than a Carmelite cloister. The issue of that desire for cloistered contemplation we have ventured to call the Great Refusal. More than the limits of this short paper would be needed to deal with the Saint's desire for the Carthusian life of contemplative prayer and with the convictions that finally left it a desire unfulfilled. If we dare to give some analysis of a decision which must still seem a contradiction of much of his mystical teaching, it will be in our final attempt to describe the Saint, not merely as a man and as a Saint, but as a Mystic.

We will begin this attempt by reminding ourselves that St. John is not merely a mystic but a mystical writer. The two qualities, though separable and often separated, were united in him.

Moreover, he is a scientific as well as a practical mystical writer. Here he is contrasted almost bluntly with St. Teresa, the practical writer whose scientific knowledge was so lacking that a Dominican director had to teach her the difference between her intellect and her imagination. In contrast with this empiric but non-scientific knowledge of the supernatural is the empiric and scientific character of St. John's writings.

Lastly, the things he taught were so effectively the life he lived from cradle to grave that we may in turn find his life the best commentary on his teaching and his teaching the naive and full unveiling of his life. Every student of the Dark Night and the Ascent of Mount Carmel knows them to be the Saint's autobiography.

Let us look at some of the principles of his mystical life.

(1) The modern mind would probably be astounded not only at the Saint's expert powers of reasoning but at the important place he gives to Reason.

161. Give heed to reason that you may perform that which it dictates to you in the way of God; and it will serve you more than all good works heedlessly done, and all the spiritual sweetness you aim at.

162. Blessed is he who, setting his own tastes and inclinations aside, looks at things according to reason and justice.

167. The desire as desire is blind because in itself it regards not reason, which is that which ever guides and directs the soul aright in its operations.⁸

Again,

'The desire to know things by supernatural means is much worse than the desire for other spiritual favours pertaining to the senses There is no necessity for any of these things, since there is Natural Reason and Gospel Teaching and Law which are quite sufficient for the soul's guidance, and there is no difficulty or necessity that cannot be solved and remedied by these means and such great use must we make of Gospel Teaching and Reason that if certain things be told us supernaturally, whether we so desire or no, we must receive only what is in clear conformity with Reason and Gospel Law.'⁹

Readers unacquainted with Aquinas's teaching on Reason and Faith might mistake St. John for a 'morning-star' of Rationalism or a re-echo of the Protestant appeal to Scripture!

(2) Like his master, St. Thomas, his devotion to God's gift of Reason means something like devotion to Greek thought and especially to Aristotle, whom he quotes when treating the sublime subject of the divine light!

(3) All his mystical teaching is expressed in the traditional vocabulary of the schools and of the cloister. He speaks of the three ways of Purgation, Enlightenment, Union. His course of Lectures on the *Prima Secundae* was responsible for his effective use of the psychology of the Passions. Like the medieval preachers, he sets store by the Seven Deadly Sins, which he expounds with true medieval Spanish wit. Like his master, St. Thomas, although he has added no new words to the vocabulary of mysticism, there are few of the old words to which he has not added some new explanation or illumination.

(4) But there is one last characteristic of the Saint's life and writings that may be looked upon as the motive and

⁸ *Spiritual Maxims*.

⁹ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Book ii; Ch. 21.

message of the present paper. It is the Saint's mystical doctrine of poverty. To the present writer it seems undeniable that the most significant element in the movement created by the sanctity and genius of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross is not Carmelite Prayer but Carmelite Poverty. These two strong-souled lovers of Jesus recognised that their beloved Master had put all right things in their right order when, opening His mouth, He said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

So habitually had the son of the widow Catalina faced poverty and indeed want from childhood, that to lack it would be to have the livery of Jesus torn from his back.

'Quiroga tells us that when John of St. Mathias was at Salamanca he read those authors who treat of the perfect life of our ancient solitaries; whose ordinary exercise was divine contemplation; and also that he read St. Denis and St. Gregory. But he found their doctrine and that of other saints whom the Church regards as luminaries on these matters so contrary to the new opinion, that is, to certain methods of prayer introduced and invented by various spiritual masters and founded on artifice and human industry rather than what was received from the divine operation that he treated the delicate subject in an excellent discourse.'¹⁰

If at any time he identified perfection with prayer, he knew that in the soul's life of prayer the most important element is the soul's life. But this threw him back on the first of the Beatitudes which Our Blessed Lord at the later date reinforced by the principle, 'A man's life' (even his life of prayer) 'does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesseth.' (Lk. xii, 15).

The latest Carmelite biographer of the Saint speaks of the vast Carmelite 'monastery' at Salamanca in which the Saint dwelt for the first four years of his professed life. Once within its vastnesses, the Widow Catalina's son, who had so often begged for hospital alms in the streets of Medina del Campo, was hardly able to analyse his natural and supernatural reactions. Less than half a century previous,

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 49.

the uncontrolled reactions of a German Augustinian had planted the vital seed of Protestantism. The self-controlled Spanish Saint stilled any power he may have had of invective. But his mind took its wonted way of criticism; by thinking to live as best he could the life he thought best amongst all ways of living. The Charterhouse, with its silence and seclusion, offered him a life which his childhood of poverty and work helped or prompted him to refuse. We now see that the refusal was all the more dramatic because its drama was so hidden in the silent heart of a young Carmelite priest. There it was hardly suspected even by himself. Whether he meant it as criticism of the contemplative orders not only in Spain but in the Church, or whether he meant it not, it was a criticism which might have saved these necessary groups of men and women from what was little less than extinction.

When Francis was sent out of the Benedictine monastery and Dominic bade the Bishop of Osma farewell at the door of Citeaux, and John of Fontiveros stilled his desire of the Charterhouse, the Western Church had received a lesson which could be ignored only to the Church's hurt.

Hardly a page of the Saint's writings fails to appeal to the First of the Beatitudes. A passage may suffice. For example:

' There are some who pay more attention to the skill with which an image is made and to its value than to what it represents This is a complete hindrance to true spirituality, which demands annihilation of the affections as to all particular things. This will become quite clear from the detestable custom which certain persons observe with regard to images in these days. Not despising the vanities of the world, they adorn images with the garments which from time to time vain persons invent in order to satisfy their own pleasures and vanities Herein, with their help, the devil succeeds in canonizing his vanities, by clothing the saints with them And in this way the honest and grave devotion of the soul is reduced to little more than a dressing of dolls. Some persons use images merely as idols upon which they have set their rejoicing. And thus you will see certain persons who are never tired of adding one image to another, and wish them to be of this or that kind and workmanship so as to be pleasing to the

THE MYSTICISM OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

senses. They are as much attached to them as was Micah to his idols, or was Laban. 'The truly devout sets his heart mainly on that which is invisible. He needs few images; and uses few; and chooses those that harmonize with the divine rather than with the human.'¹¹

This stern rationing of the visible for the sake of the invisible, and of the secondary for the sake of the primary, was the Saint's acceptance of the challenge, 'Blessed are the poor,' which the Master set first in His mystical teaching. Every line of the Saint's writings, no matter how high the plane of divine vision, reminds the pilgrim towards perfection that his quest will be reached only when in poverty of spirit the soul seeks not any gift that is God's, but only the Gift that is God!

Seldom does the Saint allow his habitual calm to pass into such strong prophetic denunciation. But the Spain of his day needed even stronger denunciation if only it had known.

In this matter of poverty, the Saint's strongest words were but a faint echo of his life. When, after four years of a cloistered life, he was made to go out into the Dark Night of the Soul, the first beginning at Duruolo was fitly called Bethlehem. Almost everything was lacking to it except the Divine Child's cradle-cloth of poverty. Once St. John had worn that royal livery he never changed it for another—nor ever sought any supernatural comfort in following the Poor Man of Nazareth in His cross-laden ascent of Perfection's peak.

Some little time before he died, he was sent to the monastery of Ubeda. By God's inscrutable Providence—and no doubt in answer to the Saint's prayer—he met with misunderstanding, and even harshness. He was given the poorest and smallest cell of the house, with only a wretched bed and a Crucifix. But John of the Cross needed nothing but the Cross—and his beloved, the Crucified. Though his body was Job's, his patience was greater than Job's. No reproach ever found its way to his lips. A little before he died, he

¹¹*Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Book iii; Ch. 35.

asked to see the Prior, who had been responsible for his ill-treatment. 'The Saint with great humility asked pardon for the faults he might have committed and for the trouble he had given those who had attended him during his illness. He then said, "Father, the Virgin's habit that I have worn and made use of—I am poor and a beggar, having nothing in which to be buried—for the love of God, I beseech Your Reverence to give me out of Charity."'¹⁰

When the midnight bell of Friday, December 13th, 1591, rang out for the Matins of Saturday, so dear to Carmel, the Saint, holding his Crucifix in his hands, said simply: *In manus Tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum*. He then looked round on all those present, as if to bid them good-bye, and kissed the Crucifix. Some who were in the room said they saw over the bed a great brightness like the sun and moon.

The little son of Gonzalo and Catalina, this Poverello of Fontiveros, had died kissing his 'beloved.' For human love Gonzalo and Catalina had faced and met poverty. But their little son for Divine love had sought and wooed and found poverty, in life and in death.

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Almost unwept and unhonoured, this son, this Saint, this major prophet of Spain, was buried in the obscurity of a Spanish Nazareth. Yet Spain of the sixteenth century had no greater need than to obey its prophet calling it to a life of prayer rooted in a life of poverty. Had Spain—still more, had Catholic Spain, but, most of all, had ecclesiastical Spain—known the time of its visitation, we who love Spain for its tireless defence of the faith should not now be in suspense lest the land of Dominic and Ignatius and Teresa and John should exchange the freedom of the sons of God for the communism which denies the rights of God and the God-given rights of man.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 351.