

It is not difficult to see the wisdom of the Church in this matter. Take, for instance, the congregations of Teaching Religious, Brothers and Sisters, whose time is spent for the most part supervising the secular education of children. We have to admit that their lives lack the homogeneity which characterises the more monastic institutions. Teaching Religious are not called upon to live what they teach. They are not by vocation theologians or lecturers in ascetics, nor do they live round the *Opus Dei*. They are concerned with Geography, Algebra, Literature, Science and preparing youthful minds for immediate, urgent examinations. It is only to be expected that time should be set aside in such harassing conditions of life for deliberate mental readjustment, safeguarded by formal meditation. Harm may be done by discouraging strict, formal meditation when by rule religious are not given, apart from this, adequate time or opportunity for spiritual reading. They are more likely indirectly to conserve the spirit of prayer through formal meditation, even though it never become more than a careful and relished spiritual reading, than would be the case if they applied themselves to a simpler approach to prayer to the total neglect of spiritual study. Nevertheless, formal meditation, like spiritual reading, should be ordered to prayer, and if *de facto* it is not, then some other time should be set aside for prayer.

Two suggestions follow from these remarks:

(1) Where formal meditation is obligatory, a simpler and more direct approach to God should be encouraged at some other convenient time. This is seldom difficult, opportunity usually being provided by rule. As there are many degrees of insistence on formal meditation, ranging from a rigid adherence to a set, traditional form, to the 'points-if-you-need-them' method, this suggestion must remain elastic.

(2) Some religious rules provide only a short period, outside morning and evening meditation, for spiritual reading. In these circumstances, if formal meditation is not of obligation it should only be discarded after a corresponding individual insistence on spiritual reading as remote preparation for prayer.

THE BEGINNING OF THE WAY

By

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I—PIERS PLOWMAN.

IF there be any need to defend the introduction of William Langland into a treatise on English mysticism and the spiritual life we may refer the reader to Christopher Dawson's brilliant essay in *The English Way*. 'This popular tradition of English religion', he writes of Fox, Bunyan and Blake, 'which was divorced from Catholic unity and even from the national unity after the 17th century already exists in its purest and most unadulterated form

in the work of Langland. He shows us what English religion might have been if it had not been broken by schism and narrowed by sectarianism and heresy'. And again: 'Langland embodies the spiritual unity of the English people at the very moment when religion in England stood at the parting of the ways'. *Piers Plowman*, the virile and powerful poem of the English people, provides a solid basis for a truly English type of spirituality. The whole purpose of the work is to show the men of this country how they may save their souls; it describes the nature of the Good Life for the ordinary man and at the same time searches for an answer to the general theological question: how can men win salvation? He describes a world of sin and degradation, the lowest rung in the scale of humanity, from which the well-intentioned men of the land will, by the grace of God, raise themselves to live a life of a spiritual character based on Truth and Love. He points out the vices, difficulties and dangers that strew the path of ascent, and also the virtues and gifts required to surmount these impediments. This would provide ample justification for including *Piers Plowman* in this study, but there is more to it than that. A close examination of the structure of the poem reveals that it is a practical application of the traditional division of human life into *incipientes, proficientes et perfecti*.¹ There is first a long introduction on the world and its needs: this occupies seven of the twenty *Passus*. But then the poet begins to discuss, amid the prolific growth of his allegory and symbolism, the nature of the three types of life: DO WELL, DO BETTER, and DO BEST. This discussion occupies the remaining three sections of the book. We may therefore summarize the Vision thus: Sin, Conversion and Entry into the first of the Three Lives or Ways. This section is divided accordingly.

II—SIN.

William Langland was a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer. But the two stand in strong contrast. Chaucer was the pioneer and chief of the movement to anglicise the continental, and in particular the French, tradition of the nobility with all its cultured classicism. Langland represents the English tradition, the English view of life. This had been handed down to him from his own people who had been serfs for three hundred years, from the early northern poetry, the pure and refined Anglo-Saxon literature. He was born in all probability in the West Country under the Malvern

¹The three stages or lives are outlined in *Passus* ix, 224 (p. 111).

NOTE: All references are to the modernised version: *The Vision of Piers Plowman by William Langland newly rendered into English by Henry W. Wills* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1938). This edition has the advantage, for our purposes, of being easily readable without losing too much of the power of the original, and also of combining the variant versions so that confusion in reference is avoided.

Hills, perhaps even 'On a May morning on a Malvern hillside', where his first vision is described (*Induction*, 5). He appears to have been the bastard son of a local squire who had him taught in the traditional clerical style:

My father and my friends furnished my schooling,
Till I was trained truly in the doctrine of Scripture,
In what is best for the body, as the Book tells us,
And safest for the soul. (*Passus v*, 37-40).

With this knowledge he was able to become a bedesman, living in a cottage on Cornhill in London with his daughter and his wife, who provided him with much bitterness. As a clerk in minor Orders with 'My seven psalms and sometimes my psalter', he earned a meagre pittance singing in chantries and reciting prayers for patrons (cf. the first part of *Passus v*). He suffered from poverty and ill health,

Yet by my faith, I never found, since my friends perished,
Any life that I liked out of these long garments.
(*Passus v*, 41-42).

Thus he combined the life of an ecclesiastic and a married layman, of the town and of the country, of well-to-do stock and of actual poverty. With so many strands meeting in him he might well provide a general example of Christian living; but at first he led a dissolute life, wasting his time in the distractions of the city. And when he came to plan this great work his object was to find his own way back to salvation and to lead others from the same irregular life where they . . . loved good living,

And to do nothing but to dine, to drink and to sleep.
(*Passus v*, 8, 9).

It was not merely his own sins from which he wished to escape, but from the sins of the society in which he lived. The poem is a protest against the recent introduction of money power into the social scheme of his day. Lady Meed who typifies the power of finance appears as the actual ruler of both Church and State, and against her the poet wages a bitter war. Lady Meed finds a friar to confess her, 'to be her bedesman and her brother also', as she pays for a new window and has her name glazed therein (*Passus III*, 40 and cf. the whole). Falsehood, Guile, the Liar and many other rascals are employed by officialdom to preserve their own *status quo*. Some of Langland's phrases have been echoed in our own day by Chesterton and Belloc.

Since soap-makers and their sons have knighthood for silver
(*Passus v*, 76).

And the reform that he calls for is consequently not isolated 'morals' but includes an economic reform such as the modern Distributists demand. (cf. *Passus VI*, particularly 1-21, 38sq., 188sq. and *VII*, 25-38). The power of finance must be broken if conscience is to have an honest chance of living and converting the souls of many. Evidently, and it is clear from the last part of

Passus VII, a natural economic solution is not sufficient. These economic evils spring first from original sin, and, for a real regeneration of society, grace, the free gift of God, must renew the face of the earth. Distributism without the Faith would fail, not because it is a wrong solution, but because without supernatural aid men would not have the power to put it into effect. Langland, then, offers no mere economic or political remedy for these social evils. Society for him requires a spiritual reform based on supernatural justice and charity. Christendom, the unity of the Church, this is the only radical cure. It is therefore useless to discuss, with any practical end in view, the upper stories of the spiritual life until we have made sure of a firm foundation in the right attitude to society—the war profiteer cannot expect to reach to the mystic life of union. The individual is not an isolated unit. He is born into society, a member of society, responsible to and for society. At this stage it would be easy to over-emphasise a high-and-dry contact between the soul and God, the soul as it were abstracted from its surroundings. Not only are the actual sins of the individual, against the background of his share in original sin, pertinent at the time of conversion. The spiritual life is not an escape from the harshness of the world. There are too many who flee to the pews of their churches, spending long hours in prayer and refusing to admit their implication in the wars and strikes, the injustices and uncharities of the society of which they are members. It is not a question of actual sin. But our Lord with no sin at all on his conscience went through every imaginable purgation for the sins of the whole human society of which he was born a member. The individual Christian cannot refuse this same responsibility for the sins of his world. The lives of the saints reveal a very deep and sensitive consciousness of responsibility for the evils of their times. The way to holiness does not lie in a vacuum. Langland therefore calls for an ascetic recreation of life in society based on the Christian virtues of individuals.

But there is a sort of despair in the concluding stages of the poem, a despair of achieving any active conversion of society. He eventually visualises a mystic, passive purgation by all the powers of evil let loose on men. The hordes of hell have been unleashed over the face of the earth and appear to be gaining the victory.

. . . in a man's likeness

Antichrist came against all the crop of Truth,

Dashed it to earth, and turned the roots upward.

Falsehood sprang and spread and sped men's wishes.

In each country where he came he cut Truth down.

(*cf. Passus xx, 50-80.*)

But Langland's prophetic eyes pierced that apocalyptic gloom, which is almost darker today than at his own time, and, in common with many writers of that era, he foresees a future

resurrection of society in the power of the New Spirit.

One Christian king shall keep the earth.

Mede shall no more be the master, as at present,
But love and lowliness and loyalty shall together

Be masters of mankind and maintain Truth . . . etc.

But before this fortune befall men they shall find the worst.

(*Passus III, 406-455.*)

In an evil age Mechtilde of Magdeburg and Joachim of Flora had prophesied a new era of grace. The followers of Joachim, indeed, the spiritual Franciscans, had been led by the prophecy into excesses and even heresy. But every age has its evils and it is useless to look forward to future betterment, trusting in politicians and plans, unless each individual is prepared to shoulder the responsibility of these very evils and so enter into the cell of self-knowledge and being thus converted help, by a holy life, in the salvation of the people.

ROSARY SUNDAY

BY

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The Holy Gospel according to St Matthew, chapter 22

... And the Pharisees being gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, "What think ye of Christ: whose son is he?" They say to him, "David's".

I HAVE to speak to you tonight about the holy Rosary. There are, of course, ten thousand things to be said about it, the least of which is a glorious battle on which probably depended the civilisation of the world; but I am going to allow a little child to lead me and you into the Rosary.

There are not many trees in London streets, but there are a great number of children—better than trees of course—and God, in his goodness, often allows little children to hail me. The other day I was passing through one of our streets, close at hand, made beautiful with the feet of little children and their gambols, and two little ones I found suddenly by my side. I think they must have crossed the little narrow street; I don't know. I only know that suddenly I found two little ones by my side. I think their aggregate age would be about six. I imagine the lesser of the two was not quite two and he had towards the elder one that natural sense of guidance which of course might be the salvation of a world in ruins. But the elder of the two began, as so many children have done before, and I hope will do again, began to search at my Rosary-side for my beads.

(I shall never forget till I die, the first time I went out to Regent's Park on Good Friday to read out the death of Jesus. There was no one there when I began, but soon there was a little child toying with my beads.)