

The Life of the Spirit

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"GOD IS OUR MOTHER"

By

S.M.A., O.P.

"As verily as God is our Father, so verily God is our Mother; and that shewed he in all, and especially in the sweet words where he said: *I it am*". (Mother Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*, c.59).

St. Thomas states (I,47,1; III,23, 2 ad 3) that the things which are in time are meant to be but manifestations of those which are from eternity; i.e. of God himself, of the eternal self-subsistent life of the Blessed Trinity, the nature of which was revealed to Moses when the Lord spoke to him out of the burning bush: "I AM WHO AM . . . Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS hath sent me to you" (*Exodus*, 3, 14). The Fulness of Being, the Plenitude of Life—such is God's own description of himself; and when S. John, who had learnt the secrets of the divine life as he lay on the bosom of the Incarnate Word, declared that 'God is Love', he was only expressing the same truth from a different point of view. For love is only the 'affluence', the diffusion, the self-donation of being. So that Being at its source must also be love at its source (cf. Maritain, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 4, 7-8).

'God is Love'. This divine love is one, since it is God himself: but its created manifestations are many, for no finite thing, indeed no number of finite things, could adequately represent the riches of infinite goodness. Yet in the love of a father, a mother, a brother, a child, a spouse, a friend, a master, we have so many reflections of their divine source, so that it is not surprising that the Holy Scriptures should apply these various forms of love to God's love for us. He loves us as our Father, our Brother, our Spouse, our Master, our Friend, and—though we may sometimes be inclined to overlook the fact—as our Mother too. The idea of the Fatherhood of God was familiar from the books of Deuteronomy, Isaias, Jeremias, etc., long before the only begotten Son came on earth to make the supreme revelation, but the idea of the Motherhood is there too—unmis-

takably if not so inescapably.

In the Book of Deuteronomy (32, 7) we read: "As an eagle enticing her young to fly, he spread his wings: and hath taken him and carried him on his shoulders"⁽¹⁾. Here he is likened to the mother bird teaching her young to fly, now by methods that are kind and loving, now by those that may seem harsh and cruel; she is educating them in the way they must go, by the methods which she knows to be the best, educating them in the strict sense of the word, by leading, and if necessary forcing them, out of the nest to which they cling, into the air, which, though terrifying to them at first, is their native atmosphere. Education is the task of every Mother. It is also the task of our Heavenly Mother, God himself. His love leads and, if necessary, drives us out of ourselves, out of our own petty narrow life, into that broad open space—*eduxit me in latitudine* (Ps.17)—into that gaping, unfathomable Abyss which is his Love; out, maybe, of the comfortable, cosy corner of a sheltered life, in which we would selfishly and self-centredly pass our days, into the draughts and storms and rocks of the world at large, in which we are made to take our proper part, to recognise our place in the scheme of things. Yet "beneath us are the everlasting arms", the arms of a Mother who loves her child with all the fervour of her being.

The same Mother's love, this time with the emphasis laid on its fidelity and unchangeableness is claimed as his by God in the Book of Isaias (46, 3)—"Hearken unto Me, O House of Jacob, all the remnant of the House of Israel, who are carried in my bowels and borne up by my womb. Even to old age am I the same, and to your grey hairs I will carry you. I have made you and I will bear you; I will carry you and will save you". And again (49, 15): "Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet will not I forget." The gifts of the Lord are without repentance, especially the gift of himself as Love, and the nearest human parallel to this divine generosity, unselfishness and fidelity despite all lapses and rebellions, is the love of a Mother for her child.

What is perhaps the loveliest passage of all, occurs in the final Chapter of Isaias (66, 9, sq.): "Shall not I that make others to bring forth children, myself bring forth, saith the Lord? Shall I that give generation to others, be barren, saith the Lord thy God . . ." And then, after several verses describing the fruitfulness of the New Jerusalem, we find this promise of exquisite tenderness—" . . . You shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you. As one whom the Mother

(1) Cf. Deuteronomy 1, 31; 32, 6. Ecclesiasticus, 23, 1 & 4. Isaias 63, 16; 64, 8. Jeremias 3, 4-19; 31, 9-20. Osee 11, 1-3. Malachias 1, 6. Wisdom 11, 11; 16, 3.

caresseth, so will I comfort you." Was the Incarnate Son of God thinking of these lines when he lamented over his city (Mk. 23, 37) "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered together thy children as a hen doth gather her chickens under her wing, and thou wouldst not" or when (Mk. 10, 14) being displeased with the disciples who rebuked those who had brought the children to him, he said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not . . ." and embracing them and laying hands upon them, he blessed them?

In all these cases, it is the tender yet strong, the cherishing, protective Love of a Mother, which the Infinite God deigns to apply to Himself; a Love whose protection is infallible and all-embracing, since it is the Divine Omnipotence and Providence. There is only one condition, that we become as little children (Mt. 18, 3) for only such can enter into the Kingdom of His Love, only to little ones can the secrets of the intimate life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit be revealed (Mt. 11, 25). To understand and experience the maternal tenderness of our Maker, to realise how the Heart which describes itself as "meek and humble" (Mt. 11, 29), is the heart of a Mother, we must approach God with all the simplicity, the generosity, the humility, above all the confidence of a child. We must be humble enough to allow Him to treat us as a child, to acknowledge our complete dependence on him; and we must be simple and trustful enough to believe that the tenderest care of the most perfect of human mothers is but a dim reflection of the love which God is waiting to lavish on us. But "some of us believe that God is Almighty and may do all, and that he is All-Wisdom and can do all; but that he is all-love and will do all, there we stop short, and this unknowing it is, that letteth most God's lovers." (Revelations c. 73).

"God is Love"—a Mother's Love. As a woman longs for children, so does he long for our souls, for our love, and to make it easier for us to understand and to respond to this Love, He will become man: For he said: "Surely they are My people, children that will not deny. So he became their Saviour". (Isaias 63, 8). Then with human hands he can lift us up and in human arms enfold us; a human voice can speak to his children, and with his own human flesh and blood he can feed their souls.

"For he hath no despite of that he hath made, nor hath he any disdain to serve us at the simplest office that to our body becometh in nature, for love of the soul that he hath made to his own likeness." (Revelations ch. 6).

The doctrine of the Fatherhood of God receives its fullest expression in the Gospels, but for the classic exposition of the Motherhood, we must turn to an English mystic of the 14th century, Mother Julian of Norwich. Her book is a "Revelation of the Love of the Blessed Trinity", seen under many aspects, and

as particular as the Love of a Mother: for "that showed He in all, and especially in these sweet words where He saith: I it am." (Ch. 59). Thus she sees the Divine Motherhood as grounded in the Being of God, but as appropriated especially to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. "Our high Father, God Almighty, which is Being, he knew and loved us from afore any time; of which knowing, in his marvellous deep charity and the forseeing counsel of all the Blessed Trinity, he willed that the Second Person should become our Mother, our Brother, and our Saviour" (Ch. 59) and "all the fair working, and all the sweet natural office of dearworthy Motherhood is appropriate to the Second Person." Ibid. It is to the Second Person regarded especially as the Eternal Wisdom, "the deep Wisdom of the Trinity" (Ch. 58) that Mother Julian applies this idea of Motherhood, and this she does in a threefold fashion, which is not entirely easy to understand. She seems to regard the human soul from a double standpoint—"the Sensuality", in so far as it is knit to a fleshly nature and is affected by it, and "the substance" which is the soul considered in its higher, spiritual nature and faculties. Thus as God, the Eternal Word is our Creator, and therefore Mother of the Substance, our "Mother in Kind"; but by becoming incarnate and taking our human nature, He becomes "Mother by the Sensuality" also; and because the Incarnation is an act of Grace, of Divine Mercy, Mother Julian calls our Blessed Lord "our Gracious Mother", "our Mother in Mercy". To restore human nature by Grace to the position to which it was originally destined before the Fall, is the purpose of the Incarnation, and it is effected through the Redemption, which is, as it were, the Divine Motherhood in action, and so Mother Julian calls it "the Motherhood of working". Such would seem to be the gist of the theme in Mother Julian (cf. *Revelations of Divine Love*, cc. 58-60, 63).

Mother Julian (op. cit. cc. 57 & 60) refutes the possible objection that this teaching on the Motherhood of God is in any way derogatory to our Blessed Lady's honour and dignity. On the contrary, Mother Julian here quite clearly sees her as the Mother of the Mystical Christ as well as of the human Christ, but she sees her also as something which a modern writer considers to be even greater, i.e. as the type, the symbol, the Sacrament, the most perfect created expression of that Divine tenderness, of that aspect of the Love of God which is described as the Divine Motherhood. And not only the expression, but truly a Sacrament, in the broad sense of the word, in that God does indeed use her as the instrument of this love for us; He lavishes His tenderness on us through her. Did Mother Julian understand this when our Lord said to her—"Wilt thou see in her (our Blessed Lady) how thou art loved, For thy love I made her so high, so noble and so worthy: and this liketh me, and so will I

that it doth thee" (Ch. 25). Doubtless she did, for throughout her book she displays a remarkable grasp of the deepest theological principles, and her teaching on this subject of the Motherhood is only the application of two such principles enunciated by St. Thomas: firstly, that "a name is applied to that wherein is perfectly contained its signification, before it is applied to that which only partially contains it; for the latter bears the name by reason of a kind of similitude to that which answers perfectly to the signification of the name" (I, 33, 3.) So that just as Paternity is applied firstly and pre-eminently to God, and only secondarily and imperfectly to creatures, so, too, does that which we call Motherhood exist in its perfection only in Him. And secondly, that God "produced things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented by them" (I, 47, 1) which explains our Blessed Lady's position in relation to the Divine Motherhood.

It will be noted that Mother Julian treats of this subject only as it effects us: that is to say, she does not attempt to explain whether and how the relation of Motherhood exists within the Blessed Trinity, but is concerned only with its operations *ad extra*—a method which she follows throughout her book, for her revelations have an essentially practical value "for thine and our safe guide, to conduct to everlasting bliss" (Addition by the Scribe). Consequently, having shown the working of Motherhood on God's part, which pertains to His "lovelonging that shall last until Doomsday" (Ch. 63) she proceeds to describe our response, our reaction, which she says is the attitude of Spiritual Childhood.

THE ENGLISH MARTYRS

By

M.M.M.

"Of twisted scarlet, the work of an artist, with precious stones cut and set on gold . . ." (*Ecclesiasticus*, XLV. 13). Nor this nor any text, inspired word of God, can be too high for these, his Saints, canonised or uncanonised, to whom He gave the great gift of martyrdom.

In early times, the Church rightly set her precious stones in the Mass, cut them out in the first Litanies, wove their scarlet threads of love and fame into and out of the histories of the first great basilicas, in Rome and elsewhere. We bless and revere the practice of the Church, then as now, and in all humility follow it, in speaking of our own later Martyrs, since there is no time with God . . . "Jesus Christ yesterday, and to-day and for ever."

It is true that we in these islands would not have the Faith, humanly speaking, did not in God's Providence some early mis-