

never-ending torments. For the rest he refused to dogmatize.<sup>4</sup>

Maurice and his contemporaries were much influenced in these doubts and hesitations by theories of the Atonement that appeared to them to make of God an arbitrary tyrant. Such theories were partial and one-sided explanations of a revealed truth, some puzzles in which can be penetrated under grace by prayer and thought, though the ultimate mystery contained in it will always be beyond the full grasp of human understanding. But once these questions had been raised, since with these men the voice of the Catholic Church was not decisive, belief in eternal punishment was pushed more and more into the background. By 1874 the famous Congregationalist preacher and theologian Dr R. W. Dale was able to write of his own co-religionists: 'The doctrine of our forefathers has been silently relegated, with or without serious consideration, to that province of the intellect which is the house of beliefs which we have not rejected, but which we are willing to forget.'<sup>5</sup> That might not unjustly be held to describe the attitude of not a few Catholics today, and it is to our loss that it is so.



## THOSE THAT LIE IN THE SLEEP OF PEACE

GERALD VANN, O.P.

**W**HEN, in the Mass, we pray for the dead we speak of them as 'sleeping in the sleep of peace'. There seems to be an echo here of our Lord's words, 'The maid is not dead but sleepeth', and again of his use of the same verb when speaking of Lazarus. Chrysostom suggests that he is telling his followers not to be afraid of death; and perhaps he is contrasting two very different ideas of the after-life: the grey, wraith-like half-existence of Sheol or Hades with the christian idea of fulfilment, glory, peace. Certainly nowadays we need to be taught not

<sup>4</sup> *Belief and Unbelief Since 1850*. H. G. Wood (Cambridge, 1955), page 30. For a very interesting letter discussing this matter written in 1849 by F. J. A. Hort to Frederick Maurice see *The Life and Letters of Fenton J. A. Hort*, vol. I, page 116. (Macmillan).

<sup>5</sup> *Life of R. W. Dale*, by A. W. Dale (Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), p. 312.

to fear death: in earlier days it was the sex-words which were taboo; now the taboo has been transferred to the death-words, and one must speak not of dying but of passing on or away or even over.

But the 'sleep of peace' in the *Memento* refers specifically to purgatory; and seems to contrast very oddly with other traditional ideas about the 'suffering souls', and with the view of St Augustine and that 'the least pain of purgatory is greater than the greatest suffering in this world'.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand the flames, the torment; on the other the peace, the beautiful flowered meadow which the seer in Bede's *History* took to be heaven.

In fact, if we are to form a true concept of the state of the holy souls, we need both pictures. On the one hand the earthly struggle is over, and with it the gnawing uncertainty, the fear that we shall fail in the end to save our souls; the infinite bliss and rapture of God can be looked forward to with joy as something assured. So the *Purgatorio* begins with the approach of dawn, and the poet describes how

'Sweet hue of sapphire, that was spread  
O'er the serene aspect of the pure air,  
High up as the first circle, to mine eyes  
Unwonted joy renew'd.'

In this world we know indeed the keen joy of anticipating joy, but there is always the fleck of fear lest our anticipations be frustrated or at least, as so often happens, that the reality prove less of a delight than we had hoped. In purgatory it is the other way round: there is utter assurance both that heaven is won and that its happiness must infinitely exceed anything that could have been imagined. So the words of Gerontius,

'I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed.  
A strange refreshment: for I feel in me  
An inexpressive lightness, and a sense  
Of freedom, as I were at length myself,  
And ne'er had been before',

are followed by the triumphant song of the angel:

'My work is done  
My task is o'er,  
And so I come,  
Taking it home,

<sup>1</sup> *Sum. Theol. Suppl. lxxii, 1.*

For the crown is won,

Alleluia

For evermore.'

'I do not believe it would be possible', writes St Catherine of Genoa, 'to find any joy comparable to that of a soul in purgatory, except the joy of the blessed in paradise—a joy which goes on increasing day by day, as God more and more flows in upon the soul, which he does abundantly in proportion as every hindrance to his entrance is consumed away.'<sup>2</sup>

But this consuming process is itself torment. There is first of all the sense of loss: when Gerontius asks whether he will see his Master when he reaches the throne the angel replies

'Yes, for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord.

One moment; but thou knowest not, my child,

What thou dost ask: that sight of the Most Fair

Will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too.'

That is the first torment: the momentary ecstatic glimpse is vouchsafed but then is of necessity withdrawn since the soul is, in its sinfulness, incompatible with it. And the second torment lies in the blinding recognition of that sinfulness, of its hideousness and horror. So Gerontius cries

'Take me away, and in the lowest deep

There let me be':

for the sinner, however penitent, however much he loves God, knows the terror of God, knows that he cannot approach him till all the sin is consumed away and love and Love are made one.

Thirdly there is the *poena sensus*, the torment of the purgatorial fire. The exact meaning of this fire, and of the suffering it causes, is obscure, and opinions differ: some think of the fire literally, as material flames, others take it metaphorically; the Church has made no pronouncement on the subject.<sup>3</sup> As Dr Bernhard Bartmann writes: 'We must distinguish between the existence of purgatory and the existence of punishment by fire; the former is defined as a dogma, the latter is not. There is no definition in regard to the nature of the pains of purgatory and there exists no certain dogmatic teaching on the subject. . . . No scholastic asserts that existence of such a fire is revealed truth. Neither is it

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mother Mary St Austin: *The Divine Crucible*, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> The Gasparri *Catechismus Catholicus* defines the *poena damni* and *poena sensus* simply as the temporary privation of the vision of God and 'other grievous sufferings'.

possible to infer it from some other dogma.<sup>4</sup> St Thomas takes the literal view, but explains the action of the fire simply in terms of detention or restriction (for obviously flames cannot burn what is immaterial). 'Although of its nature', he writes, 'a corporeal thing is able to confine an incorporeal spirit to a place, it is not able of its nature to detain an incorporeal spirit in the place to which it is confined, and so to tie it to that place that it be unable to seek another, since a spirit is not by nature in a place so as to be subject to place. But the corporeal fire is enabled as the instrument of the vengeance of divine justice thus to detain a spirit; and thus it has a penal effect on it, by hindering it from fulfilling its own will, that is by hindering it from acting where it will and as it will.' So, he concludes, the soul 'is tormented by the fire' by being 'enchained as it were' by it.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever view one takes, however, of the nature of the fire there is no question about its aptness as a symbol. Baron von Hügel pointed out how, at the basis of all St Catherine of Genoa's teachings about purgatory, there is the assumption of 'the essential unity and continuity of the soul's life here and hereafter',<sup>6</sup> so that she sees purgatory simply as the continuation of the purgatorial process begun in this life. Now the mystics again and again describe that process in terms of fire burning away dross or alloy; St Catherine herself speaks of the 'rust of sin' being burnt away by the fire so as to lay the soul more and more open to the rays of God their true Sun.<sup>7</sup> Here you have that ambivalence which explains how purgatory can be at the same time both joy and sorrow: to quote Newman again, the divine effluence scorches and shrivels the soul so that it lies 'consumed yet quickened by the glance of God'.

And though the fire 'detains' the soul, this does not mean that the soul enters it unwillingly; on the contrary, as St Catherine says, it 'swiftly and of its own accord casts itself in'.<sup>8</sup> And she sees the fire too as an inner impetus and impulse: 'When a soul approaches more and more to that stage of original purity and innocence in which it had been created, the instinct of God, bringing happiness in its train (*istinto beatifico*), reveals itself and

<sup>4</sup> *Purgatory*, p. 126; cf. Mother Mary St Austin, *op. cit.* pp. 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> *Sum. Theol. Suppl.* lxx, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *The Mystical Element of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 281.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. E. Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 202.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hügel, *op. cit.* p. 287.

increases on and on, with such an impetuosity of fire that any obstacle seems intolerable.<sup>9</sup> Thus the Fire is God adored and God purifying; it is also the transforming process within the soul. 'The joy of a soul in purgatory goes on increasing day by day, owing to the inflowing of God into the soul'; the still imperfect soul is like a covered object which 'cannot respond to the rays of the sun which beat upon it . . . because the covering intervenes. Now 'sin is the covering of the soul; and in purgatory this covering is gradually consumed by the fire; and the more it is consumed, the more does the soul correspond and discover itself to the divine ray'.<sup>10</sup> So, in the end, it becomes itself Fire, in that mysterious identification with and absorption into the divine life which yet leaves the created personality intact.

The continuity of the purifying and transforming process in this life and the next, the thought of the torment-aspect of purgatory and the helplessness of the holy souls to shorten its duration, all this underlines for us the importance of the exhortations of the spiritual writers to do penance and purify ourselves as far as may be in this world. If we could see here and now the horror of sin we should perhaps not sin at all; but we are blind, and can blind ourselves further, and so we not only sin but become con-naturalized with sin. We must suppose that the roots of a long-cherished evil habit must go very deep—or, to use St Catherine's metaphor, the rust on a soul long neglectful of God must be very thick—and the purifying process will need to be a very lengthy one. The holy souls cannot sin, but neither can they accelerate the process of purgation. With us it would seem to be the other way round: in our weakness we cannot fail to sin, but we can do something to counteract the sin and its effects: we can, through prayer, sorrow, ascetical practices, growth in the virtues, come a little closer to that state of love without which heaven is closed to us.

But the fire-symbolism underlines something else for us: the purifying and transforming process is essentially though not exclusively a passive one. It is God the Fire who purifies; the soul which is purified. Perhaps one should say that the process is *receptive* rather than passive, for of course the process will not go on unless the soul actively wills it; but it is a will to accept the

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 288.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 290-291.

Fire—we are back at de Caussade's definition of holiness as willing what comes to us at each moment by God's order—and all the ascetical and pious practices on which we might be tempted to rely would be of little avail unless above all we were trying to make this our fundamental attitude and praying for the grace to succeed. And indeed how can we hope to achieve even the first step in the ascetical or purgative way, the simplest beginnings of mortifications and self-dominance, unless the grace of God works in us to impel us to do so. The holy souls have all the single-minded and intense longing for God which we in our worldiness lack; to have something of that longing must be our first prayer, for otherwise we shall lack the will to accept the Fire, we shall fail to see or feel the need to mortify ourselves because we shall fail to see that 'all those self-regarding instincts—so ingrained that they have become automatic—which impel the self to choose the more comfortable part' . . . 'are gross infringements of the law of love'.<sup>11</sup>

If with us the fundamental attitude is the passive or receptive one, while at the same time we must also be 'busy about many things' in our attempt to order our lives, with the holy souls, as we have seen, it is otherwise: they must be wholly passive. Hence their need of our prayers, and our duty to offer them. We owe that duty primarily to those who were nearest to us in this life, for whom we were most responsible or to whom we ought to be most grateful; but the Church encourages us to pray for all the souls in purgatory in general, which means a far vaster number than those who at their death were formally Catholics or even Christians; and perhaps there is a special rightness in praying sometimes particularly for those souls who have none to pray for them personally because their families and friends have no belief in the efficacy of prayer for the dead.

Gerontius sings of how he must  
'the lone night-watches keep,

Told out for me.

There, motionless and happy in my pain,

Lone, not forlorn—

There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,

Until the morn.'

'Happy in my pain': we return to the point from which we began;

<sup>11</sup> E. Underhill, *op. cit.* p. 220.

they sleep in the sleep of peace. The gentleness of Fauré's *Requiem* seems closer to the spirit of the *Memento* than do the majesty and terror of Verdi's *Dies Irae* for all its stupendous beauty; and Newman's poem too, and Elgar's music, strike at the end the same note:

'Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul,  
 In my most loving arms I now enfold thee  
 And o'er the penal waters, as they roll,  
 I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee. . . .  
 Angels, to whom the willing task is given  
 Shall tend and nurse, and lull thee, as thou liest:  
 And Masses on the earth, and prayers in heaven,  
 Shall aid thee at the throne of the Most Highest.  
 Farewell, but not for ever, brother dear,  
 Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;  
 Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,  
 And I will come and wake thee on the morrow.'



## MYSTICISMS

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.

THE Church is like a noble house and estate, and we are welcome to the run of it—to wander through the apartments, explore the galleries and secret courts, go roof-climbing, sample the cellars, walk in the garden, exclaim at the vistas, inspect the stables, swim in the lake, take our ease, and contemplate the domain stretching to the distance, over the hills and far away. *Non est hic aliud nisi domus Dei et porta caeli.* And it is our home. Of course we know that in a sense, but in fact are we not inclined to think of it as National Trust and behave like respectful trippers? The motor-coaches crunch on the gravel and we follow the guide inside, stare at some of the treasures, buy our postcards and then have tea.

That is a parable, not an allegory, certainly not meant to scold but only to suggest how much is missed if our religious life