

## FEELINGS IN PRAYER

BY

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**F**EW things are more easily agreed to and more difficult to realise in practice than the fact that feelings count for next to nothing in prayer and the spiritual life. The position of the emotional life, that is to say, is readily accepted by the Catholic who realises that Faith even in its motive is supernatural, which is essentially of the Spirit and only accidentally concerned with the bodily or physical element of man. There are some who make the distinction between body and soul with too great a facility. And for them theoretically a man should be able to continue living a very highly supernatural life with no experience whatever, living entirely on the divine workings of faith all unfelt in the mysterious depths of his soul. Generally this facility for distinguishing remains purely theoretical, for as soon as feelings and experience cease to receive any reaction whatever in prayer such a man will either rush off to his director in great distress begging for help to regain what he has lost, or he will gradually let things slide until he has reached a workable minimum of spiritual duties on a level in which neither he nor anyone else will expect to have any sort of experience of supernatural realities.

There are others, however, who have not reached even the theory of the independence of the spirit. For them the test of their life of grace and prayer is whether they experience the presence of God and feel themselves uplifted into heights of prayer and holiness. They judge sometimes even their faith by what they have 'felt' to be true, and more often they look to their experiences to assure them that they are progressing on the royal road of virtue. Such people forget that the Gospel gives no such guarantee of authenticity. When our Lord says that it is by the fruits that we shall recognise the men of God he is not speaking of interior feelings and assurances but of the distinguishing works recognisable from outside. He gives the main fruit in terms of charity—'By this shall men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for the other'. And such charity is often most distasteful to the senses. St Francis did not necessarily feel a sense of well-being when he kissed the leper.

In reading the classics of the spiritual writers it is very necessary to remember that faith, the life of grace and prayer are not necessarily connected with the emotions or the imagination. For the type of language they use is very often soft and luscious with sense-imagery—embraces, transports of love, touches and kisses, sweet smells and heavenly sounds—but all of this as we have often had occasion to mention is due to the need to use symbols and metaphors to reach out towards the reaction of the pure spirit. Words are necessarily imaginative and when the writer speaks of emotions in this context he is nearly always speaking by parable.

This warning is particularly needed in reading Hilton who often speaks of feelings in such a way that he seems necessarily to be drawing the life of experience into his scheme of spiritual ascent. In fact the most perfect conversion in which the soul reaches to a very high degree of unity bears the very word in its famous description—‘the reformation in faith and feeling’. And much of what he has to say of the more perfect stages of the spiritual life are couched in these terms.

And when thou feelest this desire to God (to Jesus—all is one) holpen and comforted by a ghostly might.... (i, 46, p. 88). He also encourages a ‘fleshy love of God’ by means of meditation on the manhood of Christ which may lead to grace from God which is bound up with this human love of our Lord. Although such a love of our Lord be very mixed up with emotion and feeling it is not, he says, ‘of thine own working, nor feigning of any wicked spirit’.

For it is an opening of the ghostly eye into Christ’s manhood, and it may be called the fleshy love of God, as St Bernard calleth it, inasmuch as it is set in the fleshy kind of Christ. (i, 35, p. 62). Moreover in his desire that man should follow the movements of God’s Spirit rather than be hide-bound by his own fancies and rules Hilton seems almost imprudent in his encouragement to follow one’s own tastes and leanings—‘drawings’ they are often called—towards the good God. We must hold what grace we feel we have and not go chasing after something in itself more noble but which is not offered us by God’s grace (i. 40). We must ask for what we feel moved to ask and take the graces that God sends as they come without straining. The feeling of God’s grace and the sensible movement of the experience of his presence in this way seem to be a real test of spiritual progress.

It must be admitted that there is a certain truth in this and it would be almost manichean to cast aside all 'spiritual' emotion and feelings; this is not what is intended by these devout and Catholic authors. It is however only at the beginning of the way towards him that God uses the sensible side of man as a practical necessity for the infant Christian. St Paul in Hebrews writes of how he had first to feed his readers with the milk of the easy and emotional teaching: 'You have need to be first elements of the words of God: and you are become such as have need for milk and not of strong meat. For everyone that is a partaker of milk is unskilful in the word of justice: for he is a little child. But strong meat is for the perfect: for them who by custom have their sense exercised to the discerning of good and evil' (5, 12-4). Children need to be fed with soft food selected for them by their parents. So also the spiritual infant requires the soft teaching which is easily accepted bringing with it a nourishing warmth of devotion.

Such experiences, then, are good and are of God; they are his gifts. But they are not God himself. And this is the truth so constantly reiterated by all spiritual writers. Hilton is not encouraging a reliance on feelings and experience as the guiding norm for all those who are growing closer to God, but only for those who need a lot of support as they take the first steps towards their goal, when 'they begin to know God in the mirror of the things of sense', as Père Garrigou Lagrange puts it. Hardly anyone has put this more straightforwardly than Hilton himself:

And though it be so that thou feel him in devotion or in knowing, or in any other gift whatever it be, rest not there as though thou haddest fully found Jesus, but forget that thou hast found and always be desiring after Jesus more and more to find him better, as though thou haddest right naught found of him. For wit thou well that what thou feelest of him, be it never so much. . . . yet hast thou not found Jesus as he is in his joy (i. 46, p. 89).

For these things are from Jesus, yet not to be identified with him. From the very outset Hilton warns his reader against any trust in bodily experiences, which may be from an evil source as well as from a good. For he is very anxious to defeat the exaggerations of Rolle's followers who thought they could feel the physical, glowing heat of love in their breasts of which the Hermit wrote rather unguardedly. Hilton mentions these physical experiences by name (i. 10, p. 14). The fire of love, he insists again, is not bodily nor bodily

felt (i. 26, p. 45); and he points out that our Lord said it was 'speedful' for the apostles that he should leave them because they loved his 'fleshly manhood' too much (i. 36, p. 64). It is necessary to grow out of this dependence on sensible devotion and imaginative representations of our Lord. Indeed it is not unknown that such imaginative and emotional love of our Lord can become quite unruly and passionate and prevent any spiritual love of God which is needed to overpower the attachment to the things of sense.

But once these distinctions between sense and spirit are clear there is no need to strain towards a sort of approach to God which is that of a 'pure spirit'. There is no need to despise the gifts God sends and it is better to follow Hilton's advice and take devotion as it comes. Sooner or later God will withdraw himself from any effect on the pure senses and the good Christian will be very distressed no doubt at finding himself so alone and in such a waste land. People who are living a life of prayer depend often far more than they would be willing to admit on 'feelings', on an inner conviction or awareness which is at least shared emotionally and psychologically by the entire man. But if he is honest and ready for the knife of detachment God will disappear, for a time at least, from that sphere and leave the good Christian in desolation seeking God once more, having been deprived of his precious gifts. But it would be dangerous to throw away these gifts oneself. These gifts are given to each one according to his own proper needs, as each one's individuality, temperament and imaginative capacities differ so immensely. Thus the more artistic and highly trained imaginative person will find it very difficult indeed not to gauge his faith and his spiritual life by his feelings; these are refined and not necessarily sensuous or concerned with the passionate side of his nature. His poetic genius has become his main channel of knowledge and he judges instinctively by this sort of intuition. To counsel such a person to cast aside all reliance on experience might easily bring a sense of unreality and strain which would lead him astray. God himself in his own way and time will almost certainly purify these poetic gifts by aridities or yet by an increase of the gift of understanding by which he will be able to rise quickly from the symbol to the reality symbolised. Let no one then despise the poetic genius which can be used in its intuitive experience to penetrate the mysterious symbols whereby the grace of God is manifested to human creatures.

Nevertheless when Hilton speaks of a reformation of the soul

'in faith and feeling' it would seem that he is using feeling in a new sense altogether. He is treating of a far higher state than that in which the Christian will depend on 'the fleshly love' of Jesus. He is considering what may well be approaching the unitive way. His terminology is here based on St Paul's (Romans 12, 2) 'Be not conformed to this world; but be reformed in the newness of *your mind*.' This has therefore nothing to do with the sensible experience of the five wits. The Greek word used is *nous* and Hilton translates it as being reformed in 'newhead of feeling'.

For thou shalt understand that the soul hath two manner of feelings: one without of the five bodily wits, another within of the ghostly wits; the which are properly the mights of the soul, mind, reason and will. When these mights are through grace fulfilled in all understanding of the will of God and ghostly wisdom, then hath the soul new gracious feelings (ii. 31, p. 305).

It is clear then that this second 'feeling' is in the *ratio superior*, the higher part of the soul, and the word can only be used in a metaphorical sense.

It is, however, worth risking the danger of confusion in this matter of 'feeling' in using the same word for two totally different kinds of experience. For one thing it is very difficult for a man always to distinguish in himself a subtle form of 'sensible experience' and the sort of experience that comes to him as the result of an unshakable faith which has stood up to a battery of temptations and is suddenly left, purified and strengthened, in an undisturbed peace. More important, though, 'feeling' conveys the type of intuitive awareness which may be either in the senses or in the mind itself; and so the sudden instinctive movements of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which come without deliberation or process of ratiocination are quite properly called a type of feeling—a spiritual feeling. This is the perfect knowing, the true Christian 'gnosis' of which Hilton speaks in describing this reformation in feeling (ii. 31-32).

This question of 'intuition' and feeling is a vexed one and may easily lead to disputes and bickerings owing to the various views that have been expressed on the matter. This is no place to enter the lists against the heavily armoured knights of theology; for our desire here is simply to lead those who are anxious to understand prayer and to progress in it away from the harangues of the schools into the quiet pastures of the presence of Christ. It will therefore be more to our purpose to follow Hilton in his description of this

reformation in feeling, for he writes as one who has the experience of his own spiritual life and also that of many other holy people who had been entrusted to him.

In the beginning of the first book of *the Scale* he tells us that the first step towards the Christian gnosis begins with affection without understanding, and from his description this would seem to be very mixed with the emotions and fervour of sensible affection (i. 5). But he goes on to say that the perfection of the true contemplative lies in affection and knowledge, an affection which is to be found in the purified love of God and which brings to the mind the perfection of faith in the intellectual gifts of wisdom and understanding. This is 'ghostly feeling' (i. 13) which leaves all bodily things behind and truly conforms the spirit of man to God. For God is a spirit and when the soul is as it were pressed against him the truth of his mind pours out from the Word into the human mind, as did Jesus fill the mind of St John lying on his breast at the last supper. All this is of course set forth still in sensible and emotional imagery. But the soul, the will, the mind, these 'ghostly' realities when receiving direct intuition receive them spiritually and not by means of rationalisation from the senses.

Being to this extent independent of imagination or emotion the 'feeling' can well be pictured as a 'lightsome darkness'—an idea made popular by St John of the Cross. Darkness, because there is no clean act of reasoning helped by clarity of image. There is simply 'a delectable softness' and a wonderful impression 'of great freedom of spirit', which sets the soul 'in the gate of contemplation' (ii. 27). So that this feeling in its beginnings is indeed one of the dark nights—the dark night of the spirit which cauterises it so deeply that it emerges free from reliance on 'fervour' and 'devotion'. This knowledge illumined by the will of affection is therefore devoid of the sensible consolation which may follow the first conversion to the spiritual life or even the conversion of the senses to the illuminative life. The people who are living in these lower spheres of the spirit thus often show much greater enthusiasm and much more outward manifestations of their piety than the one who is fully reformed in feeling. Yet the 'little soul' who cannot grasp all at once the beauties of this vast desert of God's pure love, as the one who is born and bred in the quiet and leafy countryside of a Sussex or a Wiltshire will not at first be able to grasp the depth and meaning of the austere magnificence of the rocky heights of ridge upon ridge

of Scottish or Swiss mountains—so 'the little soul' being prepared for 'big graces' will, although being essentially transformed to God in this union, still manifest outward signs of 'devotion' while the full transformation is taking place. But true spiritual feeling cometh after and is at rest and peaceful. The person becomes far less demonstrative and he may pass in the crowd for a simple soul who has hardly known prayer and its joys (ii. 29).

Thus the new sort of feeling culminates in this affective knowledge by an outpouring of the gifts of understanding and wisdom. But even here the experience is never wholly removed from its bodily connection for the soul still inhabits and informs the body and the manhood of Jesus still overshadows the soul as it strains up through this shadow to glimpse the direct vision of Jesus's divinity—as the fire comes down with bodily fervour upon the Apostles and yet at that time the Holy Ghost

was unseeably felt in the mights of their soul, for He lightened their reason and kindled their affection through his blessed presence so clearly and so burningly, that they had suddenly the ghostly knowing of sooth fastness and the perfection of love (ii. 30—the whole chapter must be read).

Yet such physical or bodily fire is exceptional and not given to all perfect souls. But the safeguard that Hilton is anxious to provide here is against the dangerous attempt to separate either the soul from the body or the humanity of Christ from his divinity. What God has joined together let no man put asunder. And when in the progress of the soul a man is given the higher and altogether different type of feeling, the spiritual feeling, he must not expect to become an angel with no power of emotional fervour or devotion. His love may lie in arid wastes but from time to time even the beauty of the unrelieved rock will sometimes move him. Let him beware—for this desert provides its mirages like any other—but let him not despair of all green pasture where he may sit to take his rest with Jesus.

For they who are thus purified and raised to union in spirit with the hid divinity by means of the reformation in feeling,

they are his own sons specially, that bear the full shape and the likeness of his Son Jesus (ii. 28, 285).