Life of the Spirit

Volume II MARCH 1948 Number 21

MEDITATIVE STUDY

BY

THE EDITOR

BENEDICTINE scholarship has seldom flourished in purely academic circles. Historical studies perhaps have provided the greatest attraction for the sons of St Benedict in the purely scholarly fields of investigation. But even there the general interest of the student has not been divorced and often hardly distinguished from the Christian life of contemplation to which the Order is dedicated. In this respect it may be remarked that David Knowles's first volume on the Monastic Order in England has had a considerable influence in turning men's minds and desires towards contemplation; and should we consider the great Benedictine patristic scholars we shall find the same primacy of the contemplative ideal. To confine our examples to English authors Abbot Butler's *Western Mysticism* and Abbot Chapman's historical and scriptural studies tell the same story. When the Benedictine enters the arena of 'the schools' he will usually find himself at a disadvantage; he will discover in himself a tendency to be almost too simple in his 'spiritualising' attitude to the scholastic questions, he will be impatient of the discipline of the *philosophia perennis* precisely as philosophy.

The reason for this constant undertone of the Christian life of contemplation, which seems at times to be almost out of tune with pure philosophy, lies in the vocation of the Benedictine whose reading and study is from the outset 'spiritual reading' in the fullest and best sense of that somewhat degraded term; the reading of the Benedictine, says the founder and patriarch of monasticism, is to be always *lectio divina*, a reading which is at the same time a prayer, a reading which sees everything in relation to divine things, a reading which is inspired by the Wisdom of the Spirit. Little wonder that, to confine ourselves still to this country, the Benedictines who have wielded the greatest influence have been writers and preachers on Christian spiritual life such as Abbot Marmion, or on the theology of the Sacraments of the Christian Life such as Abbot Vonier, or on the prayer of the Liturgy such as Abbot Cabrol. The work of all

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026935930003370X Published online by Cambridge University Press

these men, and many like them, has been fructified and given vigorous growth by the prayer in which it was all conceived. *Lectio profana* or *lectio philosophica* is an embarrassment to the Benedictine who is dedicated to seeing things in their highest cause.

Among the subjects which demand a prayerful treatment of this character we could list a column of special subjects from dogmatic and moral theology. But there is one which demands of necessity an approach through *lectio divina*, one which if treated by the analytical brain of the pure schoolman would be in danger of withering into a meaningless formalism. If a Christian attends to the study of the life and nature of the God made man, from whom his life, both natural and divine, springs and has its movement, in any position other than on his knees he is running the risk of blinding himself to the truth of what he is looking at. This does not mean that our Lord came upon earth as man in order to become an object of worship, nor that in speaking of the God made man the Christian should revert to the pre-Christian attitude of fear of God. Worship and respect are due in abundant measure to him, but still more is love. And the beloved is always spoken of by the lover with bated, prayerful breath. Christ means so much; he *is* the way and the life; he is the centre of all our lives; he is everything to us from the most intimate lover to the maker of the daisies upon which we step in springtime. To approach the hypostatic union as an interesting 'case' in theological practice and not as though it were throbbing with life and reality for the student personally, would mean an approach to an abstraction which had no counterpart in reality. If a lover be asked to describe his beloved in purely biological terms, or even to paint her portrait on canvas or to describe her beauty in verse he will confess the inadequacy of all these media to approach the reality. How much more the schoolman when asked to formulate syllogisms on the nature of the Son of God will confess that he stands before a divine mystery full of love, or the apologist when he defends the gospels against the attacks of higher criticism, will admit that he speaks of the Mystery which he can never prove.

It is therefore exactly fitting that one who has been nurtured in the school of *lectio divina* as well as in the scientific discipline of St Thomas should approach the study of *The Christ of Catholicism* as a 'Meditative Study'.[1] The author, Dom Graham, has with accuracy acquainted himself with the other secular, pagan, purely external approaches which have hampered and limited the tremendous study for so long. He knows the principles with which to tackle the

1 The Christ of Catholicism. A Meditative Study. By Aelred Graham, Monk of Ampleforth (Longmans; 21s.)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026935930003370X Published online by Cambridge University Press

enemies of the gospel and he treats summarily but competently of these external problems and difficulties about the person of Christ. But it is time that men should be recalled to the living mystery of Christ the Saviour of the World; indeed there can seldom have been a time in history when the Saviour in all the depth of his true reality was not more urgently needed than now. The historical or the apologetic approaches are valid within their limitations; but we can no longer be content with these limitations. Mankind needs to be introduced with the great challenge of eternal truth and life to this one central mystery. The time has come again when the mystery itself must be preached with St Peter and St Paul before pagan audiences, rather than defended from heretical attack with the great preachers of late times. And the Mystery cannot be preached until it is known by an ever deepening personal experience, as he was known by St Peter in the intimacy of daily human life.

It has been possible in recent centuries to take Christ for granted; to be too interested in what he said without thought of who he is. And having exclusively concerned ourselves with this application of revealed doctrine we can easily use Christ and his teaching to bolster up our own pet theories about human history and behaviour. This may have the appearance of an evangelical approach to life, but in fact it is well-nigh blasphemy, treating the Sacred Person as a kind of mascot.

Today, therefore, we have a special need to return to the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, to approach him with reverence and love and to learn from him the secret of salvation. And this is where this Benedictine monk's attempt to synthesise the scriptural testimony with the doctrinal teaching of the Church about the person of Christ has much importance at the present time. Of course the author is the first to admit the vastness of the task and his own impotence:

> Our task is not to adapt the Church's teaching on Jesus Christ to the limitations of our own minds, but to raise and expand the mind to grasping its essential purity. Alas, this enterprise has only to be stated in words for us to see its impracticability. The Church alone is divinely commissioned to proclaim the complete view of Christ. (*Preface*, p. vii.)

To begin with, the book itself could have been twice as long as it is without spinning out any point in it; indeed future editions should be enlarged as much as possible, for often the treatment is almost too summary even for a jumping-board into meditation and prayer. And there have been some notable omissions. We may be surprised by the absence of the Annunciation at the beginning of the chapter on 'The Life-work of Jesus Christ' which summarises in 120 pages

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026935930003370X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the history of Christ on earth. This event is in fact relegated to a chapter towards the end of the book on the Consequences of the Incarnation in which the author discusses 'The Role of the Mother of God'. Nevertheless this can hardly be considered an omission in itself because it serves as a striking opening to a very beautiful and profoundly theological treatment of our Lady's place next her Son in the work of salvation, and the slight awkwardness in arrangement serves to show how difficult it is to approach the real Christ of the gospels without at once meeting his Mother also. Again, in view of modern theological development the reader might have expected to find more account taken of such work as that of Père de la Taille on the Sacrifice of Calvary, especially as the book *Mysterium Fidei* is quoted in the bibliography. But here again Dom Graham refreshes the reader by continually bringing him back to the great and perennial sources, the Gospels, the Fathers, St Thomas. The Gospels and the Epistles remain the principle source throughout the whole work so that we are reminded that St Thomas and his fellow medieval masters of theology were officially expounders of Sacred Scripture—Aristotle and all other thinkers were merely instruments used for their exposition.

In other words, any defects or omissions—inevitable in a book concerned with this central reality of life—will be engulfed by the prayer in which they should be read. The *lectio divina* of the writer must be carried over into the *lectio divina* of the reader, and thus the principles touched on will be elaborated, the hints of other aspects of the Mystery will be followed up, the gaps will be filled in. The actual 'work of the book', to borrow a phrase from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, is begun by the saying of the Rosary wherein the mysteries of Christ's life and personality are reviewed in speaking contact with Christ himself in prayer. What the Rosary contains in germ has here grown and expanded into a large volume, but no one, least of all the writer himself, would claim that this was the final stage of the growth, of all that could be meditated. The Mystery of the Incarnation contains infinite depths which the prayerful mind of man in this life will never plumb.

Religion, therefore, and the life of prayer and virtue are not things concerned with an ideology. For so many today, faced as they are by militant ideologies which take on the character of religion, their own religion becomes something of the same kind. There is a Christian ethos, a Christian culture, a Christian society; but each of these is a human intellectual synthesis. Christian religion *is* Christ; Christ is a real person and from him all these other things grow. In order to obtain renewed vitality in our religion and to overcome the danger of allying themselves to an ideology or system of doctrine, men must

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026935930003370X Published online by Cambridge University Press

return to this unique Person. In effect of course they can only be introduced to him by the direct power of God, because each one needs the divine gift of faith before he can overcome the barriers of time and space and so be brought into the presence of the Son of God. But God himself uses other infinitely lesser courses to help in this work of introduction. He sends his apostles out into the highways in order to compel all stragglers to come in and meet his Son at his nuptial feast when he is wed to his Church. A 'meditative study' of the sort we are here considering will play a happy part in this work of introducing men to Christ; and we may conclude with some words of his own peroration:

> The onward march of humanity, considered from the ultimate viewpoint, has Christ for its term. The world itself, that collective entity which remains as yet outside the Christian fold, can know no real progress except as an approach to him. The world, which at the beginning of history sin had invaded . . . is the world with which God strives so that he may reconcile it to himself in Christ. Human learning and philosophy, which the world laboriously acquires and of which it is so proud, compared to the saving knowledge of Christ, are no more than schoolroom tasks, an alphabet taught to children (p. 339).

In this Dom Graham is following closely the powerful meditations of St Paul himself for whom this Mystery fulfilled all knowledge.

> Being instructed in charity, and unto all riches of fulness of understanding, unto the knowledge of the mystery of God the Father and of Christ Jesus, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2. 2-3).[2]

We must not of course fall into the error of despising the use of reason but we must submit our reason to the purifying heat of prayer in order to reach true wisdom. This ideal is the *lectio divina* of St Benedict, and the book we have been considering will help considerably in attaining to the heights of that ideal.

[2] We quote here from the Douay version. The author himself uses the recent Knox translation, the appearance of which in a work like this reminds us how unusual it still remains.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026935930003370X Published online by Cambridge University Press