Life of the Spirit

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SIMPLICITY OF SANCTITY

BY

THE EDITOR



OCCASIONALLY an analytical book on some saintly writer will obtain a greater popularity than the actual writings themselves. This was so with the profound work of Baron van Hugel on St Catherine of Genoa; *The Mystical Elements of Religion* has probably brought greater understanding of that saint than her own rather limited writings on purgatory. The work of Père Philipon, O.P., on Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity has also achieved a far greater success than her own writings; indeed the book, while bearing some resemblance to von Hugel's classic, in fact penetrates more theologically and with greater clarity and brevity into the nature and development of mystical holiness than the latter. For this reason the Newman Bookshop of America and the Mercier Press of Cork are particularly to be congratulated for their wisdom in publishing the translation of Père Philipon's book by a nun of Stanbrook.[1] *The Spiritual Doctrine* may be read by anyone interested in the nature of sanctity; it has been admirably served by the translator (and we may wonder whether she had not one eye on earlier spiritual literature when she uses such words as 'overly'); and although Sister Elizabeth's own *Souvenirs* were published a good many years ago, this book, which includes some more of her own writings, will reach a wider English public and leave a deeper impression on English spiritual life than those writings.

One of the principal reasons for this popularity for books about saints rather than the books by the saints lies in the extreme simplicity to which the saint must attain and which enables him or her to see far more within the compass of far fewer words and sentences than the average reader can hope to comprehend without the help of the theologian's analysis. The *Revelations* of Mother Julian of Norwich would reach a far wider public if she did not compress so much within her short chapters. The ordinary Christian requires to reach these truths by a circuitous route, twisting in and out among

[1] *The Spiritual Doctrine of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity.* By M. M. Philipon, O.P., translated by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey. (The Mercier Press; 21s.)

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the great doctrines and trying fitfully to link them up one with another. It is precisely in this respect that Père Philipon makes so efficient an amanuensis. For Sister Elizabeth lived so short a time and left so little outward mark by the events of her life that without this theological analysis it would have been difficult to discover the secret of her holiness, or even to have realised that she had that secret.

But the essential feature of Sister Elizabeth's holiness is so simple as to seem almost elementary; and for that reason in particular we shall find this book almost a revelation in itself. To say that sanctity is simply the full flowering of the 'seed of glory' which is grace in the soul would seem almost trite; and yet if we follow the steps down the winding stair into this truth we shall arrive with some labour at a glimpse of the simple truth into which Sister Elizabeth plunged with such directness and with such a force of spiritual gravity as to be able to find her heaven in the Trinity already upon earth. This simple truth of the nature of grace as a participation of the soul in the life of the blessed Trinity holds within it all the truth of the Gospel. Our Lord himself is constantly likening the kingdom of God which is the kingdom of heaven to a seed which grows up into the perfection of the Father, and he says that this kingdom is already within us. To realise in the concrete the force of this simple teaching would in fact mean sanctity, for it would leave only the darkness of faith to hang before the face of the triune God. This veil is the only barrier between the saint and beatific vision; and death removes the veil so that the soul reaches the perfection and the fruit of the life it has already been living. This is the simple doctrine of grace which makes it not a foolish ambition for the least Christian to aspire to sanctity but in fact a prime necessity of his new life which moves by the impetus of God's will which is sanctification—'the will of God your sanctification'. If Christians could realise that this is their individual vocation from the first moment of grace when the three Persons dwell in this new way in their souls heaven would not seem so remote to them nor sanctity so special. Too easily are they content with working to acquire some of the principal moral virtues such as patience and temperance, to pray to God away up in the clouds, to treat heaven as almost a pious dream and to shy away from the Trinity as too intricate a doctrine. And yet their end is the vision of the Trinity and that end is not removed to a distance from them either in space or time. Heaven is all about them, heaven is within them if the smallest spark of grace has given them this share in the divine life.

Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity came towards the end of her life

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to realise that the metaphysics of her being, plunged into the depth of grace, turned her wholly into a 'praiser' of the Trinity so that her very name became *Laudem Gloriae*, 'Praise of Glory'. This realisation that she was to be *named* 'Laudem Gloriae' as a proper name, analogously to the proper naming of the Persons of the Trinity, came very near to the perfection of simplicity. But this simplicity, embracing as it does as many perfections as it belongs to the soul to acquire, did not mean that it was reached with ease—there is an unhealthy weakness in the English tongue to equate simplicity with facility. Certainly she had the natural gifts of a mystic and we find her, like St John of the Cross and others, attracted by the wide spaces of a clear night with its stars and the wonders of nature, the wind sighing in the trees and the song of the birds. But such natural attractions do not make the saint, so that she has to purify this tendency until she finds her 'little paradise' in her Carmelite cell—a 'straw bed, a little chair, a wooden table'. God speaks *through* creatures to the 'natural mystic'; but in the silence of the bare cell he himself speaks directly to the soul.

Such simplicity therefore can only be called forth from the originally complicated soul by the utter detachment from all creatures which means a complete conformity with Christ, from the solitude of the Temptation and the nightly mountain vigils of prayer to the complete desolation of the Cross: the simple way is the hardest of all. Sister Elizabeth followed this path almost contemporaneously with St Thérèse of Lisieux, with whom she has often been compared and whose 'Little Way' has also often been mistaken for an easy way. The last week of her life was so closely allied with the last hours of our Lord on the Cross that her sisters could not help remarking the likeness of even her outward features to those of the suffering victim of Calvary, and it was in that complete detachment wrought by God himself that she finally reached the transforming union which is nothing added to the life of grace but only its fullness and perfection. The simple soul can see that he alone is and that he is alone. And so she seeks to forget herself in the death of 'denial', to find the Only One and to go to him *for his sake*.

What more terrifying than this simplicity! It would seem, in its harping on 'nothing, nothing, nothing' and on 'nescivi', to be nihilist in its attitude to the world. And yet this life of conformity to the Cross is at once the heart of contemplation and the source of the apostolate. And, although Père Philipon contrasts her with the Carmelite of Lisieux as fulfilling her mission in interior souls whereas the former 'covers the whole Catholic world with rose petals scattered for love', he does outline her apostolate for the priesthood which must

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certainly approach very closely the mission of her sister at Lisieux. It was a common heritage from their foundress St Teresa, who encouraged her daughters to pray specially for priests. Sister Elizabeth's mission in this respect seems to have been profoundly spiritual and at the same time very personal. The priests who came in contact with her derived immense encouragement and strength from her words as well as from her sacrifices, and it seems probable that she finally offered her life for priests. 'While you carry him to souls', she wrote to a priest friend, 'I, like Magdalen, will stay close to the Master in silent adoration, asking him to render your word fruitful in souls. Apostle, Carmelite; it is all one.' The truth is that the simplicity of the saint will embrace all the perfections of the Church. The man who thinks himself simple in chasing ceaselessly after one form of activity, even if it be the Apostolate itself, will find that his life remains very complicated. The one who seeks only the Trinity in the depth of his heart will find that he has become almost universal in the singleness of his purpose, for he has begun to share in the essential simplicity of the Godhead. Sister Elizabeth found almost without seeking it that she increased the Praise of Glory also in this world. Simplicity sets the soul alight and it shines with that brilliance which is as a city on a mountain top which cannot be hid.

After the reader has gathered all the theological strands discoverable in the life of this youthful Carmelite presented to him by Père Philipon he will find that he has approached the secret of simplicity when these strands become a length of single cord stretching into the infinite depths of the Trinity. 'It is not only for its joy that God abides with the soul but primarily for his glory. "The Trinity so loves to find its image and likeness in its creation".' Thus the glory of the Trinity must finally raise the soul above itself and its own joy. 'Since my soul is in heaven, wherein I dwell while awaiting the heavenly Jerusalem, this heaven, too, must sing the glory of the Eternal' (p. 212).

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