

THE CANTICLE OF CANTICLES AMONG THE EARLY DISCALCED CARMELITES

SUMMARIUM. — Synthetice exponuntur commentaria in « Canticum Cantorum » a primis scriptoribus Reformati Carmeli edita.

Of all the Books of Holy Scripture, none has been more subjected to destructive commentary than the Canticle of Canticles. A few years ago the present writer bought at Oxford a small book containing the Canticle "told in the Lancashire dialect—for all Lancashire lovers of the Bible, of dialect, and of lovers, arranged and transcribed by Rev. J. Barlow Brooks." The following note preceded the text: "As it is a pure love song, and a very fine one withal, and has no such significance as was once attributed to it, I dedicate this dialect translation and arrangement of it to all who love, have loved—or will love. J. B. B." This view is spreading alarmingly among non-Catholic writers, and Catholics therefore have the duty of defending, now more than ever, the inspired character of the Canticle and its unique position in Catholic thought and tradition.

We shall be greatly aided in this task if we realize that we can learn much from Catholic writers of past centuries. Among those some of the early writers of the Discalced Carmelite School merit special attention. Several of the protagonists of the Carmelite Reform wrote on the Canticle, finding in it a very adequate expression of the love of Christ's soul, and of the admirable fidelity with which the soul, filled with the supernatural love of her Redeemer, follows Him and adheres to Him in time and eternity. In this paper we shall confine ourselves to four only of these early Discalced Carmelite writers and to their observations on Solomon's Song of Songs. These four are: St. Teresa of Jesus, St. John of the Cross, Fr. Jerome Gracian and Fr. John of Jesus and Mary.

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St. Teresa (1515-1582), the great Foundress of the Discalced Carmelites, has left only a few chapters on the *Canticle of Canticles*. They occupy pages 483-511 of the latest standard edition of her works.¹ They are not a full commentary: they are rather an exhortation to her nuns to read and meditate on the *Canticle* as a means to familiar and loving intercourse with Christ. Some of the nuns were evidently afraid to meditate on the *Canticle*, not knowing how to make use of it. The Saint enlarges on her own former fears about it and on the delight which she now derives from it, Thus in the first chapter she writes:

“You may think that some of the things written in this *Canticle* could have been said in some other way. I would not be surprised, so great is our stupidity; I have heard some persons say that they tried to avoid hearing these things. O good God, how truly miserable we are! For just as in the case of persons with deadly poison in their system, all that they eat is turned into poison, so it happens to us. From the great favours which Our Lord grants us here, teaching us to appreciate that which He grants to the soul who loves Him so that she may get high courage in order to speak and enjoy the presence of Our Lord, we derive only fear and interpret His words according to the little love of God which we have.”

A little further on the Saint speaks about her own experiences, in the third person as is often her wont:

“I know of a person who was for many years with many fears, and there was nothing which would satisfy her, until one day it pleased God that she heard something of these *Canticles*, and through them she understood that her soul was well directed because, as I have said, she understood that it is possible for a soul who is lost through love of her Spouse to feel all these delights, and dismays, and deaths, and afflictions, and joys, and contents in Him, after she has left all those of the world for His love and has utterly abandoned herself into His hands.”

In her own inimitable way the Saint interprets a few verses from the *Canticle*, and applies them to the graces with which Christ fills the souls that love Him. From her exposition it is obvious that the Saint is fully conscious of the fact that among her nuns there were many souls worthy of those spiritual graces. Evidently she expects them all

¹ Santa Teresa de Jesús. *Obras completas*, con un estudio preliminar y notas por Luis Santullano, Quinta edición. Madrid, 1945.

to understand what she writes. It is a pity that she selects so few verses on which to hang her somewhat lengthy commentary. She obviously enjoys writing on this subject and expects her nuns to share her appreciation of it. However—as usual—she makes it quite clear that what she has written she has written under obedience :

“What I have said, I have written in obedience to him who has ordered me to do it.”

The person who actually issued the order was no less a theologian than the great Dominican Father Báñez. It is clear that he knew how to direct the Saint to the heights of sanctity under the guidance of the inspired Word of God.

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St. Teresa's first follower and glorious rival in the restoration of the ancient Carmelite observance throughout Spain, *St. John of the Cross*, showed a marked predilection for the Canticle of Canticles. He is not the author of any specific commentary : but in one of his works he followed the Canticle so closely, both in poetry and in prose, that it may be well described as one of the best commentaries on Solomon's Song of Songs. We refer of course to the *Cántico Espiritual*.

In most editions of this work the verse is printed first by itself, under the title of *Songs between the Soul and her Spouse* (Canciones entre el alma y el Esposo), and this is followed by the full length commentary in prose. The verse itself represents the highest level of Spanish poetry, and indeed has hardly been surpassed in any language. Allison Peers speaks of it as follows :

“It was in the early days of the Discalced Reform, and some of his fellow-Carmelites who had no desire to be reformed, had conceived the crude expedient of kidnapping him and imprisoning him in a small, dark cell in their monastery of Toledo. While there, he begged for some paper and ink and set out to compose a few things profitable to devotion.² Those few things were the doctrinal stanzas on the Holy Trinity :

*Far away in the beginning
Dwelt the Word of God on high...*

² Allison Peers, *Spirit of Flame*, p. 40.

Apparently verse came easily to him ; so, in his second attempt, he gave the rein to his imagination and produced the lovely allegorical poem "Although 'tis night." In his next flight he soared still higher ; for it was in the Toledan dungeon that he wrote the first thirty stanzas of one of his greatest poems, the *Spiritual Canticle*. As we read them, we can well imagine how they began. At some moment of intense depression, the darkness of the prison merged into the Dark Night of his soul, and, like Christ on Calvary, he felt that God had forsaken him." *A donde te escondiste?* he cried, in anguish : and then, perhaps after the black mood had passed, and he could think once more, he put pen to paper again to record his own experience, and found himself writing that never-to-be-forgotten narrative of the Bride's quest of her Divine Lover :

*A donde te escondiste,
Amado, y me dejaste con gemido?...*

Whither hast vanished,
Beloved, and hast left me full of woe ;
And, like the hart hast sped
Wounding, ere Thou didst go,
Thy love, who follow'd, crying, high and low?

That poem, expanded to forty stanzas, the longest that its author ever wrote, became the basis of his great mystical treatise which bears the same title."

The same treatise may be taken as an informal Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles. Quotations from the Canticle are to be found on almost every page, and it may truly be said that the whole of the Song of Songs is dealt with in the *Spiritual Canticle*. To be exact, the following verses of the Song of Solomon are commented on by St. John :

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| Chapter | I - vv. 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17. |
| » | II - vv. 1, 3, 4, 6, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15. |
| » | III - vv. 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11. |
| » | IV - vv. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 14, 16. |
| » | V - vv. 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 14. |
| » | VI - vv. 1, 2, 9, 11. |
| » | VII - vv. 10, 12, 13. |
| » | VIII - vv. 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10. |

Other books of the Old and New Testaments are likewise referred to, but the Song of Songs is that work with which St. John of the Cross

keeps in constant touch, and his comments are usually very apt and most illuminating. For example, in explaining the first line of his Canticle

A dónde te escondiste?

Where hast Thou hidden Thyself?

he says :³

“The chief object of the soul in these words is not to ask only for that affective and sensible devotion, wherein there is no certainty or evidence of the possession of the Bridegroom in this life : but principally for that clear presence and vision of His essence, of which it longs to be assured and satisfied in the next. This, too, was the object of the Bride who, in the Divine Song desiring to be united to the Divinity of the Bridegroom Word—prayed the Father, saying : ‘Show me where Thou feedest, where Thou liest in the midday.’ For to ask to be shown the place where He fed was to ask to be shown the Essence of the Divine Word, the Son : because the Father feedeth nowhere else but in His only begotten Son, Who is the glory of the Father.”

The Saint considers the Canticle of Canticles simply as a divine presentment of the spiritual union of the soul with God, through the outpouring of God’s grace upon the soul which He wishes to unite with Himself. Nowhere could he have found a better foundation upon which to base his own doctrine of mystical union.

It was from St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross that the Theologians trained among the Discalced Carmelites drew the inspiration for their writings on mystical theology. We turn now to the consideration of two of these.

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The first is Father *Jerome Gracián of the Mother of God*, a great Carmelite and a great Theologian, held by St. Teresa in the highest esteem. Indeed, we would venture to say that if anyone has a claim to be considered the genuine representative and interpreter of the Saint of Avila that man is Fr. Jerome Gracián.

Fr. Jerome Gracián was born at Valladolid in 1545. His father Diego Gracián had been for a long time Secretary to the Emperor Charles V. Jerome studied philosophy and theology at the University of Alcalá under the Jesuit Fathers, and there gained the Doctorate in philosophy before his twenty first year. He was actually teaching philo-

³ Translation by David Lewis, *Spiritual Canticle of the Soul*, pp. 17, 18. 1919.

sophy at the same place when he joined the Discalced Carmelites, then in the first splendour of their reform under St. Teresa. She put all her trust in him, and, as a consequence, those who were jealous of St. Teresa's success persecuted him throughout his life. He was compelled to abandon Spain and then Portugal, where he had been working in the interests of the Carmelite Reform. In Rome he tried unsuccessfully to join other Religious Orders. He was taken captive by the Moors, but, after two years spent in custody at Argel, he found his way back to Rome. Thence he was sent to Belgium, where he died at Brussels in 1614.

Throughout his life he remained faithful to St. Teresa, whose works he imitated, copied, edited and propagated.⁴ The year before his death, 1613, he published a small volume entitled *Conceptos del Divino Amor sobre los Cantares*, Thoughts on Divine Love on the Canticles, in imitation of the work of St. Teresa on the same subject. This small work was re-published at Madrid in 1944, and it is the text of this edition that we are using here.⁵ From Flanders, where he was living in exile, Father Jerome sent this work to the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of Spain, "with the fervent love of a brother, to satisfy the wish of many who have asked me, as being responsible for the publication together with a few notes of my own, of Blessed Teresa's *Concepts of the Love of God*, which she wrote on the Canticles, that I should follow this up with some further annotations of mine on the eight chapters of the Canticle. I write in the shortest and clearest style of which I am capable without digressing to the many other concepts which each thought inspires, for I know that where there are so many good desires and thoughts as are in your hearts, prompted as they are by the life of prayer to which you are dedicated, only a few sparks will suffice to kindle the fire of divine love which I desire for you all."

Fr. Gracián passes through the eight chapters briefly; but his thoughts are very apposite and considerably help the reader to understand and follow the inspired text. When he begins to explain the title of the book, he reminds his reader of that passage from St. Augustine on the Psalm: *Cantate Domino canticum novum*, which is one of the best known thoughts of the great African Doctor: *Quod ibi dixit canticum novum, hoc dixit Dominus mandatum novum; quid enim habet canticum novum nisi amorem novum? Cantare amantis est; vox hujus cantoris fervor est*

⁴ In the *Bibliotheca Hispana* of Nicolás Antonio, first vol., p 442.

⁵ *El Cantar de los Cantares de Salomón*, por el Maestro Jerónimo Gracián de la Madre de Dios, Carmelita. Madrid, Apostolado de la Prensa, 1944.

sancti amoris. Basing his remarks on these words, Fr. Jerome Gracián gives us an excellent interpretation of Solomon's great Song. All those who feel called to divine contemplation can indeed derive much profit by perusing these few pages, written as they were in the golden age of Catholic Mystical theology. We give here a specimen of his style and method. Commenting on verses 13 and 14 of chapter IV.

"Cypress with spikenard. Spikenard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon, with all the trees of Libanus, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief perfumes ;"

he says :

"All of which abound in Asia and are brought thence to all the parts of the world. And though one could write at length of sweet-smelling trees and ointments and fragrant odours, nevertheless, because this would not answer our purpose, I shall summarize the doctrine of the Spirit in the sevenfold manner of the same Spirit, according to the number of these seven ointments as Our Lady taught them to us in her divine Canticle of the Magnificat :

The first is the *esteem and desire of God's glory* and of His plans, as it is to be found in the loving soul, according to the words : *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*.

The second is *joy and spiritual exultation in God*. *Exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo*.

The third is most *profound humility* and knowledge of one's own misery. *Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae*.

The fourth is a sincere *sense of thanksgiving* for all the graces received, for which the soul is deeply grateful, since they have been given her by the hand of God, *Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est*.

The fifth is a *reverential fear*, that is, the dread which the soul feels when she finds herself before God, so immense, so powerful. *Timentibus eum—Fecit potentiam*.

The sixth is a fervent desire *with hunger and thirst after justice*, rectitude in the service of God, whereby the soul is filled with all good things. *Esurientes implevit bonis*.

The seventh and last, is *union with Christ*, and the fact that one welcomes Him and carries Him in one's own heart. *Suscepit Israel puerum suum*.

Thus, the Spouse here declares that the Bride has to be filled with these seven spirits or seven parts and ways of the good Spirit, or again—the seven fruits of the good Spirit, that is, of a useful—loving life of spiritual prayer."

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Our fourth Discalced Carmelite is Father *John of Jesus and Mary*, who wrote two Commentaries on the Canticle, which are still very useful to the interested reader as a reflexion of the mind of the Church on that particular book.

Father John of Jesus and Mary was born at Calahorra, in Northern Spain, in the year 1583 and joined the Discalced Carmelites in his early manhood. Soon after his profession he passed on to Genoa, and then to Rome, where an Italian Institute, modelled on that of the Spanish Discalced Carmelites, was started with great success. Of this new Society, Fr. John of Jesus and Mary became the third General. During his stay in Rome he became a great friend of Pope Paul V and of St. Robert Bellarmine. He wrote much in Latin, Italian and Spanish. Here we are concerned only with his *Cantici Canticorum Interpretatio*, published in Rome in 1601, at Salamanca in 1602 and at Mainz in 1603. The present writer has studied it in the copy preserved in the Library of the Discalced Carmelite Fathers at Kensington. This copy is part of the complete works of Fr. John, published in two folio volumes. In the first volume there is a full commentary on the Canticles and a second Commentary much shorter, at the end of the volume. As late as 1925, the celebrated Biblical Scholar, Father John G. Arintero, O.P., in his *Mystical Exposition of the Canticle of Canticles*, borrowed very many passages from the book of Fr. John of Jesus and Mary. All the extracts he used are exceedingly useful as keys to the mystical meaning of the inspired Song. He comments, for example, on the text, *Let him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth*, which is the opening verse of the first chapter of the Canticles, and writes :

“The Eternal Father is here introduced as bestowing a kiss. But the mouth which gives a kiss to the Spouse is the Eternal Father’s Son, that is, His Eternal Word, it being a figure of speech, common to all nations, to let the mouth stand for the word. The Kiss, therefore, which proceeds from the mouth of him who kisses, is obviously, it would seem, an appellation of the Divine Spirit, . . . Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth, that is, let the Eternal Father be intimately united with me with the Spirit of His Word, let Him be united to me with this intimate union of His own nature . . . Through this inspiration, or rather through this impression of His kiss, we may understand in the historical sense, the mission of the person of the

Holy Ghost, and His reception into the faithful soul, which is here so ardently asked for by the Bride."

"*Post te curremus.* This has to be understood in such a way that the Spouse infuses the gifts of the Holy Ghost into souls and thus through the union of Himself which is given to souls, these are rendered more ready to run to God. And very aptly He mentions His gifts as being enriched by His ointments, rather than by the virtues, for He wishes to indicate the promptitude and readiness of the souls that run to Him. Because it is undoubtedly a most opportune effect of divine providence that it is the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost which are granted to all the just, in order that they may be helped by them and made by them more easily moved by God and led to the acquisition of the theological virtues."

"*Introduxit me in cella vinaria.* He has introduced me into the wine-cellar and His banner over me is love... Indeed, divine contemplation is the cellar where the wine is kept, where in fact is kept the good wine, wherewith our will is inebriated. For here indeed love becomes inebriated. He has therefore introduced His Spouse into this house... God has called this house love, in order that we may understand that those are actually introduced into the cellars of contemplation, who are led by love."

Thus, faithful to the Carmelite tradition of mystical contemplation, Father John of Jesus and Mary in his Commentary on the Canticles, never loses an occasion of describing the importance and reality of the effects of divine contemplation on the soul.

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If only for this reason the commentaries and works on the Song of Songs produced by the early Discalced Carmelites have still a great, indeed a unique importance. Nothing could be more gratifying to a Catholic Biblical student, who is also, as he should be, a man of prayer, than to find divine contemplation, as described and explained in their works, based, at least in a general way, on the actual authority of Holy Scripture, written for us under the direct inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

St. Augustine's Abbey Ramsgate, 1947.

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