

## FR. GABRIEL OF SAINT MARY MAGDALEN EXPONENT OF CARMELITE MYSTICISM

An important contribution to the present volume would undoubtedly have come, had he lived out his normal span of years, from Father Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, professor of spiritual theology in this Faculty from its foundation until his death in 1953.

Not only was Father Gabriel among the founders of the *Ephemerides Carmeliticae*: he was its very first contributor. This, added to the fact that that first article in the *Ephemerides* was an exhaustive study of unitive contemplation according to Saint John of the Cross,<sup>1</sup> makes it all the more appropriate that he should in some way be represented in this symposium.

Father Gabriel's memory is still vividly alive in the field of spiritual letters, and the esteem which his many books and articles enjoyed during his lifetime remains undiminished a decade after his death. It would perhaps not be out of place, nevertheless, to recall here briefly the salient features of his career and personality, already recorded for us more amply elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> before going on to commemorate — again briefly — those aspects of his thought which are especially relevant to this collection of studies, in which we shall thus try to ensure him, if not the place he would rightfully have occupied, at least an acknowledgement that his absence is deeply regretted.

Born in Belgium on 24th January 1893, he entered the Discalced Carmelite Novitiate at Bruges in 1910. Called to arms in 1915 he interrupted his theological studies, begun in Ireland, to serve as a stretcher-bearer in the Belgian army for the remainder of the first World War. He was twice wounded in the execution of his duties, and was decorated for his courageous service.

Ordained Priest in 1919, he taught in his Province until 1926, when he was called to Rome as Vicerector of the International College of St Teresa, an office he filled for the next ten years.

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Problème de la Contemplation Unitive*, in *Ephemerides Carmeliticae* I (1947) p. [5]-53; [245]-277.

<sup>2</sup> See *Un maestro di vita spirituale*, compiled by the nuns of Carmelo San Giuseppe. Rome, 1959. (Collana Itinerari 3). Also BENIAMINO DELLA S.S. MA TRINITÀ, O. C. D., *Il fondatore della Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, in *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, VII (1953), p. [113]-161.

At different periods he taught philosophy, dogmatic theology, and sociology, but the field in which he excelled, and in which he eventually became one of the eminent figures of his time, was, of course, that of spiritual theology. He occupied the chair of spiritual theology at St Teresa's from 1931 until his death.

When the Discalced Carmelite Theological Faculty was erected in the College in 1935, Father Gabriel was appointed Prefect of Studies, and held that office for twelve years. In 1945 he was nominated by His Holiness Pope Pius XII Consultor to the Sacred Congregation of Rites, for work in connection with causes of beatification and canonisation. He combined these intellectual activities with an intense apostolate, giving courses of conferences, preaching numerous retreats for the clergy, laity, and religious institutes, and exercising a wide ministry of spiritual direction to individuals and communities. A number of his courses of conferences appeared in published form, but these account for only part of his considerable literary output. In 1941 he founded, and for the rest of his life contributed largely to, a review which was at first dedicated to Carmelite spirituality under the title of *Vita Carmelitana*, and in 1947 became the *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, with a more universal scope and wider appeal. He was in the full flood of his activity and at the height of his intellectual maturity when, on 15th March 1953, he was, after a brief illness, called to his eternal reward.

Outstanding in his zeal for the religious life, for the traditions of his Order, and for a truly *Carmelite* apostolate, Father Gabriel is mourned today as keenly as ever by all who knew him, personally or through his work, within or without the Teresian family. While we hope that more competent pens than ours will not fail to honour the tenth anniversary of his death with worthier tributes, these few pages will meanwhile serve to record the respect and affection in which his memory is held by the members of the Discalced Carmelite Theological Faculty.

We do not propose to attempt a complete survey of Father Gabriel's literary production on themes related to Carmelite mysticism: within the limits of this brief notice it would hardly be possible to do so. Fortunately we find his mature views epitomised in some of the last pieces he wrote. The notes for his systematic course in spiritual theology, which he was revising as he delivered it during the spring of 1953, were actually interrupted by his death halfway through the chapter on mysticism, so that we possess a partial summary written during his last few days of life,<sup>3</sup> nor is it difficult to complete these notes from other

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<sup>3</sup> *Corso sistematico di teologia spirituale (secondo anno)*, [1953], 169 p. polygraphed notes *ad usum auditorum*. In this second part of his course

among his more recent writings, published and unpublished. There is, of course, the preceding redaction of the same course, and his article *La contemplation dans l'école du Carmel Thérésien* in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* is also much to the point.<sup>4</sup> It is upon these two sources, the systematic course and the article in the *Dictionnaire*, that we shall draw in the main for this synthesis, referring to our author's other writings as occasion arises for the elucidation of some particular point.

For Father Gabriel the discussion of mysticism, the element of passivity under divine action which is present to some degree in every true interior life, begins with the distinction between mystical *experience* and mystical *life*.<sup>5</sup> (The distinction is vital to his solution of the « problem of contemplation », as we shall see later). Mystical experience « is a particular human experience by which one is conscious, with more or less certainty, of the direct intervention of God in one's spiritual life »,<sup>6</sup> while the mystical life « means the progressive extension of the Holy Spirit's dominion over the soul through an ever-wider activation of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost ».<sup>7</sup> Mystical life is, then, a much wider term, embracing mystical experience to which consciousness is essential, but also covering the unconscious reception of direct divine intervention.

By mystical experience we are to understand primarily the experience, in prayer, of the soul's *union* with God: in a word, *contemplation*. Other phenomena, whether they remain purely mental: visions, locutions, revelations etc., or whether they entail a somatic element: ecstasy, stigmatisation, levitation etc., are accidental to spiritual progress and secondary in importance.<sup>8</sup>

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Father Gabriel dealt with the *Via Illuminativa* and the *Via Unitiva*. The *Via illuminativa* was to have had four chapters: 1 « L'acquisto delle virtù perfette », 2. « L'apostolato », 3. « La mistica - sua natura », and 4. « La mistica è per tutti (o il problema della mistica) ». Chapter 3 was interrupted by the author's death, and the course was completed by his successor, Father JUAN DE JESÚS MARÍA, from two sources: a) *Studio sistematico-teologico della vita spirituale*, a course of lectures given by Father Gabriel to a Congress of Mistresses of Novices in February 1953, published under the title of *La vita spirituale* in *Rivista di Vita Spirituale* VII (1953), p. [254]-295; b) the preceding redaction of his *Corso sistematico*. We have been unable to discover the year to which this redaction belongs. We shall cite page numbers from Father Juan's « edition ». Pages 1-83 contain the 1952-53 course; 90-94 extracts from the *Studio sistematico-teologico*; and 94-165 chapters from the preceding redaction of the *Corso sistematico*.

<sup>4</sup> See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Paris, 1937- , t. II (2 partie), col. 2058-2067.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. *Corso sistematico* p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 90.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135-138.

Father Gabriel, following the traditions proper to the Carmelite School, gives priority in his study of contemplation to the experiences recorded by the mystics themselves, above all by Saint Teresa; theological principles are only brought into play when the examination of the experimental data has been completed, to aid the analysis and furnish the explanation of the psychological phenomena.<sup>9</sup> It is in this field, the synthesis of the psychological and the theological, that Saint John of the Cross comes into his own as the prince of mystical theologians and leader of the Teresian school. St John of the Cross also supplies invaluable descriptions of the intermediate or transitional stages of prayer hardly touched on by Saint Teresa: the passage from meditation to contemplation, and from imperfect to perfect contemplation, known in his own terminology which has become classic in the school as the Dark Nights of Sense and Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Needless to say, Father Gabriel would have been the last to claim for himself the rôle of innovator. He strove always to remain faithful to the purest traditions of his Order, basing his teaching above all on the works of the two great Carmelite mystics. He was also deeply versed in the writings of their followers and commentators, especially those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which may be said to have seen the apogee of the Carmelite School. Where they agree he follows; where they appear to differ he seeks to compose their differences; where modern theological development poses a hitherto undiscussed question, he resolves it strictly in the light of Carmelite tradition.

Before going on to outline Father Gabriel's synthesis of the degrees of infused contemplation, it would be well to glance at his position on the much-discussed question of « acquired » or « active » contemplation.<sup>11</sup> The terms are practically synonymous: authors of the Carmelite School in which they originated use some one, some the other, some both, and some another form of words to designate a state preceding the undisputedly contemplative stages of prayer. Some include the state of initial contemplation described by Saint John of the Cross, while others have in mind merely a simplified form of meditation or discursive prayer — an affective gaze at an object previously meditated on. Those who speak of active contemplation in the former sense do not, however, according to Father Gabriel, by any means intend to exclude an infused element from initial contemplation;

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, loc. cit. col. 2058.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Corso sistematico* p. 115-116. See also the article *École mystique thérésienne (Carmes déchaussés)*, by Father Gabriel, in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. II, col. 171-209, and his book *La Contemplazione Acquisita*, Firenze, 1938. This last has appeared in English, in *St. John of the Cross...* translated by a Benedictine of Stanbrook Abbey. Cork, 1946, p. 100-202.

they merely seek to emphasize that the soul in this state should not desist from every personal effort in prayer, and that such effort is indeed necessary for it if it wishes to avoid wasting its time. Thus initial contemplation is « active » in that it is not entirely passive; it is also in a sense « acquired », since facility in its use is gained by effort and perseverance. Those who write of active contemplation in the latter sense treat of a state in which « it would be difficult to demonstrate that the Gifts of the Holy Ghost do not exercise some influence »;<sup>12</sup> it is however definitely a state reached by the soul's own efforts, and remains within the ambit of meditative prayer. It is a conceptual, affirmative « contemplation », so called only because reasoning is stilled in a loving gaze, and strictly other than the negative, aconceptual knowledge, fruit of infused love, contemplation « properly so-called », of which Saint John of the Cross writes. It is to be noted that, though Saint John of the Cross extends the term contemplation to cover states in which the soul is not directly conscious of the divine action within it, while Saint Teresa uses it in a more restricted sense, neither the one nor the other uses it to indicate anything but a form of prayer *infused* by God and in some degree passive.

Infused contemplation first makes its presence felt by means of a crisis of aridity, in which the soul, unable to meditate, is completely bewildered, believing that it is doing nothing and is wasting its time. Saint John of the Cross teaches the soul to recognise by certain signs that it is in fact beginning to enter the contemplative state, and gives rules for its conduct. According to Father Gabriel,<sup>13</sup> the three signs given in the *Dark Night of the Soul* indicate initial contemplation *in fieri*, while those given in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, essentially the same in many respects, enable it to be recognised *in facto esse*. In the first case the impossibility of meditation is not absolute and perpetual. The soul is not to force itself to try and meditate, but is to use meditation when it is found possible. Otherwise it is to exercise itself in the simple loving attention of faith to God. Thus it will attain peace and tranquillity in its new form of prayer. The soul is fed with a new nourishment: the contemplation with which God is beginning to favour it; it becomes more conscious of its nothingness, and feels a greater need for purity by reason of its new knowledge of God. In the later stage — initial contemplation *in facto esse* — meditation can be abandoned altogether, for the soul has acquired the « habit of contemplation »; it delights to remain alone in loving attention to God, without particular considerations, in interior peace. This

<sup>12</sup> *Corso sistematico* p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 75-78; cfr. also p. 114-121.

gradual transformation often takes place in a fluctuating manner, and though many enter the Night of Sense, and enjoy glimpses of divine illumination, not even the half of fervent souls does God intend to lead into the fully contemplative state. Initial contemplation is realised in different ways. Sometimes there is present only the simple loving attention of faith; at other times this is so pure and simple that the soul hardly realises its presence and feels itself to be « in darkness »; sometimes it feels immersed in a great forgetfulness. The latter two degrees already correspond to the Prayer of Quiet.

When Saint Teresa<sup>14</sup> uses the word contemplation she leaves no doubt as to what she means: it is an infused, or, as she puts it, « supernatural » form of prayer, in which the soul *feels*, is *conscious* without possibility of error that God is acting within it. She speaks of two types of contemplation in this sense: semi-passive contemplation, in which there is some room left for the soul's spontaneous cooperation, and completely passive contemplation in which all it can do is consent to the divine action within it. The Prayer of Quiet is typical of the first kind, while to the second belong the various degrees of unitive contemplation.

The first degree of contemplation in the Teresian sense is then the Prayer of Quiet, though between this and meditation she places two forms of what she calls the Prayer of Recollection, active and passive, in which discursive reasoning is notably diminished though not altogether eliminated. Passive differs from active recollection in that it is not the result of personal effort on the part of the soul; the soul is « placed » therein, and is aware of the fact. It is however still possible to exercise a simplified form of meditation.

In the Prayer of Quiet it is the will that is made captive by infused love. The soul, aware of God's activity within it, remains peacefully and lovingly in His presence. This is the « beginning of pure contemplation » — pure because not based on the efforts of the understanding and therefore of the senses; the will alone is captive, and the other powers, the understanding and the memory, sometimes hinder prayer by their efforts to realise what is going on. They must learn to help by contenting themselves with a simple loving attention to God's presence.

Gradually however the divine influence extends itself to these other powers and renders them captive in their turn. When this is perfectly accomplished the state is known as the « sleep of the powers ». The soul is not however yet deprived of all personal cooperation, though the amount of freedom grows progressively less. Up to this point contemplation is imperfect, though peaceful and illuminating, because the soul is not yet completely passive.

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<sup>14</sup> *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, loc. cit. col. 2058-2060; *Corso sistematico* p. 78, 121-134.

Before entering fully into completely passive prayer, the prayer of union in its various stages, the soul must pass through a second crisis: the Night of the Spirit, more painful by far than the Night of Sense. It finds itself plunged into powerlessness, emptied of all personal activity, even supernatural, keenly conscious of its moral worthlessness. Saint John of the Cross describes this state and teaches the soul to recognise therein the divine influence working to produce in it the perfectly passive contemplation characteristic of union.

The Night of the Spirit past, and complete passivity established, the divine activity in the soul is so profound and so manifest that when it returns to itself after prayer it cannot doubt that it has been in God and God in it. Hitherto God has been acting on the powers of the soul; He now invades its very substance, and it feels itself united to Him in its centre. In a certain sense divine life *takes the place of* the human life, whereas hitherto it has simply been an aid to the soul in raising itself towards God. This divine invasion takes place at first for a few moments only, sufficient to constitute a « first meeting » between the soul and her Beloved. Later however, when the Spiritual Betrothal is reached, the irruption is so violent that the soul is thrown into an ecstasy. The state also becomes more frequent, and produces an irresistible desire for permanent union. Finally the soul reaches the Spiritual Marriage, and the prayer of union becomes continual, though not always equally absorbing: often the soul feels it only at its centre, which remains consciously united to God in the midst of exterior occupations. At other times the divine operation takes hold of the powers also, and the soul is completely absorbed in the loving contemplation of the Spouse.

Here, to sum up, is Father Gabriel's tabulation of the progress of contemplative prayer from the time the soul abandons meditation: <sup>15</sup>

A. IMPERFECT CONTEMPLATION (SEMIPASSIVE)

1. Prodrome: Night of Sense.  
Passage from meditation to contemplation. Purgative contemplation. Development of initial contemplation.
2. Illuminative, peaceful imperfect contemplation.
  - a. The Prayer of Quiet.
  - b. Initial union of the understanding and the memory.
  - c. The Sleep of the Powers.

B. PERFECT CONTEMPLATION (COMPLETELY PASSIVE)

1. Prodrome: Night of the Spirit.  
Passage from imperfect to perfect contemplation.

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, loc. cit. col. 2060.

2. Illuminative and unitive contemplation.
  - a. Prayer of Union.
  - b. Contemplation of the Spiritual Betrothal.
  - c. Contemplation of the Spiritual Marriage.

In addition to all these stages of « negative » contemplation, consistently « dark » and « confused » though progressing in the profundity of its influence on the subject, Father Gabriel admits the possibility of another type of mystical knowledge called by some authors « positive » or « distinct » contemplation.<sup>16</sup> This has as its object some particular mystery, for example, or even created being. For Father Gabriel however, this is a grace outside the normal ambit of the mystical life, generally speaking, and is charismatic in character.

We come now to Father Gabriel's theological explanation of contemplation.<sup>17</sup> All « negative » contemplation, whether completely or only partially passive, originates in the will, which God favours with an infusion, or rather a direct activation, of supernatural charity. This inflammation of the will, its contact through love with the divine essence, « redounds » in the intellect, which thus participates in the will's experience, enjoying a knowledge of God it has not tasted before. However, this knowledge, since it originates not *ab extra* through the normal channels of conceptual knowledge: the senses, the *intellectus agens*, the *species impressa* and *expressa*, is devoid of any form — it is a « sense » rather than an « idea » of God directly present to the will. Faith alone is incapable of giving the intellect the capacity for receiving such knowledge, since faith illuminates by means of distinct concepts. A higher principle must be postulated, and here, with the Carmelite School and Saint Thomas, Father Gabriel invokes the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, in particular the « contemplative » gifts of Understanding and Wisdom. The Gifts, according to Saint Thomas, are conferred *in adiutorium virtutum*, for the very purpose of rendering the faculties capable of receiving the illuminations and inspirations of the Holy Spirit, and it is on them and their activation that the whole mystical life of the soul depends. The difference between semi-passive and unitive contemplation, even in its highest manifestations, is purely one of degree and not of kind, and there is no need to recur to any principle beyond the Gifts of the Holy Ghost to explain even the union of the Mystical Marriage.

The Gifts of the Holy Ghost belong, as do the theological

<sup>16</sup> See *Ephemerides Carmeliticæ*, loc. cit. p. 257-271.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* loc. cit. col. 2060-2064; *Ephemerides Carmeliticæ* loc. cit. p. 247-257; *Corso sistematico* p. 95-112. See also Father Gabriel's *La Mistica Carmelitana*, Firenze, [1935], p. 125-164.



virtues, to the normal supernatural « organism » of the soul. They are present in every soul in a state of grace, and are active wherever any serious effort is being made to live a spiritual life. It follows then that in the spiritual life of every soul earnestly striving to please God there will be a mystical element, a certain amount of illumination through the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, which can truly be called « contemplative knowledge » of God, even though the soul is not conscious of the divine activity. This fact provides the key to Father Gabriel's solution of the so-called « Problem of Contemplation », the question as to whether or not the contemplative states of prayer are necessary to sanctity. Father Gabriel answers that the mystical *life*, the « contemplative knowledge » produced by the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, is indeed necessary for the complete fidelity to grace requisite for sanctity, but that the soul can arrive at a state of perfect union with God — perfect conformity of its will with God's Will — without experiencing that intense actuation of the Gifts necessary to produce contemplative states of prayer. He adduces the example of Saint Teresa of Lisieux, from whose life such states of prayer — at least the higher states — appear to have been almost entirely absent. He adds however that, though we cannot speak of necessity we can speak of connaturality. It is normal that intensity of spiritual life should be associated with intense activity of the Gifts, and it is also fitting that « God should be generous with the generous ».

From observation and theory to practice.<sup>18</sup> Should one desire or pray for the graces of mystical prayer? Should one strive after them? What are the practical rules to be followed by the souls and its director if the phenomena of contemplative prayer present themselves?

To desire contemplative prayer would seem legitimate, in that it is an aid to sanctification, though the desire — and the petition if made — must always be accompanied by the humble realisation that contemplation is always a *gift* of God, and that there can never be any question of meriting it, at least *de condigno*; there must also be complete abandonment to God's Will in the matter. As for striving after it, gift as it is no personal straining directly after mystical graces can ever be of the least avail; the most the soul can do, and should do, is to prepare itself by fidelity in prayer and the practice of virtue for the reception of infused prayer if God should be pleased to confer it. If contemplation should manifest itself, the soul must put itself entirely into the hands of a competent director.

The director's chief obligation is his own scientific preparation for the guidance of contemplative souls by the study of mystical theology. He must also exercise great prudence in recommending

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* loc. cit. col. 2065-2066.

or permitting the reading of mystical literature by those under his direction: in some cases it might lead to illusion, in others to a preoccupation more intellectual than practical.

The above *resumé*, condensed as it necessarily is, does scant justice to Father Gabriel's harmonic view of the mystical life. Our arid schematic relation leaves unsuspected the unction with which he wrote and the wealth of study behind his conclusions. It also fails to reveal the genuine fervour for the spiritual life itself that lay at the bottom of his interest in spiritual theology. His was no mere intellectual passion: he studied the ways of sanctity principally to be able to walk in them himself and to help others to do so. Those who know his book *Intimità Divina* — so much more than a book of meditations — know how well he was able to present theory in a way that relates it intimately to practice, to make theology *feed* the life of the spirit. Those who knew the man can bear witness to a life that reflected his studies.

Some have remarked on certain differences between Father Gabriel's views — on « acquired contemplation » for example — as expressed in his earlier books and as he proposed them toward the end of his life. This is a matter that lies outside our present scope; we would merely remark that a change of view, great or small, is often a sign of progress, and above all of intellectual honesty. In Father Gabriel integrity is beyond dispute, and to the end of his days he never rested on his achievements, never hardened in a fixed position, nor ever slackened his pace in the pursuit of truth.

It has also been observed that there are certain minor inconsistencies or insufficiencies in his mystical synthesis, even as it stood at his death: did he never succeed, for instance, in establishing the exact relationship between St Teresa's « Prayer of recollection » and the « Initial Contemplation » of St John of the Cross? Here again, however, it is intellectual honesty that we see at work: a lesser man might have been tempted to omit evidence that was not convenient to his thesis.

There is, in fine, no denying that, humanly and scientifically speaking, Father Gabriel was cut off before his time, before his life's work had had time to achieve its prime, before he had been able to perfect the Manual of Spiritual Theology he longed to give his pupils and the world, and which, alas, we shall never see as he intended it to be. It may well have silenced the critics. We conclude, therefore, as we began, with the expression of our sorrow that he was not spared to continue his quest for truth in matters so vital to the life of the spirit, to which we add a hope that his example will serve as an inspiration to many others to take up the task where he laid it down.

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