

# THE CAPACITIES OF THE HEART

By A. M. ALLCHIN

ONE OF THE KEY MOMENTS IN THINKING about the communion of saints occurred for me more than thirty years ago in Sweden. I had been taken to visit a beautiful medieval church in a small country town. When we went in the whole of the interior seemed to be covered with frescoes, dating, so I was told, from the fifteenth century. My immediate reaction was, 'this is just like the Byzantine churches which I have been visiting in Greece'. But the more I looked at the frescoes the more I saw that this was not the case. In the Byzantine world the Church had a long and hard fought controversy over the use and meaning of visual images. As a result the frescoes and mosaics used in church interiors are carefully ordered and arranged. There is not only a sense of order but also a sense of unity in the multiplicity of images. Over all the ascended Christ reigns in the dome. Around him stand the apostles and the evangelists. The great events of the gospel, the birth, the baptism, the transfiguration, the death and resurrection, the ascension, all have their appropriate place. The ranks of angels, the company of the saints with the mother of God at their head, all enter in. It is a world of multiplicity, but of an ordered multiplicity in which the centrality of Christ is clear.

In Sweden it was quite different. There seemed, at least at first sight, no order at all. The figures of Christ and his mother, the great saints of the universal Church, the later saints of local veneration, were there; so were the stories of the Gospel, stories from Swedish history and stories from popular legend. But all seemed mixed up together with no apparent order. I suddenly understood as I had never understood before, the Reformers' desire to do away with images altogether. Rather than this confusion of images, surely a church room with no images at all would be preferable.

That was not in fact the way taken by the Lutheran Reformation, certainly not in Scandinavia. It is true that there was some simplification of the church interior. Some frescoes were whitewashed, side altars, the altars of the saints, were usually taken away, but the high altar remained and remains. So, in a pre-Reformation Scandinavian church, to celebrate the eucharist, the celebrant still stands at the pre-

Reformation altar with his or her back to the congregation. At the high altar the reredos usually also remained; sometimes however the medieval one was replaced by a baroque example, no less covered with figures. The pulpit became more prominent but again, its prominence was emphasized by paintings and statues of the Lord, his apostles and evangelists. There is still a wealth of visual imagery, even if it is more obviously centred on Christ.

The Genevan pattern followed out the Protestant principle more consistently. Here there was a plain church room with no images at all. Everything centred on the pulpit, the presence of the Word proclaimed; the holy table was altogether overshadowed by it. As to the saints, they have disappeared. This is the context of prayer and worship out of which, in the twentieth century, theologies have come, theologies as different as those of Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth.

But by centring all on Christ in this radical and exclusive way, something vital has been lost. Firstly, the sense of the multiplicity of ways in which the divine is revealed, a multiplicity which reflects something of the infinite richness and diversity of the divine being is no longer there. Secondly, the lesser intermediaries between human and divine are no longer available. In a way which is the reverse of what was intended, through this concentration on the one thing necessary, the figure of Christ recedes into the past, is no longer seen surrounded by his friends, is no longer linked with us by the succession of his followers through the ages. Hence there comes a sense of an unbridgeable gulf, cultural, intellectual, spiritual, which seems to cut us off from the age of the Gospel, now so long ago.

In both these ways the doctrine of the communion of saints and its celebration in prayer and worship proves to be more central to Christian faith and life in the twentieth century than has often been thought. Perhaps in relation to this problem of the gulf between us and our origins we can see something of the reason for the great importance, at least in Roman Catholic circles, of prayer and devotion to the saints of our own time. One may think in the first half of this century of the immense popularity of Thérèse of Lisieux, a living contemporary witness to the reality and mystery both of gospel and tradition.

It is significant that within the second half of this same century these contemporary witnesses should so often be actual martyrs, and that they should be an entirely ecumenical group: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Maria Skobtsova, Janani Luwum. This has been a century of martyrdom of a kind with no exact parallel in the past, and it is in the ecumenical gift of martyrdom that the deepest roots of the

movement towards unity are to be found, as John Paul II insists in his encyclical, *Ut unum sint*. The search for a renewed awareness of the communion of saints has thus become something which touches all the churches.

*The contemporaneity of the saints*

Of course it is not only with saints of our own time that we may feel a sense of contemporaneity. Saints from the past can, as it were, come out of the past and accost us. In England this seems to have been particularly the case for the last twenty years or more with Julian of Norwich, a figure who has been 'recognized' as a saint in a totally spontaneous and ecumenical way by a great variety of people, and who has now been included in the revised calendar of the Church of England. The title of a book of essays published in 1985, *Julian, woman of our day*, is itself eloquent in this regard. In the introduction to the book Michael McLean writes:

As our title makes clear, we believe that Julian is a woman of our day; that . . . her wisdom has been saved up for our generation. In her life time she was clearly prepared to wait in patience . . . It may well be that she has waited six centuries for a people who could receive her message . . . Her words are discovered to have a particular relevance to the spiritual condition and quest of many people today, both within and without the Church.<sup>1</sup>

One might think that the writing of someone who shut herself up for forty years in a single room would be singularly cramped and narrow. Precisely the reverse is true. Her book is an immense affirmation of the potential meaning and extent of human space and time. When human life expands into its true dimensions, when it is constantly being taken up into God, then one room can contain all the universe and one lifetime can contain all of human history.

If we move from western to eastern Christendom, some words written in the 1960s by a young monk on Mt Athos speak in more personal terms of this discovery of contemporaneity with a figure of the past:

I am reading St Isaac the Syrian. I feel for the first time that there is a voice that resonates in the very depths of my being. Although he is so far removed from me in space and time, he has come right into my room, spoken to me, sat down beside me. For the first time I feel a kind of pride in our human nature, an amazement before it . . . He belongs

to our common humanity. I rejoice in this. Being of the same nature as myself he can transfuse the life-giving blood of his freedom into me. He reveals to me man in his true nature.<sup>2</sup>

This passage is interesting for many reasons. It is, perhaps unconsciously, ecumenical, for the saint to which it refers was in his life time a bishop of the Church of the East, commonly but mistakenly called Nestorian, with which the rest of the Christian world has been out of communion for about fifteen hundred years. While speaking of a sense of contemporaneity, it also speaks of a restoration of confidence in our common humanity which many have found through their contact with Julian. It is one of the greatest gifts of the saints to our deeply wounded and pessimistic era. They are able to restore to us glimpses of confidence and hope.

If, as yet, Isaac is not so well known as Julian, one passage at least from his writings has become well known, quoted in a great variety of places. It is a passage which speaks of the true capacity of the human heart:

An elder was once asked 'What is a compassionate heart?' He replied, 'It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person's eyes overflow with tears owing to the vehemence of the compassion which grips his heart; as a result of his deep mercy, his heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation. This is why he constantly offers up prayer full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy. He even prays for the reptiles as a result of the great compassion which is poured out without measure – after the likeness of God – in his heart.'<sup>3</sup>

If we want to know more of the milieu out of which such an affirmation of the capacity of the human heart comes, we cannot do better than to turn to the monk of Mt Athos, the Staretz Silouan, who through the monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights has come very close to us in Britain. The Staretz St Silouan the Athonite (as he has become since he was canonized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1988), was the spiritual father of Father Sophrony, who founded the community in Essex. Here is a man of our time in whom this charitable heart is fully made known.<sup>4</sup>

One might be tempted to ask whether in fact Silouan was a man of our own time. Born in 1866, the first thirty years or more of his life

were spent in the nineteenth century. What is more important, his mind was formed by the prayer of the Church as he found it in the lengthy offices of an Orthodox monastery and in the constant practice of the Jesus prayer. Silouan had no education, in the formal sense of that word, beyond two years schooling in a village school in the province of Tambov. This is one of the facts which makes the theological lucidity and balance of his meditations of such particular fascination. It is not given to many theologians to state the doctrine of the Trinity in a single sentence as clear and all embracing as: 'Thus the Lord by the Holy Spirit makes us one family with God the Father'.<sup>5</sup> But even so, the sources of his wisdom were to be found in a period long before our own.

Was then Silouan a twentieth century man at all? We shall suggest that he was, not only at the deepest level of prayer but also in more superficial ways. Reading between the lines of the biographical passages in Father Sophrony's book, we become aware of a man who belongs to our own time; certainly a peasant, with many of the outstanding qualities of a countryman: shrewdness, perseverance, realism and balance. We see this in his love for the beauty of creation. 'That green leaf on the tree which you needlessly plucked – it was not wrong, only rather a pity for the little leaf. The heart that has learned to love is sorry for all created things.' But we also see his realistic attitude towards animals and the way in which he is baffled and repelled by much of our urban tendency to make them pets.<sup>6</sup>

Again, we see in his attitude towards newspapers not only a spiritual insight but a mind of shrewdness and judgement which belongs to our own century:

I don't care for newspapers with their news . . . Newspapers don't write about people but about events and then not the truth. They confuse the mind, and whatever you do you won't get at the truth by reading them; whereas prayer cleanses the mind and gives it a better vision of all things.<sup>7</sup>

We have referred to Silouan as a witness to the capacity of the human heart, the catholicity of the human person. The man of prayer, as Father Sophrony expounds the matter,

descends into his inmost heart, into his natural heart first and then into those depths that are no longer of the flesh. He finds his *deep heart*, reaches the profound spiritual, metaphysical core of his being; and looking into it sees that the existence of mankind is not something

alien and extraneous to him but inextricably bound up with his own being. 'Our brother is our life' the Staretz often said.<sup>8</sup>

In such a vision of things the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself is something more than an ethical imperative; it points to a deep unity of being. In prayer understood in this way the full catholicity of the human person is revealed. 'In his deep heart the Christian, after a certain fashion, lives the whole history of the world as his own history and sees not only himself but all humanity . . . no man is alien to him – he loves each and every one as Christ commanded.'<sup>9</sup>

### *Solidarity in love*

In a small, but very valuable book, recently published, Simon Barrington-Ward, Bishop of Coventry, tells us of his discovery of the Jesus Prayer and of the Staretz Silouan in this context. It is interesting in his book to see the life-blood of the Orthodox tradition of prayer flowing into the heart of the Church of England. For Simon Barrington-Ward, Silouan 'is one of the very great intercessors of our time'. Far from seeing him as cut off from our century, in his monastic retreat, he sees Silouan as bearing its anguish in his innermost experience. It is in this way that the bishop reads perhaps the greatest of the Lord's words to Silouan, 'Keep your mind in hell and do not despair'. This was of course an intimately personal word addressed directly to Silouan in the particular agony through which he was passing. But he was living at such a depth of spiritual and human integrity that what was said to him alone had universal meaning and import.

He had been called to undergo this travail not just on account of his own sin . . . but that he might enter into the darkness of separated humanity and tormented nature and, through his ceaseless prayer, be made by God's grace alone, into a means of bringing that grace to bear on the whole tragic circumstances of his time. He was living and praying through the time of the first world war and the rise of Hitler and the beginnings of all that led to the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

The bishop's own book, a practical one teaching about prayer, is in itself a remarkable witness to the way in which Silouan can speak directly to our present situation.

It is interesting to turn from these comments on the life of Silouan and the significance of his place in the spiritual history of our time to Silouan's own words about the communion of saints.

God is love; and the Holy Spirit in the saints is love. . . . To many people the saints seem far removed from us. But the saints are far only

from people who have distanced themselves – they are very close to those who keep Christ's commandments and possess the grace of the Holy Spirit.

In heaven all things live and move in the Holy Spirit. But this same Holy Spirit is on earth too. The Holy Spirit dwells in our church; in the sacraments; in the Holy Scriptures; in the souls of the faithful. The Holy Spirit unites all men, and so the saints are close to us; and when we pray to them they hear our prayers in the Holy Spirit, and our souls feel that they are praying for us . . .

In their lives they learned of the love of God from the Holy Spirit; and he who knows love on earth takes it with him into eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, where love grows and becomes perfect. And if love makes one unable to forget a brother here, how much more do the saints remember and pray for us.<sup>11</sup>

It is certain that the Staretz was altogether unaware of the terms of the controversies between western Christians, at the time of the Reformation and since, about the nature of the communion of saints: the discord over such questions as whether the saints pray for us, whether they can know our condition, whether we can address them in prayer, whether there is any necessity for us to do so. What is remarkable about his statements is their inclusive equilibrium. The Holy Spirit works not in one way but in many: in the sacraments, in the Scriptures, in our hearts. It is in the Spirit that we are united with the saints and that they are united with us. All is based in love, and the experience and power of love is imparted by the Holy Spirit. In such a perspective human beings belong together, dwell in one another. The questions which were fought over in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and which in some places are still being fought over today, are found to have been too narrowly framed. Where there is a discovery of the true dimensions of the human person, there we find that men and women are able to share in one another's life and love across the barriers of death, as well as the barriers of time and space.

#### *Questions which remain*

At the beginning we thought of different ways in which, in the past, Christians have thought about and experienced God's revelation of himself in Christ and the Spirit. The late Medieval Church in the west gave us a picture in which the outlines of God's showing of himself seemed to have become blurred and obscured in too great a multiplicity of images. The church of the Genevan Reformation on the other hand, in its desire to concentrate all on one central figure, had in the end

isolated that figure, so that the Christ is no longer seen at the centre of the world which he has made and redeemed. The Byzantine model seemed to show us a way in which unity and multiplicity could be held together. The example of the Staretz Silouan shows us, against all expectations, that model still functioning in life.

Yet, as we have also already seen, when we begin to think of the saints of our own century we are at once aware that they belong not to one but to many traditions within the one Church of Christ. Perhaps surprisingly we have found this awareness in Pope John Paul himself. There is a wider, more varied, less orderly pattern which wants to assert itself. Indeed there is something further which demands our attention. Have not some of the greatest figures of the Christian world in our century been people whose lives have been illumined not only from within the Christian world but from the world beyond it? I think of a man like Louis Massignon, as his friends said at the time of his death, the most Christian of Muslims and the most Muslim of Christians. I think of a man like Thomas Merton and his prophetic exchanges with the Dalai Lama in the last weeks of his life. I think of men like Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths who began to discover in themselves new and different dimensions of the mystery of Christ to which the saints have always borne witness. What will it be when the saints are recognized not only by men and women of different Christian traditions but by men and women of different religious traditions? What must we say of Mahatma Gandhi whose life has had such an influence on Christians? What shall we say of Mother Theresa of Calcutta whose life has had such influence on Muslims and Hindus? If holiness is a self-communicating principle then perhaps we shall find, in the coming century, that we are being led into the discovery of new ways of apprehending both the unity and the diversity of the divine nature as it makes itself known to us in all the variety of the creation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Llewelyn (ed), *Julian, woman of our day* (London, 1985), p 2.

<sup>2</sup> A. M. Allchin, *The world is a wedding* (London, 1978), p 76.

<sup>3</sup> A. M. Allchin, *The heart of compassion: daily readings with St Isaac of Syria* (London 1989), p 9.

<sup>4</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *St Silouan the Athonite* (Malden 1991).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 389.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 94–5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 73.      <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 234.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Barrington-Ward, *The Jesus prayer* (Oxford 1996), p 76.

<sup>11</sup> *Op cit.*, pp 394–5.