

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Brother John of St Samson O.Carm. (1571–1636)

WRITING ABOUT the structure of the soul according to the mystics in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Leonce Reypens refers to the blind French Carmelite, Brother John of St Samson, as ‘the most profound of the French mystics’ who, in addition to following the general lines of Ruysbroeck, gives great importance to ‘the nakedness of the spirit in the depths of the soul. There occurs the paradoxical essential operation . . . which leads to the death of the spirit in the life of God’. There is as well great stress on the ‘union without difference’ which John of St Samson calls ‘consummation of the subject in the object’.¹ Called ‘the most eminent representative’ of the French school of mysticism by Louis Cognet,² Brother John of St Samson has also been referred to as the ‘French St John of the Cross’³ by students of Christian mysticism.

Life and writings

John Du Moulin was born at Sens in the Duchy of Burgundy and was baptized on 30th December 1571.⁴ The exact date of his birth is not known but it was presumably not long before his baptism according to the custom of the time. His parents were reasonably well-off and John received a strongly Christian upbringing, although not without setbacks of a physical, emotional and psychological nature, which might well have proved quite disastrous for a less balanced and prayerful person. The first of these occurred when John was three years old; while he was recovering from an attack of smallpox a pseudo-medical practitioner recommended application of an ointment to remove scabs which had formed on his eyes, with the result that he immediately lost the sight in his left eye and, despite the best efforts of an eye specialist, shortly afterwards he became totally blind. Then, when John was aged ten, both of his parents died and he went to live with the family of his maternal uncle Zachary d’Aziz where his education in grammar, poetry and Latin was continued, and where he developed his remarkable musical talents, becoming an accomplished organist as well as an adept in a wide variety of musical instruments.⁵ During the sixteen years spent in the lively household of his uncle, John also developed an interest in books of a spiritual nature, and he was fortunate in being able to have read to him such works as the *Lives of the saints*, the *Imitation of Jesus Christ*, the *Institutions* of Tauler (possibly given to him through his association with the Dominicans at whose Church he played the organ)⁶ and especially a

work which became a favourite of his, the *Mantelet of the Spouse* written by the Flemish Franciscan Frans Vervoort,⁷ which he learned by heart and which appears to have been the basic influence for his 'conversion' to the serious pursuit of evangelical perfection through a more profound interior and spiritual life.⁸ In addition to the above works, he was also familiar with the *Book of Mount Calvary* of Anthony de Guevara, and the life and works of St Catherine of Genoa, and the method of prayer of Louis de Granada.

In 1597, after a number of sorties from his maternal uncle's home in search of a place where he could find the opportunity for a more austere lifestyle, John departed from Sens for Paris where he lived for four years with his elder brother John-Baptist Du Moulin and his wife Anne.⁹ During this time, in addition to continuing his reading of spiritual authors, he began to practise religious mortifications such as wearing a hair shirt and using the discipline. It was at this time too, that his deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary led him to become a member of the various confraternities of the Scapular, the Rosary, and the Cord of St Francis.¹⁰ However, both his brother and his sister-in-law died in 1601, and after seven or eight months with a relative of Anne and a further two years with a M. de Montdidier, Prior of the Canons of St Augustine, he eventually settled for a room with the grocer Tonnelier in Rue de Judas which was quite close to the large house of the Carmelites at Place Maubert. He had already begun to frequent the Carmelite Church of Place Maubert, and with a request to the organist to be allowed to play the organ on the feast of St Cecilia, there was the beginning of an important friendship between him and the organist who was Matthew Pinault, a Carmelite student from Dol in Brittany. From this date in 1604 John began to deepen his knowledge of the spiritual authors and mystics in the company of Matthew Pinault and, gradually, other members of the community joined them. He brought his own books along too and together they read the *Institutions* of Tauler, Henry Herp, Ruysbroeck, the *Garden of Contemplatives* of Thomas Deschamps, and the works of Gerson and Dionysius the Areopagite.¹¹ Eventually John was given a room in the monastery in return for teaching the organ, and during this period he came into contact with Philip Thibault (1572-1638) who had already begun moves towards a reform among the French Carmelites of the Province of Touraine. In 1606, John Du Moulin applied for admission to the Carmelites and was accepted, departing for Dol in Brittany where he was received as a novice and took in place of his surname the name of Saint Samson, first bishop of Dol and patron of the cathedral there—no doubt chosen for the link too with Samson in the Book of Judges who also suffered the affliction of blindness.¹²

Six years after becoming a Carmelite, Brother John of St Samson was transferred to the community at Rennes at the instigation of Philip

Thibault who wished him to join the Reform which had been formally inaugurated in that monastery on 21st April 1608. Both the period spent at Dol, and then from 1612 until his death on September 14th 1636, John of St Samson devoted much of his time to writing at the request of his superiors for the benefit of novices and members of the new reform entitled the 'Stricter Observance' and at the request of people such as the Bishop of Dol who sought spiritual guidance from him. His letters, treatises, directions, meditations, poems and exercises fill more than 4,000 manuscript pages and were edited between 1650 and 1659 by Donatien of St Nicholas O.Carm., who published two tomes of the writings in 1658.¹³ The style can be at times difficult due to the author's blindness, and to the fact that whatever he 'wrote' was the result of dictation to novices and students, and as a consequence, all the disabilities of such a method are evident. Nevertheless the essential message is clear and can be extracted without much difficulty.

Several elements stand out as being the basis of his spiritual teaching. These include the importance of the liturgy as a source for the contemplative movement of the heart to divine union in love; the continuing relevance of aspirative prayer which is present at all stages of the growth in spiritual and mystical life; the insistence on development of the habit of contemplative prayer times for the beginner in the journey of the spirit, in order that solid growth and also apostolic activity might flow from the correct divine source;¹⁴ and the direction of souls through personal experience, study of the spiritual masters and the actual practice of prayer itself. It is this last which can sometimes be the most effective teaching instrument of his works, and with several of his writings the blind brother stresses the need for them to be read over a number of times until gradually one may be led into the direct experience of union with God and become dependent on him alone.

Religious observance and spiritual guidance

Brother John of St Samson became the spiritual heart of the new reformed observance of the Carmelite province of Touraine which spread to the other French and Belgian provinces and eventually encompassed the Order as a whole under the title of the 'Stricter Observance'. Since there was great stress on observance as the external sign of the inner quality of religious life at this period in history, it is not surprising to find that Brother John was considered by his contemporaries to be exemplary in this respect:

His days at Rennes followed a regular pattern cut out by exact observance. He was always in the church early, taking Communion at the first Mass, as he suffered from an insatiable hunger to be united with his Lord in the Eucharist. At the conventual Mass

and during Office he played the organ; this was his official post. Then he would pray the Brothers' Office, the set number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys which was laid down in the Rule. The rest of the time he spent in his cell, rarely going out except to comfort someone on his deathbed. He observed the Church and the Order fasts rigorously.¹⁵

Although he possessed no office of authority within the Order, yet Brother John exercised an enormous influence through his association with almost all of the first generations of members of the reform. This was due to the wise decision to have him at all times a part of the principal formation community of the province of Touraine—the novitiate at Rennes. Novice masters succeeded each other but all ensured that the blind brother would continue his regular teaching on prayer and the ways of the spirit to the novices. It would seem that this teaching consisted not so much in the theory of prayer, nor yet in the development of a set method of meditation, but rather with the practice itself of prayer, the actual experience of 'introversion' and the 'internal loving conversation with God', a phrase which 'is found in almost all the spiritual documents of Touraine. It is a phrase that was burnt into the minds of the reformers by their master, the blind Brother of Rennes'.¹⁶

He accepts and recommends already existing methods of prayer particularly those of Luis de Granada the Spanish Dominican, and the Belgian Capuchin Constantine of Barbanson (1582-1631) whose *Secret Paths of Divine Love* contains frequent references to the idea of introversion or not going outside oneself to find God but to seek him within the soul.¹⁷ John of St Samson also recommends his own writings to both novices and novice masters:

And if the director is the kind I expect him to be, then he will use our exercises and a good part of our writings, omitting that which is of no help to himself or to anyone else. He should also use the first part of the Direction of Barbanson. But he should be imbued with his spirit, because the book is not at all organized and divided, as Granada's book and others. It will be very helpful to him, if he can use the theory and the simple and mystical wisdom it contains. For those who make progress it is very expedient that the director leads them according to this practice, since it is very like to my spirit and has the true order of perfect wisdom.¹⁸

Because John of St Samson is above all a practical guide in the spiritual life and tries in his writings to inculcate a disposition which will more easily lead to the actual experience of God through the action of divine

grace directly in the soul of the one being guided along the ways of true prayer, he does not presume that all will find the same method to be the one most suitable for them. He is concerned to remind his readers that it may sometimes be necessary in times of aridity or distraction to alter the course of prayer, and even on occasion to change the type of prayer from, for example, meditative to vocal prayer. But like all great masters of the spiritual and mystical life he stresses the importance for the one who is seeking an experience of God to persevere in prayer.¹⁹

Largely through the influence of the Flemish Henry Herp, Brother John of St Samson is remembered for his great ability to communicate the practice of continually living in God's presence through the use of the technique known as aspirative prayer. He remarks that this is a truly Carmelite way of developing the practice of the presence of God in one's life after the example of the prophet Elijah who exclaimed: 'The Lord lives in whose presence I stand' (1Kg 17,1):

Among the religious orders founded to practise perfect love of God, it is our lot as successors and legitimate sons of the great prophet Elias in the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel . . . not necessarily to dwell on Mount Carmel, but to live in our homes, with purity of soul and body, practising fervent, actual, continual presence of God, so that we live more by this exercise than our bodies live by our souls. This is the true spirit of the Order.²⁰

Sometimes the practice of aspirative prayer is confused with ejaculatory prayer; but they are not the same, and John of St Samson is concerned to ensure that the difference between them is clearly understood. It is the Holy Spirit who is the correct guide in all things pertaining to prayer which is aspiration—a breathing in and from God which bursts out from a desire for complete and direct union between the soul and its true love and source. Because it is an intellectual and willed exercise there is often the danger that a certain element of constraint may enter in, even to the extent that the aspirative prayer loses its authenticity. It must always be rooted in the desire of the heart for direct experience of union with God through the action of his grace, and therefore any attempt at force or artificiality will be less than helpful. What may be helpful is the early cultivation of the practice of ejaculatory prayer, in order to predispose the person for the development of affective conversation with God. This prayer is the best preparation for the natural gift of aspiration and its supernatural growth and flowering into a continual exercise whereby the constant link with the divine orientation of spiritual desire is maintained. Whereas ejaculatory prayer tends to be more appropriate for the beginner on the spiritual journey, and may be helpful in providing a soul with a

simple method of contemplative prayer which will lead it to a more advanced state; aspirative prayer, on the other hand, is a simplified way of prayer for those who are already advancing or making progress of some sort in the journey of the spiritual life. Aspiration, or aspirative prayer, reveals the transforming union of the soul which is completely taken up into the trinitarian love of the Lord Jesus, its object and desire:

Aspiration then, is not just an affective conversation which is in itself a good kind of exercise from which aspiration is born and takes its origin. It is a loving and inflamed thrust of the whole heart and the entire spirit by which the soul goes deeply beyond itself, and transcends every created thing, being united closely to God in the brilliance of the manifestation of his love; an essential manifestation which surpasses all perceptible, rational, intellectual and understandable love. It comes to union with God by the impulse of God's Spirit and by his power, not haphazardly, but by a sudden transformation of the spirit in God. I mean that the spirit surpasses in itself all recognizable and intelligible love in the rich and ineffable sweetness of God himself in whom it is lovingly absorbed. This is what essential aspiration is in itself, its cause and its effect.²¹

True to the continuing tradition of all great mystics, John of St Samson is careful to advise that this is pure gift, in that a soul cannot attain this type of transforming union with God by its own efforts. Nevertheless he is equally careful to encourage those whom he is directing in the ways of the spiritual journey that they can prepare themselves confidently and expectantly for such an experience of love. Being baptized into Christ, they have at their disposal rich resources of grace with which they can begin to achieve the mastery of their own tendencies to wander from the evangelical path of growth and maturity. In addition to the normal means of achieving a pure heart, that is, a heart which is fixed on God alone, he constantly encourages the cultivation of a desire for silence and the love of solitude. Exterior observance of silence and solitude will lead gradually and relentlessly to the proper awareness of the inner solitude and silence where God may speak to the heart and where the person may begin to realize the full potential of spiritual maturity.

An exercise for the experience of God

In 1629 at the request of the Bishop of Dol, Antoine Revol, Brother John of St Samson wrote a fascinating work which has the title: *L'Aiguillon, les flammes, les flèches et le miroir de l'amour de Dieu, propres à éprendre l'âme de Dieu en Dieu lui-même* (The sting, the flames, the arrows and the mirror of the love of God to infatuate the soul with God in God himself).²²

More in the style of an 'exercise' to be put into practice than a systematic treatise or exposition of the spiritual life, this text deals with personal mystical experience and, by means of the use of symbolism, its aim is to lead whoever will read it slowly, reflectively and repetitively into the very same type of experience as it is describing. As with so much of his writing, John of St Samson seeks with his words to lead into a direct introduction to the mystical life. Essentially the movement of love is to become more and more interiorized to the point at which the reader becomes love through the fundamental or deep-seated activity of transforming union, an ineffable process which will defy all attempts at logical definition. The process of gentle and constant spiritual reading and re-reading leads to an imperceptible change in the way of acting, the manner of thinking and the sense of feeling—a change which is directed according to the gospel law of love. Human life then becomes enveloped, transformed into the divine life more and more, so that eventually the text itself must gradually give way or diminish in order to leave the way clear of all external hindrance for the ineffable activity of God in the human soul. *L'Aiguillon* as a piece of literature tends to develop in a characteristically (for John) unstructured way, which can be disconcerting unless the aims of the work are kept in mind and the work itself is not forced into becoming something that it was not intended to be.

At the very beginning of the reading of the text, there is presented the primary and essential insight which is common to all the great mystical authors, that is, the complete dependence on God in the spiritual life, the absolute gift of mystical experience. Perhaps it might be described as something like a discovery, a realization of having been touched in some way without quite knowing it:

It is quite apparent to men of good will that we are in a wretched state since the fall; as for those who are truly wise in the ways and the knowledge of divine wisdom—by God's goodness and love, and by their loving attention, this wisdom is abundantly and sensibly infused in them in the luxuriance and power of its straightforward growth—these then, I say, know by loving experience that mankind has become misery itself by the fall. And so, having had their eyes opened by this divine and savoury knowledge of divine love, they are greatly astonished and confused both in seeing and in feeling themselves drawn out and already changed in some way from the state of corruption even to that of the spirit; thanks to all they have mercifully and freely received from God, in him and by him, they are prepared both to know God and to love him.²³

John of St Samson remarks that this wisdom is settled by reflection and normally is achieved in a gentle way; knowledge and love of God are at

the same time accompanied by correct knowledge and love of self through the awareness of humility and dependence on the action of grace in the soul. The second stage in the exercise is the development of a strong sense of faithfulness to the Lord's love, 'whence it is easy to see and to decide that our perfection does not consist in learning and speculation about all this, but in the actual practice of the virtues and of love, such virtues which are unceasingly presented to us on numerous occasions so that we might carry them out with ardent love and unflinchingly'.²⁴ Holiness consists not so much in feeling or not feeling God's activity in the soul, but rather 'in an efficacious, genuine and essential love which informs all activity'²⁵ and which has for its pre-eminent example the life, death and passion of the Saviour Jesus Christ into whose likeness we are to be transformed as witnesses to the power of the gospel. An ardent and continuing love in and for God must have the effect of producing irresistibly in the soul the evangelical virtues, and making the practice of them something which is naturally developed as the soul continues its journey. Brother John advises those whom he is directing that they must expect to have a variety of effects from the action of the grace of God in their souls which is like a wave rolling in and withdrawing but never lost.²⁶ In this context he recommends the practice of one particular aspirative prayer in order never to neglect opportunities for loving the God who is the source and the growth of spiritual experience:

Make use of this very simple aspiration: 'you and I, my love, you and I, you and I, and never another nor more!' To which you could add some burning words like: 'since you are entirely good and all goodness itself; since you are entirely glorious and all glory itself; since you are entirely holy and all holiness itself!' (*Vous et moi, mon amour, vous et moi, vous et moi, et jamais ni autre ni plus!*)²⁷

Explanations, discussion and sound advice are the means by which John of St Samson attempts to instil in the reader something of his own experience of God's love in his life. Again it should be stressed that he did not envisage this work being read for an intellectual or academic exercise, but rather as an exercise with the meaning of actually putting it into practice. It involves taking a risk which is quite beyond the normal claims made for literature whether spiritual or not.²⁸ In a sense his direction is an adventure for the courageous person who intends to try to experience something of the love of God in this life. In addition to warnings which are intended to assist the searching soul in extracting itself from ideas and attitudes which are non-productive of the fruits of the Spirit, Brother John reminds us that the transforming love of God is meant to bring us, as well as peace and tranquillity, a bounteous supply of the Christian joy which can make one able to cry out with St Paul:

'With Christ I am nailed to the Cross' (Gal 2,20); and therefore: 'Christ lives in me'.

Perhaps because of the infirmity he suffered, John of St Samson displayed an interest in people and their problems to the extent that he was frequently in demand for spiritual advice and counsel. The young Carmelites at Rennes were only a part of his apostolate as spiritual guide. As well as Bishop Antoine Revol whose director he was over many years, local parish priests and countless lay people during the years were influenced by his teaching. His influence was not confined to the immediate vicinity of the monastery, however, as his advice was sought by people from various parts of France. 'He took part in the controversy over the "chapelet secret", condemned by the Sorbonne in 1633. There is a letter of his, severe in tone, to its author, Mother Agnes Arnauld of Port Royal'.²⁹ He was also involved to some degree with the case of possession concerning the Ursuline nuns of Loudun in which town the Carmelites also had a house. In all of these cases, whether they had to do with an individual's quest for guidance in the ways of the spirit, or whether it was an opinion being sought by one of his brothers or a priest or bishop, Brother John of St Samson is remarkable for the clear exposition of practical guidance which he gives through his written words. He seems to have known better perhaps than others that the power of the word depends upon whether the hearers will take it to heart and act upon it. His own use of scripture throughout his works to provide examples illuminating the practical path to be followed shows that in regard to himself the Word in the word became alive and active to the point that he became one of the Lord's great contemplative apostles. To read his works is to be exposed to the fire of divine love which transcends all the limitations and disabilities from which the author suffered, and which brings with it an introduction to the reality of the mystical experience.

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NOTES

¹ Reypens, Léonce: 'Amc', *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, tome 1, (Paris, Beauchesne, 1936), col 464.

² Cognet, Louis: *De la dévotion moderne à la spiritualité française*, (Paris, 1958), p 93.

³ Valabek, Redemptus M.: *Prayer-life in Carmel*, (Rome, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1982) p 96.

⁴ Bouchereaux-Michel, Suzanne M.: *La réforme des Carmes en France et Jean de Saint-Samson*, (Paris, J. Vrin, 1950), p 123.

⁵ Smet, Joachim: *The Carmelites: a history of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, vol III, (Darien, Ill., 1982), p 42.

- ⁶ Joseph of Jesus: *Vie de Frère Jean de Saint-Samson*, quoted in Bouchereaux, *La réforme des Carmes*, p 9.
- ⁷ Bouchereaux, *La réforme des Carmes*, p 127.
- ⁸ Bouchereaux, *La réforme des Carmes*, p 128.
- ⁹ McGreal, Wilfred: *John of St Samson*, (Rome, 1962), p 3.
- ¹⁰ Bouchereaux, *La réforme des Carmes*, pp 128-129.
- ¹¹ Janssen, P. W.: *Les origines de la réforme des Carmes en France au XVIIe siècle*, (La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), p 147.
- ¹² Bouchereaux, *La réforme des Carmes*, p 137.
- ¹³ Vernard, Poslusney: (ed) *From the writings of John of St Samson*, (NY, Alba House, 1975), pp 35-36.
- ¹⁴ Valabek, Redemptus M.: *Prayer-life in Carmel*, (Rome, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1982), pp 97, 109.
- ¹⁵ McGreal, Wilfred: *John of St Samson*, (Rome, 1962), p 6.
- ¹⁶ Healy, Kilian: *Methods of prayer in the directory of the Carmelite reform of Touraine*, (Rome, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1956), p 149.
- ¹⁷ Healy: *Methods of prayer*, p 150.
- ¹⁸ John of St Samson: 'Méditations pour les retraites', quoted in Healy, *Methods of prayer*, p 151.
- ¹⁹ Healy: *Methods of prayer*, p 153.
- ²⁰ Jean de Saint-Samson: 'Méditations pour les retraites', quoted in Healy, *Methods of prayer*, p 154.
- ²¹ Jean de Saint-Samson: *L'Aiguillon, les flammes, les flèches et le miroir de l'amour de Dieu, propres à éprendre l'âme de Dieu en Dieu lui-même, Oeuvres mystiques*, texte établi par Hein Blommestijn et Max Huot de Longchamp, (Paris, O.E.I.L., 1984), p 99.
- ²² Jean de Saint-Samson: *L'Aiguillon*, p 99.
- ²³ Jean de Saint-Samson, *L'Aiguillon*, p 37.
- ²⁴ Jean de Saint-Samson: *L'Aiguillon*, pp 48-49.
- ²⁵ Jean de Saint-Samson: *L'Aiguillon*, pp 54-55.
- ²⁶ Jean de Saint-Samson: *L'Aiguillon*, pp 83-84.
- ²⁷ Jean de Saint-Samson: *L'Aiguillon*, p 85.
- ²⁸ Blommestijn and de Longchamp: *Oeuvres mystiques*, p 25.
- ²⁹ Smet: *The Carmelites*, vol III, p 43.