

THE WESTERN SPIRITUAL TRADITION

By LUCIA OF THE INCARNATION

WHEN ASKING ourselves the question what contribution woman has made to western spiritual tradition, we must first cast a glance at culture in general. What strikes us at once is that in past centuries all the works of genius, in philosophy, science and art, were produced by men. Is there some truth then in the age-old assertion that woman's intellect and creativity are inferior to that of man; that her vision and interest are limited to the material? This postulate has been decisively refuted in our own day. We attribute the absence of notable outward achievement in the past to the lack of opportunity and encouragement given to woman, to man's 'superiority complex' and the feminine inclination to passivity, which have held her so long in an inferior position in society, and have kept many fields of activity closed to her. But this is only part of the answer; nor is it the real explanation. The reasons lie deeper.

Woman represents one half of all human reality; therefore she has always had an influence on culture. Culture indeed is only possible through the fruitful polarity of man and woman. Should one of them be absent, no creativity would be possible. But woman has been present in her own mode as woman; and most certainly her contribution was greatest whenever she most fully accepted and lived her womanhood. She is man's equal partner precisely as woman, complementing but not imitating him. As his partner she reveals to him the other half of creation, a second dimension of the cosmos. It is only through woman that man really knows himself also, and becomes creative. There has never been any great literature or art except through her mediation. However, this powerful influence so often remains hidden. It becomes momentarily visible in the great female figures in literature and art, but it goes beyond them all. For the dimension that woman symbolizes in the totality of creation is not its empirical appearance, but its metaphysical depth. Paul Claudel has said, and repeated it often: 'Woman is the promise that cannot be kept'. She points beyond herself.

Woman's nature is profoundly ordered to motherhood, to the reception, transmission and nurturing of life on all levels. This is her primary field of creativity: and what other could compare with it? Man's nature is ordered to action and achievement. Fatherhood is never more than one part of his life. 'When a woman loves, she loves always. Man has to do many other things between' (Jean Paul). Woman *is* her love; she is closer to being than action, to persons and concrete situations than to abstract theory. Her physiological and psychological functions are more integrated than those of man. Through her receptivity, her gifts of intuition and identification, she mothers not only human life, but also culture. Apart from every-day experience, there are numerous explicit testimonies to this. Let us quote just one. Teilhard de Chardin wrote in *Le coeur de la matière*: 'From the critical moment of my awakening, when I discarded many forms transmitted to me by family and convention, in order to grow into my true self: from that moment nothing has ever developed in me save under the eye and influence of a woman'.¹

From all this it would appear that we must look for womanly achievement in the Church in the western spiritual tradition, primarily where it cannot be measured or directly seen. The Church has two aspects. She is the instrument of salvation, the giver of life in the sacraments through the ministerial priesthood. This belongs to her institutional character, more especially entrusted to man. But she is also the Community of the redeemed, the Bride of Christ, who listens to his word and responds to his love; and under this aspect she is more especially related to woman. Jean Guittou expresses it in this way: 'A woman can be a victim, an oblation, immolation, constant, profound; inspiration, succour, counsel, reparation, renewal. She can forget, she can awaken . . . Women also have a vast kingdom of silence'.

When we turn now to the direct contribution of woman, we are struck by the fact that, whenever she left her 'vast kingdom of silence' and revealed her genius in a more outstanding way, it was almost always in the religious sphere; and here her contribution bears more characteristically that of a charismatic vocation than in the case of man. She does not speak on her own account, but as an instrument: in this way, again, profoundly true to her nature. But in so doing, each time she reveals her unmistakable individuality.

¹ Quoted here from Ida Friederike Görres: *Sohn der Erde: Der Mensch Teilhard de Chardin*, (Frankfurt a Main, 1971), p 122.

There is, for example, St Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century, one of the most remarkable women of the middle ages, at first a recluse, then abbess of her monastery. Favoured with visions from the age of three, she actively contributed to the reform of the Church in her day, travelling all over Germany, settling conflicts, giving counsel, reforming monasteries even of men, writing to popes, rebuking bishops, emperors and kings. Three hundred letters of hers are preserved, among them some correspondence with St Bernard of Clairvaux. She was not only a prophetess, but a guide of souls. For all her political activity, she was profoundly humble. Her most important work, *Scivias*, contains an account of her visions, apocalyptic and obscure, but full of pearls of wisdom and accurate theology. Her ascetical teaching is marked by common sense. Her writings show none of the sentiment we find later in St Gertrude. They are permeated with a deep love of God, but a love of the will. 'But thou, O man, sayest, I cannot do good. But I say, thou canst. Thou askest, how? I answer: by intellect and reason'. Guibert of Gembloux, one of her correspondents, called her *speculativa anima* – 'this contemplative soul'. Besides her spiritual works, she wrote a book on medicine which, long discounted as a curious mixture of medieval beliefs and personal intuition in the light of later scientific progress, is receiving new interest in our own day. Hildegard was imbued with a deep reverence for the cosmos, and the place of man in creation and redemption. The impact she made is truly charismatic: the overflow of God's mystical gifts to her, which perfected a strong, independent, feminine personality, at once active and contemplative.

A century later, also in Germany, we have the two Mechthilds and Gertrude the Great, three women of quite a different stamp. St Mechthild of Magdeburg was a Beguine under the direction of the Dominicans. Her *'Flowing Light of the Godhead'* is a collection of her visions, poems and colloquies with God. She was the forerunner of the Rhineland mystics, who sought God in the centre of their being rather than in affective devotion. Suso owes much to her. Mechthild's theme is that of the great love that dominated her life. Her mysticism is a bridal mysticism, seeking union with God through detachment. The image of the bridal love of God is profoundly biblical, and one much used by the Fathers. Only the image of conjugal love is adequate to express the exclusive, the jealous love of God, strong as death, at once blissful and demanding. For Mechthild and all Christ's lovers through the ages, this image of

bridal love has never been a substitute for a reality denied them or voluntarily sacrificed, but simply the reality of which the marriage-union of earthly spouses is but the faint image. Though Mechthild must have known St Bernard's homilies on the Song of Songs, her burning words owe little to others; while the mystics who followed owe much to her. She remains always practical and womanly in her writings. In the midst of her sublime colloquies with God, we find passages like the one in her exhortation to Superiors, in which she descends to delightful details about the guest-houses, the sick-room and the kitchen.

As prophetess, Mechthild spoke a strong language, denouncing the evils and abuses in the Church among the clergy which brought her much persecution, obliging her finally to leave Magdeburg and find refuge in the monastery of Helfta, at the age of fifty-eight. There she influenced St Mechthild of Hackeborn, then twenty-eight, and St Gertrude the Great, who was fourteen. These two were cultured women, brought up from childhood in the cloister, which they never left. They remained comparatively unknown beyond their native-land for two centuries.

After the Carthusian Lanspergius translated Gertrude's *Herald of Divine Love* and Mechthild's *Book of Special Grace* in 1536, they became two of the most loved saints in the western world. Nourished on the liturgy and scripture, their spirituality presents the full flowering of the new orientation given by St Bernard: a tender and intimate devotion to the humanity of Christ. All their womanly affection, all their imaginative gifts are brought into play, but there is never a shadow of sentimentality; it is simply a coming to life of the great dogmas of our faith. Christ is seen as the great repairer and redeemer, the lover of mankind. Here, the devotion to the Heart of Christ, already present in scripture and the Fathers, flowers as in a mystic garden enclosed, long before St Margaret Mary made of it a popular resort, as it were. For St Gertrude, however, stress is laid less on the bleeding Heart full of sadness than on the Heart overflowing with the mercy and goodness of God, the treasure-house of all riches, the lyre plucked by the Holy Spirit. It is her home, calling her: *Veni, mea, ad me! Intra, mea, in me!* Serenity, a rich and radiant optimism, trust and confidence are the mark of her spirituality. 'I wish your writings to be an irrefutable testimonial of my divine love', Christ said to her. And the charming intimacy with Christ which was cultivated at Helfta is demonstrated in the well-known words he addressed to another nun of the monastery:

'If you seek me, you will find me in the heart of Gertrude'. And in the heart of Gertrude countless souls during the following centuries did find him.

In the fourteenth century it is Julian of Norwich in England who attracts our attention. In simple and homely language, she tells us how in 'Sixteen Showings' the whole christian faith was revealed to her in the Passion of Christ. 'Love is his meaning' is the quintessence of her revelations, whether she sees the universe carried in the care of God 'like a hazel-nut on the palm of my hands', or whether she tries to express the tender love of Christ under the image of motherhood, 'our good Mother, Jesus', or whether she speaks, like St Francis before her, of the exquisite 'courtesy' of God toward his creature.

While Gertrude, Mechthild and Julian lived hidden lives of great intensity, enriching the Church's contemplative awareness of the mystery of Christ, an awareness which they were able to express in their writings, St Catherine of Siena belongs to the spiritual family of Hildegard. What was the source of her extraordinary power? Popes, princes and common folk, her little group of followers, men and women, were passionately devoted to her whom they called *dolcissima mamma*. She had a virile intelligence, determination, charm, a flair for politics, a playfulness of manner combined with an inner depth of judgment and feeling. Her sweetness was compelling because it was distilled from strength and a certain harshness of nature. While St Bridget of Sweden, some years before her, had influenced men by working on their emotions through her prophecies, Catherine worked on men's reason and intellect through her gift of infused wisdom. Like St Teresa's, hers was an unusual intelligence, supernaturally enlightened. The two great women, on whom the Church has conferred the title of Doctor of the Church, had this in common: both were untutored, not interested in speculation or the theoretical, but occupied with life, with the need of the moment, with the cause of the Church. They were apostles. They stand in the full stream of the authentic tradition of christian mysticism. Catherine's political interventions were ultimately destined to fail, like those of Joan of Arc, who died at the stake, following her Master. In her *Dialogue*, Catherine gives us her deep theology, acquired in contemplation and expressed in vivid images. The centre of her mystical life is 'the inner call', consisting as it were of two compartments: self-knowledge and knowledge of God. For her, humility is born of knowledge. She calls faith 'the pupil

of the eye of the intellect', and sees faith and reason as made for each other. This gives the *Dialogue* its intellectual character. But she is far from being an intellectual. Mystical union in conformity to Christ crucified is her all-absorbing passion. Christ is the 'Bridge' between heaven and earth, which images the whole economy of salvation. She sees everything in terms of Christ. The Pope is 'the sweet Christ on earth'; the whole world is for her 'dyed in the precious blood of Christ'. With Gertrude before her and Teresa after her, she had a deep sense of the Church. All three emphasized the redemptive value of prayer and holiness of life which until then had been little stressed, even by theologians. The emphasis had been rather on the ascent of the soul to God than on its redemptive power in the Church. St Gertrude was the first to be imbued with this awareness, Catherine brought it into the open, and Teresa of Avila was to found a whole Order on this basis.

Teresa's task was different from Catherine's. As *Mater Spiritualium*, she was to teach the way of prayer. She is one of the most human and womanly of saints, appealing to millions as much by her sheer humanity as by her sublime mysticism. Her books are not so much treatises on prayer, systematic representations of doctrine: rather they are Teresa as she lives, Teresa the person. One almost hears the inflection of her voice. As far as her teaching goes, it is not strictly true to say that she sets down from her lived experience with a woman's intuition and infused wisdom what St John of the Cross expounds with the rigorous precision of the trained theologian. Both approach their subject in a unique and individual way, reflecting different personalities which God has touched differently. Both together embody the ideal of Carmel, tempering its stark absoluteness with the breadth and width of exquisite human feeling.

With St John of the Cross, we have to look for this human balance in his life rather than in his books. But Teresa's writings have a human sparkle: they abound in shrewd judgment, practical advice and humour. She was the outgoing dynamic personality, the organizer. When she represents the soul to us as an interior castle, it is because she herself had to win it, mansion by mansion, at the point of the sword. Or when she speaks of the different ways of watering the garden, she can feel for us when we have to labour with buckets, because she had to do so herself for many years. We are delighted and relieved to find ourselves understood in our difficulties. Yet for all this, she always keeps her eyes on the heights. We never find her compromising; the ardour of her love is not

diminished, but ever fanned by her realism. Charles de Foucauld says of her in one of his letters: 'When you have read her, you will read her again. She is one of those authors who are daily bread'. She reveals an astonishing insight into human nature and psychology as well as into the mysteries of God. She possesses also that highly feminine characteristic of guiding those who are her guides. Her humility, deep though it is, is nevertheless blended harmoniously with strength and authority. Teresa will always be the classic teacher on prayer. She can also be called the first woman in the Church to speak up for woman's liberty and equality. Humble daughter of the Church, yet she refutes with conviction the theologians of her day who regard women as unfit for mental prayer.

If Teresa of Avila had a charism exclusively her own, there is a woman in Carmel who can be said to be the living expression of the doctrine of John of the Cross, though in her own very personal way. This is Thérèse of Lisieux. Who would expect that under her flowery language would be found the strong doctrine of the *nadas* and of absolute love! But so it is. Is there a more complete surrender than that expressed under the playful image: 'My one ambition is to remain as a worthless toy in the hands of the Child Jesus . . . to become one with the whims of the divine Infant'.² And the absolute nature of her renunciation is expressed in such terms as, 'I used to force myself to smile in order that God, as though deceived by my countenance, should not suspect that I was suffering'.³ For the ordinary christian of our modern world, St Thérèse in her 'Little Way' translated and made accessible St John of the Cross. She linked his teaching to the gospel, leaving on one side all the unnecessary accretions of the centuries which had come to complicate its message. She, too, was an instrument of the holy Spirit – an ordinary girl of extraordinary surrender, on whom the divine choice fell.

In our own day, women have made their voice heard in the Church more extensively than before. Outstanding among them is another Carmelite, Edith Stein, a gifted philosopher, who in her youth lost the jewish faith into which she had been born, and became an atheist. Her integrity in her search for truth was answered by the grace of conversion and the gift of faith, and she went her way with the absoluteness characteristic of her. This led her to Carmel

² *Manuscrits autobiographiques de St. Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus* (Lisieux, 1957), p 161.

³ Sister Génévieve: *A Memoir of my sister St Thérèse* (Dublin, 1959), p 65.

and to the gas-chamber of Auschwitz. It is her fully integrated christian personality and holiness lived in its totality that is a sign for us today. But she also exercised an important influence through her writings. Her clear and lucid thinking on the role of women in the Church had a significant influence in the 'twenties and 'thirties. In her philosophical work, in the tradition of St Thomas who made use of truth wherever he found it, she tried to reconcile modern phenomenological thought with St Thomas and St John of the Cross, and this in a very original way. In spite of certain deficiencies, it was a bold venture; and, as Donald Nicholl put it, she may well prove to have been the greatest glory of the phenomenological school. Erich Przywara saw 'classic philosophical objectivity, combined with depth of artistic feeling, as the great style proper to her'.

Her contemporary in France, Simone Weil, also a jewess of brilliant intellectual capacity and ardent lover of Christ, never crossed the threshold of the Church. Her mystical insights, radically lived, penetrated deeply into the meaning of suffering, sacrifice, the Cross, purification and human solidarity, but never broke through to the note of resurrection and joy which is the dominant and final expression of christianity. But in this, as she felt herself, she followed her own charismatic vocation. Her pure, heroic, lonely figure is for us a symbol of our tormented hour of history: an hour when the old is dying and the new painfully coming to birth. She points to the future, to a Church as it will be and is not yet, embracing all that is human in a universality which only God can give. Simone Weil remains on the threshold in hope. It is conceivable that only a woman could embody this particular sign-character.

There are other modern women-writers who have raised their voice 'in the midst of the Church', of whom two of the most eminent are Gertrud von Le Fort and Ida Friederike Görres. The one gave us profound insights into the mystery of the Church, of history, and of woman;⁴ the other raised a fearless, critical voice of depth and quality, born from a great love of the Church, at a time when this was unusual, showing new vistas to a young generation which found its own aspirations expressed in them, and fulfilled since by the Council. They both did this in their capacity as women. In fact, they made an impact precisely because they stand out as women, close to the mystery at the hidden heart of reality, a mystery grasped by

⁴ This article is indebted to her book *Die Ewige Frau* (München, 1934: trans *The Eternal Woman*, Milwaukee, 1962).

intuition rather than rationalization. All these women were of outstanding intellectual quality; but their contribution was not one that could have been made by men. Man and woman each have their own contribution to make. Imitation of each other has produced only mediocre achievement.

It is clear that women of this calibre would have been pre-eminent in any walk of life. The fact that they turned their attention to the things of the Spirit seems to indicate that woman reaches her highest potential, achieves her greatest influence, makes her most characteristic contribution, when she appears in the sign of Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, taken into service by the Spirit, of the one woman in whom the promise has been supremely kept, to use the phrase of Paul Claudel. This is born out in the last figure we wish to mention, who joins in our own day the long succession of charismatic women: Adrienne von Speyr (1902-67), doctor of medicine, wife, writer, theologian and mystic.⁵ Graced by God with visions, charismatic gifts of healing and prophecy, stigmata, and inexplicable vicarious sufferings, her importance for the Church lies in the immense volume of her written works: commentaries on sacred scripture, works on mysticism, the Church, the Saints, dictated to her confessor and guide, Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁶ What they reveal is a profound sense of the Church such as Gertrude, Catherine and Teresa manifested. Her theology is marked by catholicity, the unity of all the mysteries of our faith, centred in the Trinity. She made very original contributions to theology, the importance of which, according to von Balthasar, we have hardly begun to realize. Adrienne von Speyr is a listening ear in the Church, receiving what the Spirit has to say. Central to her message is the *fiat* of man as the vital answer to the primary word of the revealing God, participating in the perfect *fiat* of Mary, which is at the origin of christian perfection and fecundity, at once the lowliest and the highest achievement of man who becomes free in the measure in which he binds himself to God.⁷

This applies to man and woman alike, for the 'new man in Christ' transcends male and female. But woman, from her natural endowment and her symbolic character in the order of creation, is especially fitted to bear witness to this truth.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar: *Erster Blick auf Adrienne von Speyr*, in *Johannes-Verlag* (Einsiedeln, 1968).

⁶ Edited by Hans Urs von Balthasar in *Johannes - Verlag*.

⁷ Cf Albrecht, Barbara: 'Une Femme dans l'Eglise', in *Vie Consacrée* (January, 1975).