AUGUSTINE BAKER

A Wise Mystical Guide

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THE BENEDICTINE AUGUSTINE BAKER (1575–1641), sometimes known as Austin Baker, a Welsh-speaker who was educated in England and later converted from Protestantism, deserves more attention than he has traditionally received. Sixteen years after his death, Fr Serenus Cressy, a friend and disciple, published, under the title of *Sancta sophia* (holy wisdom), a huge compilation of his writings (662 pages). It consists of three very long treatises, followed by an extensive series of ejaculatory prayers.[1]

A Rather Obscure Spiritual Master

Fortunately Baker's writings have recently become better known among Benedictines and others thanks, for instance, to a conference held in 2000 at his birthplace, Abergavenny in Wales.[2] Perhaps he has been, by and large, neglected by the Benedictines because he focused on personal contemplation, apparently underplaying the importance of the Divine Office (the *Opus Dei* or work of God) so strongly emphasized by St Benedict in his *Rule*: 'Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God' (43.3).

Thus an expert on Baker's doctrines explains:

> Baker, who wrote as a contemplative and for contemplatives, had little regard for or interest in prayer that was not highly interior, spiritual and simple …. He had a special antipathy for the discursive prayer commonly called 'meditation' that was gaining wide popularity among English recusants through the influence of Jesuit missionaries.[3]

[1] For reasons of space I shall not delve into Baker's autobiography, titled *Confessions*, about which James Gaffney wrote: 'Most of the doctrinal content of the *Confessions* is presented more fully and in better order by *Holy Wisdom*'. See Gaffney, *Augustine Baker's Inner Light: A Study in English Recusant Spirituality* (Scranton: U. of Scranton, 1989), 18.

[2] See *That Mysterious Man: Essays on Augustine Baker with Eighteen Illustrations*, edited by Michael Woodward (Abergavenny: Three Peaks, 2001).

[3] James Gaffney, 'An Unpublished Treatise of Augustine Baker on Discernment', *The American Benedictine Review*, 25 (1974), 235–245, here 240. Gaffney's article cites MS 22 in Downside Library,

However, Baker did not favour any abandonment of the Divine Office by Benedictine monks and nuns. His Benedictine prior stated, unsurprisingly:

> It is supposed as a ground in all those collections and observations [by Baker], that the Office of Choir, and actions of obedience, and conventual acts, and all other things prescribed by Rule and statute, are most exactly to be kept and observed: yea, preferred before all other private exercises whatever.[4]

While he valued 'an attention or express reflection on the words and sense of the sentence pronounced by the tongue or revolved in the mind', which is 'the lowest and most imperfect degree of attention', Baker also commended 'an attention to God, though not to the words', which 'is far more beneficial than the former' (347–348). He proposed a sort of integration of these first two degrees of attention, as he wrote:

> A third and most sublime degree of attention to the divine Office is that whereby vocal prayers do become mental; that is, whereby souls most profoundly and with a perfect simplicity united to God can yet, without any prejudice to such union, attend also to the sense and spirit of each passage that they pronounce, yea, thereby find their affection, adhesion, and union increased and more simplified (348).

Baker was sent by his superiors to the convent of Benedictine nuns at Cambrai, in Flanders, to be their spiritual adviser.[5] There he was accused of teaching that inner mystical experience stood above obedience to confessors; hence, a shadow of suspicion covered his reputation, although he was never censored by his Benedictine supervisors. As Liam Temple has shown, however, 'these criticisms … were, rather, the product of deeper anxieties concerning power and control within early modern Catholic convents'.[6] According to James Gaffney, Baker's views

which is part of a collection of manuscripts that Baker himself titled *The Remains of Other Works*. The short treatise bears the long title, 'The Means and Manner How a Soul Should Behave Herself for to Know What She Were Best to Do in a Doubtful Case That Is of Moment'.

[4] 'A Memorial Written by the Late V. R. F. Leander Á S. Martino', in Augustine Baker, *Holy Wisdom: Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation Extracted out of More than Forty Treatises*, edited by J. Norbert Sweeney (London: Burns and Oates, 1911), 555 (subsequent references to *Holy Wisdom* in the text).

[5] Interestingly, from that convent his influence continued in its foundation in Paris. The spirit of Baker was kept alive in the transfer of the English Benedictine nuns to their native country during the nineteenth century. See Benedict Rowel, 'Baker's Continuing Influence on Benedictine Nuns', in *That Mysterious Man*, 82–91.

[6] Liam P. Temple, 'The Mysticism of Augustine Baker, OSB: A Reconsideration', *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, 19 (2017), 213–230, here 213.

concerning the nuns' capacity to discern the will of God regarding their practical decisions in personal prayer smacked, for the ecclesiastical authorities, of the Protestant accent on the individual believer's freedom.[7] So Baker was blamed for inciting the nuns to follow their personal inspiration. It must be pointed out that Baker equally cared for the nuns who were unsophisticated, since he complemented his praises for the highest states in prayer with a very long succession of ejaculatory prayers, obviously providing for both the more advanced and the less advanced in their spiritual life.[8]

To what spiritual masters was Baker indebted? He was mostly influenced by the Bible, by the fourth-century monk John Cassian, by the sixth-century Gregory the Great and the Byzantine Dionysius (the Pseudo-Areopagite), by several medieval authors—Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Johannes Tauler, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, the anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Herp (Harphius)—by the sixteenth-century Jesuit Baltasar Álvarez, the Carmelites Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, and the seventeenth-century Capuchin Benet of Canfield.[9] He was indeed widely read in spirituality.

Main Themes

I shall single out six principal themes in Baker's writing: divine inspiration, humility, flexibility, the will of God, the signs indicating that a person is called into mystical consciousness, and the experience of desolation.

Divine Inspiration

Several experts consider Baker's doctrine of how prayerful people (including the Benedictine nuns at Cambrai) can perceive *divine inspiration*, which Baker called 'Inner Light', to be the most original theme in his teaching. James Gaffney remarks that correctly understanding divine inspiration requires a premise:

> His teaching on inspiration presupposes his teaching on propensities .... God normally inspires in accordance with the proclivities of nature, and spiritual directors must keep individual and general propensities well in view if they hope to guide effectively in the way of inspiration.[10]

[7] See Gaffney, 'An Unpublished Treatise', 236–237. I return to the believer's freedom below.
[8] See Augustine Baker, 'Certain Patterns of Devout Exercises of Immediate Acts and Affections of the Will', in *Holy Wisdom*, 563–662.
[9] I am mentioning the names that frequently recur. For a longer list, see Baker, *Holy Wisdom*, 87.
[10] Gaffney, *Augustine Baker's Inner Light*, 31.

Gaffney also notes that such inspiration is given to 'those who follow a contemplative vocation' and consists in 'enabling and inclining them … to know and do the will of God'. He goes on to say: 'The sort of inspiration on whose importance Baker insists should not … be confused with such out of the way experiences as mysterious voices, apparitions, and the like'.[11] So, even though the inspiration comes directly from the Holy Spirit, it is not an extraordinary phenomenon.[12] Baker emphasized the duty of consulting with a spiritual director (527–530), provided he or she is capable of understanding the complexities of contemplative prayer—the kind of person that Baker regretted not having encountered. As the psychiatrist Richard Lawes points out, as far as Baker himself was concerned, after a dramatic religious experience, 'his decision to become a Catholic came not from pure inward illumination, but a slower and more scholarly process of reading various authorities'. This prudence in not rushing towards a decision 'is in keeping with Baker's view that inner illumination, however important, must be constantly verified by careful resort to trustworthy figures in the mystical tradition of the Church'.[13]

Augustine Baker, attributed to William Faithorne, 1654

Concerning 'how much certainty one should attribute to such inspiration', Gaffney tells us that Baker thought,

[11] Gaffney, *Augustine Baker's Inner Light*, 32.

[12] Baker was acquainted with Thomas Aquinas' teaching that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were 'motions' offered to all, and not the result of reasoning; see *Summa theologiae*, 1. 2, q. 68 and 2. 2, q. 45.

[13] Richard Lawes, 'Can Modern Psychology Help Us Understand Baker's *Secretum Sive Mysticum*?', in *That Mysterious Man*, 211–233, here 216. The *Secretum sive mysticum* is one of Baker's several writings that include autobiographical passages.

'one who proceeds obediently and dispassionately by recollection and resignation to seek the will of God can rest assured of the divine authorship of those inner promptings which commonly follow'.[14]

Humility

Virtually all Christian mystics praise *humility* as ranking among the central virtues. As a good Benedictine, Baker was aware of its great importance.[15] He writes: 'The deeper thou groundest thyself in humility, the higher thou raisest thyself in charity' (60). He also highlights the connection between humility and the joys of contemplation:

> Now this same humility is to be exercised, not so much in considering thine own self, thy sinfulness, and misery (though to do thus at the first be very good and profitable), but rather in a quiet loving sight of the infinite endless being and goodness of Jesus; the which beholding of Jesus must be either through grace in a savourous feeling knowledge of him, or at least in a full and firm faith in Him (60).[16]

Flexibility

Baker advocates *flexibility* to those who are called by God to pass from a mainly active prayer to a passive one:

> If thou findest that through custom such works do in time lose their savour and virtue to increase this love, and that it seems to thee that thou feelest more grace and spiritual profit in some other, take these other and leave those, for though the inclination and desire of thy heart to Jesus must ever be unchangeable, nevertheless thy spiritual works thou shalt use in thy manner of praying, reading, &c., to the end to feed and strengthen this desire, may well be changed, according as thou feelest thyself by grace disposed in the applying of thy heart. Bind not thyself, therefore, unchangeably to voluntary customs, for that will hinder the freedom of thy heart to love Jesus, if grace would visit thee specially. (61)[17]

[14] Gaffney, *Augustine Baker's Inner Light*, 39. Instructively, without referring to Baker, a twentieth-century German mystic took up the same position as our British Benedictine: 'One should seek out an experienced person and tell him everything. The advice of such a person should be taken seriously, while at the same time one should reserve the freedom to act according to one's own innermost conscience in case one has not been fully understood or one senses the danger of being unduly influenced.' (Romano Guardini, *The Art of Praying: The Principles and Methods of Christian Prayer*, translated by Prince Leopold of Loewenstein [Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1994], 124–125.)

[15] See Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1996), index s.v. 'Humility (*humilitas*)'.

[16] Later, in his second treatise, second section, he writes a long chapter on humility (chapter 13).

[17] And see 421, 423 and 425, especially the phrase 'due liberty of spirit'.

Despite his accent on a freedom of decision that leads to wordless prayer, Baker recommends 'a totall indifferency & resignation in the matter' of a decision to be discerned.[18] This is perhaps an allusion to Ignatius of Loyola's *indiferencia*, which characterizes the entire readiness to accept the will of God throughout the process of discernment.

The Will of God

Baker stresses the importance of resignation or submission to *the divine will*. He offers this very wise—and original—advice:

> There is in acts of Resignation far more security and less danger of propriety or self-interest than in acts of immediate love, which being apt to cause stirrings and pleasing motions in corporal nature, very few souls can practise them purely and without propriety, except they be exalted to a supreme degree of spiritual divine charity. Again, there is in Resignation exercised more directly true mortification and contradiction to self-love and interest than in any other kind of internal prayer, and consequently it is a prayer more purifying. (451)

Signs of a Mystical Calling

Like the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and like John of the Cross, Baker proposes *signs* indicating that a person is called to wordless prayer. He concurs with these authors that the person called by God to this new kind of prayer experiences a kind of impotence in practising discursive meditation at the same time as a fruitful rest and repose in God.[19]

In treating meditation as seemingly opposed to entering into a post-meditative state, and as presumably amounting to a countersign, Baker acknowledges the objection that it would be deleterious *not* to meditate on Christ's passion, which 'is never to be set aside' (423). He maintains that the relationship to the suffering Jesus does not require attention to *the details* of his passion, provided the prayerful people satisfy two conditions:

[18] Augustie Baker, *Remains*, edited by John P. H. Clark (Salzburg: U. Salzburg, 2009), 4.

[19] Both *The Cloud* and Baker's *Holy Wisdom*, however, lack the second sign described by John of the Cross: 'The memory ordinarily turns to God solicitously and with painful care, and the soul thinks it is not serving God but turning back, because it is aware of this distaste for the things of God' (John of the Cross, 'The Dark Night', 1.9.3, and see 1.10.1, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. edn [Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991]). The context here is the dark night, whereas later in his life, in *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*, he would become more serene.

> 1. In their internal prayer, wherein they produce the same affections and acts of love, humility, and patience of which our lord gave there a pattern in His Passion. 2. In their external doings, really on occasions practicing the same virtues (which are proper to the Passion) with far more perfection in virtue of such prayer than they could be meditation, and so do show themselves to be more true disciples of His. (423–424)

The Experience of Desolation

Towards the end of *Holy Wisdom*, Baker touches on what he calls the 'Great Desolation'. This desolation is similar to the dark night of the spirit described by John of the Cross. As in the latter, Baker notes that the soul 'begins to suspect that by some great unknown sin she has procured all this, or, however, that her resistance is now so feeble and inefficacious that she deserves that God should quite cast her off'. With his usual precision, he observes, 'this most afflicting martyrdom oftentimes continues many months, yea, in some persons several years (not always in extremity, but with some intercisions)' (538).

However,

> … the truth is that in this case of desolation the soul doth by her free-will or rather in the centre of the spirit beyond all her faculties, remain in a constant union and adhesion to God, although no such union do appear unto her (540).

In addition, Baker draws attention to 'the fruits and benefits flowing from this most sad estate (supported with patience and tranquillity of spirit)' (540). The principal benefit is this:

> Hereby the devout soul obtains a new light to penetrate into the mystery of our Lord's desertion in the garden and on the cross, and from this light a most inflamed love to Him; now she ceases to wonder why He should deprecate a cup so mortally bitter as this, and that it should work such strange effects on Him, or that He should cry out, *Eli, Eli, lamma sabachthani*, and by this desertion of His (which lasted till the very last moment of His life) she hopes to have an end put to hers (540).

The Entry into the Contemplative Mode

In his first treatise, Baker defines the *contemplative mode* in general as consisting in, 'reducing our thoughts as much as may be, from multiplicity to unity, by fixing them continually on the divine love which is that *unum necessarium*' (98, and compare Luke 10:42).

In the third treatise, he distinguishes between three degrees of 'internal prayer': 'meditation'; 'acts of the will', also called 'affections of the will'; and 'contemplation', also called 'passive union'. Although he acknowledges the importance of meditation, the principal thrust in his treatises is in favour of the second and the third degrees.

Acts of the Will

The second degree is divided into 'forced acts of the will' and 'exercises of aspiration'. On the one hand, forced acts occur 'without a distinct or express motive represented by the understanding, or else suitable to such a motive, yet without any formal discourse of the understanding'. They are called 'forced acts' because the soul, 'will need to use some force upon herself for the producing of the said acts of the will, which are imperfect contemplation'. On the other hand, the exercises of aspiration,

> … are in substance little differing from the former …. Yet by reason of the facility wherewith they are produced without force, foresight, or election, purely flowing from an internal impulse of the Divine Spirit, we therefore give them another name. (432)[20]

Baker directly contrasts the acts and the aspirations:

> Immediate acts are not only produced with deliberation and choice, but ordinarily with some degree of force used upon the will. But Aspirations proceed from an interior impulse, indeliberately, and as it were naturally flowing from the soul, and thereby they show that there is in the interior a secret, supernatural, directing principle, to wit, God's Holy Spirit alone, teaching and moving the soul to breathe forth these Aspirations, not only in set recollections, but almost continually (512).

Contemplation

Contemplation, the third degree of internal prayer, is discussed in the fourth section of Baker's third treatise, which begins by delineating 'Contemplation in General':

[20] Much later, in his second edition (1830–1831) of *Der christliche Glaube*, Schleiermacher also distinguished between the facility and the difficulty (joy and sorrow) felt in the feeling of absolute dependence. See Louis Roy, *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (Albany: SUNY, 2003), chapter 6, section titled 'Feeling'. In that section, I showed that for Schleiermacher 'feeling' is not a feeling in the usual sense; actually it is very close to what Baker meant by 'aspiration'.

> There is a mystic contemplation which is, indeed, truly and properly such, by which a soul without discoursings and curious speculations, without any perceptible use of the internal senses or sensible images, by a pure, simple and reposeful operation of the mind, in the obscurity of faith, simply regards God as infinite and incomprehensible verity, and with the whole bent of the will rests in Him as her infinite, universal, and incomprehensible good (504).

I must confess to finding it difficult to distinguish this 'contemplation in general' from the second kind of the second degree, the 'exercises of aspiration'. Furthermore, chapter 2 of this section is titled 'Of the Prayer of Aspiration'—which seems to bring us back to the second degree! In fact, Baker calls this state the 'last term of Aspirations' (510), thus implying that the third degree is simply the perfecting of the second kind of the second degree.

But while the exercises of aspiration are mostly active, contemplation is mostly passive, and this third degree is the state that Baker wished many of the cloistered nuns to achieve. It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit, today as in the past, invites a good number of prayerful people to enter into this blessed state.

Clarity and Practicality

From wide reading on mystics and mysticism, I can assert that no one among the mystics has been as precise as Augustine Baker about prayer and contemplation. Teresa of Ávila gives us a wealth of practical observations, but her analyses are less coherent than Baker's.[21] And John of the Cross mentions fewer concrete details than Baker about the variety of situations and states in which people involved in mystical consciousness are engaged.[22]

Therefore, if readers of *The Way*, even those who see themselves as novices in mysticism, peruse at least a few sections of Baker's lengthy book, they will probably agree with Anthony Low: 'His discussion of the approaches and first stages of mysticism is unsurpassed in its clarity and practicality'.[23] Low explains:

[21] On Theresa of Ávila's lack of coherence, see Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain (1500–1650)* (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 120–229, especially 145, 150, 160–161, 196 and 201.
[22] See Louis Roy, 'The Experience of the Absence of God according to John of the Cross', *The Way*, 55/1 (January 2016), 89–98.
[23] Anthony Low, *Augustine Baker* (New York: Twayne, 1970), preface [vii].

> Baker also combines, in his own way, the elements of unlimited spiritual goals with common sense in attaining them. He is one of the most reliable guides for beginners in the mystical way, because he presents his doctrines in sober, discursive, carefully qualified form, making no attempt to sway the reader's emotions.[24]

I wish to leave to James Gaffney the final assessment of Augustine Baker's importance for today:

> Baker's solicitude for spiritual freedom, his repudiation of formalistic piety, his denunciation of legalistic obedience, his pursuit of a simplified asceticism, his awareness of the interplay of grace and natural character, his emphasis on the individuality of vocation, and his conviction that lack of spiritual direction is not an insuperable handicap, all these are views with obvious relevance to some of the most acute problems of contemporary Catholic spirituality.[25]

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[24] Low, *Augustine Baker*, 118.
[25] Gaffney, *Augustine Baker's Inner Light*, 149.