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I

The Search for Life

One of the most tantalizing figures in the whole of the Gospel story is surely Lazarus, the man who for four days lay dead, and was then brought back to the world by the word of our Lord. He was a man who knew by experience, who had *seen*, the answer to the questions which perpetually engage the human mind: the nature of the world that awaits us beyond the tomb. And yet perhaps even if he had spoken and his words had come down to us we should not be much the wiser; for we have the testimony of St. Paul that it is idle to hope for an expression of the inexpressible: "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of a man. . . ."

But there is another question which vexes the mind; and to this we might well have expected an answer. What difference did his journey into eternity make to him, how did it alter his way of life when he returned to the world of time? Here, too, we are baffled and without an answer; we are told nothing further of him at all, except that when, later on, Jesus went to Bethany and a supper was made for Him, Lazarus was one of the guests. But what was he like? How was he changed? And perhaps, in default of information, we paint a picture of him for ourselves: we tend to think that with this unforgettable taste of infinity forever with him he must necessarily have

been dreamy, preoccupied, hopelessly bored with the unimportance, the pettiness, of the business of living, the everyday affairs of the world of men. You imagine the practical, motherly Martha having to tell him repeatedly at mealtimes: "Lazarus, do get on with your food."

And yet there was a supper, and he was one of the guests. Was he, in fact, dreamy, abstracted, bored? Fortunately we need not be at a loss for an authentic answer; for if Lazarus himself does not supply one there are plenty who do. There are plenty of others who, like him in what matters most, have known eternity and then returned to the world of time: there are all the saints who have been given in the heights of prayer to know the secret things of God and in their ecstasy have forgotten everything but the Eternal, but who then returned again to the world of man—and were they dreamy, were they bored and preoccupied? There was St. Paul who was rapt to the seventh heaven; and thereafter swept like a blazing fire through the length and breadth of the world. There was St. Teresa, living with God in the heights of the prayer of union, yet always returning again to the busy, practical life of organization. The list could be prolonged indefinitely. What is the explanation? Why is it that the picture we tend to paint for ourselves is so entirely at variance with the facts? For indeed we could surely appeal in support of it to common human experience: the man who has been through some intense experience does, in fact, tend to be preoccupied. We shall find the answer in the most striking and explicit parallel to the experience of Lazarus: the story of St. Catherine of Siena.

We are told that one day when her confessor was preaching a sermon in the church they brought news to him that Catherine was dead. He went round to her house, where her followers were gathered weeping; but he, for his part, refused, in spite of the appearances, to believe that she was dead, and after a time she did indeed return to the world and open her eyes and become aware of what was going on around her. Now her first words were much what we should have expected: for a long time she could only cry, over and over again, "Oh, I am so unhappy," because she had seen the secret things of God and could not bear to be parted again from them. But that is not the whole story: far from it.

For it was Catherine who, after this "mystical death," became one of the most famous and the most powerful women of her century, endlessly active, advising Popes and princes, traveling, negotiating, issuing orders, determining policies, shaping the life of Christendom. What had intervened? She had learned the truth expressed in the words of the pseudo-Denys: *omnium divinorum divinissimum est cooperare Deo in salutem animarum:* of all divine things the most divine is to share with God in the saving of souls; she had begged our Lord in ecstasy to take her back to her eternal home; and she had been reproached by Him—for her *egoism*. She had been taught by Him: "You cannot render me any service, but you can help your neighbor. The soul in love with My truth gives herself no rest but searches ceaselessly to help others. You cannot give back to Me Myself the love I demand, but I have put you beside your neighbor so that you may do for him what you cannot do for Me. What

you do for your neighbor, then, I consider as being done for Me."

And finally, there is the astonishing story of the exchange of hearts: the story that one day our Lord took her heart from her, and some days later gave her, instead, His own, so that from that time forward she always prayed: My Lord, I offer Thee *Thy* heart; and the substantial reality that we must see in this story, and apply to ourselves, is the fact that to have the heart of Christ means to be identified with the will of Christ: to will nothing that Christ does not will, to will everything that He does will. And what is the supreme desire of the will of the Christ who is Lover and Savior, but to obey and glorify God by redeeming the world?

Why, then, do we go wrong in our judgment about the saint returning from eternity in the world of time? Because we forget, or underestimate, the importance of the world. We forget, first of all, its importance as praising God. They tell us of another Dominican saint, Bl. Jordan of Saxony, that one day as he was walking with some of his students along a country road, an ermine darted across into the hedge a few yards in front of them, and the youths, who had never seen one before, were disappointed at the short glimpse they had caught of it. Jordan went to the side of the road and called to the little animal to come out and let them have a look at it. It obeyed; put its front paws on his hand; let itself be stroked. Then Jordan blessed it, and bade it go back and praise God. The saints' lives are full of similar stories, because they remember the thing we forget: that the world is God's handiwork and His habitation, and that its destiny is to

praise Him. "Bless the Lord, all ye works of the Lord": the lilies of the field praise Him with their whiteness and the grass with its green; the birds of the air bless Him with the beauty of their flight, the beasts of the field bless Him in their work and their play. But these are not isolated voices raised to God; they are part of the total song of the spheres, the song of all creation; for it is creation in its order and unity and wholeness which best reflects the beauty of God. And man has, in this symphony of nature, a special, a directive, part to play: it is for him, first of all, to join in the song with immortal voice himself; but it is for him also to help with his husbandry the song of the lesser creation, and to raise it by his awareness and his loving worship of God to a more explicit sharing in the prayer of Christ—*instaurare omnia in Christo*.

It is no mean thing, this song of the spheres, and the part which each creature plays in it: it was for this that the world was made. And when you return from prayer to the homely things of earthly life it is this you must see in them: if you are tempted to be bored with them, remind yourself of this. You are called, with all the saints, to bless in the power of Christ's priesthood the song of the world, and to perfect it. But there is much more than this. There is sin in the world. The song of creation is out of harmony: there are voices which are faulty or mute or discordant: the world of nature, as St. Paul reminds us, is still in travail, and the world of man is still sunk in sin and ignorance and malice: there is work to be done in the world by those who love God, redemptive work, and for that work God *needs* them. The more you understand

what this song of creation means, the more you will realize how imperfect sin has made it. But the more deeply you have become identified with the heart of Christ, the more you will want to help in redeeming creation and restoring the perfection of the song. And you can only redeem and restore in the degree to which, being first redeemed and restored yourself, you have learned to love.

Here is the clue to that paradox which runs right through the teaching of our Lord, the lives of the saints, the sayings of the mystics. "Honor thy father and thy mother"; "by this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another"; "if any man come to me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters . . . he cannot be my disciple." How can we love and yet hate? How can we, with St. Paul, suffer "the loss of all things and count them but as dung," and yet, also with St. Paul, be "all things to all men"? St. Paul himself tells us when he says: "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me." St. Thomas tells us when, quoting the words of our Lord, he writes: "We must hate those near to us for God's sake, i.e., if they turn us away from God." There is no answer other than an exchange of hearts with Christ; but in the exchange of hearts with Christ there is an answer which is total, all-embracing, final.

You must give all to God, you must surrender everything, you must strip yourself of every vestige of self-will—it is the common teaching of all the saints and mystics. You must have no will in regard to created things but the will of God. You must enter into nothing-

ness, and naked follow the naked Christ. But that does not mean that you may refuse creatures their rights, as things in themselves, as God's handiwork, as part of the song of the spheres: it does not mean that you may shuffle off your responsibilities, that you may refuse to love what God loves.

Jacques Maritain, in some magnificent and invaluable pages of *Les Degrés du Savoir*, has shown, first of all, the danger—a danger of total misunderstanding—which lies in confusing the language of mysticism with the language of theology; and secondly, the way in which theology can, in fact, state with perfect clarity the single truth in which the apparently opposing commands of love and hatred are made one. When St. John of the Cross, he writes, bids his readers tear up by the very root all attachment to their families, "are we to suppose that he is contradicting the common teaching of the Church, and notably of St. Thomas, on the love that is due to them? On the contrary, he is presupposing this teaching. He knows that his readers are no more likely to fall into insensibility than the contemplatives to whom he teaches the way of nothingness are likely to fall into quietism. . . . These prescriptions must be taken in all their force, without the least softening-down. But we have to understand them. They demand not only an external detachment but an internal, radical, detachment, a complete death: but this means a radical renunciation of our *proprietorship* and *purely natural exercise* of our feelings, a renunciation thanks to which a greater love will vivify them. It does *not* mean a radical destruction of the (ontological) *reality*, if one may speak thus, of those feelings in

themselves. Between these two sorts of death there is all the distance between the superhuman and the inhuman: as far as the growth in the life of the spirit is concerned, it is as great a disaster to abandon oneself to the second, and become hard-shelled and cold of heart . . . as it is to reject the first, which means to refuse the perfection of love and the value to be set on it.*

The "expropriation of the self," dying, in the words of St. Bernard, "the death of the angels": this is the meaning of all that the saints have to say of Christian detachment. St. John "preaches neither mutilation nor suicide, nor the slightest ontological destruction of the most fragmentary filament of the wing of the smallest gnat. He is not concerned with the structure of our substance and its faculties; he is concerned with our *proprietorship of ourselves*, as expressed in the use we make of our active power as free and morally responsible beings. And there he demands everything of us. There we have to give everything. What he does preach is a very real death, a death much more subtle and delicate than any material death or destruction: the death which is called the *expropriation of the self*. This destruction of self-will is a death which is active and effective within our being, a death which is experienced and freely undergone; it is within the innermost activity of the spirit that it takes place, and by the spirit that it is brought about. It grows with the growth of the spirit, and cleaves to it in its inmost depths. But it is a death which does not destroy sensitivity, but, on the

* See J. Maritain, *Les Degrés du Savoir*, Annexe IX: *Les* Cautelas *de saint Jean de La Croix*, pp. 903–4. (This appendix is not printed, unfortunately, in the English edition.)

contrary, refines it, and makes it more exquisite. It does not harden the fibres of the being, but, on the contrary, makes them supple, and spiritualizes them. It is a death which transforms us into love." *

And what follows? The more the saint burns out of his heart everything that savors of a proprietary attitude to creatures, every vestige, therefore, of self-love, in other words the more he "despises creatures in the degree to which they are rivals to God or objects of a possible choice against God, the more he cherishes them in and for Him whom he loves, inasmuch as they are loved by Him. . . . For to love a being in and for God—I am speaking here of the love of friendship, not of the love of covetousness—is not to treat it as a pure means or occasion for loving God. That would mean excusing oneself from loving it in itself—and if we do that we cease immediately to love God truly, for we only truly love Him if we love also His visible images. No, to love a being in and for God is to love it in itself, and to treat it as an end, and to desire its good precisely because in itself and for itself it is worthy of love. . . . This is the explanation of the paradox whereby in the end the saint enfolds in a universal love of friendship and piety—incomparably more care-free but also more tender and more happy than the possessive love of the voluptuary or the miser—everything which passes with time, all the weakness and the beauty of things, all that he has abandoned." **

* Maritain, *Les Degrés*, p. 659; English trans. p. 407. (In this and the following quotations I have made use of the English edition, but have departed from it a good deal in places.)

** *Les Degrés*, pp. 665–66; English trans. p. 411.