

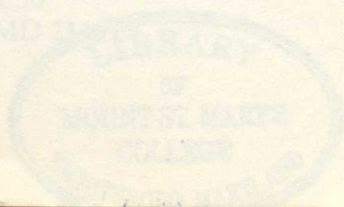
*The Coming
of
Consolation*

How God Gets Through to Us

by
William P. Sargant, S.J.

With a foreword
by
Monsignor Leonard J. Flaherty
Josephinum College
Columbus, Ohio

Christian Classics, Inc.
P.O. Box 50
Westminster, MD 21156
1986



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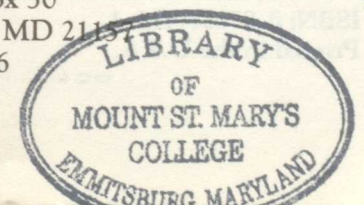
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FOREWORD

Father Sampson has written a truly Christian classic; St. John of the Cross or St. Theresa of Avila he is not, nor intends to be. But he has formulated a series of interlocking insights into the teachings of God as expounded in the Scriptures and verified in everyday life that will make the reader pause—and, upon occasion, even gasp.

By way of example, he skewers the oft-proclaimed notion that one doesn't have to like everybody—just love everybody . . . as though affectionless love, to use his term, is a satisfactory ideal. His insistence that one of the primary requisites of good praying is Faith (trust) in God is a recurring theme.

For whom is the book intended? For anyone, surely, who is interested in spiritual growth: it will serve well as spiritual reading, as a preparation for a weekend or week's retreat; it would serve admirably as a textbook for a group of retreatants. It is surely not for the Christian who is content with minimal Christianity; for while its demands are formidable, its rewards are even more formidable.

Rev. Msgr. Leonard J. Fick
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FOREWORD

After a long and varied career in the Christian church, St. John of the Cross, the Doctor of Avila, as he is not infrequently called, has formulated a series of penetrating insights into the teaching of God as expounded in the Scriptures and verified in everyday life that will make the reader pause—and, upon occasion, even gasp.

By way of example, he shows the oft-proclaimed notion that one doesn't have to like everybody—the love everybody idea—though all-choke love, to use his term, is a catastrophe. He illustrates the insistence that one of the primary virtues of God is that He is a loving God.

For whom is the book intended? For anyone, surely, who is interested in spiritual growth. It will serve well as a guide to reading, as preparation for a weekend or week's retreat. It would serve admirably as a textbook for a group of retreatants. It is especially for the Christian who is content with material Christianity for while its demands are formidable, its rewards are even more formidable.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a moment in the gospel when Jesus is criticized because he does not have his disciples fast (Luke 5:33-39). The disciples of the pharisees and the disciples of John fasted frequently, but the disciples of Jesus ate and drank freely. Jesus himself ate and drank freely, and people said of him, "This one is a glutton and drunkard" (Matt 11:19). Despite the loss to his reputation, Jesus persisted in his way; and he tried to explain why he did not fast. Fasting was like an old wineskin. It was useful for holding old wine. But what Jesus had was new wine. It would burst the old skins.

There are ways of imagining God and our approach to Him that can be expressed by fasting. But what Jesus was introducing was a radically different path. It required a new set of ascetical practices. To use the old set would not work. The radical differences would be lost, and the core of his teaching would be missed.

Jesus was aware that his coming was the moment for a radical break with ordinary ways of thinking. In him, an invasion of the human was taking place. The Christ-event was such a fundamental shift at the deepest level of reality that every aspect of spirituality was affected. A new source of consolation had become available to us through Christ. It made the old ways useless. Just as the invention of the automobile began a series of changes that touched every part of our lives—the harness business collapsed, the oil business exploded—so, too, with the

coming of Jesus our way of approaching God was radically altered.

It was like watching Columbus sail west. Centuries of doing things one way were at stake. West to the Indies—it was very strange!

In our days we saw a new source of energy discovered. There was found to be incredible energy present inside the atom. We glimpsed a new energy source. How to get at it? It would not be like drilling for oil, or mining for coal. Radically different ways were needed, and the energy suppliers had to learn a new vocabulary.

A cosmic event occurred in Jesus. A new source of energy had been found, and a radical shift in our spirituality could alone tap that new source. It's all rather hard to grasp. It is not surprising that we keep returning to the old ways, the old wineskins. What Jesus preached is hard to believe—in a way, incredible. We are never at home with it. It's always news when we hear it. Nietzsche tells us:

Lightning and thunder need time,
the light of the stars needs time,
deeds need time,

even after they are done,
to be seen and heard.

This deed

[the killing of God in men's hearts]

is as yet further from them than the farthest star—
and yet they have done it.¹

So, too, the implications of Jesus' radical preaching keep slipping away from us. In every age we are led down false paths. Such paths even become popular, and they appear to be breakthroughs. Because they fit our instinctive ways of approaching God, their inconsistency with the gospel is not at first perceived. Fortunately, we are living in a period of deeper commitment to gospel reading. We must rely on this larger immersion in Scripture to lead us to the paths Jesus pointed out. Our advances in

spirituality are never advances beyond the New Testament, but are advances toward the New Testament. It has yet to be heard in its fullness. A text is suddenly seen to mean much more than we had ever realized. Jesus is there before us drawing us toward him.

What I shall try to do is to get at Jesus' answer to the question: where is God coming from? What is He up to? What is His way of behaving toward us? What is He trying to do? The better I know this, the more able I will be to unite myself with Him. He has gone to great lengths to reveal His desires and His aims. His hiddenness does not consist in His keeping Himself secret—not at all. He is hidden from us because we are such static-filled receivers. He is too much light for our darkness.

Nor is it so much a darkness in our more theoretical efforts. It is, rather, a practical inability to choose in accord with what we "know" by faith. In our practical imagination there reigns enthroned a false god whom we find easier to believe in. In his presence we are not so insistently pressed to forgive the unforgivable from the bottom of our hearts. With this god we can be anxious without taking it as a sign of unfaith, and we can peripheralize the plight of the poor with some cans of food. God is not so hidden that we cannot recognize how unlike this false god He is. His will is never so veiled that we cannot get at what He wants here and now. He is not dumb, and He prides Himself on His ability to speak, in contrast with the idols. His will is always available to us. What would He gain by keeping it concealed?

What is it that He wills as I stand in His presence? God comes to me with a story behind Him. He chose to create me; I am His—even more than I am mine! So He looks at me as my possessor.

I remember a student years ago in a high school where I was teaching. The headmaster told me that each morning the boy would put his head in the office and ask, "How is my school doing today?" He let the school know it belonged to him. God is

like that. His gaze is of one who knows that I belong to Him. I am being looked at by the eyes of my creator.

He has had such hopes for me. He invites me to see what He had in mind when He first made me. It is an image of me that never leaves Him. It is an image of the person that I could be. I could be so much happier than I am now. That is where God's focus is fixed—the much deeper joy that could be a part of my days and nights. He sees me as I am, and He loves me. But He also sees me as I could be, and in His love for me He yearns for that day when I will enter into that much deeper joy. He can bring that about in my life. He wants to. He is set on it.

I am not yet that person He made me to become. So much deeper is the joy He had in mind. The "me" He intended would be so much more filled with faith in Him, and so much more sensitive to the needs of my brothers and sisters than I now am.

God is present to us with His will quite well known. His love has been revealed to us at great cost. His love presses upon us a future of greater joy, faith, and love. It is here that our spiritual life is always beginning.

The new energy which Jesus makes available to us comes along a very specific path, a path he has marked out for us. Down this path toward us comes his energizing gifts, his consolation. When we place ourselves in the presence of a God whose preoccupation is the person we could be, we are standing in the path.

Imagine an enemy gazing at us. What would he be hoping for us? Maybe that we be elsewhere, transferred to some distant place, out of his sight. Imagine a mother looking at her son, and the hopes she feels, the good things she wishes will be his future. Cicero said somewhere that there was only one person in the world who he wished would surpass him in every way, and that was his son. Cicero was not noted for his willingness to take second place, but he loved the boy. So God loves us, and desires for us a much richer reality than is ours.

Our willingness to be aware of that, to let this element in

God's personality pass slowly before us, and take up its home in our consciousness, this presence of God in us, is the path He comes along. This is the beginning of Christian asceticism. It is not like fasting at all. It is not even part of the same world-view as fasting. But it is a discipline, and it leads to being fed on the new wine. It is the path along which the new energy comes.