The Fierce Battle Between Rome and the Jesuits Against the Quietists in the Golden Age of France and More Devotional Treasures

Prayer
Scripture: Galatians 2:15-21
Hymn: 646 "O, The Bitter Pain and Sorrow" (None of Self)

Some of the most treasured devotional classics from the modern period are those that came from the Quietist movement of the last half of the seventeenth century. The leaders of the Quietists were devout Catholics who rose to high positions in the Catholic Church and who were highly honored and exercised widespread and great influence before they were attacked by the Jesuits and finally condemned by Rome. The battle against Quietism was one of the fiercest of the Golden Age of France. Although the Quietists were condemned their works are still treasured by both Catholics and Protestants who take seriously the quest for a deeper spiritual life.

What Do We Mean by Quietism?

Quietism was a system of spirituality that flourished in Spain, Italy, and especially in France in the second half of the seventeenth century. It was an intense search for the inner quiet and peace so highly prized by the medieval mystics and the saints of the Counter-Reformation. It took for granted the total depravity and complete unworthiness of man taught by both Catholics and Protestants—a doctrine that both drew from Augustine. It was a strong reaction to the Wars of Religion, the bitter religious persecutions, the worldly involvement of the church, the casuistry of the court Jesuits, and the vanities of the court of Louis XIV. Quietism meant the complete renunciation of the world and complete surrender to the love and will of God. This called for the absolute denial and crucifixion of the self. The height of human perfection could be reached only through complete passivity attained through passive prayer and union with the Divine resulting from complete surrender. The soul's highest attainment is the passive contemplation of the Divine. This results in a pure, disinterested love of God and the renunciation of the self and all its desires. The soul refuses all discursive meditation, all distinctive acts, any desire for virtue, even love and adoration of Christ and God. Intellect, will, and emotions were renounced for spiritual union with the Divine. This passivity freed the soul from all thoughts of heaven and hell, any desire for salvation, from all external distractions, including such outward acts as self-mortification, almsgiving, going to confession, all outward acts of worship, all spiritual exercises, visible and outward acts of prayer, and from all ordinances and sacraments of the church. In such passivity God would act in the soul and through the soul. The soul would rest in the presence of God in pure faith and leave all to God.

Quietism meant the condemnation of all human effort. Everything must be left to God. Such love for God and trust in him would become a habitual state wholly pure and disinterested. It would be a love for God for God's own sake and not for any merit or gift or for any thought or desire for one's own salvation. The goal was a holy indifference resulting in unitive life with the Divine. It made all outward acts superfluous. Quietism made sin impossible and all
action unnecessary. There might be temptations but since the will had been annihilated there was no necessity to resist. All actions would be the action and will of God.

MIGUEL DE MOLINOS (1640-1697)

The father of seventeenth century Quietism was the Spaniard, Miguel de Molinos, born at Muniesa of noble parents. He was educated at Coimbra, near Saragossa. He was ordained to the priesthood after completing his doctor's degree. He was sent to Rome in 1663 where he became one of the most celebrated and influential confessors and spiritual directors. He was the friend of many high prelates, including Cardinal Odescalchi, who in 1676 became Pope Innocent XI. Molinos earnestly sought the highest and purest spirituality and the essence of religion above and beyond its external manifestations in the creeds and acts and sacraments of the visible church. Many under his guidance sought a deeper spiritual life. In 1675 he published his Spiritual Guide that greatly increased his fame and influence. It was widely circulated. The Spiritual Guide set the goal of Christian perfection to be attained through prayers of contemplation, the abandonment of all desires and all effort, bringing the soul to a position of complete passivity in the pure love of God. The individual could make a beginning in the church and its ordinances. Faithful use of these could lead to devotion to Jesus. Devotion to Jesus could lead to the union with God which is the end of contemplation, the surrender of the self, and the pure love of God.

Molinos went even further in letters to his disciples. The soul, beginning with devotion to the church and progressing to devotion to Jesus, could finally rise superior to both in devotion to God alone. For the soul in the state of perfection all external actions including self-mortifications, religious observances, and even resisting temptations would be a hindrance. Perfection meant the total annihilation of all desires, of the will, of all thought. The soul should come to complete rest in the hands of God.

By 1680 Molinos' teachings had spread throughout the Christian world and were being seriously followed. They proved especially popular in France. In 1681 a Jesuit preacher, Segneri, began attacking the teaching of Molinos without mentioning his name. He saw in the teaching a threat to the church and to his order. Segneri became so zealous in his attack that the matter was referred to the Inquisition. The Inquisition pronounced the Spiritual Guide perfectly orthodox and censured the intemperate zeal of Segneri.

The Jesuits determined that Molinos had to be condemned. They appointed Father La Chaise, one of the confessors of Louis XIV, to move the king to put pressure on the pope. At the time Louis XIV was on bad terms with Pope Innocent XI. He seized the opportunity to accuse the friend of the pope of heresy. The French cardinal who was the French ambassador to Rome pressed the case. Innocent XI felt threatened by his friendship with Molinos. To the great shock of his friends Molinos was arrested in May, 1685. At first his friends were confident of acquittal but they had underestimated Louis XIV and the Jesuits. A number of the disciples of Molinos,
both men and women, were arrested and examined by the Inquisition. Molinos was tried and condemned for heresy in 1687. He was accused of attacking the teachings and sacraments of the church. It was reported that nuns under his direction had begun to refuse to recite their office, to go to confession, of discarding their rosaries, and of disturbing the discipline of their convents. Some of his more radical disciples were accused of immorality, claiming that it was impossible for them to sin. Their will had been annihilated and what they did was the will of God. What would have been sin for others was no sin for them. Molinos was accused not only of heresy but of immoral conduct. Molinos recanted his teaching and confessed himself guilty of the accusations but was sentenced to life imprisonment. Throughout his trial and imprisonment he maintained imperturbable serenity of soul. He died in prison in 1697/97.

The life and character of Molinos have remained an enigma. Some regard the charges of immorality utterly false and impossible. Some insist that his confession was a part of his humility and self-abasement rather than a confession of guilt. Many Catholics and most Protestants considered it another case of Jesuit persecution of a disturbing critic. The Spiritual Guide has continued an influential devotional classic.

MADAME GUYON (1648-1717)

The leading propagandist for Quietism in France was Madame Guyon, born to a noble family of wealth, at Montargis, and named Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Mothe. She was educated in various convent schools, where she came under the influence of the Duchesse de Béthune. She wanted to become a nun but was forced by her mother to marry a wealthy middle-aged invalid named Jacques Guyon du Chesnoy, dominated by a tyrannical mother. Her husband was 22 years her senior. She was 16 at her marriage in 1664. It was a most unhappy marriage. She bore him three children. A plague of small pox left her and the three children terribly scarred for life. She had been considered a very beautiful and charming lady. She found comfort in prayer and meditation.

Her husband died in 1676, leaving her with considerable wealth at the age of twenty-four. Shortly after her husband's death she discovered the writings of Molinos and was powerfully attracted to them. By 1680 she had achieved what she described as a "unitive state" with the divine in which the "God-me" supplanted the "self-me." In 1681 she began to experience visions and revelations. She met a neurotic Barnabite friar, Lacombe, who also was an avid disciple of Molinos. From 1681 through 1688 together she and the friar travelled over France preaching their mystical Quietism, seeking to found "interior" churches, and to give birth to "spiritual children." During this period she turned out a number of her best mystical essays on Quietism. They won many converts.

The authorities suspected the two of heresy and immorality. In 1686 Lacombe was recalled to Paris and put under strict surveillance. In autumn of 1687 he was sentenced to the Bastile; later he was moved to the castle of Lourdes where he died of insanity or softening of the brain in 1715.
Madame Guyon was arrested in January 1688, accused of heresy and shut up in a convent. The next year she was rescued by the Duchesse de Béthune who introduced her to the devout court circle of Madame de Maintenon. Madame Guyon, in spite of the disfigurement of the small pox, had developed into a very gracious and charming teacher. She spoke with great eloquence and power. She became a great favorite and a powerful influence for spirituality among the pious ladies of the court. Madame Maintenon was so impressed that she invited her to lecture to the girls of St. Cyr, a school of which Madame Maintenon was patron. It was during this period that Madame Guyon met Fénelon who was one of the favorite spiritual directors and counsellors in the court circles. He was a favorite with both men and women who were dissatisfied with the formalism of the Jesuits and the average Catholic church circles. Fénelon became a devoted admirer and convert to Quietism. Between 1689 and 1693 they corresponded regularly.

Ugly rumors of the relationship of Madame Guyon and Lacombe multiplied and spread as her popularity grew. Also from her critics charges of heresy increased. In May 1693 Madame Maintenon became so concerned over the rumors that she ended the teaching at St. Cyr. Madame Guyon appealed to Bossuet, the most powerful churchman in France, in an effort to establish orthodoxy. Bossuet found intolerable things, both in form and matter, in her writings and Madame Guyon submitted to his judgment and retired to the country, promising to dogmatize no more (1693). The next year she petitioned for an inquiry into her teachings hoping to be cleared. At the Conference of Issy (1695) Bossuet charged her with heresy and Fénelon defended her. From this time Bossuet suspected Fénelon of heresy. She was sent as prisoner and penitent to Bossuet's cathedral town of Meaux where she spent the first half of 1695. Bossuet convinced she was sincere gave her a letter of orthodoxy. When she left in the summer without his permission he regarded it an act of disobedience and she was arrested and imprisoned in the Bastille, where she remained until 1703. She was liberated on condition that she live on her son's estate near Blois under the supervision of the bishop. She spent the rest of her life at Blois in charitable and religious activities. Many admirers made pilgrimages to Blois. Many in France and abroad considered her a great spiritual prophetess. Her French critics considered her a fanatic and hysterical degenerate. In England and Germany she was held in high esteem as a most saintly teacher of the devout spiritual life.

Her autobiography, The Life of Madame Guyon, and her Short and Easy Method of Prayer, are treasured among the devotional classics from the Quietist movement.

ARCHBISHOP FRANCOIS FÉNELON (1651-1715)

The Quietist whose influence has proved most lasting and widespread is Fénelon. His continuing popularity as a guide to spiritual living is due to his good sense shown in avoiding the extremes of Molinos and Madame Guyon. He is best described as a Semi-Quietist.
Francois de Salignac de La Mothe Fenelon was born to an ancient family proud of its traditions and station. Because of ill health he received his early education at home. He studied in the University of Cahors. In 1666 he began his theological education in the famous Jesuit theological seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris. He was ordained a priest in 1675. He was appointed superior of the Catholiques Nouvelles (New Catholics), a house for recent women converts from Protestantism. He wrote his Traité de l'éducation des filles (Treatise on the Education of Young Ladies) which some consider his most influential work. He completed it in 1681 and it was published in 1687. It became the standard work in France on the education of girls.

Fenelon was put in charge of a number of priests sent on a mission to convert Huguenots in the area around La Rochelle (1686-1688). Catholics considered him a model of statesmanship and effectiveness. Protestants accused him of bribery, espionage, and force.

Fenelon was rewarded in 1689 by being made tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, grandson of Louis XIV and son of the dauphin and eventual heir to the crown. The lad had been a terror and utterly impossible to previous tutors. Fenelon turned him into a disciplined and earnest student. Out of this work came his Télémaque, a classic in educational history. He tried to instill into his pupil utopian ideals of kingship. The king should be the servant of his people, unselfishly devoted to their welfare. He should be their model in character and religion. He was critical of the mercantile system of Colbert. He opposed war and taught the fraternity of nations. When the book was published in 1699 Louis XIV considered it a satire on his reign.

Fenelon became a favorite disciple of Bossuet. The bishop encouraged him to write his Treatise on the Existence of God. He also published his Dialogues on Eloquence where he pled for simplicity and naturalness in the pulpit and held up Bossuet as the model of good preaching. Fenelon developed into a highly admired preacher and one of the most popular spiritual guides, counsellors, and confessors in the court of Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon. He was a cleric of great charm and grace. His popularity was such that he was appointed archbishop of Cambrai (1695), one of the richest benefices in France.

While a tutor of the young duke Fenelon met Madame Guyon who also enjoyed great popularity in the court. He was strongly attracted to her Quietism. For some time they corresponded regularly. Fenelon attracted the wrath of Bossuet when he defended Madame Guyon at the Conference of Issy in 1695 shortly after he was appointed Archbishop of Cambrai. Fenelon had developed under the influence of Madame Guyon his own system for cultivating the spiritual life which he published in 1597 under the title, Maxims of the Saints. It was bitterly attacked by Bossuet and condemned by the Sorbonne. He was removed from his tutorship (1697). Fenelon appealed to Rome. After two years of bitter controversy Fenelon's book was condemned by Pope Innocent XII in 1699. Louis XIV sided
with Bossuet. Fénelon made his submission to Rome but was exiled from the court and confined to his diocese of Cambrai. He was allowed to leave it only once during the last eighteen years of his life.

Fénelon devoted himself to the care of his diocese as a wise and caring shepherd. He was noted for his great preaching, his diligent care for the poor, and the attention to raising the standards of education and spirituality. A carriage accident led to untimely death on January 7, 1715.

Fénelon, in addition to his Maxims of the Saints, left a wealth of shorter spiritual writings. Most famous are his Christian Perfection and his Letters to Men and his Letters to Women. His concern was to guide people deeply involved with the business of the world to a closer walk with God that would bring true spiritual maturity.

EVALUATIONS OF THE QUIETISTS

Catholics were quick to see in the Quietists the fruits of the Protestant Reformation. Jesuits saw shades of the Calvinist doctrine of the impossibility of apostasy, Luther's faith only, and subjectivism and the exaltation of the individual's revolt against authority and his rejection of the church and its sacraments. Actually the Quietists had little sympathy for Protestants. They looked to the medieval mystics and to the saints of the Counter Reformation—especially to John of the Cross.

Much of the criticism of the Quietists was aroused by disciples who took the teachings of the leaders with great literalness and carried them to the most fanatical extremes.

The passing of time has demonstrated that the works of the Quietists have great power to inspire people to look beyond the temporal and the seen to the unseen and the eternal. They are powerful antidotes to pride and selfishness. They can still fire the heart with a longing for a purer love of God and for a closer walk with the Father.

BROTHER LAWRENCE (1605-1691)

One of the most loved of the devotional classics from the Golden Age of France is Brother Lawrence's The Practice of the Presence of God. It was treasured and used by Fénelon. It has inspired both Catholics and Protestants.

Brother Lawrence was a member of the Barefooted Carmelites in Paris. When he was born in the early part of the seventeenth century in the French province of Lorraine he was named Nicholas Herman. He came from plain, poor working people. He received very little book learning. Through his youth and middle life he was first a soldier and then a household servant. He described himself as an awkward fellow who broke everything. He was converted and later gave this description of his conversion:
"...in the winter, seeing a tree stripped of its leaves, and considering that within a little time the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear, he received a high view of the providence and power of God, which has never since been effaced from his soul."

He entered the Barefooted Carmelite monastery in Paris and was assigned to menial work in the kitchen. Here he developed his own devotional practice that created in him a grace and serenity that won the love and respect of all who knew him. He performed his menial tasks with such grace and love that others sought his guidance. His whole life and teachings were an example of "the Simplicity that is in Christ." For him the aim and end of prayer is "the incessant production of works, works." One should have a single eye fixed on God as it goes about daily tasks. For Bro. Lawrence prayer and work went together:

"The Time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity, as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."

Bro. Lawrence did not indulge in self-pity or excessive sentimentality. He did not perplex himself with worries about virtues or salvation. He just went faithfully about his duties with a heart fixed on God. Business did not divert him from God. All through his work he kept God in his thoughts. He was not preoccupied with self. Conscious that he was in the presence of God he went about his daily tasks in meekness and love. He resigned himself to the will of God and kept God at the center of his life. He maintained that the soul attracted to God cannot love and be centered on itself. One cannot deceive God. There were dry times when he felt God was hiding himself. He found that if one would trust in God with all his heart, God would not cast him down. He could do all things with the grace of God. To Brother Lawrence the secret of prayer was the consciousness of the presence of God.

"I have quieted all forms of devotion and set prayers but those to which my state obliges me. And I make it my business only to persevere in his holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an 'actual presence of God;' or, to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God, which often causes me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes also outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them and prevent their appearance to others."

He lived and worked in the kitchen into his eighties. After his death his writings were edited by Abbe de Beaufort.