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HENRY SUSO — DOMINICAN

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OVER THE MAIN ALTAR of the Chapel in the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, there is a large mural depicting the Saints and Blessed of the Order in glory. Slightly behind the large, luminous figure of St. Thomas Aquinas there is a small, rather dark figure. Closer investigation shows a cowled head—the only one in the mural—and a hand holding a quill. The quill is a symbol of the mystical writings, the cowl a symbol of the contemplative character of Blessed Henry Suso. Perhaps the obscurity of the figure could be taken as an unintended symbol of the oblivion into which, for a long time now, the great name of Brother Henry Suso, Priest of the Order of Preachers, has fallen. For instance, the *Life* by himself, which is the best source and far and away the best introduction to the Blessed, has not been reprinted in English since 1913. And the other works are probably even more difficult to obtain. This is a great loss to ascetical and mystical literature, for as Father Philip Hughes points out in his recent *History of the Church*, Blessed Henry's *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* compares favorably with the *Imitation of Christ*. The latter, though certainly an excellent work, does not, Father Hughes thinks, show forth the sound doctrinal and dogmatic basis that Blessed Henry's work does.

THE RAW MATERIAL

Henry Suso was born in Switzerland March 21st in the year 1290 of Count Van Berg and Anna Suess (Suso). That Henry should have used his mother's maiden name is significant, for he was in temperament far more like his sensitive, gentle and pious mother than

his rather unfeeling, rough and tempestuous father. Henry had that poetic temperament which enjoys itself with the expansiveness of a bright summer day, and yet must suffer with a fierce and terrible pain. Even later in his spiritual life, when he had learned to discipline his spirit, he found self-control difficult. One time when his fate was being decided by his superiors in another room. Henry could not sit still, but paced the floor in anxiety, trembling and wringing his hands. When good news was at last brought to him, he wept like a child. Such was the grown man; so had been the growing boy. His father complained that he had not as much spirit as his sisters. There was no use in trying to make a knight of such a weak fellow whose only pleasure was in accompanying his gentle mother on her endless pilgrimages to church. Count von Berg decided that the priesthood was not without honor, and to Henry's delight he was sent off to the Dominican Priory by the shore of lovely Lake Constance.

He was but thirteen, but he loved the calm, ordered peace of the cloister. The studies were interesting, and his easygoing disposition made him a favorite with his fellows in the Novices' Common Room and the Priory garden. And there was the trouble. Freed from a home life that had not been too happy, he was in danger of finding only a natural happiness in the convent. He kept the rules well enough to avoid serious trouble with the Superiors, but all the rest was just glorious entertainment. He was not a bad Religious, but neither was he a good one. Still, there was the inevitable fly in the ointment of his happiness. He knew his present life was not worthy of the high calling of a Dominican, and somehow pleasures that had seemed enticing had a way of dissolving the way pretty bubbles burst into ugly grease spots.

FALLING IN LOVE

He was eighteen when he fell in love. Perhaps that is not a good expression because cheap and tawdry associations have tarnished the beautiful richness of the reality. Still, there is no other way to describe it, for that is precisely what happened. It was not sudden, and he himself is not quite clear as to how it all began. He had tried in the beginning to empty out all the foolish joys of the past, because he knew them to be foolish. Yet their absence left him with an uneasy emptiness. His old friends shrugged off his moroseness as a mood that would pass. When it did not pass, they began to tease, to argue, to scold. He came back several times, but went away more unhappy than before. So they left him alone.

He was terribly alone when it happened. It was January the 21st after the noon meal, and Brother Henry was feeling especially desolate. He went to the church and sat down near the screen that separated the choir of the friars from the church of the laity. And then, for apparently no reason at all, he fell into ecstasy. For about an hour and a half, he rested in the embrace of God. When he rose to plod his way into the cloister he was a new man. He had found his Beloved, and he knew that he was loved in return.

WAY OF THE CROSS

But he knew too that God loved him with a strong love that demanded the denial of self. Now this is the part of Henry's life that has been for many singularly unattractive. Henry himself was not unaware of its unattractiveness. Later on in his life, he tells of a dream or vision in which he paged through the Missal looking for the Mass of *Gaudeamus* or "Let us Rejoice." But he could find only the Mass of *Multae Tribulationes Justorum* or "Many are the Tribulations of the Just." When he complained that he would rather sing *Gaudeamus*, he was told that tribulations came first, and the joys only later. He knew that the Master he followed had said: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." He belonged to an Order, which, as Jorgensen pointed out, has always been known for the severity of its ascetic discipline. The very black of the cappa of the Blackfriars is the badge of penance and mortification.

Henry's corporal penances however were so severe that they have become a byword in the history of asceticism. He ate but once a day, and then abstained not only from meat as was the Dominican custom but from fish and eggs. He mortified himself so severely in the matter of drink that his parched tongue reached out for the few drops of holy water that were sprinkled during the *Salve* procession. He took a cruel discipline, and often rubbed salt and vinegar in the wounds. He wore a hair shirt, an iron chain, and a nail-studded cross on his back. His undergarment was studded with 150 brass nails. And then there were the little things that hurt the most—for instance, he tied his hands to his rude bed so that he could not wave off the swarms of insects that infested his unscreened cell. Nor must we think that this was easy, or according to his disposition, which, as has already been said, was extremely sensitive, and some authors maintain, almost effeminate. He suffered, and suffered bitterly for sixteen years.

CALVARY

When at long last, Henry was told that these physical tortures were at end, he was so glad he wept out of sheer relief. But his joy was short-lived. He was told that he was to mount to greater heights where the sorrows, though not physical, would be even more severe. He was completely crestfallen. Disconsolate he wandered into the cloister. There a little dog was playing with an old rag, tearing and grinding it with his teeth. Henry looked at the torn and dirty rag. There were tears in his eyes, but with a supreme effort of will, he said to himself: "I must be like that rag. I will be God's plaything; and like that rag, I will make no protest."

And so he was. There were terrible interior trials. Temptations against faith dogged him for years. His heart was weighed down by a mountain of sadness. And worst of all, he could not shake off the frightful obsession that he was already one of the damned. These were the high paths that Henry Suso trod, half believing himself alone in those high and desolate crags veiled in a dark fog. And there was always the crazy desire to cast himself down, down the yawning abyss of despair to the bottomless pit of damnation.

And with all this, he managed to do his work. He was not a monk behind the walls of a monastery, but a friar charged with the care of souls. He was a Religious of an Order whose vocation was apostolic, *contemplata aliis tradere*, to give to others the fruits of his contemplation. Which was exactly what he did as he trod his weary way up and down Germany, preaching in the churches, directing the Friends of God along the highways of the spiritual life. The souls of the religious and laity committed to his care weighed heavily upon his already terribly burdened conscience. And everything seemed to go wrong; like His Master, he was a sign of contradiction.

One time he set out on a mission with a half-witted lay Brother as a companion. When they had gone so far, the lay Brother refused to go one step farther. Father Henry set out to look for lodgings in the village, and the Brother sought out the only place of warmth a stranger could find, the tavern. There in the center of a group of bullies who proceeded to bait him, the poor Brother tried to distract attention from himself by a story about his Priest-companion. Father Henry, he said, was very intelligent, not a poor worthless fellow like myself, and he is high in the councils of the Order. And besides, he went on, the story getting better as the audience showed more interest, he is up to no good among you. He has been hired by the Jews to poison your wells. The credulous villagers looked at each other in horrified fright. Then with hoarse cries, the mob set out in pursuit

of the poor Friar, who was blissfully ignorant of the activities of his companion. Father Henry, hearing the blood-thirsty shouts at his back, started to run. Soon he distinguished his own name in the fierce cries, and began to tremble and groan at the unexpected danger in which he found himself. He ran from door to door, breathless and sobbing; no one would take him in for fear of the mob. At last he headed for the open country where he hid himself in the hedges. Eventually he was rescued by another priest, and then had the task of getting the hapless lay-Brother out of jail.

This was but one incident. Henry seemed to have a genius for getting into trouble. He fell into a river in mid-winter and nearly drowned. An attempt was made on his life. He was elected Prior, and found his office a galling task, especially when he could not feed the Brethren.

CRUCIFIXION

Henry's troubles were by no means over yet. He had enjoyed some reputation for holiness; now even his good name as a priest and religious was to be lost. He had befriended a fallen woman whom he thought he had converted. When he found out that she persisted in her evil life, he refused to have anything more to do with her. She persisted; her motive was blackmail. Henry refused to pay, and she began to spread the story that he was the father of her child. It may seem strange to us that such an accusation of a holy priest by a woman who was known for her evil life should have been so widely believed. But if enough mud is thrown, some of it is sure to stick. Hundreds of years later, St. Thomas More was to find out that though Tyndal would not believe in the report of a miracle even if it were attested by hundreds of reliable witnesses, he would readily believe evil of a friar if there was but one disreputable witness. "For," said the anti-Catholic Tyndal, "it is the nature of friars to be lecherous." There were those of Tyndal's mentality in Henry's day, too. And his name was so blackened that foolish relatives and friends proposed to the horrified Henry that they do away with the child that was involved in the story. But eventually after bitter heart ache, Blessed Henry was exonerated through an investigation by the Master-General of the Order.

It was one thing to be involved in a scandal with the consolation of innocence; it was quite another to be deprived of even that. This last trial, which Henry himself called "a great suffering," was in the person of his sister. She was one of those light hearted girls that Count Von Berg had wished were the boys instead of Henry. She

had been sent off to the convent at the same time as Henry, but hardly with the same enthusiasm. She found the convent an even gayer place than Henry had in his early days, and unfortunately had not taken the same road. Opportunities were many for the discipline was lax, and at last this sister of Henry's fell into serious sin. Overcome with fear, remorse and sheer confusion she ran away from the convent. Now indeed Henry Suso's cup of sorrow overflowed. The looks the Brethren gave him in the cloister were like darts in a heart already broken. But Henry like the Good Shepherd set out to find the lost sheep. At the end of a long search, he at last found the poor girl on the feast of St. Agnes, which he remembered with bitter irony as the anniversary of his great joy.

The scene that followed is surely one of the most tender in the life of a warm hearted saint. "As soon as he saw her, he sank down upon the bench on which she was sitting, and twice his senses left him. When he came to himself again, he began to cry aloud piteously, and to lament and weep and beat his hands together above his head saying "Alas, my God, how hast Thou forsaken me! . . . But as soon as he came to himself again, he took his sister into his arms." Their beautiful conversation ended in her return to the convent, a stricter one this time, where she lived and died in a manner becoming the sister of a saint.

And so went the life and sufferings of Henry Suso. As Sister M.C. remarks: "We know very little about Friar Henry's last years, for his lovely life was so perfectly Dominican that his brethren did not think to keep an account of it." What we do know about his whole life is owed to his spiritual daughter, a Dominican nun, who is largely responsible for the preservation of the autobiography and the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*.

THE GLORY OF HENRY SUSO

If Blessed Henry Suso is not so well known as he should be, perhaps it is the vague aura of near-heresy that surrounds his name. He is usually mentioned in the same breath with two other Dominicans, Meister Eckhart and John Tauler. The condemned propositions of Eckhart can be found in Denzinger's *Enchiridion*, but it should be remembered that these errors of pantheistic mysticism were revoked by Eckhart himself as soon as they were referred to the Holy See, and the errors themselves were not condemned until after the Meister's death. As a matter of fact, there are European scholars today who maintain that Eckhart's propositions, wrenched from their context by men jealous of the Dominican success in popular preaching, can

be understood in an orthodox sense. Unfortunately, not all of Eckhart's work is extant, and a final judgment will be difficult.

But Blessed Henry himself, although he tells us that he saw his beloved Meister in glory, is very careful about pantheism. The last nine chapters of his autobiography are a closely reasoned treatise on the science of mystical theology, and a vigorous protest against the errors of pantheism and quietism. The assumption that Henry was somehow neo-Platonist, that he followed an Augustinian school that was not quite Thomistic and Dominican is unwarranted. His whole spirituality was doctrinal and dogmatic, that is, it was based on the solid foundation of the revelation the Son of God has made to us. Henry's whole devotion was to the second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, Whose Holy Name—"the lovely name of Jesus" he had literally carved on his breast. He worshipped Our Lord under the title of Divine Wisdom. This may seem strange to those who are accustomed to think of Wisdom in connection with the Holy Spirit; St. Thomas however says: "Wisdom has likeness to the heavenly Son, as the Word, for a word is nothing but the concept of wisdom."¹ Blessed Henry carried his studies as far as the Doctorate in Sacred Theology, but was told in a special revelation that the degree in his case was unnecessary. "Thou knowest well enough how to give thyself to God, and to draw other men to Him by preaching." Henry pursued "a course in harmony with reason . . . according to the rule of sound discretion in harmony with the sentiments of holy Christendom." As in St. Thomas himself, there are many influences present in his writings, but above all others, his master was, as he says, "that bright light, the dear St. Thomas the teacher."

This is the solid foundation of the Dominican ideal of which Père Garrigou-Lagrange says: "On a strong doctrinal basis it unites liturgical prayer and contemplation with apostolic action." Henry's contemplation of course is his outstanding characteristic. Likewise he followed the rule of the Friars Preachers who chant the entire Divine Office, and whose beautiful liturgy is well known. Over and above that, Henry's use of the liturgy may be seen from a glance at the chapter headings in his *Life*. He tells how he began the New Year, how he kept the feast of Candlemas, how he celebrated the Mardi Gras, how he began the month of May, how he practised his own version of the way of the cross. Once he tells us of his medita-

¹ *Summa*, I q. 39, a. 8.

tion on the *Sursum Corda*, and in such ways the Liturgy like a golden thread winds through his life.²

But first, last, foremost and always Henry was an apostle. The best picture of him is perhaps that in the vision of a nun who saw him saying Mass on a high mountain with innumerable spiritual children clinging to him. These were, God informed her, the penitents and disciples of Father Henry Suso. He believed firmly the Dominican teaching that the life of the mystic is open to every Christian, and so he devoted his time not only to the direction of contemplatives but to all religious and lay people. He preached not only in convents but in great cathedrals. And Father Hughes in his *History of the Church* credits much of the devout life that flourished in Middle Europe during the late medieval period to the efforts of Henry and the spiritual school to which he belonged.

Père Gardeil in *The Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost in the Dominican Saints* remarked that the imprint of the Holy Trinity can be seen in the Dominican spiritual school. Our holy Father St. Dominic he sees as mirroring the Father, our holy teacher St. Thomas as the Son or Word, and St. Catherine as the Holy Spirit of love. With all honor and respect to our seraphic Mother St. Catherine, if we would keep this mirror of the Most Holy Trinity within the first Order, we might well nominate Blessed Henry Suso as the reflection of the Holy Spirit, because, if St. Dominic is his father, as Father Hughes says: "Above all others his master is St. Thomas Aquinas, whose calmly-argued ideas break into flame once they make contact with Suso's ardent mind."

² Dominicans will enjoy the solemn editor who noted that the *venia* Henry often mentions was a monastic practice of kneeling down to kiss the ground.