TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

John Ruusbroec as Spiritual Guide

SOME DECADES AGO, THE PSYCHOLOGIST William Sheldon wrote that his continued observations in clinical practice led him

> almost inevitably to the conclusion that deeper and more fundamental than sexuality, deeper than the craving for social power, deeper even than the desire for possessions, there is a still more generalized and more universal craving in the human makeup. It is the craving for knowledge of the right direction – for orientation.[1]

If that was true in Sheldon's day, it is perhaps still more true in our own, when numerous writers, including ones in this journal, have pointed out that we live in a time when past certainties seem long gone. In their quest for orientation, many persons latch on to one single master and follow his or her precepts almost blindly, sometimes only to become terribly disillusioned when the master turns out to be far less admirable than was once supposed. In a very real sense, we Christians likewise have one single master, but we recognize that the direction we need can be found not only in the teaching of Jesus Christ as found in the Bible but also in the life and doctrine of all those men and women whom we honour as his truest disciples and who are, in part, being discussed in this ongoing series, 'Traditions of spiritual guidance'.

Of course, none of the guides in this series can provide all of the direction that we seek; moreover, some of them might prove very helpful at one period in our life and then, years later, no longer speak to us in so convincing a way. These facts make the diversity and richness of the Christian spiritual tradition all the more significant. One author who has in fact meant a great deal to many readers in our own century is John Ruusbroec (or Ruysbroeck, a later spelling), the fourteenth-century Fleming to whom Evelyn Underhill turned more frequently than to any other mystic when treating the culmination of the mystical experience in the final chapter of her groundbreaking book *Mysticism*. Persons much less well known than Underhill have found similar riches in Ruusbroec's works. As the translator of four of his treatises into English, I have received over the years a number of letters from persons saying how much the reading of this mystic has meant to them. One woman wrote: 'Be sure I have gone through your volume of Ruusbroec four times! Other readings seem dull now.' Another, experiencing a particularly difficult period in her life, said: 'Every time I feel I need help, I open Ruusbroec, and I am always given a word of counsel most appropriate for my need at the moment'. Another letter began:

'This is Holy Thursday morning and, as I am wont to do every year, I have been relishing the exceptionally beautiful passages Ruusbroec has on the Eucharist'.

While it would be unrealistic to think that every reader will be as taken by Ruusbroec as these were, it is nevertheless certain that here is a man who was unquestionably gifted in the art of spiritual guidance. The relatively little that we know about his life confirms this. As a young priest in Brussels, where he was ordained in 1317, he began writing his treatises precisely in order to give guidance to persons whom he saw being misled by quietistic teachings espoused by adherents of what came to be known as the movement of the Free Spirit.[2] Some decades later, at the age of fifty, he and two like-minded confrères moved to a remote, forested setting at Groenendaal where they eventually established an Augustinian priory, but even here people from all over northern Europe would seek him out for spiritual counsel, while several of the treatises he wrote during this final period of his life were primarily intended for the guidance of Poor Clare nuns living in Brussels. Although Ruusbroec speaks of the most advanced levels of the spiritual life in all of his works, he never overlooks the importance of the beginning stages and so has much to say about such foundational virtues as humility, meekness, generosity, purity and the like. This breadth in Ruusbroec's teaching led one distinguished historian of Christian spirituality to say of him:

> The power and coherence of his synthesis, which unites in an unbroken line the humblest ascetic strivings and the highest manifestations of the theopathic state, joined to the richness of his experience and to his literary genius – all this makes his work one of the most exceptional achievements that Western mysticism has produced.[3].

Since it is not possible in a single article to treat many aspects of Ruusbroec's teaching, I will focus above all on what he says about God's own life and some of the ways we may respond to the offer of sharing in God's life and love.

The Trinitarian mystery

Many students of Ruusbroec's works have noted the prominence he gives to the central doctrine of Christian faith, the Trinity, and to the way in which we ourselves are caught up into that mystery. Near the beginning of *The spiritual espousals*, an early treatise which most commentators consider his masterpiece, Ruusbroec writes that 'the Father and the Son breathe forth a Spirit, that is, a love, which is a bond joining them to one another and to all the saints and all good persons both in heaven and on earth'.[4] In a way that would please a Trinitarian theologian of our day like Catherine LaCugna, who protests that theological speculation about the Trinity has often been divorced from the realities of the salvation wrought for us through Christ in the Holy Spirit,[5] Ruusbroec generally avoids such speculation on the grounds that the inner life of God is incomprehensible and inaccessible to us. He does, however, at times use forceful images to capture something of the vibrant life of the Godhead, as when he writes that

> God is a flowing and ebbing sea which ceaselessly flows out into all his beloved according to their needs and merits and which flows back with all those upon whom he has bestowed his gifts in heaven and on earth, together with all they possess or are capable of. (p 103)

The references in this passage to God's beloved and to the bestowal of divine gifts upon such persons shows how close Ruusbroec is to the New Testament teaching that 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8) and that this love has been 'poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). The whole point of the Christian life according to Ruusbroec is to be caught up more and more fully into the life of this loving God, this abyss of the Godhead which no human understanding can fathom but which can nevertheless be attained in love. 'Where understanding remains without, desire and love enter within' (p 70); upon entering, they find 'that dark stillness in which all lovers lose their way' (p 152).

In the technical language of mystical theology, Ruusbroec is here clearly in the apophatic tradition, with its emphasis on the incomprehensibility of God. Prominent already in earlier Christian authors like Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, this theme has been sounded in our own century by such writers as Karl Rahner (who, as we know from references in his published prayers, read Ruusbroec carefully during his student days) and Thomas Merton (who once told the Trappist novices under his direction that if he had had the choice he would have been born in the fourteenth century, since that was the era of Eckhart, Ruusbroec and Tauler). For those of our contemporaries who at times may feel bereft of familiar spiritual footholds as they are confronted with the stark and often unsettling truth of God's ultimate incomprehensibility, the reading of an author like Ruusbroec can be salutary indeed, especially since they will there see that the acknowledgement of this truth need not reduce one to absolute silence in the divine darkness. This mysterious God has, after all, also spoken out of the darkness, and this other, 'kataphatic' side of mystical theology likewise has a sure place in Ruusbroec's thought. As he writes in the final part of *The spiritual espousals*,

> in the abyss of this darkness . . . an incomprehensible light is born and shines forth; this is the Son of God, in whom a person becomes able to see and to contemplate eternal life. (p 147)

So important does Ruusbroec consider this Christ-centred means of 'seeing' that he regularly concludes major divisions of *The spiritual espousals* with admonitions to take Christ's own life as our model. Among the most beautiful of such passages is the following:

> Now note how Christ with true faithfulness gave himself to all in common . . . He went out to all in common in his love, his teaching, and his admonitions . . . His soul and body, his life and death, and his

> service to others were and are common to all . . . He ate and drank for our sake, he lived and died for our sake. (pp 106–7)

This is, in other words, the way in which we see something of what it means to say 'God is love', for that love is offered *to all*, a point emphasized by the repeated use of the term 'in common' in the text just quoted. In a somewhat later treatise, *The sparkling stone*, Ruusbroec picks up on this term to describe what he considers the apex of the Christian life, for he calls it 'the common life', 'common' not in the sense of 'ordinary' but in the sense of 'playing no favourites', of showing equal love to all 'in common':

> A person who has been sent down by God from these heights [of contemplation] into the world is full of truth and rich in all virtues . . . He will always flow forth to all who need him, for the living spring of the Holy Spirit is so rich that it can never be drained dry. Such a person is a living and willing instrument of God with which God accomplishes what he wishes in the way he wishes. Such a person . . . stands ready and willing to do all that God commands and is strong and courageous in suffering and enduring all that God sends him. He therefore leads a common life. (p 184)

Since there have at times been disputes in the history of Christian spirituality over the respective merits of 'the active life' and 'the contemplative life', it is refreshing to see that in this passage there is no question of competition or antipathy but rather of harmonious interplay. Likewise impressive is the natural way in which Ruusbroec lends a Trinitarian note to his description of this 'common life', for he says its source is the Holy Spirit, whom he always understands as the bond of love between Father and Son. This is but one further instance of the way in which the mystery of the Trinity forms the heart of Ruusbroec's teaching.

The trust to which the triune God calls us

Like all sound theologians, Ruusbroec is clear that the initiative in the great work of salvation is God's. Allusions to God's grace are frequent in his treatises, and on this foundation he builds another of his major themes, the trust which should characterize all that we do or undergo. As an experienced spiritual guide, Ruusbroec was familiar with the phenomenon that is often called spiritual dryness or aridity. In a section of *The spiritual espousals* in which he employs the imagery of the zodiac to illustrate his teaching, he uses the sign of Libra to develop his counsel on how to cope with periods of desolation:

> At this time of year [i.e., late summer], the sun enters the sign of Libra, the Balance . . . In the same way, Christ stands on a balance over against the person who is resigned. It does not matter whether Christ gives sweetness or bitterness, darkness or light, for whatever he lays on

> the scale, such a person balances it evenly . . . When these self-composed persons have been thus deprived of all consolation and think that they are devoid of all virtue and abandoned by God and by all creatures, then it is clear that all kinds of fruit, grain and wine are now ripe and ready for the harvest . . . All the exterior and interior virtues which were ever practiced with delight in the fire of love will now be practiced with diligence and with a good heart, for never before were they so valuable in God's eyes, never before so noble and fine. (pp 92–93)

In *The mirror of eternal blessedness*, a much later treatise written during his years at Groenendaal, Ruusbroec again draws on his experience as a spiritual guide to show how trust in God should pervade all of our activities. Here it is not so much a matter of spiritual aridity as rather the tendency of some persons to think that it is they themselves who have to have everything 'just right' in the matter of confessing their sins. We know instances from the history of spirituality – the cases of Martin Luther and Ignatius Loyola come immediately to mind – in which the sacrament of penance was for a time a pure torture because the penitent was never satisfied that he or she had confessed fully and properly. To whatever extent one might attribute such scrupulosity to legalistic tendencies in the Western Church (for this is a phenomenon that seems quite rare in the Eastern Church), certainly someone like Ruusbroec knew that the proper remedy was to wean the person away from a prideful reliance on self and so lead him or her to deep trust in God. In words addressed directly to his reader, Ruusbroec writes:

> Above all else you should avoid long confessions with many words, for they would rob you of peace and lead you into error and scrupulosity. If you speak much in the confessional when there is no need of that, as in the case of venial sins, and if you try to set your mind at rest through your own doing rather than through trust in God, then you will always remain unenlightened and uninstructed by God and will not be able to discern the difference between what is great and small, weighty and light in your transgressions. Moreover, if it should happen that you omit something which you are accustomed to confess but which it was not necessary to confess, you will then become troubled, oppressed, and grieved as though you had not been to confession or perhaps even worse, because instead of the faith, hope, and love of God which should rightly fill your conscience, there is found there instead anxiety, fear and a natural self-love. (p 203)

While this specific advice may be less needful in our own day, when so many people are avoiding the sacrament of penance altogether, the main point about deep trust in God is surely part of the perennial message of the gospel and one from which we can all learn through the reading of this and many similar passages in Ruusbroec.

Our growth in the ways of love

The passage just quoted also referes to the contrast between 'natural self-love' and the 'love of God which should rightly fill your conscience'. It would be no exaggeration to say that Ruusbroec wanted all of his readers to experience this love of God ever more deeply. He could indeed be called a phenomenologist of love, for he accurately describes the various stages through which it normally progresses. At the beginning of the spiritual life, a person's love for God will often be markedly affective, even at times accompanied by physical manifestations like tears of joy or cries of jubilation. Ruusbroec by no means disdains such phenomena, but he also recognizes that they are in no sense a sure sign of advanced stages of spiritual growth. Rather, they will often be given by God to persons 'when they begin to turn from the world', for at that time 'they are still weak and need milk and sweet foods, not the strong fare of great temptations and abandonment by God' (p 83).

Those who have entered more deeply into a genuine experience of love of God may undergo what he calls 'the storm of love', in which the human spirit and the Holy Spirit 'incessantly strive after one another in love' in such a way that 'each spirit is wounded by love' (p 115). This language of being wounded by love, found already centuries earlier in Origen of Alexandria and prominent several centuries after Ruusbroec in the works of the great Spanish Carmelities, is the Flemish mystic's way of describing the apex of what he calls 'the interior life', beyond which lies 'the contemplative life, lived in the divine light and after God's own manner' (p 116).

Ruusbroec recognizes that the latter is a relatively rare state which can easily be misunderstood by those who have not experienced it themselves, so he urges such readers 'not to take offense at it but simply to let it be as it is' (p 146). He describes it in the third and final book of *The spiritual espousals*, above all in terms of blissfully resting in God and feeling so united with God that there is no longer any felt distinction between oneself and the divine Lover. While Ruusbroec's language about such union is not quite so bold as that of Eckhart, it was nevertheless criticized, above all by the fifteenth-century theologian Jean Gerson, who felt that it could easily mislead readers into thinking that Ruusbroec was describing a state of absolute metaphysical identity with God. But Ruusbroec had already given his own succinct and precise response to such an objection in *The mirror of eternal blessedness*:

> Now whenever I write that we are one with God, this is to be understood as a oneness in love and not in being or nature, for God's being is uncreated and ours is created, so that God and creatures are immeasurably different. (p 247)

In other words, he is using a language of identity such as is found in the love literature of all ages, whether it be describing one's love for God or the love of one human being for another. Thomas Merton, for example, in a poem composed two years before he died and addressed to a woman he loved, wrote:

Writing to you
Is like writing to my heart
You are myself
The loneliness here . . .
Envelops me
Like your own loneliness
Exploring my dark wood
And my lost house
To find itself.[6]

At the time Ruusbroec wrote *The spiritual espousals*, this sense of loving oneness with God was regarded by him as the apex of the spiritual life. In his next treatise, however, he modified his position, perhaps as a result of further experience and reflection on his part or possibly in response to criticism from some of his readers. Here in *The sparkling stone*, as we have already seen, 'the contemplative life' is not the final stage but rather leads to 'the common life', in which a person descends from 'the heights' of contemplation to serve others in their humblest needs. This, too, is in accord with the experience of mature lovers throughout the ages. In human love – provided that the persons concerned are continuing to grow – there comes a time when two lovers no longer simply want to look into each other's eyes but rather look outward together toward other persons, enveloping them within the orbit of their own love. Ruusbroec is telling us that it is the same in our life with God. Contemplative resting in God does not suffice; the true lover of God will also 'flow forth to all who need him' (p 184), even as the triune God is constantly going out to all creation in love. Here Ruusbroec is altogether in accord with those theologians of our own day who are pointing out that the fullness of the Christian life lies in an integration of two dimensions: on the one hand, we are called to experience something of that prayerful union with God which led Christ to say, 'The Father and I are one'. This dimension may be called 'the mystical'. Ideally conjoined with it will be a practical, energetic concern for the needs of other persons and for our endangered earth itself. This praxis-orientated dimension may be called 'the prophetic' or 'the political'.[7] They are both clearly present in Ruusbroec's mature works, even as they were likewise present in the way he lived. His early biographers note that he would often retire to forested seclusion in the vicinity of the priory at Groenendaal to commune with God in prayer, but at the same time would regularly give counsel to the many persons who came to consult with him, even as he would serve his own Augustinian community by taking upon himself some of the lowliest and least attractive duties. Today, when many people are seeking ways of loving God and neighbour that will enable them to do so 'with joy in the Holy Spirit', the teaching and example of Blessed John Ruusbroec may well prove to be a precious source of guidance indeed.

James A. Wiseman OSB

NOTES

[1] Sheldon, William: *Psychology and the promethean will* (New York, 1936), p 34.
[2] For more on this movement, see Robert Lerner: *The heresy of the Free Spirit in the later Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972).
[3] Cognet, Louis: *Introduction aux mystiques Rhéno-Flamands* (Paris, 1965), p 281.
[4] *John Ruusbroec: The spiritual espousals and other works*, trans by James A. Wiseman OSB (New York and London, 1985), p 48. All further quotations from Ruusbroec will be from this volume and so will simply be indicated by parenthetical page references in the text.
[5] LaCugna, Catherine: *God for us: the Trinity and Christian life* (San Francisco, 1991).
[6] Merton, Thomas: 'Six night letters, VI' in his *Eighteen poems* (New York, 1985), no pagination; italics mine. For a fuller treatment of this entire subject, see my article '"To be God with God": the autotheistic sayings of the mystics', *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), pp 230–251.
[7] For a contemporary discussion of these two dimensions, see David Tracy: *Dialogue with the other: the inter-religious dialogue* (Louvain and Grand Rapids, 1990).