

INTRODUCTION

Jean Nicolas Grou was born in 1730. He went to school with the Jesuits, became a novice and is next heard of as a teacher in the Jesuit College at La Flèche. His work gained a considerable reputation and he found time to translate several volumes of Plato's dialogues, which won high praise from the scholars of his day and were reprinted again and again. The suppression of the Jesuit Order brought him into trouble, but in 1766 we find him at Paris, whither he had come on the invitation of the Archbishop, living under the assumed name of Le Claire. His stay in Paris was a short one, but it was to mean much for him, for there he became acquainted with Mère Pélagie, a Visitation nun of great sanctity, who advised him to make the retreat which was the occasion of what he always called his conversion. This happened in 1767 or 1768, and thenceforward he becomes one of that band of saints who live their lives in the spirit of prayer, with a habitual sense of God's presence and complete abandon to his holy will. Later he goes to Holland where he is to remain for some years and does not return to Paris till 1776, where for some years he gives his time to the writings of books on the spiritual life. He produced two volumes of comments on St. Augustine's Confessions which later appeared in English under the title, *Morality Extracted from the Confessions of Saint Austin*. Amongst other writings there appeared later the *Maximes Spirituelles*. These maxims, twenty-four in number, are set out shortly in verse "that they may be grasped and retained more easily by the memory". A hundred years later John Mason Neale translated them into English and comments thus: Widely differing from the ordinary Jesuit teaching of

the present day the spirit of Père Grou is almost identical with that embodied in our sound old English ascetic books such as *The Scale of Perfection*, *Holy Wisdom*, etc. At this period Père Grou was much occupied in giving addresses to various religious houses in Paris which were to be published in the book called *Manuel des Ames Intérieures*, perhaps the best known of all Père Grou's works and now published in English as the *Manual for Interior Souls*. It seems to be the basis also of a once well-known little book by H. L. Sydney Lear, *The Hidden Life of the Soul*.

Besides such work as this, a good deal of time was being given to the collection of materials for a work, *Traité dogmatic de la vraie religion*, undertaken at the request of the Archbishop. The manuscript, fruit of fourteen years' labour, got into the hands of a French priest who produced an unauthorized mangled edition under his own name, and it was only in 1792 that the author got it back into his own hands. As he was fleeing from France, he entrusted it to a lady who was arrested during the Terror; and her servants, thinking the manuscript might compromise her, deliberately burnt it. Later on Père Grou heard of the tragedy and made the characteristic comment: "If God wished to derive glory from that work he would have preserved it; since he has allowed it to perish he can as well make use of another for his purpose as of me."

The outbreak of the Revolution changed the whole course of Père Grou's life. He had been living a happy and peaceful life in Paris, his writings and preachings were widely known and greatly esteemed, and his work had been recognized by the bestowal of a pension by Louis XVI. His first thought was to stay in Paris and carry on his priestly work there secretly, but Mère Pélagie, herself a fugitive, wrote to him from her hiding-place in 1792, strongly urging him to fly from Paris. He knew nobody in England but Father Alexander Mackenzie, who had published translations of two of his works and

was chaplain to a certain Mr. Thomas Weld of Lulworth Castle. As it happened, he received at this very time an invitation from Father Mackenzie asking him to come to him.

So it came about that Père Grou spent the last eleven years of his life in England at the house of a pious and munificent Roman Catholic layman. Thomas Weld was the father of a large family of children, many of whom came under Père Grou's influence, and his numerous benefactions made him the father of a far larger family of religious communities who looked to him as their patron or founder. We need only mention here that his mansion at Stonyhurst, Lancashire, was placed at the disposal of the exiled Jesuits from Liège. A disastrous fire has left Lulworth Castle a mere shell so that the little cell where Père Grou lived, scarcely larger than a big cupboard, can no longer be seen. He was greatly loved by the family, but he chose to live the life of a hermit in his little room, rising at four each morning, winter and summer, and spending his time in prayer and writing. We are told that in order to observe his vow of poverty he would not receive from his host any regular allowance, but would ask for food, clothing or books, just as the need arose. He regarded his solitary life as a special blessing given him by God. "Nothing", he writes in a letter, "is more opposed to my inclination than intercourse with mankind, and no motive but the glory of God and the salvation of my neighbour makes me engage in it. I love solitude, silence, work. I would rather be alone even with nothing to do, than take part in brilliant conversation in which I find nothing to interest me any more than in other things that belong to this lower world." Thus, whilst the old world of France was in ruins and Europe wracked with war, Père Grou lived the life of prayer and wrote his books. "I write nothing of myself", he said; "upon matters spiritual, God guides my pen. When I take it up I do not know what I am going to write and I am the first to be surprised at the thoughts which come to me." Père Cadrès who, examined all

his MSS., says that, although some are known to have been composed very rapidly, they show no signs of correction or alteration, but seem “to have flowed from his pen without effort like water from a jet”.

The last two years of his life were years of great suffering, but he would make no change in his way of life, or reduce the time given to his religious exercises. He died on 12th December 1803, in great peace. Almost at the beginning of this period of suffering he had received a great and unexpected consolation. He had always lived strictly the Jesuit life, even after the suppression of the Society, but now in 1801 the Pope gave his canonical approval to the Society in England, and so a few months before his death he was able to renew the four vows of his solemn profession and to call himself openly a member of the Society of Jesus.

The School of Jesus Christ is in many ways the most important of all Père Grou’s books, a full-dress treatise on the Christian life. Written during those last years in England, it is the ripe fruit of the author’s life of prayer and meditation. The chapters on prayer form the first half of the second book, about a quarter of the whole work; they form in themselves a complete and independent treatise on Christian prayer. Evelyn Underhill, in one of her published letters, refers to them as “one of the best short expositions of the essence of prayer which has ever been written”. The first chapters deal at length with the first consideration of all: we do not pray of ourselves, we cannot, it is God who teaches us to pray. Not that he teaches us in any external way as giving us instructions which we are to follow by ourselves. God teaches us to pray in an interior way, i.e. he inspires our prayers, so that we can say that all true prayer is God’s prayer. Again and again Père Grou analyses the prayers that Christians make, probing into our motives and ruthlessly casting on one side all prayer that is not real prayer, i.e. prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is not we who pray, but God who prays in

us. Then follow four chapters on different aspects of prayer and it is not long before the author is giving us the very heart of his message and recommending the prayer of silence. "After stating our needs simply by word of mouth, if we prefer it, our Saviour bids us keep silence and allow our hearts to speak far more eloquently than our lips." The chapter on Continual Prayer reveals the massive common-sense of this hermit, for whilst he insists that we must pray without ceasing, he allows that prayer goes on through our actions and certainly through our sufferings; it can go on through our social duties and make us "more accessible, more genial and more obliging". In the chapter on Common Prayer he deliberately omits all consideration of public worship to deal entirely with household prayers. Here, more than anywhere else, we see the priest of the old régime for whom the patriarchal system of eighteenth-century France is a sacred ordinance. The whole is rounded off by the long chapter on the Lord's Prayer as the type and model of all prayer. As the prayer is expounded clause by clause, so carefully and lovingly, it is as though the author is writing in the very presence of the Lord who gave it.

The great French school of devotional writers which begins with St. Francis de Sales, has in recent years been introduced to English readers by the publication of the works of de Caussade, Grou and others. Of this school was also Baron von Hugel, for like Charles de Foucauld he was a pupil of the Abbé Huvelin. Evelyn Underhill finds the characteristic mark of these great French teachers in a twofold realism, i.e. there is on the one hand a vivid sense of the presence and transcendence of God, and on the other hand an acceptance of human nature as it really is, in all its limitations and many weaknesses. The human soul therefore must know its own nothingness, it must accept the fact of the human situation, abandoning itself to God with no reservations. And yet this abandonment of the soul is the very opposite of the fanatic's

surrender, for it is to be completely homely and truly natural, the surrender of the tiny child to the parent's loving care.

Within this company of great masters of the spiritual life Père Grou has his own particular place. Abbot Butler said of him that he was "more gripping" than any other spiritual writer, "very ingoing, very exacting, but full of saving reasonableness". There is in him a strictness and austerity; you feel, when you read his words, that here is a man who did not spare himself and will not spare you, as long as you try to evade God's claims. It is true that the modern reader has to remind himself continually of the setting in which he wrote, that old authoritarian age which seems so far away. But if he will cross that line of division between Père Grou's world and his own he will be greatly rewarded. He will find a solidity, a thoroughness, strangely absent from so much devotional literature, he will be in touch with a great genius in the art of prayer who speaks only of what he practises himself. Père Grou was a truly inspired writer, for he wrote at God's command and as God gave him the words. His words will therefore endure.

J. D.