

HÉLINAND OF FROIDMONT ON SELF-KNOWLEDGE

THE BEAUTY OF THE SOUL

THE inward beauty of man is twofold. There is a natural beauty common to all, and a particular beauty which is special to each, since it depends on the good will of the individual. Man's natural beauty is in that he is a rational soul, immortal, invisible, and not bound by the ties of place. His rationality guards him from giving himself up to the pleasures of the senses, and his immortality warns him against the folly of avarice. Among all the monsters of the world, there is surely none more monstrous than a human body inhabited by a bestial soul. Aristotle and Sallust are agreed that a man who has given himself up to greed and sensuality cannot be considered as anything more than an animal.

Reason has a threefold office—to distinguish between things which are contrary, to reprobate things which are evil, and to choose those which are good. Devils can discern between good and evil, but they cannot choose anything but evil. Therefore the kind of man who chooses that which is evil, knowing full well that it is evil, is little better than a devil. Nothing is further from reason than that the immortal soul of man should covet what is mortal, for the soul, in a little while, must leave behind it all its treasures and go empty-handed into eternity. Nothing is more repugnant than that the invisible soul, whose deeds are done in secret, should delight in boasting or in being praised. The fact that our soul is invisible should persuade us to perform all our acts in secret as far as we may, so that our

Father, Who sees what is hidden, may reward us. It is an abuse which almost verges on the black art, to make a pompous show to human eyes of the invisible gifts of wisdom, holiness, or any virtue that may be in us, with which our creator has endowed us.

When we consider how the soul gives life to the body, being in all its parts without being confined exclusively to any one of them, are we not reminded of Saint Paul's words: 'If one member suffers, all suffer together'?¹⁰ Is not this a wonderful lesson in brotherly love? For the members of a body are kept together by one spirit, and all are equal and are bound by the ties of love. Therefore a man who resents the fact that his neighbour is praised, judging himself to be slighted thereby, should see that his own glory, far from being diminished, is increased. The glory of any one member redounds to the honour of the whole body.

Thus far we have spoken of the beauty which is common to all souls by reason of their natural endowments. Now the particular beauty of each soul depends on the will and consists of two things—in doing those things which God desires for us, and in avoiding the things of which we know beyond doubt that He disapproves. The will of God is the rule and measure by which we must adjust our wills. On this showing, a soul's beauty is its holiness, and this holiness consists in a firm and stable purpose and a constant affection for all that is holy. The holy love of God implies a holy hatred of evil. Evil is the occasion of sin, but goodness for us is God Himself and the imitation of God. Holy love and holy fear are like the two eyes of the dove in the Canticle, for the dove is of all birds the most timorous and the most loving. For us, cleanness of heart comes through embracing goodness and fleeing from evil.

We must add that in order to know our own soul we must first know our soul's exemplar, that is God, in Whose image and

likeness our soul is made. This is, after all, in the due order of things. The seal in the ring comes before the seal which it imprints in the wax. The idea comes before the expression in which it is phrased. Therefore to Apollo's dictum 'know thyself,' we would add 'but know God first.'

There are seven ways in which our soul resembles God. First, God is a spirit, and so is our soul. God is immortal and invisible—likewise the soul. God is one in substance and in persons three. Our soul too is a unity, with three powers of reason, memory and will. God is present everywhere, and the soul is present in every part of the body. God is intellectual, and the soul for its part is intelligent.

When the human soul knows that God is a spirit, it can see what sort of spirit it is itself. It can begin to see that there is a life of the spirit distinct from that of the flesh. It begins to realize that, in Saint Paul's words, it must not live according to the flesh but according to the spirit.¹¹ The soul in its simplicity, which is modelled on the unity of God, must realize that it must shun all the complexity of falsehood, and walk uprightly before God. Immortality teaches the soul to fear, not the sufferings of this life, but of the damned in hell. It teaches detachment from the passing pleasures of the world, and instils the desire for those which are, like the soul itself, for all eternity.

—Hélinand of Froidmont (ca. 1160–after 1229), Cistercian, in *The School of Self-Knowledge: A Symposium from Mediaeval Sources*, chapter 2 (drawn from his *Liber de cognitione sui*), translated from the Latin by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker, and published by The Saint Austin Press, London, in 2001, pages 14–16. *The School of Self-Knowledge* first published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1956.

NOTES

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

¹¹ Galatians 5:16.

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