



“Between Heaven and Earth”

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"Between Heaven and Earth"*

During a recent stay in the United States I was astonished at the publicity being given by Catholic periodicals and bookshops to a work entitled *Between Heaven and Earth*. Let it be said at once that it is not from a Catholic pen. From one point of view there is no reason to be surprised at the favorable reception it has received even among the devout, coming as it does from the author of the *Song of Bernadette*, the novel many found irreproachable and moving. Franz Werfel had written so well of Our Lady that his readers might have expected the same fidelity in *Between Heaven and Earth*. But having examined this work, I am obliged to say that it calls for the most serious reservations. In fact, it teaches errors clearly and directly contrary to the two most fundamental truths of our religion. "In our faith," says St. Thomas, "two things are principally to be believed: the mystery of the Trinity, and the mystery of the Incarnation." Surely Catholic readers should be put on their guard against the pernicious errors contained in this book; and it will also be failing in charity toward these outside the fold not to expose so false an understanding of our faith.

Here are several propositions cited from the English text: "The second person of the Trinity is the social aspect in the Deity. *Verbum caro factum*. This not only applies to the Son but, in another sense, to the world also. All created things are expressed words. The Son is that essence of God which does not contemplate itself, like the Father, but has to do exclusively with the world, as the first and uncreated and yet incarnate Word above all words" (p.144).

In this brief passage are implicit several grave errors which are also closely interrelated. In truth, it is independently of all creation and independently of the Incarnation that the Word is the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father, equal to the Father. He knows Himself as the Father knows Himself. *Genitum, non factum*. In God He is begotten and not made. The Word was *made* flesh. The Word that is exclusively concerned with the world is the incarnate Word as incarnate — not the Word as such. The begotten Word is concerned with creation only second-

* This note is the English version of a radio-talk delivered on the Laval University Hour of April 1945. The original text appeared at the time in the Quebec *Semaine Religieuse*. Several American priests have asked us to render it available to the English-speaking public, since the book in question is still being favorably reviewed by Catholic periodicals and on sale in Catholic bookshops.

arily¹. Similarly, it is the incarnate Word only as considered in His humanity who is inferior to the Father. *Aequalis Patri secundum divinitatem: minor Patre secundum humanitatem*². To identify the Word as such with the incarnate Word is to render the Word as such inferior to the Father, to lower His divinity and to make creation and the Incarnation necessary acts.

Nor are we drawing inferences which the author himself fails to state. Here are his plain words: "...The mystery of Incarnation... is an intra-personal act within the Deity, having nothing to do with creation" (p.143). The author affirms that, since life is a communication of self, God cannot help but turn outward; self-contemplation may not suffice Him. So that: "Every motion directed outward from within arises out of insatiability" (pp.145-6).

Mr. Werfel's mistakes are not always coherent. Having lowered the dignity of the Son of God, that is, of God Himself, he next speaks of "the Son, who is the Father, the Father who is the Son" (p.183). Such enormities are not only contrary to theology; they are directly contrary to formally revealed truth.

On the motive of the Incarnation, Mr. Werfel teaches an error comparable to that of Ludwig Feuerbach in *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, namely that the Incarnation is necessary to God Himself. Were it not for the Incarnation, he thinks, the creature would hold an advantage over God which God could not permit. "Since the Deity is *Integritas* and *Incorruptibilitas* personified, humanity has the advantage of one experience over Him: suffering and death" (pp.144-5). This experience, the fruit of sin, is that of wretched and fallen nature, it is true. "And yet, suffering and death are the deepest experience of created beings; and it is precisely this deepest experience that the creator does not possess" (*ibid.*). It is this, says Werfel, that reveals to us one of the most mysterious reasons for the Incarnation of God. "The Creator cannot suffer His created being to have any advantage over Him even if it be pain and decay" (*ibid.*). Hence, "Something like a longing for debasement and twilight awakens in the Absolute Light" (*ibid.*). "The Lord descends so that man may not be superior to Him even in that which is negative" (*ibid.*). In a word, according to Werfel, God did not humble Himself solely to snatch us from our misery and save the world — *propter nostram salutem*; He humbled Himself in order to enrich Himself with an experience in which otherwise man would have an advantage over Him: "He descends not only to save the world, but in *His very own interest*, to taste of death..." (*ibid.*, *italics ours*).

Werfel has not understood that it is sheer goodness, that it is the most pure and disinterested liberality, in short, infinite Mercy, which is at the base of all the works of God — *miserationes ejus super omnia opera ejus*; that God has humbled Himself for us; that from this God derives not the slightest profit. The words just quoted from *Between Heaven and Earth*

1. Cf. S. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.34, a.3: *Utrum in nomine Verbi importetur respectus ad creaturam*; *Q. D. de Veritate*, q.4, a.5: *Utrum Verbum relationem ad creaturam importet*.

2. *Symb. Athan.*

are among the most frightful and blasphemous that have ever been written. We must believe that Werfel did not know the import of what he was saying. It is not our task, fortunately, to judge the intentions of the author; our concern is simply with the sense of his words as attacking God in His condition of extreme humiliation. How could we hear without shuddering that, if *God emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross*¹, He did it not out of pure mercy, to save us from the misery in which we find ourselves, and to assimilate us to Himself, but rather in virtue of a Self-interest essential to His divinity, so that man might have no advantage over Him, so that man might not be His superior. According to Werfel, if God must taste suffering and death, the responsibility is not entirely ours, since God also empties Himself "in His very own interest." "The mystery of the *Passion*, or the sacrificial death . . . is suffered for the sake of the Creator no less than for the sake of the creatures" (p.131).

Let us hearken rather to Saint Paul: *Quoniam propter vos egenus factus est, cum esset dives, ut illius inopia vos divites essetis*². For you, being rich, He became poor, that through His poverty you might be rich. Are we to shamelessly protest to our God that we are not the only ones enriched by His poverty? That His becoming humbled was not through mercy alone? That fundamentally He profited more by it than we? It is an odious blasphemy. Truth forces us to cry from the house-tops to all readers of Mr. Werfel that no one could be more wrong. We have no right to permit the illusion that the author of the *Song of Bernadette* knows revealed doctrine on the most fundamental points of our faith. *Fides ex auditu*. Faith comes from preaching heard. Even they who are well disposed to believe these revealed truths, must yet be made to hear them. And these truths are hard. *Durus est hic sermo*.

One should not conclude from this criticism that *Between Heaven and Earth* contains only errors. But I make bold to say that the author goes astray whenever he takes up a question that is in the least profound. It is regrettable that Werfel should have thought himself competent in these matters. He appears to be the victim of his talent of stating things pleasingly. The gravest errors and the most vain conceptions can be phrased in a language correct and elegant.

These condemnations and reservations will displease some; but broad-mindedness has its limits; and there are things which God does not allow. *Omne verbum otiosum, quod locuti fuerint homines, reddent rationem de eo in die judicii. Ex verbis enim tuis justificaberis, et ex verbis tuis condemnaberis*³. We cannot allow the monstrous errors of *Between Heaven and Earth* to be spread on the strength of the charm and piety of the *Song of Bernadette*. Doctrines so fundamental must be defended in season an out of season.

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1. *Ad Phil.*, II, 6.

2. *II Cor.* VIII, 9.

3. *Matth.*, XII, 36.