

Quinque Prudentes Virgines

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THE parable of the wise and foolish virgins, appearing only in *St. Matthew XXV*, 1-13, is seemingly one of the more enigmatic of the parables of Jesus. The position taken in this paper is that the parable is one of ingathering: of concentration, the perfection of virtue, and the return to the Edenic state or the Earthly Paradise¹; and that this perfection of the integral individuality implies the virtual identification with the Eternal and Unique Word of God. In what follows some of the evidence for these views is set forth.

The principal theme of Scripture is by no means mere ethical precept; rather, "for many reasons the Scriptures hide the sense. First that we may become inquisitive and be ever on the watch to discover the words of salvation. Thus it was not suitable for all to understand so that they might not receive harm in consequence of taking in another sense the things declared for salvation by the Holy Spirit. Wherefore the holy mysteries... are veiled in parables—preserved for chosen men selected for knowledge in consequence of their faith; for the style of Scripture is parabolic... also the Lord, who was not of the world, came as one who was of the world... it was His aim to lead man, the foster child of the world, up to the objects of intellect, and to the most essential truths by knowledge, from one world to another."² Nor are there irrelevancies or merely accidental elements in the Gospel narratives. "Next to the general conception of the parable it is right to examine the whole of it... according to the letter, so that he who advanced with care to the right investigation of each detail... might derive profit from what is said".³

With this in mind it will be well to consider first the concrete setting of the parables which were and are invariably founded on fact. The literal meaning of the parable rests on Jewish social practice⁴ contemporary with Jesus. Marriages were celebrated at night, as is still the practice in many parts of the Orient. Some commentators say the actual ceremony was celebrated at the home of the bride; others say at the home of the groom. Probably the legitimization of the union would take place with the bride, and the nuptial feast with the groom. There is general agreement, however, that a feast as elaborate as the bridegroom's means would permit was celebrated at the latter's home. In the evening, the bridegroom and his attendants went to fetch the bride from her parents; she was brought, perhaps in a litter, to the home of the bridegroom. The female relations of the bridegroom were expected to meet the bridal party with lighted lamps. That the virgins were of the household of the bridegroom is matter of very interesting implication for the meaning of the parable. It is of further interest that the rabbinical authorities specified ten mourners at funerals, and quite possibly ten maidens on such occasions as this; ten was considered by these authorities as the all-inclusive number. Many expressions of joy and congratulations would be exchanged on this the happiest of social occasions. After these were accomplished, the wedding party went within, and no doubt closed the doors to the uninvited.

Tunc simile erit regnum caelorum decem virginibus: quae accipientes lampades suas exierunt obviam sponsa et sponsae. Quinque autem ex eis erant fatuae et quinque prudentes.

"Then shall the Kingdom of Heaven be likened to ten virgins who taking their lamps went out to meet the bridegroom and the bride. And five of them were foolish and five wise". The Kingdom of Heaven, which *intra vos est*, is in principle identical with the Divine King, with Christ Who is at once King, Priest, and Eternal and Unique Word of the Father; by extension, the Kingdom refers to those states to which the just accede after the direction of their spiritual development is fixed at the time of the dissolution of the body; and by further extension, the Kingdom is the rule of Christ, the New and Eternal Law over us in the situation in which we presently find ourselves.

We are struck by the numbers five and ten. Some scholars assert that these have no special significance—a view we cannot share. According to the *Zohar*, ten is the numerical value of the Hebrew *yod* (the *yod* represents the Eternal Word), the first letter of the Divine Name; it is the number of the Sephiroth; the number of the words by which the universe was created; the number of the words of the *Torah*,⁵ which expresses God's Mercy and His Rigor. For the Pythagoreans, ten was the Sacred Ten, the divine number, the paradigm of creation in the mind of God the Creator; it was also the number of the cosmos. Ten numbers complete the basic system of the common decimal numeration. Man has ten fingers, five on the right hand and five on the left. For the Romans, the X was the sign of the decade; lamps bearing the X as monogram of Christ and possibly as reference to the *decem virginibus* have been found in the catacombs. Ten talents were returned by the faithful steward (*St. Luke XIX, 13ff*), and ten was the number of pieces of silver owned by the woman in the parable in *St. Luke XV, 8ff*. Ten lepers were cleansed, *St. Luke XVII, 11ff*. Suffice it to say that ten represents comprehensiveness, completeness. In the parable under consideration it represents, along with its division into two pentades, the basic range of spiritual possibility open to men: salvation or perdition.

The reading given by most modern translations is: "Then shall the Kingdom of Heaven be like ten virgins who took their lamps⁶ and went out to meet the bridegroom", omitting reference to the bride. But the *Vulgate*, as we have seen, speaks of... *sponso et sponsae*; and the Douay version, faithful of course to the *Vulgate*, has "bridegroom and bride". Some, at least, of the more recent scholarship affirms the reading "bridegroom and bride", found in the older manuscripts, particularly in the Latin.⁷ Whatever the reason for absence of mention of the bride in some texts, this absence confirmed nominalist and literalist tendencies to understand *decem virginibus* as reference not to the soul who with her five faculties is saved or lost, but to so many individuals; it was argued that the parable demands a plurality of individuals in order that a distinction may be made between them—ignoring that this requirement is met by the stated duality of the five wise and five foolish virgins. It has been argued that the believer cannot be represented by both the virgins and the bride; if the virgins are considered as separate individuals, and if only *their* relation to the bridegroom is considered, then mention of the bride would be awkward and superfluous. Such a view, however, is incompatible with the highly synthetic character of Scripture—especially of the Gospel parables. The role of the bride is fully implicit and the believer, or at least the chosen from among the believers, is in fact represented simultaneously by the bride *and* the five wise virgins.

Again, we face the neat division into five wise and five foolish virgins; two pentades. Five is par excellence the number of man; it is the number of sense faculties proper to the human individual; Aristotle held that the soul has five powers⁸; five elements constitute the substance from which this world and man are elaborated; five were the wounds of the crucified Christ; as mentioned above man has five fingers on his right hand and five on his left. For the Greeks, five was the number of love, the nuptial number, combining as it does the first even (feminine)

number and the first odd (masculine) number after unity.⁹ The number five, then, as in the five-pointed star, refers to the integral individuality.

St. Augustine considered the identity of the ten virgins¹⁰ and concluded that it was no easy question. They are not merely religious, not the *sancti moniales*; rather this parable relates to each of us. And the virgins are not souls of every kind, but rather such as have the Catholic faith; they are the called.¹¹ "Every soul in the body is... denoted by the number five, because it makes use of five senses. For there is nothing of which we have perception by the body, but by the fivefold gate, either by sight, by hearing, by smelling, by tasting, or by touching. Whoso then abstains from unlawful hearing, unlawful seeing... smelling... tasting... and touching, by reason of his incorruptness hath gotten the name of virgin". And though "few have virginity in the body, in the heart all ought to have it". While the Bridegroom tarries, they all slumbered and slept; not a sleep of sloth, for the wise slept like the foolish, and the foolish are not condemned for their sleeping, but for their lack of oil. This sleep, for St. Augustine as for other early Christian writers, was the sleep of death which the wise do not escape. Sleep is, immediately, the dissolution of the body and midnight is the threshold of a change of state. Obviously midnight is also a time of crisis when it is no longer possible to "... go... to them that sell and buy..."

Methodius of Olympos (fl. 3rd. cent.) devoted an entire treatise¹² to this parable. "By profession they had equally proposed the same end... but they did not for all that, go forth in the same way to meet the bridegroom. For some provided abundant future nourishment for their lamps which were fed with oil, but others were careless, thinking only of the present. And therefore they are divided into two equal numbers of five inasmuch as one group preserved the five senses, which most people consider the gates of wisdom, pure and undefiled by sins;... for whether... we do right... or... do wrong through our senses, our habits of good and evil are confirmed... there is a chastity of the eyes, and of the ears, and of the tongue, and so on of the other senses; so here she [i.e., the soul] who keeps inviolate the fidelity of the five pathways of virtue—sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing—is called by the name of the five virgins, because she has kept the five forms of sense pure unto Christ, as a lamp, causing the light of holiness to shine forth clearly from each of them. For the flesh is truly our five lighted lamp, which the soul will bear like a torch when it stands before Christ the Bridegroom, showing her faith springing out clear and bright through the senses, as He Himself taught, saying, 'I am come to cast fire upon the earth; and what will I but that it be kindled?'¹³ Meaning by the earth our bodies, in which He wished the swift moving and fiery operation of His doctrine to be kindled. Now the oil represents wisdom and righteousness; for while the soul rains down unsparingly, and pours forth these things upon the body, the light of virtue is kindled unquenchably, making its good actions to shine before men so that our Father... in Heaven may be glorified".

Oil, then, according to Methodius, represents the wisdom and justice which are from God. Oil is the vehicle of the Holy Spirit, the "oil of gladness". It symbolizes strength and energy; repentance, turning away.¹⁴ Oil for the ancient Mediterranean world was olive oil, and the word "oil" derives from the Latin and Greek words for the olive—the olive which was to be cultivated and harvested only by the virtuous in order that its continued flourishing might thus be assured.¹⁵ In ancient Israel the best oil was reserved for liturgical and medicinal use; it was also used in cooking and for lighting. Later it came to be used in the Christian rites of baptism, confirmation, ordination, and extreme unction; in the consecration of altars and sacred vessels. All these associations: *metanoia*, strength and energy, vocation, office, victory, wealth,¹⁶ sanctity, joy and peace are to be borne in mind in determining the significance of oil in this parable. Oil is also

very closely related to that "rational coin" which is in question in the parable of the talents¹⁷ The oil that feeds the lamps of the five wise virgins represents a concentration of energies, a sustained power of attention focused on the one thing needful.

Let us turn now to the significance of marriage itself as a symbol of the definitive accomplishment of one stage of the spiritual return journey. "In His unbounded love, God became what we are that He might make us what He is".¹⁸ The Church, in a restraint adapted to the multitude, has used the symbolism of marriage to depict the relation of herself and her Lord¹⁹; the same symbolism represents the Mystical Body and its Head, human nature and the Eternal Word of God. Christian contemplatives have always seen in the amorous imagery of the *Canticle of Canticles* the relationship of the soul and her divine lover. There are aspects of the same in this parable: the soul is the bride and Christ is the bridegroom. But the emphasis in the parable is less, apparently, on the bride whose role throughout is assumed, than on the virgin bridesmaids—though near the end of the parable the five wise virgins join the Bridegroom and the bride in the consummate unity of the nuptial feast.²⁰ What then of the relationship of the virgin bridesmaids to the Bridegroom? It is what might seem from a literalist point of view a polygamous union²¹; in fact it represents the holy ardor of the Divine Bridegroom to possess the bride completely and utterly, through her every faculty, said faculties being represented by the virgin bridesmaids. Those who have had the experience of a surpassing love will know something of an unusual degree of identity, transient²² in most human experience, by which a young man and woman seem to see, hear, feel, speak and understand preeminently and coincidentally. Considered as symbol, this condition gives profound insight into the divine *caritas*. The Bridegroom wishes to possess our very faculties, external and internal. The virgin bridesmaids are of the family of the Bridegroom, as in fact the bride and each of the chosen are. He is the sight of our sight, the hearing of our hearing, the light of our understanding. For the wise "...happy are their eyes because they see, and their ears because they hear!" But for the foolish "...hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand: and seeing you shall see, and shall not perceive. For the heart of this people is grown gross, and with their ears they have been dull of hearing, and their eyes they have shut: lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them".²³

The division of the ten virgins into the wise and the foolish denotes the responses of souls to the Bridegroom, and the two destinies that follow upon these responses—to be among the chosen or the rejected. "The dove and the crow, released from the ark, show all the difference that exists between 'to be taken' and 'to be left'. Noah receiving the dove back again, keeps it in the ark, reserving it for sacrifice; but he abandons the crow to wander as it will until the waters dried up from the face of the earth".²⁴ It is thus that the Lord determines the separation of the sheep from the goats, the wise from the foolish virgins. Both the wise and the foolish were called, both were of equal dignity at the outset, both were virgin, both pretty.²⁵ Like the tares and wheat growing together until harvest²⁶ the foolish virgins were not separated from the wise until the last moment; until the advent of Christ, whose coming is also a separation. But at the crisis of His coming the foolish lacked oil, lacking which they lacked means of entry into the bridal chamber of the Lord. The advent of the Lord is a crisis of self-knowledge, and a judgment on energies dissipated toward frivolous ends.

It will further our understanding of the parable if we examine certain traditional views of human nature. For the ancient Christians the notion of an existential independence of man, considered individually or generally, would have been absurd; similarly, any notion of

immobilism would have been heterodox. Man was a creature in motion, in flux; but it was a dynamism subject to the law of his own nature, as well as to the laws of the cosmos. "... Man ought to know himself and... see what he is, whence he is, why he is... And it is this very thing which we cannot seek out and investigate without inquiry into the universe; since things are so coherent, so linked and associated together, that unless you diligently examine into the nature of divinity, you must be ignorant of that of humanity. Nor can you [even] perform your social duty unless you know that community of the world which is common to all..."²⁷ In the creation account of Genesis we read: "And He said: Let us make man to our own image and likeness... And God created man in his own image: to the image of God He created him: male and female created He them... And the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth, and breathed into his face²⁸ the breath of life, and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a paradise of pleasure from the beginning, wherein He placed man whom He had formed. And the Lord God brought forth from the ground all manner of trees, fair to behold, and pleasant to eat of; the tree of life, also in the midst of paradise: and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil".²⁹ One must endeavor to see in the figures of the creation story more than a quaint botany. Philo Judaeus saw in Paradise the *hegemonikon* of man—at once the divine image and ruling principle, the *hegemonikon* in man corresponding to God in the cosmos.³⁰ According to Diodoch of Photikos: The soul, primitively, had only one sense... but since the disobedience of Adam it has been divided into two tendencies: the one carries it always towards things celestial; the other, seeking terrestrial joys, was subdivided again; these are the vicious appetites of the five senses".³¹ For St. Gregory of Nyssa,³² the image of God in man and in which man is created "... truly exists only insofar as it possesses all the attributes of its prototype; in the measure that it falls away from resemblance with its prototype, in this measure it is no longer image. As one of the properties of the divine nature is its *unseizable* character, in this also the image must resemble its model. If the nature of the image can be 'seized', while that of the prototype is beyond our grasp, this diversity of attributes would prove the downfall of the image. But if we are unable to know our own spirit which is in the image of its Creator, it is because it possesses in itself the likeness of He who dominates it, and because it bears the imprint of the ungraspable nature by the mystery that is within itself". This is the pristine innocence and purity of human nature, and it is to this purity that we are called in this parable.

Further, in respect of the tree of Gen. II, 9, St. Gregory asks³³: "What is this tree, full of pleasure for the senses, which contains the mixed knowledge of good and evil?... To my mind the Scripture here does not equate 'knowledge and science'; and following Scriptural usage I find a difference between 'knowledge' and 'discernment'. The Apostle rightly said... that a man of perfect dispositions of the mind and purified senses can discern between good and evil. Also, he gives this counsel, 'to judge everything',³⁴ for... judgment pertains to the spiritual man. The word knowledge itself does not seem always to designate science and pure understanding, but rather an interior disposition toward that which is agreeable. Thus 'The Lord has known those who are his own'.³⁵ And He said to Moses 'I have known thee in preference to others'.³⁶ To the damned, He who knows all things says... 'I never knew you'.³⁷ As most men, therefore, consider the good to be that which charms the senses³⁸; and as the same word designates the good and the apparent good, the desire that carries one toward evil as if it were a good is called by the Scripture the 'knowledge of good and evil', the word knowledge expressing this interior disposition and this admixture.

"Neither an absolute evil, for the good flourishes all around, nor a good without admixture, for evil is there hidden, but a mixture of the two; such is the fruit of the forbidden tree, according

to the Scripture—which has no other aim than to repeat this truth: that the good is without composition, that its form is simple³⁹ and that it is foreign to all duplicity and to all union with its contrary; while evil is variegated and presents itself in such a way that it is taken for one thing while upon experience it reveals itself as something quite other; its knowledge, i.e., the taking hold of it in experience, is the beginning and the foundation of death and corruption... the Serpent thrusts forward the vicious fruit of sin, but without clearly displaying the evil as it is by nature; man would not be deceived by evil if it blazed abroad before his eyes; but the demon, making the exterior appearances to shine forth, and like a charlatan, charming our taste by some pleasure of the senses, appeared to the woman worthy of confidence... ‘The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and that it was desirable for the knowledge that it could give. So she took some of its fruit and ate it’.⁴⁰

And that is precisely the mixture of the fruits the tree bears, Scripture intending to show clearly the sense according to which it indicates this tree capable of making known good and evil: it has the malice of those poisons which are prepared with honey; in that they flatter the senses they seem good, in that they cause the death of him who takes them, they are the worst of evils.

"Therefore, after this fatal poison has produced its effects on human life, then man, whose creation and whose name are full of grandeur—then man, this image of the divine nature becomes, as the Prophet said,⁴¹ like an ephemeral creature. *And thus the image does not reside any longer except in the highest parts of our being; the sadnesses and the miseries of the present life have nothing in common with our divine resemblance.*"⁴²

These are the roots of the human condition. In the Christian perspective original sin, the sin coeval with the race, was the indulgence of inordinate desire contrary to the divine order. It was an all inclusive desire involving the roots of all the faculties and the impetuses and motives of civilization. This was the beginning of the history of the race, a history by definition centrifugal. Individually it is a progressive disharmony and alienation from one's own most intimate personal reality. Perhaps it may be objected that this "discord in the pact of things" is an absurdity in a well ordered cosmos. Such a view would be one-sided, to say the least. The Judeo-Christian view of the procession and return of creatures presents the former in terms of an infidelity of will on the part of man, and the latter in terms of an active seeking of fallen man by the Divine descent and abasement leading to man's reorientation and self-naughting: *mors janua vitae*. The whole is summed up in the symbol of the Lamb triumphant, slain from the foundation of the world. But the point for the present discussion is that the doctrines of the fall and redemption, that of the image, and within this context the parable of the wise and foolish virgins provide us with essential self-knowledge, which is a means to the knowledge of God; and to which only the knowledge of God is to be preferred. The realization of our nature is not in the indefinite exercise and deployment of our faculties,⁴³ but rather in their active introversion and return to their point of origin. This does not connote the atrophy or desiccation of the soul or the faculties, for insensibility is a vice and "the body's rational use of creatures is not a drawback to the soul".⁴⁴ It points rather to the truth that the root of all our faculties, external and internal, is in God. Though this doctrine is less explicit in Christianity than, e.g., in Hinduism, it is nonetheless definite Christian teaching. Many passages in Scripture are cited in this testimony; e.g., Ps. IV, 7: "The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us", which St. Thomas quotes in support of his statement that... "the human soul derives its intellectual light from Him... Who is the soul's Creator"⁴⁵; and this, again, is the significance of the virgins' being of the household of the

Bridegroom. It is most necessary for us, therefore, if all is to be well with us, that we keep our faculties chaste, virginal at least in the sense of a restored virginity to which St. Augustine alludes.⁴⁶

The modern mentality seeks freedom in pushing sensory experience *a l'outrance*,⁴⁷ ignoring that our experiential limits are fixed and determined by nature and that an excess of sensory and aesthetic experience can only produce discontent, if not abnormalities and abominations; in approaching too frequently or endeavoring to exceed these limits, we invite satanic control. The foolish virgins were not so foolish as to deny completely their obligations to the Bridegroom; they wanted security and respectability—and also excitement. They preferred dalliance with their own riotous passions to His peace. They preferred the life of the senses, which life is His death. His death is our life, and *vice versa*, in several understandings of this statement. "He who would come after Me, let him deny himself..."⁴⁸ The foolish virgins preferred not to know Him until too late. But for every soul there must be a confrontation, a judgment, whether for her weal or woe. God comes to us in the quiescence of the senses,⁴⁹ and the restless senses have not the strength to exclude Him forever, for their strength is from Him. Inevitably, their agitation will end—probably unexpectedly.

The path, however, of the chosen, of the wise virgins, is the return to Paradise, to the primordial condition of man. "We must become again what the first man was in his first state of life... Still stranger to the pleasures of sight and taste, he placed all his delight in the Lord alone. One must, therefore, having renounced the illusions of sight and taste (and of all the senses) adhere to the only true good".⁵⁰ Achieved in its perfection, this is the consummation of the Lesser Mysteries, the return to Paradise, the primordial state. Cardinal Danielou adds: "C'est là le terme même de la vie spirituelle, qui ne connaît plus au delà de lui que l'extase".⁵¹ This is indeed a consummation devoutly to be wished, but it is not the eternal life which consists in the knowledge in act of the one true God, and of Jesus Christ the unique Word uttered by the Father⁵²; which *gnosis*, perfected in and by the Holy Spirit, is a perfect identity, a most true deification, inadequately if at all implied by the word ecstasy. The parable under discussion implies this ultimate deification.

"The restoration of the paradisaic state by the spiritual life has as its essential object the dissipation of the illusion of sensory enjoyments and to give back to man the taste for God".⁵³ "Sight, taste and the other senses relax the memory of the heart when we make use of them without discretion. Our mother Eve teaches us this. While she was not complacently regarding the tree of the commandment, she carefully remembered the divine precept"⁵⁴ ... The doctrine of spiritual senses by which we become capable of this taste for God, plays an essential role here... The originality of Gregory is that this doctrine is not only the expression of the... *dulcedo Dei*... it also attaches to his anthropology; it represents... the true nature of man, that of the first Adam".⁵⁵ Certainly there are in the Christian Scriptures many references to the sensory perception of the Divine.⁵⁶ These references, however, should not be over-emphasized. Origin gives the clue⁵⁷ ... nothing that is sensible is true. Yet though the sensible is other than the true, it does not follow that the sensible is false, for the sensible may have an analogy with the intellectual and not everything that is not true can correctly be called false". "Man has to put under himself the things that God has made, even the soul herself as to her powers... the soul must withdraw into those powers which can work to perfection in the body, i.e., love and knowledge. In those twin powers the soul pours out of and dies to the world. For knowing God, I want no eyes (or ears); that needs another, spiritual, knowing... the less preoccupied and freer the powers of the soul the better,

wider open they will be to receive and conceive and the greater is their bliss... Doctors declare concerning the inner senses that these are of two kinds, the highest and the lowest. The lowest come between the highest and the outward senses, and to these outward ones are near allied. What the eye sees or the ear hears is straightway seized by desire, provided it pleases, and conveyed to the critical faculty which considers it well and, if lawful, passes it on to the superior powers which take it and carry it up to the chief power, without likeness, for this power admits neither image nor likeness. It is called *sinderesis*, and is all one with the soul's nature, a spark of the divine nature... It is without stain, perfectly pure and wholly superior to temporal things... anything that enters here must be freed from multiplicity and sensible affections. The powers of the soul, outer and inner are all summed up in this..."⁵⁸ Finally, "it behooves us to pray hard so that all our mortal members with their powers—eyes, ears, heart, mouth and all the senses—are turned in that direction, and we must never stop until we find ourselves on the point of union with Him we have in mind and are praying to, God namely".⁵⁹

Such is the lamp of the five wise virgins and the oil by which it is fed. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins is a parable of concentration, of ingathering.⁶⁰ It depicts the introversion of the faculties, the reversal of the "normal" outflow and dispersal of our attention by which we "get and spend and lay waste our powers". It represents the purification and spiritualization of all the human faculties so that they are made worthy to participate in the nuptial festivities of the Bridegroom and bride. The individuality is not abandoned, at least at this point; rather the parable represents the integral perfection of the individuality preliminary to its definitive transcendence. This is the perfection of the image, of which St. Gregory spoke; the separate faculties are not lost, in spite of a seeming death, but are perfected and transformed. Purged of the stains of a sensitive memory,⁶¹ of associations and identifications with their respective elements,⁶² the faculties regain an ethereal and virginal purity and unity which aptly may be termed "the bridal chamber of the Lord", "the Paradise of the Second Adam".⁶³

The five wise virgins, found ready at the advent of the Lord, enter the nuptial chamber; there is no further distinction between these five and the bride. The *janua coeli*⁶⁴ is now definitively open; the soul, perfected and fully integrated is:

remade, reborn, like a sun-wakened tree
that spreads new foliage to the Spring dew
in sweetest freshness, healed of Winter's scars;
perfect, pure, and prepared to mount up to the stars.⁶⁵

* * *

Outwardly, there was little to distinguish between the five foolish and the five wise virgins, until the Lord's advent. Then, in the middle of the night, in the quietude of sense, in death, in change of state, was posed the crisis of distinction. The Lord knew His own, and He who knows all things denied knowledge of the five foolish virgins. The foolish found no profit in companionship with the wise,⁶⁶ and the wise knew the limits of their compassion for the foolish.⁶⁷ If grace is prevalent, response is unique; and the response cannot be shared, it is a personal entelechy. The answer of the wise virgins to the foolish when asked for oil was not that of those who give counsel, but of those who mock.⁶⁸ But it was in the spirit of the Divine Wisdom:

Since I have called you and
you have refused me

Since I have beckoned and none
has taken notice
Since you have ignored all my advice
and rejected all my warnings,
I, for my part, will laugh at your distress
I will jeer at you when calamity comes.⁶⁹

"Lord, Lord, open to us", they cried. "Amen, I say to you, I do not know you". By nature He could not be ignorant; their knocking and their entreaty compel a manner of recognition, but His "*non agnosco*" refers to His will. The Lord rejects those who put away from themselves the knowledge of Himself.⁷⁰ If we do not know God, God does not know us. *Ascendere ad Deum, hoc est intrare in seipsum*. "Go thy way; if thou know not thyself, then go thy way. But if thou know thyself, then enter in".⁷¹ Then shall we know even as we are known.⁷²

"Watch, therefore, for you know not the day nor the hour". This frequently repeated admonition shows us not only our ignorance of our departure hence, but also our ignorance of ourselves, of our own nature. It is, of course, a warning of the inadequacy of a merely conventional rectitude; but it is much more a call to diligence, to the concentration and focus of all one's energies on the one thing needful.⁷³ The parable is stark, rigorous and final in the judgment of the foolish virgins. "Where was the profit of virginity, when they saw not the Bridegroom?⁷⁴ And not even when they knocked did they obtain, but they heard the fearful saying: Depart, I know you not... Seest thou not only the spoiler, and the covetous, not only the doer of evil things, but also he that doth not good things is punished with extreme punishment".⁷⁵

In *Byzantine Painting*, by Andre Grabar (Skira, 1953) there is reproduced (p. 163) an illumination from the Rossano Gospel (VI Cent., Codex Papyrus, Cathedral Treasury, Rossano, Calabria, Italy) illustrating the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. "The obvious anxiety of the foolish virgins in their bright garments contrasts with the staid demeanor of the wise, aggrandized and ennobled by their rectitude. Behind them Christ is closing the Gate of Paradise, a garden bathed in limpid light in which we glimpse the four streams of living water and the white radiance of the blessed".⁷⁶ In a private collection, a similar painting depicts the Christ with His right hand raised in sign of rejection, as He stands behind the closed Gate of Paradise, while the five wise virgins move upstream. Above, the circling stars surround a cross in the zenith of the midnight sky.

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*Quinque prudentes virgines acceperunt oleum in vasus suis cum lampidibus; media autem nocte clamor factus est: Ecce sponsus venit: exite obviam Christo Domino.*⁷⁷

¹ Cf. Dante, *Purgatorio*, esp. Cantos XXVIII-XXXIII.

² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*.

³ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.10: The author of Holy Scripture is God, in Whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by word only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science [Sacred Doctrine] has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore the first signification whereby words signify things

belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division. For as the Apostle says (Heb. X, 1) the Old Law is a figure of the New Law, and as Dionysius says the "New Law itself is a figure of future glory" (*De Eccles. Hier. V, 2*). Again in the New Law, whatever our Head (i.e., Christ) has done is a type of what we ought to do. Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are signs of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as these signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the analogical sense. Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Scripture is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting... if even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Scripture would have several senses.

Cf. also, René Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*: Apart from their dependence on their principles, all things would be mere non-entity... Historical [and social] facts likewise conform to the law of correspondence... and thereby in their own mode translate higher realities, of which they are a human expression.

And *Summa Theologica* I.10.2: The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled; and its truth so far remains that it does not allow the minds of those to whom the revelation has been made, to rest in the likenesses, but raises them to the knowledge of intelligible truths... the very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds, and as a defense against the ridicule of unbelievers.

⁵ Cf. Decalogue, *deca—logos*.

⁶ That some recent translations read "torch" rather than lamp is not a substantive point for the meaning of the parable. Moreover, archaeologists have discovered lamps in the form of torches used about this time in ancient Israel.

⁷ Cf. *The Interpreter's Bible*, later editions; Abingdon Press.

⁸ The vegetative, sensitive, appetitive, locomotive and intellectual; cf. *De Anima* II, 3.

⁹ Cf. Mathila Ghyka, *Philosophie et mystique du nombre*.

¹⁰ Sermo XLIII.

¹¹ And, by implication, the called of every orthodox tradition.

¹² *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*.

¹³ *St. Luke*, XII, 49.

¹⁴ Cf. *St. Matthew*, VI, 7: But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face...

¹⁵ R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, and the Soul*.

¹⁶ *St. Matthew XXV*, 14ff; it is very significant for the meaning of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins that it is followed immediately by that of the talents.

¹⁷ St. Ireneus.

¹⁸ Cf. the Old Testament symbolism of God as Bridegroom and Israel as bride, and the prophetic castigations of Israel as adulteress; also, Christ's strictures against the Jews: "An evil and an adulterous generation seeketh after a sign..." *St. Matthew XII, 39* and XVI, 4.

¹⁹ The importance of the wedding feast, or more generally the banquet of love, as a symbol of union with the Lord cannot be over-emphasized whether in this or other parables; cf. *St. Matt. XXII, 1-15*:... *Simile factum est regnum caelorum homini regi qui fecit nuptias filio suo*... And *St. Luke XV*, 11ff., esp. 23 and 24.

²⁰ This suspicion may have been a factor in the exterior manner in which this parable has usually been interpreted.

²¹ Cf. *Specie tua et pulchritudine tua intende propere procede et regna*... *Concupivit Rex decorum tuum, quoniam ipse est Dominus Deus tuus. Audi, filia, et vide, et inclina aurem tuam. With thy comeliness and thy beauty, Set out, proceed prosperously and reign*... The King hath greatly desired thy beauty, for He is the Lord thy God, Harken, O daughter, and see, and incline thy ear. Ps. XLIV, 5, 10-13; used in the Common of the feasts of virgins.

²² "Kiss the joy as it flies", it cannot be other than transient. Most men and women are only would-be lovers.

²³ Cf. *St. Matthew XIII*, 16, also 14, 15.

²⁴ *Quodvultdeus*, II, VI, 10.

²⁵ Cf. Lanzo del Vasto, *Commentaire sur l'Evangile*.

²⁶ *St. Matthew XIII*, 30.

²⁷ Menucius Felix, *Octavius*.

²⁸ Corporally, the noblest part of the individual.

²⁹ *Genesis* I, 26, 27; II, 7-9.

³⁰ Elsewhere the concept of *hegemonikon* is truly metaphysical; cf. Origen, *Commentary of John*: John's... testimony is that His previous existence or "pre-eminent being" extends unto all the world, in rational souls.

Consider whether, because in the midst of the whole body is the heart and the ruling principle (*ἡγεμονικόν*=*hegemonikon*) in the heart, "there standeth in the midst of you one whom ye know not" (St. John I, 26), may be understood of the *logos* in each.

³¹ Quoted in Jean Danielou, *Platonisme et theologie mystique*. Like Diodach, the Christian Greek, the ancient Greeks recognized a *thumos* which draws men upward and an *epithumia* which drags them down. In St. Anthony (of the Desert), there is to be found a remarkable parallel to doctrine of the three *gunas* of Hindu cosmological theory. In speaking of the three wills in man, St. Anthony mentions "first... the will of God perfect and saving; second the will of man, not necessarily pernicious, but certainly not in itself a saving will; and thirdly, the demonic will seeking our perdition", quoted in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.

³² *The Creation of Man*.

³³ *Ibid.*, chap. XX.

³⁴ Cf. I *Cor.* II, 15.

³⁵ II *Tim.* II, 19.

³⁶ *Exod.* XXXIII, 17.

³⁷ *St. Matthew VII*, 23; also XXV, 12: *I know you not*. Cf. also the legal expression, "carnal knowledge". And finally, consider the notion of "disinterested scientific knowledge" in the light of this remarkable epistemology. For further enlightening comment thereon, see Jean Danielou, *Platonisme et theologie mystique*.

³⁸ Cf. *Summa Theologica I*, 49.3: For the good of man as regards the senses of the body is not the good of man as man, but [rather] the good according to reason. More men, however, follow sense...

³⁹ i.e., it is formless.

⁴⁰ *Genesis* II, 6.

⁴¹ Cf. *Ps.* CXLIII, 4.

⁴² Emphasis added

⁴³ Even hedonists, or the more sophisticated among them, counsel the periodic relaxation and emptying of the faculties, though obviously with quite other ends in mind.

⁴⁴ *Meister Eckhart*, vol. I, Sermon LVII; translated by C. de B. Evans.

⁴⁵ *Summa Theologica I*, 79.4; cf. also *Ps.* XXXVI, 10: By Thy light shall we see light; *Wisdom I*, 6: God is the witness of his loins, the faithful keeper of his heart; and his words, He understands; *Wisdom* II, 15:... imperishable is the root of the understanding. Also, *Ps.* XCIV, 11; *Ps.* CIII, 14; *Jeremias* XI, 20; *Acts XV*, 8; and *Romans* VIII, 26, 27.

⁴⁶ *Sermo XLIII*.

⁴⁷ Cf. At the end of time there are going to be people who sneer at religion and follow nothing but their own desires for wickedness. *Jude 18*.

⁴⁸ *St. Mark* VIII, 34.

⁴⁹ Which is to say that we go to God in the repose of the senses, the *vacare Deo*, which is far from being mere passivity. "While all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, Thy Almighty Word, O Lord, came down from heaven, from Thy royal throne", Introit of the Mass for the Sunday in the octave of Christmas.

⁵⁰ St Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on the Soul and the Resurrection*; quoted in Jean Danielou, *Platonisme et theologie mystique*.

⁵¹ Danielou, *op. cit.*

⁵² Cf. *St. John* XVII, 3.

⁵³ Danielou, *Platonisme...*

⁵⁴ Doidach of Photikos, quoted in *La Petite Philocalie de la priere du coeur*, edited by Jean Gouillard.

⁵⁵ Danielou, *Platonisme...*

⁵⁶ To cite only the most familiar: *Ps.* XXXIII, 9, "O taste and see that the Lord is sweet".

⁵⁷ *Commentary on John*.

⁵⁸ *Meister Eckhart*, vol. II, Sermon XLVII, Book of Benedictus, and Sermon IX; translated by C. de B. Evans.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, In collationibus, 2.

⁶⁰ Cf. *St. Matthew* XII, 30: He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.

⁶¹ Doidach of Photikos compares the active penetration of the abyss of faith to a Lethean lustration, *La Petite Philocalie...*

⁶² *Summa Theologica I*, 78.3:... nature provided various mediums for the various senses, according to what suited the acts of the powers... to be cognizant of the natures of sensible qualities does not pertain to the senses, but to the intellect.

⁶³ Titles of the Blessed Virgin. Cf. Philo Judaeus, *Allegory of the Sacred Laws I*, 45-46: "Paradise is the symbolical name for virtue. It is planted in the East, for virtue never sleeps, nor does it cease; as the rising sun fills all darkness with light, so when virtue arises in the soul, it enlightens its night and dispels its darkness".

In the Earthly Paradise, Dante encounters seven nymphs, who represent the perfection of virtue: the Holy Seven, the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues.

Here we are nymphs; stars are we in the skies.
Ere Beatrice went to earth we were ordained
her handmaids. We will lead you to her eyes;
but that your own may see what joyous light
shines in them, yonder Three, who see more deeply
will sharpen and instruct your mortal sight.

Purgatorio XXXI.

Seven is the number of virginity.

⁶⁴ Gate of Heaven; along with the two in the paragraph above, titles of Virgin Mary.

⁶⁵ Dante, *Purgatorio XXXIII*.

⁶⁶ Cf. St. John Chrysostom, *Concerning the Statues*, Homily VI.

⁶⁷ Cf. *St. Luke XVI*, 19ff.

⁶⁸ St. Augustine, *Sermo XLIII*.

⁶⁹ Proverbs I, 25, 26.

⁷⁰ Cf. St. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate IX*, and St. Athanasius, *Letter VII*, Easter 335.

⁷¹ St. Augustine, *Sermo LXXXIII*.

⁷² Cf. *I Cor. XI*, 12.

⁷³ "... there exists a lack of receptivity [or co-operation with grace] which is accompanied by no express gestures of refusal or rejection, which is simply *inattention*... the conditions of modern life *almost* compel such inattention... It is an error as common as it is fatal... to think that 'truth may be approached *without homage*' ". Josef Peiper, *Belief and Faith*; phrase in quotes from Cardinal Newman; emphasis added.

⁷⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily LXXVIII*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* Cf. *I Cor. IX*, 24: Know you not that they that run in the race, all run indeed, but one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain.

⁷⁶ *Byzantine Painting*, p. 160.

⁷⁷ Communion verse, Mass of a virgin not a martyr.