



## INTRODUCTION

Four hundred years ago the name of Denis the Carthusian was one that most educated people knew, and his writings were cited by scholars throughout Europe. But who, beyond the confines of his order, reads him now? Most educated people have never heard of him, and although his works may be found in older libraries, few are the scholars who consult them. With this situation in mind, Sr Íde Ní Riain has rendered into English a selection of his writings on prayer, and the clear and readable versions she has produced invite us to consider anew the qualities of thought and style that made him famous.

### *Life*

Denis the Carthusian was born at Rijkel, in the Flemish-speaking part of modern Belgium, in 1402 or 1403. As a child, he attended day school in the nearby town of Saint Truiden, and when he was thirteen he went to boarding school in Zwolle, where he became proficient in Latin, the language in which he later composed his works. From an early age he showed a strong inclination to prayer and study, and by the time he left school in his late teens he had decided to become a monk. He asked to be accepted as a novice in two Charterhouses, one of them at Roermond (in modern Holland), but because he was under twenty, the minimum age allowed, neither could admit him. Instead he went to Cologne, on the advice of the prior of Roermond, in order to study philosophy and theology, and when he returned three years later, having obtained a degree, he joined the Roermond community.

As a monk, Denis lived the life of solitude, silence and seclusion that the Carthusian rule required. He joined his brethren for the night office and the conventual mass, and occasionally for recreation, but otherwise he stayed in his cell, where he said the remaining hours of the divine office privately. Believing that the most perfect life was a blend of contemplation and action, he divided his day into two, devoting the first part to prayer and the second to study and writing, and this remained his pattern for almost fifty years, with only occasional interruptions. As knowledge of his writings spread, he was approached for advice and guidance by people of all conditions, religious, clerical and lay, and he readily complied with their requests, conscious, despite his reclusion, of the troubles afflicting the society of his time.

In August 1451, Denis left his monastery for seven months in order to accompany Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) on a journey through the Low Countries and the Rhineland, during which they visited parishes and religious communities to encourage renewal and reform. Later, in 1465, he left Roermond again to help found a new charterhouse in Bois le Duc, but the enterprise taxed his health, which up to then had been

robust, and after four years he returned, a sick man. The months following were tranquil, despite his infirmity, and it was at Roermond, at the age of sixty-nine, that he died, in 1471.

### Writings

Denis was a prolific writer, and he penned over one hundred and fifty works, which occupy, in the most recent edition, forty-two large tomes. The range of his interests was equally vast, extending to every aspect of theology, and his writings vary accordingly in the subjects that they treat. Despite their diversity, however, they do not lack unity of theme, but are shaped by three great enthusiasms to which he often refers.

First among these was Scripture, which Denis knew in the *Vulgate*, the Latin version associated with Saint Jerome (341–420). It formed the core of his monastic round: the recitation of the office, with its readings and psalms, and the prayerful rumination of *lectio divina*. One of his first works was a commentary on the psalter, and he went on to comment in detail on every book of the Bible, dwelling in turn on its two senses, literal and spiritual. Hostile to the exegesis of Nicholas of Lyre (1270–1349), which was welcomed by his contemporaries, he turned for inspiration to the Fathers of the Church (Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory), and to monastic writers before the twelfth century, such as Saint Bede (673–735), who had developed and transmitted their readings. In all that he wrote he quoted Scripture frequently, and he moved at ease between the Old Testament and the New, seeing in both the one mystery of Christ. He was also a keen advocate of affective meditation on the Gospels, a practice that had been made popular by the writings of his fellow Carthusian, Ludolph of Saxony (1300–78).

Denis' second enthusiasm was the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), which he encountered as a student in Cologne. He deplored the theology of his own day, especially the currents associated with John Duns Scotus (1265–1308) and William of Ockham (1285–1347), preferring instead an earlier scholasticism, ascendant before the fourteenth century, which Saint Thomas, in his view, exemplified. One of his most ambitious works was a study of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (1100–60), then the standard text in all theology courses, in which he drew together and summarised the ideas of previous commentators. Significantly, all those he chose were active before 1300. He also wrote a résumé of the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas himself, and he cites him throughout his works, differing from him only rarely in matters of substance, and then usually to agree with Saint Albert (d. 1280), who had been Thomas' master.

Denis' third enthusiasm was the thought of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, whom he revered as a sure guide in the realm of mystical theology. Since the late twelfth century, Western writings on contemplation had been strongly influenced by this Greek author, who is nowadays thought to have lived in Syria early in the sixth century. For Denis and his contemporaries, however, he was the convert of Saint Paul mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles* (17:34), and therefore deserving of the greatest respect. Denis was familiar with the views of late medieval commentators on the Areopagite, including those of Thomas Gallus (d. 1246), one of the earliest and most

influential, and in his writings he developed the interpretations they had advanced, though without always agreeing with their ideas. He also wrote a detailed commentary of his own, based on the ancient Latin version of John Scotus Eriugena (810–77). His reverence for the Areopagite was such that it determined how he approached later writers on prayer, such as the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381) whom he esteemed as 'another Dionysius', and it marked his own treatises on the subject, including those collected in this volume: *The Fount of Life*, an anthology of texts drawn from various of his works; *Prayer; Meditation*, which he composed at the end of his life; and *Contemplation*.

### Times

Denis may be seen as reflecting in his writings the crisis of theology that befell, and eventually destroyed, the late medieval Church. It has been shown, for instance, that much though he loved the spiritual interpretation of Scripture practised by the Fathers he did not fully understand its true nature, which had long become obscured, and he has been described as a deeply conservative writer who longed for the kind of synthesis that Saint Thomas and others had once achieved, but that was no longer feasible in his time. As Denys Turner has put it so aptly, in his book *The Darkness of God*, 'he wrote at a point very late in the Middle Ages where it was possible to perceive rather clearly what was happening; but it was both too late to prevent it, too early to see that preventing it was no longer possible' (pp. 224–5).

Denis' adherence to tradition, however, was more radical than reactionary. He desired to renew theology by returning to its sources, and although his medieval learning did not equip him for the task, the direction in which he headed anticipated in many ways the route that Catholic theology followed, under the impact of humanism, in the half century after his death. His cultivation of Scripture and the Fathers, for instance, foreshadowed in a monastic context the enterprise of Erasmus (1464/9–1536), who hoped by his editions of the Fathers and his work on the Greek New Testament to renew the spiritual interpretation of the Bible. Denis' preference for Aquinas, similarly, anticipated the revival of Thomism, initially in Paris and then in Salamanca, during the early 1500s, a revival that culminated later in the century when Saint Thomas took the place of Peter Lombard in the curriculum. And his devotion to the Areopagite, which looked back to John Scotus Eriugena and Thomas Gallus, also looked forward to the neoplatonism of Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), whose elegant translation of some of the Areopagite's works was printed with Denis' commentary in early sixteenth-century editions.

The congruence between Denis' sympathies and these movements of reform, which were gathering pace outside the cloister in his day, helps to explain the popularity that his writings eventually enjoyed. During the 1520s the Carthusians of Cologne, aware of the impending Reformation schism and anxious to forestall it, decided to publish his works, which had hitherto circulated in manuscript, and in the decades that followed they brought out fifty-seven volumes, many of which were subsequently reprinted. To readers of the period, whose outlook had been influenced

by the Renaissance, Denis' medieval mindset must have seemed old-fashioned, but they appear to have recognised in him a kindred spirit who shared many of their concerns, and they certainly valued the range of his knowledge, which they captured in a memorable tag: *Qui Dionysium legit, nihil non legit* (Whoever reads Denis, reads everything).

### The writer

It has been said that Denis was not a great writer, and it is true that he has his *longueurs*, but he possessed the skills of a communicator, and his writings, at their best, are pleasant to read, and sometimes compelling. His gifts and limitations may both be seen in his unassuming treatise on *Prayer*, in which he comes before us as a teacher, ready to pass on the wisdom of a tradition that he knows well. Like a good teacher, intent on clarity and concision, he divides his exposition into short chapters that may be read in brief bursts of *lectio*, and the syntax of his sentences is to the point, and rarely convoluted. From occasional allusions to the office, we realise that he is writing for monks, yet if we are not monks ourselves we do not feel excluded, since he directs our attention to what is essential in the Christian life common to all. Each chapter is shaped like a homily, with a quotation from Scripture at its head to sum up the theme, and his normal procedure is to enunciate a general principle and then cite authorities that support it. Among these authorities the Bible has primacy, followed by the Fathers, monastic writers up to the time of Saint Bernard (1090–1153), notably John Cassian (360–after 430) and John Climacus (570–649), and Saint Thomas.

To illustrate the points he wishes to make, Denis sometimes introduces imaginary tales or *exempla*, and usually these are about characters (a king, a judge, a doctor, a merchant) whose stories now seem dated. He also has a fifteenth-century liking for long lists that modern readers may find tedious, and he can be, to our eyes, rather credulous about legends associated with the saints. These features, however, are offset by the relationship that he builds up with us, his readers. From an early stage he adopts a speaking voice in which he addresses us directly, asking rhetorical questions, and including himself with us, at times, in the first-person plural. At one moment he even pictures himself sitting at our side as we jot down a plan for prayer on lined paper (Chapter 20). His intention, we see, is not just to inform us but to move our will, and bring us to conversion of heart.

As we read, we see, too, that Denis' comprehensive learning is not diffuse but focused. In Chapter 10, for instance, on tears, he summarises succinctly a cross-section of differing views on their desirability and role, before going on to reach some firm conclusions of his own. Later, in Chapter 18, he shows that in Scripture and tradition there is no consensus about whether prayer should be brief or prolonged, and then presents a personal view in which he seeks to be fair to both sides. In such passages we learn to respect both his learning, which provides us with an overview, and his judgment, which directs us in our prayer. He is, we feel, an experienced and reliable guide, with a connatural understanding of the issues involved.

The authorial presence that Denis creates enables him, in addition, to instruct us by example, and not by precept alone. He provides prayers of his own devising, for instance, to show us how to begin, and to encourage us to compose, in turn, extempore prayers for

ourselves. Chapters 31–39, almost a quarter of the whole, voice an uninterrupted paean of praise, directed to God. At one point he states that he is writing, not for contemplatives, but for those who are beginners (Chapter 25), yet it is as a contemplative that he addresses us, able and eager to lead us to our goal. For him, as he makes abundantly clear, contemplation is the end to which all prayer leads, and his tone alters whenever he evokes it, becoming suffused with excitement. In such ways he not only affirms the truths about prayer that he wishes us to know, but he shows us, by his own response, what heartfelt prayer really means.

### Contemplation

Denis' treatise on *Contemplation* is the fullest statement that we have of his thinking on a subject to which he devoted his life. Like all his works, it is based on a thorough study of previous writers, whose names he lists in the second of its three books. He treats their views with respect, even reverence, and when they disagree among themselves he seeks for the common ground that unites them, guided by a principle that he states in vivid terms:

We must not pass beyond the ancient bounds our fathers have fixed. On the contrary, we should take our stand upon the sound teachings of Sacred Scripture and the Catholic Fathers. It is not for us to have the impudence to add something from out of our own heads, unless we are quite certain that it is in harmony with the sentiments of Scripture and the Fathers. (Book 1, Chapter 29)

Contemplation, he explains, is essentially knowledge of God, and, in its highest form, an anticipation in this world of the beatific vision promised in the next. But in what, precisely, does this knowledge consist? Denis formulates his answer with three general principles in mind.

The first principle is God's transcendence. Following the Areopagite, Denis affirms that the Creator may be known through His Creation, which reflects His being and its beauty, but, because He also transcends all things, this knowledge is strictly limited. In Himself He is a mystery, beyond anything we can imagine or conceive, and He cannot ultimately be 'known' in the usual sense of the word. Contemplation, therefore, in its most perfect form, is 'negative' knowledge, an encounter with the divine in which the intellect is placed, paradoxically, in both darkness and light.

The second principle has to do with human nature. According to William of Ockham and his school, the transcendence of God was such that no necessary correlation could be said to exist between the spiritual aspirations of men and women and His inscrutable will. Denis rejected this view utterly, and, taking his lead from Aquinas, he argues that in contemplation the deepest needs of our nature are fulfilled. Logically, therefore, he refers with interest to the writings of non-Christians (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, the Arab philosophers), believing that in their humanity they can bear witness to the properties of contemplation, a natural gift that the Spirit brings to perfection in the Church.

The third principle concerns the relation in contemplation between knowledge and love, an issue that Denis inherited from previous writers of the late Middle Ages. He

disagreed with those, like Thomas Gallus, who had affirmed that contemplation involves the will, not the intellect, and he argues in his treatise that both faculties are concerned, although in different ways. Love is the energy that empowers the soul's ascent to contemplation, and the knowledge of God in which contemplation consists finds its fullest expression in love renewed. For Denis, the experience of union that contemplation provides engages and transforms the whole soul.

#### Further Reading

There is no critical edition of Denis' works, no general study in English of his thought. Early in the last century the Carthusians republished, with some modifications that are not always signalled, the original editions of Cologne: *Doctoris ecstatici D. Dionysii cartusiani Opera omnia*, 42 vols (Montreuil, Tournai and Parkminster, 1896–1935); copies are still available from Saint Hugh's Charterhouse, Henfield Road, Partridge Green, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 8EB. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), has a fine chapter on Denis' understanding of contemplation. The same author's *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995) examines Denis' approach to Scripture, and provides a translation of part of his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. The crisis in late medieval theology is analysed in depth in Anthony Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation: The Intellectual Genesis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). Two studies in French may be recommended also: the article by Anselme Stoelen entitled 'Denys le Chartreux' in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 3 cols 430–49, and the pages on Denis in Henri de Lubac SJ, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vols (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64), vol. 4, pp. 363–7 (an English translation of this great work is currently in progress).

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