

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life: Ven. John of St Samson's Mystagogical Guidance to Mgr Antoine Révol in *L'Aiguillon*

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The Bishop and the lay brother

In the Cathedral of Saint-Samson, the ancient seat of the Bishop of Dol, a beautiful nineteenth-century stained glass window in the apsidal chapel portrays Mgr Antoine Révol, Bishop of Dol. The medallion beneath the hieratic portrait of the Archbishop depicts a critical incident in the life of Mgr Révol during his tenure. He is blessing roaring waves that threaten to engulf the Church while holding the Eucharistic host in one hand in the moment of consecration. Antoine Révol was at the helm of the Diocese for twenty-five years, from 1604 to 1629. He was appointed bishop on 5 November 1603, after the nomination by King Henry IV in 1602. Two months later, on 6 January 1604, he was consecrated in Saint Martin des Champs, in Paris, by the Archbishop of Aix Paul Hurault de l'Hospital.¹ In his ecclesiastical

¹ Joseph Bergin, *The Making of French Episcopate 1589-1661* (Yale University Press 1996), 690. The Principal Co-Consecrators were Bishop Gaspar Dinet and Bishop Claude D'Ormy. See: "Diocese of Dol. Diocesis Dolensis. Suppressed to: Diocese of Rennes and Diocese of Saint-Brieuc," in *The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Current and Historical Information about its Bishops and Dioceses*: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dd511.html> (accessed on 28 July 2020). See also Jean de Saint-Samson, *L'éguillon, les flammes, les flesches, et le miroir de l'amour de Dieu, propres pour enamourer l'ame de Dieu en Dieu mesme*, Vacare Deo – 8, edition, introduction et commentaire par Hein Blommestijn, O.Carm. (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1987), 123. Hereafter

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

career, he was the Regular Canon of the Saint Ruf de Valence Abbey, where it seems he met Saint Francis de Sales. Later on, this proved to be a significant encounter. Subsequently, he was appointed Canon and Cantor of the Cathedral of Dol. Mgr Révol started his career as a simple cleric. He obtained a doctorate *in utroque iure*, was ordained as a sub-deacon and eventually became the twenty-ninth Bishop of Dol as his cousin Enemond Révol ceded his nomination to the seat in his favour.² Mgr Révol was installed in his Diocese on 20 February 1604. The cenotaph erected in his honour in the Cathedral of Dol commemorates him with the following words as an exemplary and pious bishop:

To God most good and most great (D.O.M.). Stop, traveller, you will gain by this stay. Here we present before you, either an example to follow, or the memory of a pure life to be venerated. A very illustrious man, Antoine of the province of Dauphiné, from the family of Révol who, worthy of his ancestors, dedicated with distinction his younger years to one and the other militia, finally reaching the age of maturity he gave himself only to the militia of Christ. He was first in his country, abbot of Saint Ruf, then, in Armorica, bishop of this Church of Dol; he governed it for 25 years, devoted himself to it completely, and taking care that no one could regret not seeing in him either the piety that a bishop should have, or the courage that befits a count. He vigorously claimed for his seat the delighted honor of holding the first rank in the States of this province; regarding the monasteries present in this city, he prompted one to a more strict piety and founded another himself; once, to calm the unusual fury of the sea he made his way to the beach to perform a religious ceremony, where as a result of fatigue and bad air, he contracted a fever which made him suffer for nine days and finished him on the tenth. This in the Year of Salvation 1629, on the 6th day of August; in his death he distributed all his goods in pious gifts. He took care that in this chapel, every day and in perpetuity, the eternal sacrifice shall be offered for the relief of his soul. What more do you expect from a great prelate?³

Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*. Citations for this contribution will be taken from this critical edition, indicating the name of the editor rather than that of Jean de Saint-Samson, to distinguish it clearly from other editions of the text. When in some cases other editions are consulted, this will be indicated in the footnote.

² Enemond was Councillor of the Grand Council and Secretary to the State during the reign of Henry III and Henry IV: Abbé Tresvaux, *L'église de Bretagne depuis ses commencements jusqu'à nos jours, ou histoire des sièges épiscopaux, séminaires et collégiales, abbayes et autres communautés régulières et séculières de cette province; publiée d'après les matériaux de Dom Hyacinthe Maurice de Beaubois* (Paris: Méquignon Junior, 1839), 292-293.

³ D. O. M. SISTE, VIATOR, MORAE, PRETIUM FRERES, HIC VITAE PURTORIS VEL SECTANDA NORMA, VEL COLENDAM MEMORIA TIBI SUCJIBITUR, VIR MAXIMUS ANTONIUS, PATRA, DELPHINUS, GENERE

Charlò Camilleri

Indeed Antoine Révol governed his Diocese by making regular synods, frequent pastoral visits and founding new religious houses while reforming the others already present.⁴ He also reserved a special place in his ministry to care for the orphans and visit the sick.⁵ It is also known that the pious bishop, advised by his friend Francis de Sales, acquired a small library of spiritual books and assiduously read Louis de Granada and Juan de Avila.⁶ This shows that Mgr Révol was

RÈVOLIUS, HAUD IMPAR MAJORIBUS SUIS, ANNI JUNIORIBUS UTRAMQUE MILITIAM PROFESSUS EGREGIE, TAMDEM AETATE MATURIORI UNICE CHRISTI MILITIAE SE ADDIXIT. PRIMUM APUD SUOS SANCTIRUFFI ABBAS, DEIN APUD ARMORICOS HUIUS DOLENSIS ECCLESIAE PRAESUL EFFECTUS EST, EAM REXIT ANNIS 25, PRORSUS INCUMBENS ILLI, CAVENSQUE NE QUAE DEBET, VEL AB EPISCOPO PIESTAS, VEL A COMITE FORTITUDO, A QUOQUAM IN EO DESIDERARI POSSET. CATHEDRAE SVAE CONVULSUM HONOREM TENENDI PRIMAS IN COMITIBUS HUIUS PROVINCLAE PENITUS ASSERUIT; MONASTERIUM HAC IN URBE EXISTENTIUM UNUM AD STRICTIOREM PIETATEM COMPIIT, ALTERUM E SUO FUNDAVIT; DUM AD COMPESCENDOS TUM TEMPORIS INSOLENTISSIMOS IMPETUS MARIS AD EJUS RIPAM SACRUM FACTURUS ACCEDERET, EX PARTINACIA LABORIS ET AERIS INJURIA FEBRIM CONTRAHIT, A QUA DIEBUS NOVEM VEXATUS, X^o CONFICITUR ANNO R. S. 1629, AD DIEM AUGUSTI SEXTAM; OMNIA SUA MORIENS IN PIA LARGITIONES EFFUDIT, HOC IN SACCELO JUGE SACRIFICIUM JUGITER ED DIEBUS SINGULIS PRO ANIMAE SVAE REMEDIO CURAT OFFERENDUM. QUI A MAGNO PRAESULE MAJUS EXPECTAS? ABI, VIATOR, ET QUAM TIBI OPTAS QUIETEM, EAMDEM EI DEPRECARE. The wording of the cenotaph is taken from: “Cénotaphe de Mgr Antoine de Révol,” in *L’inventaire du patrimoine culturel en Bretagne* (on-line): <http://patrimoine.bzh/gertrude-diffusion/dossier/cenotaphe-de-mgr-antoine-de-revol/84de9e85-cf10-4332-b419-db522c23cefb> (accessed on 2 December 2021). If not indicated otherwise, translations are of the author. In order not to encumber this research paper, original citations will be given in footnotes only in cases when these are taken from an unpublished text or manuscript.

⁴ He was an intimate friend of another holy Bishop, Saint Francis de Sales, founding no less than twenty-nine Visitandine monasteries. Cf. Tresvaux, *L'église de Bretagne*, 292-293. Still extant is the correspondence between the two.

⁵ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 125. Donatien de Saint Nicholas gives a detailed account of the Bishop's attention and care towards the sick, especially lepers. Cf. Donatien de saint Nicholas, *La Vie, les Maximes et partie des Oeuvres du tres excellent contemplatif, le Venerable Fr Ian de Saint Samson aveugle dès le Berceau et Religieux Laic de l'Ordre des Carmes Reformez* (Paris: Denys Thierry, 1651), 161.

⁶ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 124-125. Louis de Granada emphasised the call for all Christians to strive for perfection to become Christlike. He advocated the practice of meditative prayer and the cultivation of virtue as means leading to divine contemplation. Although he was suspected of Illuminist tendencies in his writings, he called for the need of mortification, observance of the commandments and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Cf. Jordan Aumann, 'Louis of

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

acquainted with ascetic and mystical literature. Considering that one of Granada's widely read books was the *Libro de Oración y Meditación*, suspected of illuminism, provides important background for the bishop's request to brother John of Saint Samson to compose for him a spiritual exercise for the benefit of his spiritual life. This perhaps explains why John's exercise immediately hits the reader with a high mystical ideal culminating in aspiration and its lasting effects on the soul. Indeed, in article seven of the exercise, John does mention Granada as the one who 'amply wrote and exposed in detail the first tools and principles of this divine science,'⁷ namely the mystical life. In some ways, this text unwraps a subversion of roles, as after the translation of Pseudo-Dionysus into Latin, and his doctrine being incorporated in theological writings, we have 'a recovery of the notion of the bishop as a hierarchical mediator who brings his subordinates to spiritual perfection.'⁸ Here, a blind lay brother comes from a lax peripheral community, who is initiating a nonetheless pious bishop in spiritual perfection. Thomas Aquinas describes the episcopal 'perfective activity' as 'producing supernatural charity in his subjects by means of his hierarchical actions, above all by preaching.'⁹ It is true that for Aquinas, the religious – already ranking as a *status perfectionis* within the Church – who like the mendicants, were also dedicated to preaching and not solely to contemplation, corresponded to the episcopal *status perfectionis*; however, it is also true that for Dionysus and Aquinas the episcopal state is more superior than the religious state, as the former actively perfects others while the latter are passively brought to perfection.¹⁰

Moreover, as in our case, lay brothers like John of Saint Samson did not partake in the office of preaching like their ordained confrères.

Granada: The Layman's Theologian,' in *Faith and Reason. The Journal of Christendom College* 16, no.2 (1990): 1-10. Juan de Avila, apart from being a model for Catholic priesthood, developed in particular a spiritual doctrine of priesthood in terms of configuration to Christ. Juan de Avila was canonized by Pope Paul VI and declared Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XVI. For a recent study on his doctrine of priesthood, see Bum Sik Min, *Il 'Cuore di Cristo' come centro della spiritualità sacerdotale in San Giovanni d'Avila (1499-1569)*, excerpta ex dissertatione ad Doctoratum in Facultate Theologiae apud Institutum Spiritualitatis Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, (Rome, PUG, 2012).

⁷ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 352.

⁸ Michael G. Sirilla, *The Ideal Bishop. Aquinas' Commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles* (Washington: CUA Press, 2017), 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ For a thorough exposition of Dionysus' and Aquinas' argument for the case, see Sirilla, *The Ideal Bishop*, 33-41.

Charlò Camilleri

One can also point out that brother Jean du Moulin, at the start of his novitiate, took for himself the name of Saint Samson, the first Bishop of Dol and the patron of the city's cathedral.¹¹ These nuances elicit a distinct facet in the relationship between a peripheral blind lay brother and a pious bishop.

In 1606, merely two years after the installation of Mgr. Révol as Bishop of Dol, the thirty-five-year-old John du Moulin was transferred from the Parisian Carmel in Place Maubert to start his novitiate in Dol, in the poorest Carmel in France founded in 1410. He chose this friary to give himself to prayer and to contribute to the French reform project of Touraine. The community counted only three lax friars. He spent his novitiate year alone with no guidance of a Master of Novices except God's. It is here that, while being admitted to the Order with the celebration of the novitiate rite of investiture, he added Samson to his baptismal name of Saint, who was also a monk and reformer of the Church.¹² Michael Brundell sees in the choice of the name also a 'link too with Samson in the Book of Judges who also suffered the affliction of blindness.'¹³ John of Saint Samson will remain in Dol-de-Bretagne until 1612, just enough time for his life to intersect with Mgr. Antoine Révol.

During these six years, the city was tried with outbreaks of the plague. Amidst the crisis, the blind Carmelite lay brother assisted the infected, contracting the plague himself while ministering to the sick and the poor. In this context, Bishop Dol crossed the path of Ven. John. People claimed the latter was healing the sick by laying hands, making the sign of the cross and reciting a 'special' prayer.¹⁴ From the

¹¹ Stefanotti notes with reference to the biblical Samson, that John's blindness had nothing to do with the choice of his religious name. Like the sixth century Bishop St Samson, John at Dol would become known for miraculous healings. Cf. Robert Stefanotti, *The Phoenix of Rennes. The Life and Poetry of John of St Samson, 1571-1636* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 22.

¹² John of Saint Samson will make his profession on 27 June 1607. Yves Jausions, *Jean de Saint-Samson*, with a preface of Mgr Pierre d'Ornellas, CEHS (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2014), 40-42.

¹³ Michael Brundell, 'Brother John of St Samson O.Carm. (1571-1636),' in *Traditions of Spiritual Guidance*, ed. Lavinia Byrne (Collegeville, PA: Liturgical Press, 1991), 223.

¹⁴ He learnt this prayer from the Provincial, who upon visiting the priory handed it to John of St Samson who was sick with fever and malnutrition. The friary was very poor and lacking the basic necessities, and consequentially in the harsh winter it was extremely cold. The prayer was the one recited in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in Rome to heal the sick with fever. Cf. Jausions, *Jean de Saint-Samson*, 45-47. One still finds this prayer printed on holy cards of Ven. John of Saint-Samson: "Que le

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

solitude and hiddenness of the cloister, his fame of sanctity spread like wildfire in the city. Bishop Révol saw to investigate the issue thinking this was a superstitious practice. During an unexpected visit to the friary, accompanied by a theologian, the Bishop furiously witnessed this 'ritual.' Appeased by his theologian's observation, Monsieur Durand, that the apostles made the same gestures, he befriended the humble blind friar and chose him as his spiritual director.¹⁵ Hagiographically, one wonders whether there is also a subtle subversion in this anecdote, as ecclesiastically, bishops are the legitimate successors of the apostles. Here, John is presented as being, in fact, a successor to the apostles as he is the one performing their own acts of healing.

Genesis and ethic of a text

The first biographer of Brother John reports that Mgr Révol's affection towards the saintly blind brother was well known, as 'many religious' recall how he 'cherished his company and his words, and how he frequently conversed with him and that he esteemed him for his holiness and for the miracles he performed at Dol in continuously healing those stricken by fever.'¹⁶ Hein Blommestijn comments that 'from that moment, Antoine Révol was all taken up by brother John's case. He frequented him regularly till the end of his life.'¹⁷ Indeed, at Dol, he frequently visited the saintly brother, at times even thrice a day, and after Ven. John was transferred to Rennes he continued to pay him visits for counsel. It was during the last visit in 1629 that Mgr Révol asked Brother John to compose for him the Spiritual Exercise entitled *L'Aiguillon* or *Le Miroir*.¹⁸ Père Joseph, the first biographer of Brother John, notes the following:

Seigneur Jésus, qui a guéri la belle-mère de saint Pierre attente de la fièvre, soigne Lui-même notre frère/sœur du mal dont il/elle souffre."

¹⁵ Jausions, *Jean de Saint-Samson*, 47.

¹⁶ "Beaucoup de religieux savent comme deffunct Mre Anthoine de Révol, evesque et conte de Dol, chérissoit sa compagnie et son entretien et combien souvent il conversait avec luy et l'estime qu'il faisoit de sa sainteté et des miracles qu'il faisoit à Dol au guarissement continuel de fiebvres.": Père Joseph de Jesus, *Vie de Frere Jean de Saint-Samson*, f37. Archives départementales d'Ille-et-Vilaine, 9 h 39 (3).

¹⁷ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 80.

¹⁸ Cf. Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 126; Donatien, *La Vie*, 162. For a detailed analysis of the text and its various redactions one should consult the already cited critical edition by Blommestijn (1987) and for more details on the various manuscript copies of the text in question and its publication one should consult also Jean de Saint-Samson, *Oeuvres Complètes I: L'éguillon, les flammes, les fleches, et le miroir de l'amour de Dieu, propres pour enamourer l'ame de Dieu en Dieu mesme*, édition critique par Hein Blommestijn, O.Carm. (Rome/Paris, Institutum Carmelitanum/FAC-éditions, 1992), 19-27.

Charlò Camilleri

Also, many recall how the Bishop (Monsieur) of Dol had such so much trust in him and esteemed so much his holiness that sometime before his death asked him to compose a spiritual exercise to be directed and guided by it in the spiritual life. He passed away while following these exercises. These can be found in his writings.¹⁹

Therefore, the exercise composed by the saintly brother is intended as a 'rule of life' that directs and guides the exercitant in the spiritual life to mature in the path of perfection. As a substitute to the three classical stages of purification, illumination and union or the ages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood,²⁰ Jean proposes to the reader four ages in human growth towards mystical maturity: 1) the nursing age, 2) from weaning to adolescence, 3) from adolescence to maturity, and finally, to 4) virility.²¹ These four ages seem to be reminiscent of the *De quattuor gradibus violentiae caritatis* where mystical progression unfolds in four stages: 'in the first degree, the soul thirsts for God. In the second, it thirsts toward God. In the third, the soul thirsts into God. In the fourth, it thirsts in accordance with God.'²² This unfolding starts with newborn infants nurtured with milk and honey²³ and matures in the boldness of a man who dares to be more than a man.²⁴ The text lying at the basis of this mystical paradigm is 1 Corinthians 3:2, where the Apostle distinguishes between milk as the nutrient for infants and solid food for adults.²⁵ The language used by John in the exercise is also reminiscent of Richard of St Victor's discourse on the soul pierced by darts of love 'piercing to the very marrow' and is flaming with desire

¹⁹ 'Beaucoup savent aussi comment Monseigneur de Dol, bien peu avant sa mort, luy avoit fait faire un exercice spirituel pour se mettre sous sa direction et conduite en la vie spirituelle, tant il avoit de confiance en luy et d'estime de sa sainteté. Il mourut lors qu'il faisoit les exercices. On le peut veoir dans ses escrits.' Père Joseph, *Vie*, f37.

²⁰ Generally, the three ages correspond to the three stages as expounded in the Neo-Thomistic work: Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Les trois ages de la vie intérieure*, 2 vols. (Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1938-1939).

²¹ Blommestijn. *L'éguillon*, 279.

²² Richard of St Victor, *On the Four degrees of Violent Love*, translated with an introduction by Andrew B. Kraebel, 28, in *On Love: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, and Godfrey of St Victor*, Victorine Texts in Translation – 2, edited by Hugh Feiss (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 287.

²³ Richard of St Victor, *On the Four degrees of Violent Love*, 30, in *On Love*, 288.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁵ Parallel biblical texts conveying the same reality are, amongst others, Hb 5:12-14; 1 Pt 2:2; Jn 16:12.

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

yearning for consummation in the object of her desire, who is God.²⁶ Max Huot de Longchamp identifies six features of the path presented in Jean's *éguillon*:

1. Gratuitous love as the point of departure
2. Faithfulness to loving gratuitousness as mystical progress
3. Conformity to Jesus Christ
4. Mystical passivity as the fundamental attitude
5. Aspiration as the mystical exercise
6. Pure and essential love as the mystical summit.²⁷

Leading the reader towards the heights of mystical life pedagogically, John sees the exercise, that is the text and the experience itself, as a gradual entering into the depths of love. The exercise presupposes gratuitousness as the basic attitude of the soul as the object of God's essential gratuitous outpouring of divine love. Hence, John speaks of the exercise in terms of 'règle certaine' and 'guide sûr',²⁸ As a seasoned spiritual director, Brother John was convinced that one cannot live without a rule in the spiritual life. In the preface of *L'Éguillon et le miroir des vrais Carmes de notre observance, vrais Enfants de Saint Elie, Contenant et montrant le vray Esprit de notre Regle et sa vive Pratique*, he observes it is not infrequent that one embarks on the path of perfection with much enthusiasm, only to be taken by the transitory things of the world, also losing that firmness and resoluteness to persevere in the path of holiness. A rule of life is needed to keep us persevering on the same path.²⁹ Without direction and accompaniment in the spiritual life, one

²⁶ Richard of St Victor, *On the Four degrees of Violent Love*, 275.

²⁷ Max Huot de Longchamp, 'Introduction,' in Jean de Saint-Samson, *Oeuvres mystiques. Texte établi et présenté par Hein Blommestijn, O.Carm. et Max Huot de Longchamp*, Sagesse chrétienne (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1984), 18-24. Hereafter: Blommestijn – Huot de Longchamp, *Oeuvres mystiques*.

²⁸ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 269.

²⁹ 'C'est grande pitié de voir comme les choses morales sont mobiles, Et les esprits des hommes en Elles ! Un temps à esté que nous n'eussions peu penser nous devoir jamais voir Et sentir dechoir de notre premiere rectitude, En laquelle ayant esté soigneusement et divinement nouris, nous nous sentions pleins de coeur, d'esprit et de cors pour tousiours ardemment avancer chemin au but de notre supreme perfection, selon l'Eminent esprit de notre Reigle: mais, nous nous trouvons bien trompés et deceus parlans de tout ce qui est bon, nous voians accablés Et environnés de tant de miserés, que notre premier esprit Est estouffé et totalement suffoqué desous leur insupportable faix: Et cela à cause du trop grand nombre de libertins, qui surpassent par trop le petit nombre des bons. C'est en ceste consideration que ie me suis resolu de guarentir (au moins ce qui veut et voudra estre bon) du peril Evident de si malheureuse ruine: Attendu que ie n'estimerai pas avoir peu fait, si ie

Charlò Camilleri

will easily lose track. Undoubtedly, the Bishop of Dol was a morally upright person, all attentive to lead people entrusted to his care in the right path, and John hints at this at least twice in *L'Éguillon*, in the fourth article of the exercise.

Besides, you won't be without spending some time, just for some honest recreation, with the people of your household. Regarding this way of doing things, I would tell you that all that you will come across, which is beautiful and pleasant to the sight, will draw you in awe in seeing the marvels of God who has made so many different things, for himself, for his exaltation and glory, as for the good and pleasure of men...

I am not urging you here to treat the people in your household like your good friends, because that is normal for a truly moral life.³⁰

What the bishop inevitably needs, from the perspective of John, at least, is 'to have an infinite desire to be truly spiritual and lover of love'³¹ considering in everything and everyone God's 'copiousness, love, wisdom, liberality, mercy, science, beauty, justice, infinite greatness and his essence which fills everything.'³²

Earlier on in the exercise, supporting his argument from the *Epistola Aurea*, John of St Samson warns the bishop that it is not enough for him to limit himself in the observance of the common precepts of the law, nor to be totally taken by tending to God's commandments, but to tend towards that which God desires of him. John bluntly points out to the bishop that 'serving God is the duty of others, your duty is that of being one with God; others have the duty to believe, know, love and revere [God]. Your duty is to know, recognise and delight [in God] for love is a great thing if it returns to its origins, re-flowing in its source.'³³ Hence, from the very start of the exercise, John establishes

puis par cecy retenir les bons sur pied en telle sorte que s'affermisants eux memes par le vif aspect de tout cecy au desir de Dieu et de la Religion, Ilz declinent et la ruine et les precipices qui la doivent preceder.' : Jean de Saint-Samson, *L'Éguillon et le miroir des vrais Carmes de notre observance, vrais Enfants de Saint Elie, Contenant et montrant le vray Esprit de notre Regle et sa vive Pratique*, f299v - f300r: Ms R 9 H 40, n.12: Archives Départementales d'Ille-et-Vilaine de Rennes.

³⁰ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 323-324.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

³² *Ibid.*, 323.

³³ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 270-271. John quotes directly from Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei*, L.1, ch. 2, n.5. In John's time this letter was attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux, as does John in his exercise.

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

the proposed aim to Mgr Révol, namely that of leading him to divine mystical transformation, wherein the ego is no more but dissolved in God. One cannot help being reminded of the biblical undertone of this ideal as expressed by the Apostle Paul: ‘It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal 2:20).

In the fifth article of the text, the blind mystic writes about the necessity of knowing this aim: ‘It is necessary for you to know, that the proper effect of the love of God towards human persons, is to go and come in them through a loving, illuminating and liquefied irradiation.’³⁴ The soul is left cognizant of its emptiness and misery, plunging herself vehemently, humbly and quietly in the divine life in an ecstatic and enstatic spiral of giving and receiving self.³⁵ In line with the Victorine school, particularly resonating with Richard of St Victor’s *De gradibus*, John insists that ‘as one progresses through the degrees, one’s own agency becomes less important, while God’s agency becomes ever more so.’³⁶ This is especially so when the soul is in the state of transforming union, liquefied in God; at this stage, ‘the question of agency becomes redundant.’³⁷

‘A high and necessary science’³⁸

In the domain of spiritual direction, John of Saint-Samson points out that particular attention to the humility of the spirit is necessary to

³⁴ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 330.

³⁵ This spiral mystical dynamic recalls the Dionysian neo-platonic idea *bonum est diffusivum sui*. Cf. Dionysus the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, Translations of Christian Literature, Series I: Greek Texts, ed. W.J. Sparrow-Simpson and W.K. Lowther Clarke, trans. C.E. Rolt (New York: Macmillan Company, 1920). This was taken up by the Victorines Richard of St Victor and Thomas Gallus, then by Bonaventure, Aquinas and others in their reflections on the relationship of God with that which is not God, including the human soul. On the eternal mystical spiralling into God, see Boyd Tylor Coolman, *Knowledge, Love, and Ecstasy in the Theology of Thomas Gallus*, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology, Sarah Coakley and Richard Cross, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 232-257.

³⁶ Andrew B. Kraebel, “Introduction,” in Richard of St Victor, *On the Four degrees of Violent Love*, 271.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

³⁸ Cf. Jean de Saint-Samson, *Le vrai esprit du carmel. Oeuvre assemblée par le Père Donatien de Saint-Nicolas. Sources manuscrites*, Collection *Source Mystiques*, Édition critique présentée par Dominique Tronc avec une étude par le Père Max Huot de Longchamp, (Mers-sur-Indre: Centre Saint-Jean-de-la Croix, 2012), 125. This text was originally published by Donatien de Saint Nicholas as *Le Vray Esprit du Carmel, réduit en forme d'exercice pour les Ames qui tendant à la Perfection Chretienne & Religieuse par le Ven. F. Jean de Saint Samson Religieux Carme de la Reforme et Observance de Rennes, en la Province de Touraine. Avec un Recueil de ces Lettres Spirituelle* (Rennes: Iean Durand, 1655).

Charlò Camilleri

grow and mature in the mystical life.³⁹ The first step he indicates in *L'Éguillon* is that of knowledge of self, of God and of his love to humbly desire union with God.⁴⁰ This goes along with the mortification of the passions, movements and inclinations,⁴¹ or, as he says elsewhere, the humility of the passions and the humility of the intellect or reason.⁴² This humility transforms the 'animal' man into a 'perfect' man.⁴³ In this regard, John advises 'directors of conscience':

to pay great attention to this, so that those who they direct will lose and surpass their first sphere in time and place and move to a truthful love. Because it is totally impossible that one starts to feel and live mystically through simple intelligence and through the divine and infused wisdom, if not through this complete death and suppression of the sensible and rational appetite. This (first sphere) is proper only to brutes and the other does not surpass it enough. In a way, this total death of the exterior man is absolutely necessary for the start of faith and the true life of the spirit.⁴⁴

John of Saint Samson highlights that true humility is necessary for self-knowledge as the foundational first step when embarking on the spiritual path leading to the state of selflessly hiding in divine Love.⁴⁵ He warns that

³⁹ John dedicates some pages also to spiritual directors, as in "Le retour de l'épouse a son Époux," in Jean de Saint-Samson, *La pratique essentielle de l'amour*, textes établis et présentés par Max Huot de Longchamp et Hein Blommestijn, Sagesses chrétiennes (Paris, éditions du Cerf, 1989), 113-117. For an exposition on John as spiritual director, see Michael Brundell, Traditions of Spiritual Direction: Brother John of St Samson, O.Carm. (1571–1636), in *The Way* 27, no.3 (1987): 222-231.

⁴⁰ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 274.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁴² Jean de Saint-Samson, *Le vrai esprit du carmel*, 157. The mystical doctrine of John of Saint Samson was collected by his disciple Donatien de Saint-Nicolas who gave a structured, logical and thematic format publishing it in a two-volume edition: *Les oeuvres spirituelles et mystiques du divin contemplatif F. Jean de S. Samson religieux carme de la réforme et observance de Rennes, en la Province de Touraine divisées en deux Tomes avec un abrégé de sa vie recueilly et compose par le P. Donatien de S. Nicolas* (Rennes: Pierre Coupard, 1658–1659).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 159. This doctrine is to be found in chapters seven and eight of *Le vrai esprit du Carmel*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁵ Cf. Jean de Saint-Samson, *Le vrai esprit*, 125: 'La connaissance de soi-même est une si haute et si nécessaire science que sans elle rien ne peut profiter à nos âmes. Le proper effet de la sapience infuse, et de cette noble science, est que l'homme goûtant Dieu voie et sente à même temps la vérité de son rien, et ce qui fait que le pécheur vraiment converti ne peut assez s'étonner de voir un amour de Dieu si excessif et si démesuré à son endroit et de ce que cette souveraine Majesté l'a daigné prévenir si abondamment des bénédictions de sa douceur.'

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

ultimately, whoever has the habit of exercising the self in perfect humility is blessed in a good sense, in view of the great disposition, he has by this means, for true holiness. But no one is perfectly arrayed with this noble habit, if not deeply purged in customs, feelings and affections, or who is not clean of heart and who does not have the aptitude of a truly mended soul, to fly in the love of God beyond all virtues.⁴⁶

Going beyond all virtues should be understood in this light of knowing and embracing one's own abysmal nothingness and helplessness in being virtuous out of one's ability. To mature in the spiritual or mystical life, one is to allow the self to fall into God's embrace: 'the soul falls in its deep abysses rapidly draining both her reason and herself in the infinite God, in whom she is detained and to whom she is fixedly attached, so as to contemplate in deep admiration the infinite wonders which he has drawn and manifested to humans for their eternal good.'⁴⁷ Hence, for our mystical teacher, growth and maturity in the spiritual life transcend the ordinary constant living the moral and ethical life and rational intellection. John's insistence on these points is more understandable when one considers that firstly 'there was great stress on observance as the external sign of the inner quality of religious life at this period in history,'⁴⁸ and secondly, the growing anti-mystical sentiment of the 'learned' against the so-called *spiritualité à la mode* of the 'unlearned' insisted on the intellectual and scholastic scrutinising discernment of the experience of faith, holding that only reason is the source of all knowledge.⁴⁹ In two letters addressed

⁴⁶ Jean de Saint-Samson, *Le vrai esprit*, 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁸ Brundell, *Brother John of St Samson*, 224.

⁴⁹ The *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* by Francis de Sales in 1616 seems to have triggered a forceful momentum in the anti-mystical sentiment which spread like wildfire in seventeenth century France. Without going into much detail which is beyond the scope of this contribution, it must be said that Jean de Saint-Samson and his doctrine were subject to criticism and suspicion mostly by his learned and rationalist confrère Jean Chéron (1596-1673). Chéron was also critical of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and the disciples of John of Saint-Samson, especially Maur de l'Enfant Jésus and Donatien de Saint Nicolas. He published the famous *Examen de la théologie mystique, qui fait voir la différence des lumières divines de celles qui ne le sont pas, et du vrai, assuré et catholique chemin de la perfection de celui qui est parsemé de dangers et infecté d'illusions, et qui montre qu'il n'est pas convenable de donner aux affections, passions, délectations et gousts spirituels, la conduite de l'âme, l'ostant à la raison et à la doctrine* (Paris: Edme Couterot, 1657). See also Jennifer Hillman, "Testing the Spirit of the Prophets: Jean Chéron, Melancholy and the "Illusions" of *Dévotés*" in *Études Épistémè. Revue de littérature et de civilisation (XV^e – XVIII^e siècles): Melancholia/ae. The religious experience of the "disease of the soul" and its definitions*, 28 (2015) <https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.827> (accessed on 10 November 2021);

Charlò Camilleri

to two Carmelite students of philosophy and theology, respectively, John advises to cultivate the interior life and to lose oneself in God while engaging in the ‘study of the sciences whose root is so difficult and so bitter to seek and savour, even more to some who have tasted divine wisdom by a delightful application of a pure and faultless heart. Erudition, in my opinion, is at the start a torment for such individuals.’⁵⁰ Ultimately, as John of St Samson opines, the point of joining religious life and embarking on the spiritual path is that of ‘living and dying without moving away from’⁵¹ ‘glorifying God.’⁵² For John, true wisdom rests in this.⁵³ To the Bishop of Dol, in *L'Éguillon*, John conveys the same message while on the same lines uses expressions like ‘satisfaire Dieu’ explicitly pointing out that it is God who ‘lovingly deigns to assist these (souls) to annihilate and destroy in them – with his active and ardent love as well as with their loving diligence to correspond totally with God – their first carnal and animal life.’⁵⁴ In this context, for John humility must be sustained by a reverence towards God to whom the loving soul dedicates herself totally and ardently, becoming consumed in God himself through the practice of virtues.⁵⁵

Seen and concealed into the text

The exercise John is pointing out does not suggest active works of piety, but a simple act of being in a state of continuous ‘secret and

Johannes Brenninger, ‘Cheron (Jean),’ *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, vol. II (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953), 821-822.

⁵⁰ Jean de Saint-Samson, ‘A une religieux estudiante en théologie,’ LT77, in *Oeuvres Complètes – 10: Lettres*, Vacare Deo 8/10, posthumous critical edition by Yves Durand, reviewed by Hein Blommestijn and edited by Charlò Camilleri, (Rome: Edizioni Carmelitane, 2020), 267.

⁵¹ Jean de Saint-Samson, ‘A une religieux qui alloit studier en philosophie,’ LT78, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 269.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ To grasp the difference between John’s mystical approach to the search for wisdom and that of the rationalists,’ exemplified in this case by Jean Chéron’s Parisian circle at the Carmelite *Studium*, compare John’s teaching on *De la Sapience Divine* and *De l’estude des science* in *Les Maximes* with Cheron’s *Typus necessitatis logicae ad alias scientias capessendas* (1622). Cf. Donatien de S. Nicolas, ed., *La vie, les maximes et partie des oeuvres du tres-excellent contemplatif, le venerable Fr. Ian de S. Samson, aveugle dès le berceau et Religieux laïc de l’Ordre des Carmes Reformez* (Paris: Denis Thierry, 1656), 296-306, 316-318; Susanna Berger, “The invention of wisdom in Jean Chéron's illustrated thesis print,” in *Intellectual History Review* 24, no.3 (2014): 343-366.

⁵⁴ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 273-274.

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 275-276.

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

silent loving recollection of heart and spirit, there where God desires only to speak⁵⁶ to the soul that is ready to listen only to him. John's invitation in *L'Éguillon*, then, is that of resorting back to the centre of one's being where God is and from where God attracts us to himself and consequently renews us to our true selves.⁵⁷ From that secret and silent place, *le fond*, as John calls it, the process of divinisation starts as in the movement inwards the soul moves in God within. In a certain sense, she loses herself in ecstasy.⁵⁸ In other words, in this exercise, John seeks to initiate the reader into the state of what he calls *l'oraison amoureuse*, which sustains and accompanies the life of virtue.⁵⁹ In *Le retour de l'épouse*, writing on the entry to a supereminent⁶⁰ state in the mystical life, John points out that those who gave themselves to actively love God become established in love, becoming themselves 'truly loving in a state which is more passive than active.'⁶¹ John calls this elevated mystical state *amour nu*, wherein the soul is continuously dying and penetrating the immensity of God, her divine object.⁶² In these treatises, John mystagogically aims at leading his directees in the interior life, enlightening them on the paths of true mystical prayer as a way of being.

Brundell notes that 'John of Saint Samson devoted much of his time to writing at the request of his superiors for the benefit of novices and members of the new reform entitled the 'Stricter Observance' at the request of people such as the Bishop of Dol who sought spiritual guidance from him.'⁶³ It would be more proper to state that Jean's writing is actually a dictation as he was visually impaired. In *L'Éguillon*, John explicitly acknowledges that he is simply revealing himself to his

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁵⁸ This is a central doctrine in mystical literature. Limiting ourselves to the Christian tradition, John resonates here with Augustine, Henri Herp, John of the Cross, Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, and others.

⁵⁹ Blommestijn, *L'Éguillon*, 276.

⁶⁰ This term indicates the high mystical state of union with God without an intermediary as the soul is totally taken up and absorbed in the immensity of God. John of St Samson also uses the term *suressentielle*. For an exposition on the debate within the 17th century on such a designation of an elevated mystical degree, see Mariel Mazzocco, 'Suressentielle' Aux sources d'un langage mystique," in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 230, no.4 (2013): 609-627.

⁶¹ "Le retour de l'épouse a son Époux," in Saint-Samson, *La pratique essentielle de l'amour*, 93.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 93-94.

⁶³ Brundell, *Brother John of St Samson*, 224.

Charlò Camilleri

reader in a straightforward text which might come across as ‘*rude et mal poly*.’⁶⁴ One of the four metaphors used in the title to convey the necessary qualities that guide the reader towards mystical perfection is the mirror. The text stimulates (*éguillon*), penetrates (*fleche*) and enflames (*flammes*) the reader in mystical consummation.⁶⁵ Hence, it presents itself as a mirror of God’s divine charity. On a second level, the text also becomes a mirror revealing the author’s soul, and in turn, also functions as a mirror into which the reader can discern herself or himself. Blommestijn sees in this divine-human interaction a particular dynamic at work as if in a spiral staircase wherein ‘the ontological possibility of one and the dynamic structure of the other’ meet.⁶⁶

It is in this significant meeting, as if in a mirror that the awareness of a marvellous reality constitutively arises in the mystic soul. It can be argued that the text as a mirror also implies hiddenness as it reveals God’s otherwise hidden love. It also shows the hidden author himself and subsequently becomes a refuge for the reader who aims at experiencing divine love ‘in God himself.’⁶⁷ Seemingly, the blind brother, from his 1) multi-levelled aloneness of visual impairment, 2) of his marginal condition as a lay brother, 3) as a mystic ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Col 3:3) and, 4) who, ‘nearer to the essence of things,’⁶⁸ in the final stage of his life, requested to be allowed to live in greater solitude, is inviting a central figure in the life of the Church to join him in withdrawal as ‘God’s chosen, kept apart to be his heralds.’⁶⁹ As with the other text *La pratique essentielle de l’amour*, in *L’Éguillon* John is inviting

⁶⁴ Blommestijn, *L’éguillon*, 268.

⁶⁵ Cf. Hein Blommestijn, ‘Introduzione,’ in Giovanni di San Sansone, *Esperienza di amore totale (1571-1636). Lo sprone, le fiamme, le frecce e lo specchio dell’amore di Dio, propri per innamorare di Dio l’anima in Dio medesimo*, prima versione italiana del P. Ferdinando Sorrentino, Ord. Carm. (Napoli: Nuova Cultura, 1983), 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 20. The image of the staircase reminds one also of “la secreta escala disfrazada” in the *Noche oscura* of John of the Cross.

⁶⁷ Blommestijn, *L’éguillon*, 267. The original title uses “pour enamourer l’ame de Dieu en Dieu mesme,” whilst the version on *Oeuvres mystiques* gives “a éprendre l’âme de Dieu en Dieu lui-meme”: Blommestijn and Huot de Longchamp, *Oeuvres mystiques*, 31.

⁶⁸ Hervé Baudry, “La poétique du sonnet chez le mystique aveugle Jean de Saint-Samson,” in *Dix-septième siècle* 3, no.288 (2020): 523.

⁶⁹ Zina Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille*, trans. Emily-Jane Cohen (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 295. This study concludes that both Jean de Saint-Samson and another mystic, François Malaval, ‘attest to the emergence of the educated autonomous blind subject... relegated more than ever to the domain of rigorous alterity.’ See also p. 47.

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

Mgr Antoine – and any other readers – to become aware that ‘one is being drawn from the masses who head towards perdition, and chosen amongst the many to know the perfect love of God’s infinite beauty and take joy in it.’⁷⁰ Hence, the mystic grows in total abandonment in God, allowing God to act in his soul the necessary purification until he reaches the state of perfect union of love.⁷¹ This mystical way of abandonment

speaks of a secret union with God, of the soul’s peace, of a blessed life, of ‘rest’ and ‘quiet.’ ‘Abandonment’ involves letting things be, in all circumstances, amid the night of faith: letting God act, letting God be God in the soul. ‘Abandonment’ is a matter of accepting that one will never be in control of one’s life, and of being ready to see a message from God in events as they occur—particularly if they are somehow contrary to our wishes or expectations. ‘Abandonment’ is subjective as well as objective: an abandoned soul renounces everything, every possible claim, including any claim about its own perfection or even salvation. Like Christ on the cross, it may even in some circumstances feel abandoned by God.⁷²

Michèle Clément argues that Jean’s oral dictation reveals ‘his proper rhythm (more rapid than that of writing) and his progression without return.’ These two features are ‘determinative elements’ in ‘his relationship with the word.’⁷³ Therefore, John’s writing is *speech*, more

⁷⁰ Saint-Samson, *La pratique essentielle de l’amour*, 17. The theme of election and the elect is also found in Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi’s doctrine in connection with the centrality of Christ. Cf. Charlò Camilleri, Maddalena de Pazzi’s *Consilium Trinitatis* in the light of Luther’s *Solus Christus* doctrine. An approximation, lecture delivered at the International Theological Conference on ‘The Spirit of the Reformation: 500 Years On’ (27-28 October 2017), Faculty of Theology, University of Malta. Script in possession of the author. This theme is also fundamental in the theology of the Reformers and in Jansenism. For a theology of election in Reformation theology, see David Gibson, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election and Christology in Calvin and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

⁷¹ Cf. Saint-Samson, *La pratique essentielle de l’amour*, 21-29. The theme of abandonment is central to French mysticism in the experience and writings of Mme Guyon, Fenelon, Francois de Sales, and later also in Jean-Pierre de Caussade’s *Abandonment to Divine Providence*.

⁷² Dominique Salin, “The Treatise on Abandonment to Divine Providence,” in *The Way*, 46, no.2 (Apr 2007): 25. John of Saint Samson distances himself from a quietist view by giving the characteristics of ‘les vrais spirituels’ who exercise themselves in virtue and are totally centred on God.

⁷³ Michèle Clément, “La *Pratique amoureuse* de Jean de Saint-Samson, ou l’institution d’une langue étrangère,” in *Pour un vocabulaire mystique au XVII^e Siècle. Séminaire du Professeur Carlo Ossola*, ed. François Trémolières (Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2004), 294.

Charlò Camilleri

precisely *mystagogical speech* aiming at introducing his listener – and now, the reader – to the mystical way. In *L'Éguillon*, he dedicates the sixth article explicitly to *The Mystical Life* after having gradually led his directee through progressive steps leading to this stage. Indeed, *mystical speech* in John aims not to have to say something, or at having something to say, but at making something happen.⁷⁴ His speech, bursting from experiential wisdom, is a creative force akin to the biblical *dābār* and *'imrāh*⁷⁵ accomplishing that which it signifies. Jausions notes that the blind mystic 'handles the word as someone of his times handled the sword,⁷⁶ akin to God's word which 'is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Hb 4:12). Through this penetrative force of his word, 'he energetically and uncompromisingly calls to start from now to participate in the ultimate goal, that is divine life.'⁷⁷

Taking de Certeau's notion that *la mystique* is an anti-Babel fable expressed in spoken words, one might argue that, similar to other mystics, Jean's mystical communication seeks 'to invent a common language that comes from God' and is at pains to translate into human language 'a heavenly language based on divine love.'⁷⁸ Indeed Jean's literary oeuvre, as noted by Benedetta Papasogli, takes place in a 'desert climate,' which is for him an 'inner place coinciding with the freedom of the human person oriented towards her All.'⁷⁹

This orientation towards God is first lived and expressed in the active life of asceticism, without which the mystical life would be challenging to come to fruition. In *Le vrai esprit*, John says:

As long as one will not transcend his own industry, one will be hardly able to know what we are saying: for although one is sufficiently faithful to the external exercises, one will not reach the inner depths, as the external exercises have still not been surpassed, arriving at their last effect, which is to be so inflamed

⁷⁴ Clément, *La Pratique amoureuse*, 298.

⁷⁵ Cf. Eccl 1:1, Prov 4:4,20; 30:1; 31:1 and Dt 32:2, Ps 119:11,140, Is 28:23.

⁷⁶ Jean de Saint-Samson, *L'Aiguillon. Petite traité de la vie mystique*, ed. Yves Jausions (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2019), 9.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁸ Fabrice Schultz, "Transcending Linguistic Borders in Crashaw's," in *Writing Journeys across Cultural Borders*, ed. Elene V. Shabily, Kimarie Engerman (London: Lexington Books, 2021), 161.

⁷⁹ Benedetta Papasogli, *Le 'fond du cœur' Figures de l'espace intérieur au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 43-45, 48.

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

with the desire of God's praises, that one will not know how sufficiently love has many other degrees of perfection, which proceed from interior exercises, but this last effect is the entrance: so that without further consideration, the soul must set itself on this path with closed eyes.⁸⁰

In the seventh article of *L'Éguillon*, John points out that the mystical life is to be understood and explained in itself, according to its exercise and its practice. While John does not exclude other forms of mystical paths which are also excellent, he shows a preference for the aspirative way as 'this dialogue pertains to the heart, to reason and to the spirit.'⁸¹ Hence, John explains that this dialogue

is not merely an affectionate colloquy, even though this is in itself a good type of exercise, as it originates in and proceeds from aspiration. [Aspiration] is a loving and inflamed pulsing of all the heart, and all the spirit, through which the soul transcends itself and all that is created, uniting itself solely to God in the lively expression of its love; an essential expression transcending all sensible, reasonable, intellectual and comprehensible love.⁸²

And in *La pratique essentielle*, he specifies that,

what is said here of aspiration highlights the continuity of the mystical life. Aspiration is not a step, but a spiritual path, which channels human effort (*industrie de l'homme*) towards the sole loving movement of the heart and the spirit. It is a true divine breathing (respiration) of the simplified soul.⁸³

Indeed, as noted by Martin de la Croix, the path of aspiration in John is the path in a vehement transforming force that thrusts the person in God. It is a form of spousal mysticism where one tastes the stillness of divine union. In this path, the totality of the human person is involved.⁸⁴ Aspiration is the point of fulfilment of meditative and affective prayer where one inflames the heart with acts of love and cultivates conversation with God⁸⁵ until one arrives at the stage of entering in God with its entire being ever progressing to a deeper

⁸⁰ Jean de Saint-Samson, *Le Vrai Esprit du Carmel*, 132.

⁸¹ Blommestijn, *L'éguillon*, 353.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 350.

⁸³ Saint-Samson, *La Pratique Essentielle de l'Amour*, 11.

⁸⁴ Martin de la Croix, "Jean de Saint-Samson, maître de l'oraison aspirative," in *Carmel* 178 (septembre 2021), 34.

⁸⁵ Venard Poulisney, *Prayer, Aspiration and Contemplation, from the Writings of John of St. Samson, O.Carm., Mystic and Charismatic* (New York: Alba House, 1975), 67. The author assembles John's texts on aspiration "to give intelligible organization to the material" (pg. 110) giving a pedagogical structure to initiate the reader in the practice: cf. *ibid.*, 67-111.

Charlò Camilleri

degree.⁸⁶ In Raimon Panikkar's words, 'aspiration is the breath – and even the blowing – of the spirit within.'⁸⁷ John concludes his exposition on the exercise of aspiration in article seven by losing himself in God and becoming totally immersed in him, forgetful of his reader as he ecstatically converses with his divine interlocutor. This exemplar of aspirative 'prayer' resonates with John of the Cross' prayer of a soul taken with love and the ecstatic utterings of Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi.⁸⁸ One is led to conclude that the prayer can be viewed as conclusive of the doctrine exposed in *L'Éguillon*, and in itself should be considered not only as a conclusion to the seventh article, but also as the conclusion of the text itself, as in the first redaction of 1629. Blommestijn opines that article eight was either added by John himself at a later stage or, less plausibly, the result of the secretary's error.⁸⁹

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this article is completely dedicated to self-renunciation on a mystical level rather than in an ascetical sense. The article relies, amongst others, on Achille Gagliardi's *Abrégé de la perfection chrétienne*, where an emphasis is placed on total conformity and uniformity in and to God.⁹⁰ John himself defines 'renunciation'

⁸⁶ Ibid., 79. John follows Henry Herp's *Speculum perfectionis* on the degrees of the movement of aspiration.

⁸⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *Opera Omnia I/2: Mysticism and Spirituality. Spirituality, The Way of Life*, ed. Milena Carrara Pavan (New York: Orbis, 2014), 159. Panikkar's statement is within the context of a commentary to anonymous texts of *The Canon of the Disciple* and the *Rule of the Master* from the Eastern and Western monastic traditions respectively. It would be an engaging exercise were one to explore parallelisms on mystical aspiration in both the East and the West.

⁸⁸ Cf. Juan de la Cruz, "Oracion de alma enamorada: Dichos de luz y amor," 26, in *Obras completas*, ed. Maximiliano Herraíz (Salamanca: Sigueme, 2002), 85-86. Herraíz describes this prayer as "efusión suavemente torrencial." See also many examples of similar prayerful effusions in Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, *Cantico per l'Amore non amato. I testi in italiano corrente*, ed. Elia Monari (Firenze: Feeria, 2016).

⁸⁹ Jean de Saint-Samson, *Oeuvre Complètes I: L'éguillon, les flammes, les fleches, et le miroir de l'amour de Dieu, propres pour enamourer l'ame de Dieu en Dieu mesme*, critical edition by Hein Blommestijn, (Rome/Paris, Institutum Carmelitanum/FAC éditions, 1992), 26.

⁹⁰ Cf. Achille Gagliardi, *Breve compendio della perfezione cristiana e vita di Isabella Berinzaga*, ed. Mario Bendiscioli, (Firenze: 1952). Gagliardi elaborates on the themes of perfection and the ecstasy of the will; apatheia; pati divina; annihilation, purification, humility; and finally, conformity, uniformity, deformity. This process climaxes in the *apex animae*. See also Mario Gioia, *Per via di annichilazione. Un testo inedito del '500*, critical edition with introduction and notes (Rome/Brescia, 1994); Charlò Camilleri, "Achille Gagliardi's Compendio della perfettione christiana in the Carmelite Monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli. Exploring two ignored Codices," in *Seeing the Seeker. Explorations in the Discipline of Spirituality*, Studies in Spirituality Supplement 19, ed. Hein Blommestijn – Charles Caspers – Rijcklof Hofman (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 277-299.

Initiating a Bishop into the Mystical Life

– a word he repeatedly uses here – in these terms. Hence, mystically, article eight seems to point towards the aim of *L'Éguillon* and the extraordinary lasting effect of aspiration, namely that ‘the agonising soul returns [back], herself dead and expired, to God [...] aching with a loving anguish into the divine embrace, eternally dwelling there and entirely submitted and renounced of herself.’⁹¹

Conclusion

Mgr Antoine Révol will eventually pass away on 6 August 1629, the same year of the composition of the mystical exercise by his mentor and friend John of Saint-Samson. De Longchamp comments that John bequeaths the reader a call to a fundamental reorientation of the self, aiming at the final renewal and perfection of the person in Jesus Christ, the ultimate end of human life.⁹² This call to a bishop of the Catholic Church is timely and everlasting, transcending the test of time. Ultimately it is what the Church herself expects of her bishops, who are the Christ present amongst his people. Dead to self and immersed in God, the bishop loses himself for Christ and his flock.

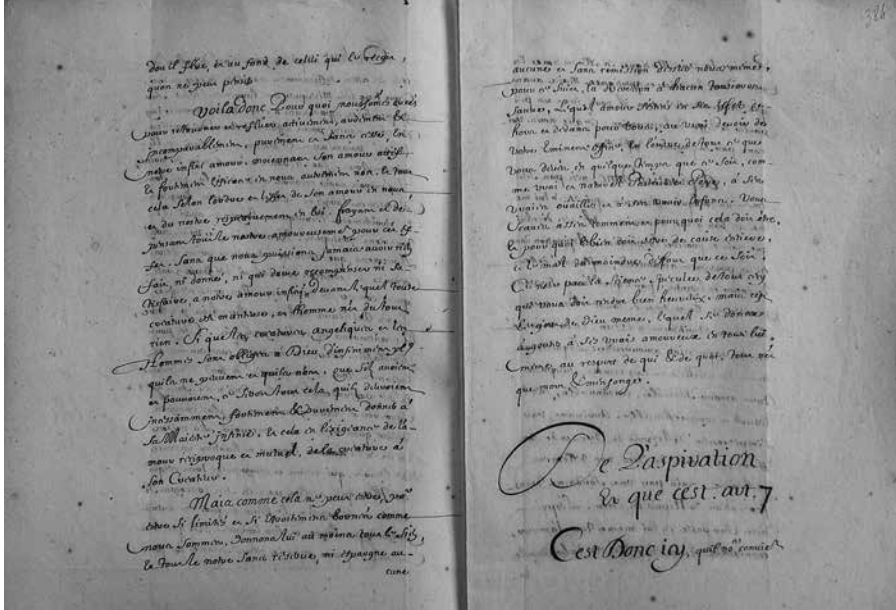
Finally, John’s call to the mystical life, mystagogically imparted to the pious bishop of Dol in *L'Éguillon*, resonates with the words of *Pastores gregis* stating that among his people, ‘the Bishop is a teacher and a promoter of prayer. He not only hands down what he himself has contemplated, but he opens to Christians the way of contemplation itself. The well-known motto *contemplata aliis tradere* thus becomes *contemplationem aliis tradere*.’⁹³ There is no way a bishop will honour this mission if not by being a mystic himself.

⁹¹ Blommestijn, *L'Éguillon*, 377. In this section, in line with the mysticism of self-annihilation, common to Christian, Sufi and various schools of Buddhism, John refers also to the anguish felt by someone on the point of death. See: Mario Gioia, *Per via di annichilazione*; Alessandro Capocchio, *Incitazione di morire spiritualmente. Tratto del Reverendo Padre frate Alessando sopra scritto, il quale sua Reverentia scritto che l'hebbe, lo dette alla M. suor Maria di Carlo Bagnesi, 1001-1012 (1544)*, edited in Charlò Camilleri, *Union with God as Transformation in Beauty. A Literary-Spiritual Analysis of the Colloquies of Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi 1566-1607* (Rome: Edizioni Carmelitane, 2008), 404-410. On this theme in Magdalen de' Pazzi's mysticism see pp. 154-169. For a study on the accompanying psychological states in this mystical process leading to rapture, see: Michael R. Levenson & Abdul Hayy Khilwati, “Mystical Self-Annihilation: Method and Meaning,” in *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9, no.4 (1999): 251-257.

⁹² Cf. Blommestijn and Huot de Longchamp, *Oeuvres mystiques*, 25.

⁹³ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *The Shepherds of the Flock: The Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World, Pastores Gregis* (2003), par. 17.

Charlò Camilleri



L'éguillon, *Les flammes*, ff. 383v-384r: Archives Départementales d'Ille-et-Vilaine de Rennes (Fonds des Grands Carmes, 9H42n6).



Portrait detail from *Vie de fr. Jean de S. Samson (Jean du Mouline) carme par le P. Joseph de Jésus*, pg 6: Archives Départementales d'Ille-et-Vilaine de Rennes (Fonds des Grands Carmes, 9H39n4-2). Photos by Dominique Tronc.