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## **Philip Rousseau. 'Cassian, Contemplation, and the Coenobitic Life', Journal of Ecclesiastical History 26. [photocopie]**

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## CASSIAN, CONTEMPLATION AND THE COENOBITIC LIFE

between various activities and ideals in the monastic life. His portrait of the apostle Paul offers an initial clue. The abbot Theonas, in *Conference* xxiii, talks of Paul's bitter complaint in Romans vii, summed up in the words (verse 24), 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?'. He asks what it could have been that so virtuous a man found lacking in himself. It was, he says, Mary's 'bona pars', the contemplation of God.<sup>1</sup> Paul was seen by Cassian as the perfect example of a man caught between the demands of an active Christian life and his own desire for union with God.<sup>2</sup> Although inspired by love for his fellowmen, he felt that his ultimate duty was to seek the companionship of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Yet the achievement of this ambition was thwarted by a further and more important tension, this time within the apostle himself: tension between his longing for God and the 'alia lex in membris suis', the distracting and often unsuccessful struggle against unconquered vice and ill-tamed desire.

Having presented this image of St. Paul as a contemplative *manqué*, Theonas begins a long discussion with Germanus, Cassian's former companion in Egypt and, in these dialogues, his literary stalking-horse.<sup>4</sup> Both agree that man will turn at times from contemplation to more practical necessities. More important, they agree that such inability to concentrate on the vision of God is in some sense natural. They fail to concur, however, in the meaning to be given to 'natural' in this regard; and it is this division between them that offers us a vital and most useful distinction. For Theonas, the 'alia lex in membris suis' of Romans vii is 'in natura humanae condicionis inserta'. It is natural in that it springs from the slavish condition that men have inherited from Adam. It represents an absence of that 'naturalis libertas' that Adam lost, and that Christ will restore. It reflects the curse of God that followed upon Adam's sin: 'nullus enim est quamvis sanctus, qui supradictum panem non cum sudore vultus sui et sollicita cordis intentione percipiat'. The human condition described by St. Paul in Romans vii is a consequence of mankind's fall, whereby men find themselves 'carnalibus tenebris circumfusi', and 'ab illa mentis celsitudine decidentes'. In other words, Theonas incorporates the whole experience of contemplation, and of its difficulties, within the general economy of human salvation, of fall and redemption. His approach may be described as primarily theological. Now Germanus adopts what must be called a more ascetic and psychological approach. He suggests that St. Paul was referring in Romans vii to 'antiqua consuetudo', which compelled him to revert to that pattern of behaviour typical of the years before his conversion: 'usus enim et frequentia delinquendi velut efficitur naturalis'. He asserts that when St. Paul prayed to be released 'de corpore mortis', he was not bemoaning the human condition

<sup>1</sup> *Con.*, xxiii. 3, recalling Lk. x. 41-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Con.*, xxiii. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Con.*, xxiii. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Con.*, xxiii. 11-15.

