

THE SNARES OF THE DEVIL

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The snares of the Devil by John Gerson

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JOHN GERSON

**THE SNARES
OF THE DEVIL**

THE
SNARES OF THE DEVIL.

BY
JOHN GERSON,
CHANCELLOR OF PARIS,
Surnamed the Most Christian Doctor.

TRANSLATED BY BETA.



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Biographical Notice.

John Charlier Gerson, a celebrated French theologian, surnamed the Most Christian Doctor, was born on the 14th of December, 1363, at Gerson, a hamlet in the diocese in Rheims, near to Reims. He died at Lyons, in a Monastery of Celestine Monks, on the 12th of July, 1419. He was the eldest of twelve children. His parents, Arnulph Charlier and Elizabeth Lachardeniere, brought up their family in a religious manner. Gerson himself tells us that three of his brothers and four sisters embraced the yoke of Christ in the conventual life. It was beneath the shadow of the Cloister that peace-loving souls, or those wounded in the struggle of life, sought for rest and shelter, away from the tumult of a corrupt and wicked age.

Gerson spent his early youth at home. If credence is to be given to d'Arqueil, he began his studies at Rheims, and there he acquired his classical taste, especially for poetry, which ever after distinguished him. At fourteen he was sent to Paris, and in 1377 he was placed on the foundation in the College of Navarre. Here, according to the frequent usage of the time, he changed his family name for that of the hamlet where he was born. This renouncing of the paternal name symbolised death to self and to one's own family. By thus loosening the ties of kindred, the chains which fettered man to his own narrow in-

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terests and passions were broken in sunder, and a sort of impersonality was accepted.

The following year was darkened by the cloud of the great Schism of the West, which passed over Christendom. Urban VI. was elected in Rome, April 1378, and Clement VII. in Avignon in the September of the same year. From this time there began, for the Christian world, for Holy Church, and for the Papacy, one of those fearful epochs, full of present misery, and pregnant with sorrow for the future. Then was it needful that some brave and mighty spirit should come forward, to undertake the task of restoring peace to the conscience, union and purity to the Church, and of rehabilitating the Holy See in her former greatness. Such was the work to which Gerson consecrated all the power of his intellect and the strength of his will; though in truth he seemed more fitted for the tranquillity of the Cloister, and for contemplation, than for the harassing tumult of an active public life.

While he was earnestly imploring help from God to heal the wounds of His Church, he raised his voice in expostulation against the foolish subtleties in which thinking minds were then losing themselves.

"It is needful," he said, "to sweep away these cobwebs, whose threads, too closely woven, break one another in their interlace..... The teaching of wisdom should be solid, it should shine forth more by clearness than astonish by its over-sicety. A fine thing it is indeed, to transcribe Homer's Iliad in microscopic letters, so as to fit the whole in a nutshell! Man should strive to make himself useful, and not be ever seeking to excite admiration."

Thus, before receiving the title of Chancellor, which

gave him authority to reform philosophical studies, he endeavoured to lead to clearer and more practical wisdom those minds which were then drifting down the stream of vain and futile thought.

In 1392 Gerson had received the doctor's cap from the hands of his former master, d'Ailly.

Three years before, d'Ailly, who had been successively promoted to the Bishopric of Puy (1393), and of Cambrai (1396), had chosen Gerson as his successor to the office of Chancellor to the University, and to the Church of Notre Dame de Paris. This choice had been seconded by the Duke of Burgundy, whose almoner Gerson was. With the honour of Chancellor fresh duties fell to the lot of Gerson, and the weight of the renewed burden affrighted him. Envious tongues made his fair name their plaything, and wicked men, whose passions Gerson had condemned, darkened it by their odious calumnies. Sick in body, troubled in mind, and fearful for the future, he thought of withdrawing to Bruges, there to fulfil, in greater tranquillity, the duties of Capitular of the Cathedral of S. Donatus, which office Philip the Hardy had conferred on him. The benefice was, however, disputed, and this led Gerson to go to Bruges to uphold his rights. He tarried in the old Flemish town for some time, often preaching to the people.

Nothing but the earnest entreaties of his friends, and, in particular, those of his patron, the Duke of Burgundy, could determine Gerson to bear the heavy responsibility of the Chancellor's office. From the moment, however, of its acceptance, he generously made the sacrifice of his love of solitude and of peace. From that time the words of the Imitation seemed to have

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been his motto: "Strive manfully." The longing for the end of the strife, mingled with so much bitter sorrow, was shown in the words which escaped from his heart in a sermon which Gerson preached at Tarascon, in presence of Benedict, "Peace, peace, oh that peace may descend; above all things I long and yearn for peace."

The Chancellor's first struggle was on the field of science, against the schoolmen. In two letters, written from Bruges to the students of the college of Navarre, he complains of their restless and tumultuous spirit, of their foolish disputes about trifles, and of weakening the thoughts of the great doctors by too great a subtlety in their arguments and reasoning. He also gives advice on the choice of books. "There are some authors," he writes, "whom it is only needful to salute in passing, as a sign that we are not ignorant of them. A few, such as S. Bonaventure, S. Thomas, and William of Auxerre, should be known to us as intimate friends. As to pagan writers, we must in no wise give ourselves up to them, but be contented to be their passing guest."

In another work the reform which Gerson sought to make in the students' studies, especially in theology, is marked by a still greater precision. The criticisms which he passed on scholastic philosophy display a mind at once elevated and firm.

In 1414 was convoked the Council of Constance; it lasted until 1418, at which Gregory XII. voluntarily resigned. The anti-Popes, John XXII. and Benedict XIII. were deposed, and a new Pope was elected, who took the name of Martin V., and thus the great Schism of the West was healed.

Gerson assisted at the Council as Ambassador of the French King. While he was away on this mission Paris was the scene of civil discord, and on the termination of the Council he was unable to return thither. In pilgrim's garb he wandered amid the mountains of Bavaria, and in the Tyrol, passing from thence to Vienna, where Duke Frederick of Austria made him welcome, and named him professor of the University. He remained here for some months, but in 1419 the murder of the Duke of Burgundy enabled him to return to France. He went to Lyons, where the party for the Dauphin predominated. John, Prior of a Convent of Celsine Monks, offered him a home, which he accepted. This John de Gerson is called his brother (*germanus*), but it is unlikely that two brothers were both named John. *Germanus* means only near kinsman. He was probably his cousin. The declining years of the great Chancellor passed peacefully in the exercise of prayer and contemplation, beneath the shade of the Monastery of the Church of S. Paul. He now blessed the trials through which he had passed, and which had led him to his peaceful retreat in the evening of life. He did not, however, withdraw into selfish solitude, he still yearned for the welfare of the souls of men; he frequently gave instructions, and he was at once edifying by his words and work. He encouraged and advised all those who sought his counsel. It was during his sojourn in Lyons that Gerson wrote almost all his works on mystic philosophy, his Commentaries on the Psalms, and his treatise on the Examination of Doctrine. It is said that he took especial delight in little children; it was, he said, through them that the reformation of the Church must

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be begun. He loved to gather the children of the poor around him, and to teach them the catechism. It was a touching sight to see this venerable man, whose words had thrilled the Christian world, surrounded by God's little ones, explaining the deep mysteries of faith to them, or teaching them the rudiments of the Latin tongue. "O God, my Creator! have pity on Thy servant, John Gerson," was the simple prayer he taught their infant lips to say for him.

Gerson's last work was a Commentary on the Canticles; it was finished just before his death, which occurred on the 12th of July, 1429, when he was in his 67th year. His body was buried in the Church of S. Paul. On his tomb were inscribed the words which mark so well his own inner life: "*Sursum corda.*" For a long time his resting-place was held sacred; the people of Lyons flocked to pray there, and it is said that miracles were not wanting to testify to his great holiness.