



Blessed John of Ruysbroeck: The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage, The Sparkling Stone, & The Book of Supreme Truth

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Surnamed the Admirable Doctor, and the Divine Doctor, undoubtedly the foremost of the Flemish mystics, b. at Ruysbroeck, near Brussels, 1293; d. at Groenendael, 2 Dec., 1381. He was blessed with a devout mother, who trained him from infancy in the ways of piety and holiness. Of his father we know nothing; John's only family name, van Ruysbroeck, is taken from his native hamlet. At the age of eleven he forsook his mother, departing without leave or warning, to place himself under the guidance and tuition of his uncle, John Hinckaert, a saintly priest and a canon of St. Gudule's, Brussels, who with a fellow-canon of like mind, Francis van Coudenberg, was following a manner of life modelled on the simplicity and fervour of Apostolic days. This uncle provided for Ruysbroeck's education with a view to the priesthood. In due course, Blessed John was presented with a prebend in St. Gudule's, and ordained in 1317. His mother had followed him to Brussels, entered a Béguinage there, and made a happy end shortly before his ordination. For twenty-six years Ruysbroeck continued to lead, together with his uncle Hinckaert and van Coudenberg, a life of extreme austerity and retirement. This period, from his religious profession (1349) to his death (1381), was the most active and fruitful of Ruysbroeck's career. To his own community his life and words were a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. His fame as a man of God, as a sublime contemplative and a skilled director of souls, spread beyond the bounds of Flanders and Brabant to Holland, Germany, and France. All sorts and conditions of men sought his aid and counsel. His writings were eagerly caught up and rapidly multiplied, especially in the cloisters of the Netherlands and Germany; early in the fifteenth century they are to be found also in England. Among the more famous visitors to Groenendael mention is made of Tauler, but though the German preacher certainly knew and appreciated his writings, it is not established that he ever actually saw Ruysbroeck. Gerard Groote in particular venerated him as a father and loved him as a friend. And through Groote, Ruysbroeck's influence helped to mould the spirit of the Windesheim School, which in the next generation found its most famous exponent in Thomas à Kempis. Just now strenuous efforts are being made to discover authentic Flemish manuscripts of Blessed John Ruysbroeck's works; but up to the present the standard edition is the Latin version of Surius, all imperfect and probably incomplete as this is. Of the various treatises here preserved, the best-known and the most characteristic is that entitled "The Spiritual Espousals". It is divided into three books, treating respectively of the active, the interior, and the contemplative life; and each book is subdivided into four parts working out the text; Ecce Sponsus venit, exite obviam ei, as follows: (1) Ecce, the work of the vision, man must turn his eyes to God; (2) Sponsus venit, the divers comings of the Bridegroom; (3) exite, the soul going forth along the paths of virtue; and finally (4) the embrace of the soul and the heavenly Spouse.

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