

90. *Mysticism*

My dear Father, I cannot hide from you that last Wednesday evening I was astonished—to put it mildly—at the indifferent tone, bordering on ridicule, with which you spoke of mysticism and mystics. I felt that it was a kind profanation. I thought of our great Catholic saints, most of whom, we know, were mystics. As I watched these students listen with such trust to their young chaplain, I felt there was a danger that you might disorient some of those who were aspiring to an encounter with God. In listening to you, they could be led to despair of finding God in a Catholic religion where everything was reduced to rational explanations, and to a morality of action.

The infatuation of certain young people and famous writers with the religions of India, the success of various cults and the unbelievable prestige enjoyed in Paris by some seer from the Orient, often have no other explanation than the disparagement of the mystical life by so many Catholic priests and lay people. Do not retort that, sooner or later, every confessor has had a bone to pick with false mystics. I am well aware of that. But do false Rembrandts necessarily discredit the authentic works of the Dutch Master?

It goes without saying that we must distinguish between genuine and false mystics, and correctly define the word whose real meaning is so often distorted! Passing over subtleties, I shall say that the true mystic perceives the active presence of God at “the center of his soul,” and receives various inspirations from this presence—to prayer, love, action and self-sacrifice. Like St. Paul, he can say: “*The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God*” (Rm 8:16).

St. Paul reveals himself to be a great mystic on every page of his Epistles. He is aware of being caught up by the power of God, of being led by his Spirit. He declares to us that this is the hallmark of the children of God: “*All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*” (Rm 8:14).

You see that I am not including, in the definition of mystical experience, various “extraordinary” phenomena: ecstasies, visions and revelations. They can occur in an authentic mystical life, but they are not what essentially constitutes this life.

You may object: “Mysticism is the consecration of holiness. What’s the use of talking about it to those who are plodding along in the valleys?” No, mystical experience is not reserved for the saints. It plays a part (at least in the form of transitory graces) in the onset of many conversions, as well as in the lives of beginners on the path to holiness. I agree, of course, that the summits of mystical experience are reached only by those who are very advanced in the spiritual life. Such persons live with God, by God, and in God.

St. John of the Cross has described the innermost life of the great mystics in his *Ascent Of Mount Carmel*:

“In thus allowing God to work in it, the soul...is at once illumined and transformed in God, and God communicates to it His supernatural Being, in such wise that it appears to be God Himself, and has all that God himself has.

...all the things of God and the soul are one in participant transformation; and the soul seems to be God rather than a soul, and is indeed God by participation; although it is true that its natural being, though thus trans

formed, is as distinct from the Being of God as it was before, even as the window has likewise a nature distinct from that of the ray, though the ray gives it brightness.” *

The beginner is indeed far from such an experience. However, the Lord sometimes allows him to glimpse these summits, to spur him on to desire and pursue union with God, the goal of every Christian life. St. Teresa of Avila and St. Jane de Chantal relate that their young nuns very often attained to a mystical mental prayer after six months or a year in the novitiate.

Mystical experience, as the definition I gave you earlier implied, is not limited to times of formal mental prayer. In the midst of action, the mystic experiences the fact that he is led by God. He is led to act, or led to pray while he is acting. However, it is during formal mental prayer that the soul discovers more readily that its God is within, present and acting. The reason for this is simply that, at that particular time, the soul makes a conscious effort to be completely free, available, and surrendered to God. Again, I shall borrow the description of this experience from St. John of the Cross.

He first calls to mind that, in its early phase, mental prayer consists in meditating. He then shows that prayerful souls, especially if they have given up everything to surrender themselves to God in the religious life, soon receive the grace of “infused contemplation.” This is the way he describes this new form of mystical mental prayer:

“For God secretly and quietly infuses into the soul loving knowledge and wisdom without any intervention of specific acts, although sometimes He specifically produces them in the soul for some length of time. And the soul has then to walk with loving advertence to God, without making specific acts, but conducting itself, as we have said, passively, and making no efforts of its own, but preserving this simple, pure and loving advertence, like one that opens his eyes with the advertence of love.

Since God, then, as giver, is communing with the soul by means of loving and simple knowledge, the soul must likewise commune with Him by receiving with a loving and simple knowledge or advertence, so that knowledge may be united with knowledge and love with love. For it is meet that he who receives should behave in conformity with that which he receives, and not otherwise, in order to be able to receive and retain it as it is given to him....”**

Let no one imagine that this is some sort of luxurious pastime. During mental prayer such as this, God works great things within the soul, and consequently great things in the Church:

And the smallest part of this that God brings to pass in the soul in holy rest and solitude is an inestimable blessing, greater sometimes than either the soul itself, or he that guides it, can imagine.... ***

To dissuade the soul from this form of prayer, from this “supernatural recollection,” “to bring it out of the gulf of deep water,” as some spiritual directors sometimes do, is—St. John of the Cross vigorously declares—a sin whose consequences are incalculable:

“...it is a thing of no small weight, and no slight crime, to cause the soul to lose inestimable blessings by counselling it to go out of its way and to leave it prostrate....

“For the business of God has to be undertaken with great circumspection, and with eyes wide open, most of all in matters so delicate and sublime as the conduct of these souls, where a man may bring them almost infinite gain if the advice that he gives be good and almost infinite loss if it be mis taken.” ****

Does this mean that such a life of mental prayer in one of complete repose, without trials, dangers, or illusions? Of course not. That’s why St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa, and so many others set out, in their writings, to guide the souls that God is leading along this path.

Need we fear lest this life of mental prayer draw lay persons away from the apostolate? The example of St. Teresa of Avila suffices to refute this objection. The more a soul commits itself to the path of mental prayer, the stronger and more intense within it becomes the need to know and make known, to love and make others love, and to serve and inspire others to serve the Lord. To quote Bergson:

“It’s an irresistible impulsion that plunges it into vast undertakings. A calm exultation of all its faculties gives it far-ranging vision, and weak as it may be, makes it accomplish great things. Above all, it sees things simply, and this simplicity, which is evident both in its words and in its behavior, guides it through complications that it doesn’t even seem to notice. An innate knowledge, or rather an acquired innocence, thus suggests from the start the useful course, the decisive action, the unanswerable word. Withal, effort remains indispensable, as well as endurance and perseverance. But these come of their own accord. They unfold spontaneously in the soul that is both acting and ‘acted upon,’ whose liberty coincides with the activity of God.”

Forgive me, dear Father, for writing to you at such length. But this subject is particularly important to me. I observe that the Christian life of those who surrender to the guidance of the Spirit of God, is so much more vital! They manifest great joy of soul, even amid trials. They persevere in their ascent toward God, even if they sometimes grow faint on the way, and their actions reveal exceptional power and efficacy.

May you see this letter, dear Father, as the sign of my very great esteem for your priestly dedication, and of my hope that you may lead the many souls that place their trust in you, to the closest possible union with God.

Please believe in my fraternal friendship.

* *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Book 2, Chapter 5, Paragraph 7 in volume one of *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers, Newman Press, 1935, 1964

** *Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, Paragraphs 31 and 32, in volume three of *The Complete Works*.

*** *Living Flame of Love* (second redaction), Stanza 3, Paragraph 39, in volume three of *The Complete Works*.

**** *Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, Paragraph 48, in volume three of *The Complete Works*“