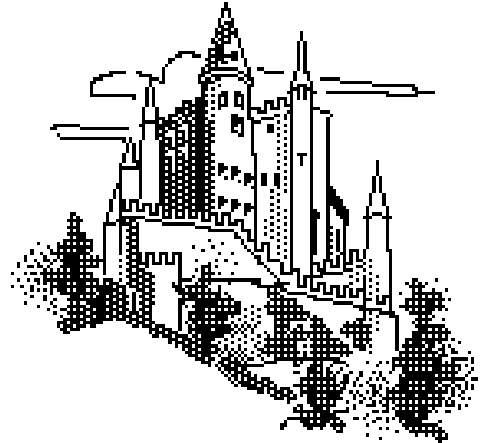


THE FOURTH MANSION - Part I

by Father Gabriel Barry, OCD

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important and delicate stages of spiritual growth comes when meditative prayer is no longer fruitful, and when God begins to lead His faithful ones “to fresh woods and pastures new.” This transition is crucial, as Saint John of the Cross proves in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*;¹ and in the *Dark Night*.² Saint Teresa devotes to it the whole of the Fourth Mansions as well as some parallel chapters in the *Life*³ and in the *Way of Perfection*.⁴ I intend to analyze and comment on the material of these chapters in the second part of this paper. But before I do that, some preliminary discussions are necessary. In this conference, then, I would like to present a bird’s-eye view of the entire field of spiritual growth, to explain, in some sort, the theological foundations on which it rests, and to throw a little light on certain words and expressions that are constantly coming to the fore whenever this phase of the spiritual life is discussed. This introductory conference then may be described as a cross-section of the Church’s accepted teaching concerning the spiritual life. I say “accepted” because, in fact, relatively little of it has been formally defined, and in a goodly number of points there is still much freedom of speculation, but there is also a considerable measure of agreement concerning the basic principles on which it all rests. I will try to present these as briefly as possible.



II. THE FOURTH MANSIONS

When Saint Teresa comes to treat of the prayer of the Fourth Mansions, she prefaces her chapters with the remark: “Before I begin to speak of the Fourth Mansions, it is most necessary that I should do what I have already done, namely commend myself to the Holy Spirit, and beg Him from this point forward to speak for me, so that you may understand what I shall say about the mansions still to be treated.”⁵ What is the reason for this diffidence on the part of so competent a writer? She herself gives the answer: “We now begin to touch the supernatural, and this is most difficult to explain, unless His Majesty takes it in hand.”⁶ It is the time when unusual things begin to happen. The Fourth Mansions are a kind of transition stage in the life of prayer. They are

¹Prologue; and in 300k II, 13-15

²Book I, 1-10

³chs. 14-15

⁴ch. 31

⁵Peers, p. 231

⁶ibid.

a confluence of many streams, and each tributary of itself possesses unfathomable depths of mystery. God begins to intervene in a Special way to lead those who pray to a higher measure of spiritual maturity than they had hitherto known. This is what Saint Teresa calls “supernatural prayer,” and which she describes in the following terms: “It is one which, despite all our efforts, cannot be acquired by industry or diligence, though we can certainly prepare for it; and it must be a great help if we do. This prayer is an interior recollection felt in the soul, which seems to have acquired new senses, Corresponding to its exterior senses....In this state, there is no loss of any of the sense or faculties, which are all fully active. But their activity is concentrated upon God.”⁷

Concerning this description, we may note: (1) That what it describes is a development in the grace-life of the soul, for God has been present in a hidden way even in the earlier mansions;⁸ (2) That, at this stage, the characteristic attitude of a soul is receptivity or passivity, whereas earlier, its own efforts and strivings were most in evidence; (3) That one’s day-to-day manner of living is now more conformed to Christ and revolves about Him as never before. For the Fourth Mansions usher in the kind of prayer which Catholic spiritual writers call contemplation. At the beginning however, this kind of prayer is not yet fully emerged from active or ordinary prayer. “There is no loss of any of the senses or faculties which are all fully active: but their activity is concentrated on God.”⁹ A modern spiritual writer points out that the prayer of the Fourth Mansions can best be described as ordinary in kind but extraordinary in elevation.¹⁰ What happens seems to be that God grants to those whom He has led thus far an unusually strong appreciation for and conviction about the truths already acquired in ordinary prayer. It is the first step in a new process by which God gradually sets the mind free from its natural ways of thinking, and purifies human affection from the taint of self-love. In other words, our limited manner of seeing divine truths, feeling or perceiving them is gradually replaced by believing in the authority of God alone. All the human activities are being transferred to a higher level of knowing and loving. This work is totally beyond the ordinary strength of human nature or of any created power. God Himself has to bring it about, but He never acts without the full and free cooperation of man. The Fourth Mansions are the first stage of this transference, which continues right on to the Seventh Mansions and into the beatific vision of heaven.

To get some idea of what this means, we must pass in review some of the basic teachings of Catholic theology. Following the example of Saint Teresa, I will try to do this with the minimum use of technical terms. In the Old Testament itself, the revelation of the Kingdom was often conveyed by figures of speech. In the same way, the inner nature of the Church and the workings of God’s grace can best be made known to our human understanding through various images.¹¹ The reason is that since grace is a mystery, it cannot be exhaustively defined, but we can gain some insight into its nature by studying various comparisons or parallels in the order of nature. The ones which best serve our purposes are drawn from light, water, plants and buildings. All of them are to be found both in the Bible and in the writings of our Carmelite Doctors. Keeping in

⁷*Relations*, V, Peers I, p. 327

⁸cf Peers II, p. 231

⁹Peers I, p. 327

¹⁰See *Graces of Interior Prayer*, ch. V, p. 72

¹¹cf *Lumen Gentium* #6

mind the adage, “Every comparison is in some way defective,” we will nonetheless use them to arrive at some understanding of such expressions as “spiritual life,” “spiritual growth,” “mystery,” “contemplation,” and “mysticism.” But no matter how we go about the task, explanations can never exhaust the full content of the realities behind these words. “How can anyone understand the thoughts of God except the very Spirit of God?”¹²

III. MAN AND HIS DESTINY

The Jews of the Old Testament grappled with the question of man and his destiny. Theirs was not the keen, penetrating minds of the Greeks, but they had a divine revelation and a solid spiritual tradition to guide them. “What is man? What purpose does he serve? What is the good in him and what the bad?”¹³ This question of Ben Sirach sums up the attitude of the average inquiring Jew into his own nature and conduct. At first, the answers were vague, uncertain and materialistic, in the sense that they were largely concerned with this life. But having a primeval revelation to guide them, the initial hesitation of the Hebrews gradually gave place to a deep enduring optimism, full of trust in God. When the Book of Job was written, they were still not a little puzzled about the trials and instability of life. But in the later books of the Old Testament, they had come to an advanced notion of man’s immortal soul and his eternal destiny.

The Christian answer to the question, “What is man?” is inseparable from our understanding of Jesus Christ who is the perfect man. The Incarnation, besides being a revelation of the character of God, is also a revelation of what is in man himself.

In the light of the Incarnation, the great theologians of the Church studied and worked out the implications of man’s relationship to God. “Acknowledge your dignity, O Christian, because you are a sharer of the divine nature. And do not fall back into your former state of degeneracy.”¹⁴ The Incarnation was in fact the taking up of the human nature into union with the divine. God became man, said Saint Augustine, so that man could become God. The Incarnation reveals to us the unrealized potentialities of human nature. It has opened up new horizons, hitherto undreamed of, for Christ came so that we can have life, and have it in the greatest possible abundance.¹⁵ We find similar thoughts expressed in the *Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*. “Man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless citizen in the city of man. For by his interior qualities, he outstrips the whole universe of mere material things. He finds re-enforcement in this profound insight whenever he enters his own heart. God who probes the heart awaits him there. There he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God.”¹⁶ “But the call to greatness and the depths of misery are a part of human experience. They find their ultimate and simultaneous explanation in the light of God’s revelation.”¹⁷ And finally: “An outstanding cause of human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God. From the very circumstance

¹²I Cor 2:12

¹³Eccles 18:7

¹⁴St. Leo: Sermon on the Nativity

¹⁵John 10:10

¹⁶#14

¹⁷#13

of his origin, man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it. And he cannot fully live according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and dedicates himself to his Creator."¹⁸ Saint Augustine sums up the true glory of man in one magnificent sentence: "The most profound fact of my nature is that I am capable of receiving God."¹⁹ The true life of man consists in the vision of God, and his sojourn here below is the prelude to this. The attainment of that vision is both a reward and an achievement. It is the final step of an activity which is man's own doing, and yet in a mysterious way is God's work too. For man has been created to the image of God. This image means something more than being endowed with freedom and intelligence. "God in His foreknowledge chose men to bear the family-likeness of his Son, Who is the eldest of a family of many brothers. He chose them long ago. When the time came, He called them; he made them righteous in His sight, and then lifted them to the splendor of life, as his own sons."²⁰ In this way, man is remade to the image of Him who is "the radiance of the glory of God and the flawless expression of the nature of God."²¹ All the members of Christ's body have to be molded into this image until He is formed in them.²² The Christian message aims at making Him known to us as the Way by which we go, the Truth by which we know and the Life by which we live. The Incarnation has set us free from creature-limits by uniting us to the divine nature of Jesus Christ and making us heirs to the Kingdom.

This is what Saint Augustine meant when he said that man was capable of receiving God - *Capax Dei*. In this respect, man is unique. Alone among all the creatures on earth, he is open, beyond the confines of this world, to the divinity. He shares the very mystery of God Himself. He is the horizon that divides the corporeal from the spiritual; he is poised between time and eternity. To be *Capax Dei* means to have a nature that is open to unlimited spiritual growth.

IV. WHAT IS MEANT BY LIFE IN GOD?

At the offertory of every mass, there is a prayer in which we beg that we may come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled Himself to share in our humanity. We describe our relationship with Jesus as "the spiritual life." It is a special kind of life that normally begins with baptism, and, given the right conditions, continues to grow and expand until it reaches its full measure in the beatific vision, which is the unhindered and immediate participation in the life of God in the world beyond the grave. The spiritual life of the Christian, then, is bounded by baptism as its starting point and the beatific vision as its goal. Between these two terms, it is normally destined to expand and grow more mature. Let us try to explain this a little.

It is not easy to define or describe what life is. We use the word every day. We know by experience what it is to live. Like all other basic concepts, it cannot be broken down to anything more simple. In general, however, anything that has the power of moving itself by its own nature is said to be alive. Because plants, fish, birds and animals possess this power of self-movement,

¹⁸ibid. #19

¹⁹ cf *De Trinitate* 14:11

²⁰Rom. 8:29-30

²¹Heb. 1:3

²²cf Gal. 4:19

though in varying degrees, they are living beings. In one way or another, they all move, even if the movement is confined to growth, as in the case of plants and other lesser organisms. As regards human beings, the notion of movement is very comprehensive. It includes breathing, seeing, hearing, perceiving, imagining, willing and thinking. Man is the highest form of life on earth, as the Bible makes clear. So much is movement the characteristic of life, that by a certain extension, we speak even of living waters. They seem to have a life of their own when they bubble up from a spring or flow along in the singing brook. Strictly speaking, of course, water is not a living entity, but the variety and beauty of its movements are such that the Bible and many spiritual writers have used it to illustrate the things of the spirit. Our Lord compares the divine life within us to fountains of living water.²³ And Saint Teresa says that she finds water a very suitable example for explaining the life of prayer. "I am so fond of this element; I have observed it more attentively than anything else."²⁴

God too has life; the most perfect of all. In fact, He is life, absolute, unending and inexhaustible. One of the basic ideas about Him in the Bible is that He is a living God, and in Him we all live and move and exist. The very name by which He chose to be known, Yahweh, is interpreted to mean "the One whose very nature it is to exist," or, in less abstract terms, the One who is always there." In other words, He is supremely living, and from Him all other forms of life flow. Saint John of the Cross has a lovely poem on this theme: "How well I know the fount that freely flows/Although 'tis night!"²⁵

This divine life is made manifest in creation through the great deeds of salvation history, which are God's way of communicating Himself to men. Above all, we see it in the person of Christ, who came to bring life in the greatest possible abundance.²⁶ Man is a citizen of two worlds, and he has a form of life that is proper to each. Within him, he possesses both natural life and a supernatural life. When he thinks the thoughts and loves the things that befit him as a citizen of this world, he is living out his natural life. This is a wonderful kind of life, even in its own right. However, he is also capable of living another manner of life; one infinitely higher and more wonderful, a life derived from God's own life. For man is capable of receiving and living His very life. This eternal life consists "in knowing the One True God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent."²⁷ Outside the nature of God Himself, this is the greatest mystery in Christian revelation, man's call to participate in the life of the Creator, knowing the things that God knows, loving what He loves, sharing His mind, and doing His will, all that is noble and good and true and praiseworthy.²⁸ Every human being is called to a life that transcends his natural limitations, and the principal purpose of our existence here below is to expand the capacity for this celestial bliss which has been so aptly defined as the total, perfect and simultaneous possession of never-ending life.

V. TRANSFORMATION IN CHRIST

²³John 4:15; 7:39

²⁴*Interior Castle*, IV Mansions, Peers, p. 236

²⁵Peers II, pp. 431-2

²⁶John 10:10

²⁷John 17:3

²⁸Phil. 4:8

Faith in the creative power of God was at the heart of the religion of Israel. Every man felt himself to be in the hands of God. If perchance they had withdrawn from Him by sin or rebellion, they could ask to be brought back and created anew. This new creation was finally brought about in Jesus Christ, who was both God and man. In Him, all mankind passed from darkness to light, from death to life. This was accomplished, in principle, in the waters of baptism, but it is also a continuing process that goes on until the day of our glorious resurrection. One of the central themes of Saint Paul's letters is his teaching on "conformity to Christ," or being transformed into Him. It means acquiring His mind, assimilating His teaching, doing the things that He would want us to do, being like Him in our self-sacrifice and in our love of all men. Human language cannot convey all the wonders of this renewal. That is why Saint Paul himself has recourse to picturesque images and vivid expressions, such as being "born anew," living "in Christ" and becoming "a new creature." He is simply trying to unveil to us some of the effects of that love which the Spirit of God pours out in our hearts.²⁹ Let us try to paraphrase him a little.

In addition to the natural concurrence which every created thing receives from God - an extension of God's original creative act - there is another kind of divine help which is reserved for rational beings. It is a special kind which God gives to those who believe in Him and love Him. It enables man to orient his life not just towards natural happiness but toward God Himself, seen as a Father, and Jesus Christ, as Brother. It is a favor that goes beyond all the powers or skill of human nature. We do not perceive it, any more than we can perceive the natural assistance that God gives us; nonetheless we depend on it every moment of the day. It is a real quality and possession, and by its means, we are raised above ourselves and transformed into Christ. It moves the mind and will of man, enabling him to say, "Our Father in heaven; I believe in God; I believe in Jesus Christ; I love God." It is grace which engenders this new life in us and transforms us beyond the capacities of mere human nature, to make us children of God. By grace in this life and by the fuller flowering of grace in the life to come, we grow up to the full measure of spiritual maturity that God has destined for everyone. It is not a question of being absorbed into God or losing our human identity. Rather the contrary. Everything that God bestowed on the nature of man develops and grows under the maturing sun of grace. The mind of man comes to know, in a finite way, what God knows in an infinite manner. The heart of man loves, in a limited way, what God loves without limit. The human will is brought into conformity with the divine, and endowed with a strength infinitely beyond its own. In this way, man grows to the full perfection of nature and grace.³⁰

VI. GROWTH IN GRACE

The seed of all this is sown in baptism, but the time of growth is spread over the whole of one's life. All who are members of Christ are progressively "filled with God," that is, with the benefits received from the redemption in Christ. And if each one works in his own special way to increase in himself the knowledge of the Son of God and His love, the entire Mystical Body

²⁹I Tim 3:3; Romans 5:5; II Cor. 5:17; etc.

³⁰see *Documents of Vat. II*, pp. 493-494; 586-587; ed. Abbott

passes to the state of the “perfect man,” which coincides with the plenitude of Christ.³¹ Spiritual growth is like natural growth to the extent that it needs the initial principle of life to spring from. And likewise, it has to be carefully nurtured. Any attempt to force it is doomed to failure. This should not surprise us. Growth and development are part of God’s providence. He is honored by them, and they work unto the good of the whole organism of the Church. But one of the errors to which we are prone is to imagine that God bestows the fullness of His gifts all at once. This can be a very serious mistake and in one shape or another is at the root of most of the spiritual heresies which have plagued the Church down through the centuries. It does not happen in that way. “According to the normal working out of God’s plan, the investiture of Grace is not followed by an immediate transportation into heaven. The reception of life, in the supernatural plane as well as in the natural, is but the launching of the creature on a career of effort and achievement. The bestowal of grace is not the ending but the beginning. When God makes a person a Christian, He by no means dispenses him from the effort to be a human being.”³² Like a lump of yeast, grace works through the whole of human nature, step by step. And we for our part must learn to go along with God’s pace, which is in fact the fastest. He is far more willing to give than we are capable of receiving. Christianity has many paradoxes, and growth in Christ is surely one of them. “He must increase according as we decrease.” And yet this growth is spontaneous, joyous and free. It brings great fulfillment, but on the other hand, it causes intense pain and requires many sacrifices. For self-love dies a hard death.

Insofar as prayer is an integral part of the Christian way of life, it too has to develop and grow. Saint Teresa describes the process with the aid of two comparisons. She likens the different stages of prayer to the various ways of watering a garden, each marking an advance on the effectiveness of the previous one. In the *Interior Castle*, she uses another type of imagery: a chateau arranged in mansions, each one progressively closer to the central mansion where the King of Glory dwells. We can sum up her thought by saying that everyone is called to commune with God. However, God does not communicate His gifts all at once. There is a gradual intensification in the divine light that is imparted to us, culminating in the graces of the seventh mansions. These are a prelude to the Beatific Vision and are separated from it only by a thin veil. The experience of these seventh mansions is one of the greatest that human nature can sustain and yet live. This is true even when we grant that the most perfect perception of God here below remains shrouded in darkness. “Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror, but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known.”³³

From the very moment that the gift of faith is imparted to a soul, God is communicating Himself to her. However, at the stage which Saint Teresa calls the fourth mansions (or the second water) a new phase begins. From now on, we are dealing with contemplation and mysticism.

But before trying to elucidate these two difficult words, it will be helpful to include some discussion, however brief, on the virtue of faith. The notion of faith enters deeply into our understanding of the spiritual life. Prayer, in fact, is the expression of faith.

³¹cf Eph. 4:10-13; *Docs. of Vat. II*, p. 67

³²Leen: *The Holy Ghost*, p. 55

³³I Cor. 13:12

VII. FAITH

We may begin by saying that faith is a form of knowledge: “Knowing the one true God and His Son Jesus Christ.” It is a ray of God’s light elevating the human mind so that it can, in a real sense know God Himself and know other things as God does. Since this is a very special kind of knowledge, it makes an impact on the entire human person. It evokes a response; it causes one to adhere to the divine word of truth; it constrains us to hand ourselves over to the Him Whom we have got to know, and Whom we now recognize as the Lord of our destiny. Faith involves an assent to truth, as made known to us by God Himself, but it exceeds a mere act of the intellect. It is more in the nature of an experience of Eternal Truth and Never-Ending Love. It means accepting the full message of salvation and committing oneself to Jesus Christ. “These signs are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing this, you may have life through His name.”³⁴ This is how St. John sums it all up.

From another angle, we can regard faith as, in a certain sense, an expansion of the power of the human intellect into a realm that is beyond its natural reach. Of its nature, the human mind is limited to acquiring natural knowledge. It has no power of its own to reach into the supernatural, though it has certain potentialities. Faith it is that takes advantage of this capacity in order to give man the actual power to know God. Perhaps the best illustration we can find is the example of light, reflected in a mirror. It is an example frequently used by spiritual writers, Saint Teresa included. When a mirror is exposed to the sun’s rays, it becomes a source of radiance and light without in any way taking from or adding to the natural power of the sun. In like manner, when the soul is exposed to the action of the Holy Spirit, it becomes illuminated and is charged with divine radiance and power. God produces in the soul a reality called Grace, and this gives it the aptitude to be associated in the very life of God. Faith is the gift by which a man comes to know the things of God, and is made like to Him in His manner of knowing.

In this life, however, our knowledge will always be “in a dark manner.” We can never see Him face to face. The “mirror” in which His is reflected is both thick and darkened. By this I mean that certain created elements enter in to the formulation of faith, as it is found in our human minds. These tend to “Humanize” our faith until God purifies them away, in order to perfect our perception of Himself. This is the goal of the teaching of Saint John of the Cross, to bring about the “pure faith” or “illuminated faith” which is the perfect medium of union with God.³⁵ But even this faith is never direct vision.

VIII. MYSTERY

The word contemplation designates one of the central realities of Christian Spirituality, and is closely linked with mysticism. Both of them, as well as faith and grace, derive from a more basic reality, namely Mystery. It has been well said that this is one of the keywords in all Christian thought. There are many truths and realities which are known to man only because God has told

³⁴John 20:31

³⁵see *Ascent of Mount Carmel II*, 3:1; 3:4; 3:9

him about them. And even when we know of their existence, even when they have been inserted into human history, they can never be fully captured by the human mind or conveyed in human language. For they contain something of the hidden presence of God Who is the supreme mystery. Saint John of the Cross has this to say of contemplative encounters of God: “It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding are fully explainable.. Who can describe the understanding He gives to those in whom He dwells? Or who can express the experience He imparts to them? Certainly, no one can, not even they who receive these communications. As a result, these persons let something of their experiences overflow in figures and similes, and from the abundance of their spirit, pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations. If these similitude’s are not read with the simplicity of the spirit of knowledge and love they contain, they will seem to be absurdities rather than reasonable utterances.”³⁶ In the same way, the inner nature of Christian mystery is best communicated by various images.³⁷

We ought not to be put off by the presence of mystery in our faith. In one shape or another, mysteries surround us at every moment of the day, even on the purely natural level. It is part of the providential order of things in this life that we can know so much, but never the whole. The human mind, for all its uniqueness cannot grasp everything, even in the order of nature. The humblest flower that grows is a mystery that science cannot fully explain, and probably never will. “And what is man?” the psalmist reflects, “noble in reason, in action like an angel, in apprehension how like a god.” Man himself is the central mystery of natural creation; he will never be fully explained, except by the One who made him.

When confronted for the first time with a great prodigy of nature, the human mind is lost in amazement. One recalls some famous lines from the poet Keats about that Spanish explorer who crossed over Mexico and was the first to gaze on the Pacific Ocean. “And all his men stared at each other in wild surmise, silent, upon a peak in Darien.” This is how men normally react to an overwhelming discovery, “silence and wonderment.” Much more may we expect mystery and awe-inspiring discoveries in the heavenly regions. And when confronted with these, all we can do is to fall on our knees and adore. “You have the words of eternal life, and we believe.”³⁸

However, God has not left us entirely in the dark. Although we cannot see Him in His glory during this life, sometimes in the greatness of His mercy, He draws back the veil ever so little, to give some men and women, not exactly a vision of Himself, but an insight or intuition which goes far beyond any other experience that is possible in this life, though still within the domain of faith. An incident in the Book of Exodus describes it admirably. Moses said to God, “Show me your glory.” And He said, “I will let all my splendor pass in front of you and I will pronounce before you the name of Yahweh (i.e. reveal something of the divine nature). I have compassion on whom I will, and I show pity to whom I please. But you cannot see my face, for man cannot see me and live. Here is a place beside me. When my glory passes by, I will shield you with my hand while I pass by.”³⁹ The lesson is that God’s sanctity is so far removed from

³⁶*Spiritual Canticle*, Prologue #1

³⁷cf *Doc. of Vat. II*, p. 18, #6

³⁸John 6:68

³⁹Ex. 33:18-23

man's unworthiness, that man would perish if he looked on God. For that reason, men "cover their faces" in His presence. But occasionally and rather rarely God grants the favor of revealing Himself more closely to His chosen friends. These are the mystics, beginning with Moses, Elijah and Saint Paul. The medium He uses is contemplation, and its initial impact comes at the stage which Saint Teresa calls the fourth mansions.

IX. CONTEMPLATION

Since prayer is one aspect of man's encounter with God, its evolution is intimately bound up with the growth of grace and the development of faith. In fact it is all one movement, showing itself under different facets. It is the action of God at work in the human soul, bringing it to the maturity of divine life. But human cooperation and a free human choice are needed all along the line. God enlightens the mind to know and strengthens the will to do. In the Liturgy we beg Him to compel our rebellious wills to go along with His designs.⁴⁰ With sincere effort, the facility to practice virtue grows. Simultaneously, the knowledge and love of God becomes a part of human consciousness, and God Himself assumes the role that normally would have been His, if there were no original sin. As Saint John of the Cross points out, the only one with whom He could assume that role right from the beginning was the Blessed Mother. She never put the least obstacle in His way. She was the perfect contemplative, and her entire life, like that of every true contemplative is best summed up by herself: "Be it done unto me according to your word."⁴¹

What happens is something like this: The more faithful one becomes to the divine guidance, according as one perceives it, the more sensitive one becomes to God's wishes and God's help. Little by little, one begins to see with a divine insight and to act with a new strength, or to use other words, the more a soul is purified and refined by its response to the action of God, the more it is taken up into God's control. "Those who are loved by the Spirit of God are the children of God."⁴² What takes place, then, is that the human will becomes more mature and responsive, with the result that God is able to intervene more easily in all we do. The human alloy in faith and the imperfections of love are purged away, and the soul of man is set free from many limitations that hitherto constrained its freedom. Christian theology attributes this to the extraordinary mode of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially wisdom and understanding. These gifts accompany grace, which, as we saw, is another word for God's absolutely gratuitous mercy and love. Its very essence consists in a divine self-giving and man is healed, justified and made eternally blessed by the divine presence. That is what we mean when we say "God is Love."⁴³ The Holy Spirit is the redemptive power of God, at work in Jesus Christ and in the lives of all who accept the graciousness of God's love. The Holy Spirit is the source of the gifts, which include the divine wisdom and charismatic love that comes in contemplative prayer. He manifests Himself in a "new form of life," characterized by joy, peace, patience, loyalty and goodness. The purpose of the gifts is to bring about a delicate receptiveness to the divine invitation to "go up higher." This alertness is often compared to the response of a finely tuned instrument to the hands of an accomplished artist; or again to a sailing boat wafted by a gentle

⁴⁰14th Sunday after Pentecost, old calendar

⁴¹cf *Ascent, III*, 2:10

⁴²Romans 8:14

⁴³I John 4:8

breeze. When this special divine impulse becomes habitual, one begins to realize what is meant by the “new life.” One knows God and loves Him as well as all creation in a profoundly better way. Prayer is no longer the fruit of laborious meditations and struggling efforts. It is evoked under the clear but gentle influence of God, acting upon the entire human person. This is contemplative prayer, and is accompanied by a joyful and willing responsiveness to God’s action. Once again, I would like to point out that according to Saint Teresa’s scale of values, the fourth mansion is the stage when this influence comes to the fore. It marks a new beginning, though as we shall see, these mansions are still relatively incomplete.

This too is the time when even experienced spiritual writers like Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross feel that they are “up against it,” if they try to express something of all this in words. Indeed both of them agree that it calls for another and very special grace, “prophecy” in the Pauline sense, the gift of proclaiming the wonders of God’s redemption. Apart from the natural reluctance of contemplatives to speak about their own experiences, they cannot find words that really match what they want them to say. Contemplative prayer is an intuition or an experience of the divine, a “secret communication” between God and man. If we reflect on the great difficulty of describing even a natural experience, color or sound or taste, for example, we can see why even great spiritual writers are constantly protesting their inability to speak worthily of God. Nonetheless, a great literature has grown up in the Church, in an endeavor to convey some idea of contemplative prayer. In the next conference, we mean to return to this point.

X. SOME FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

Even though the call to contemplation may be regarded as an aspect of the universal call to holiness,⁴⁴ there are many profound and probably unanswerable questions about it. For instance, why are genuine contemplatives so rare? Are there two ways to God, the mystical and the non-mystical? Are visions, ecstasies and other unusual graces part of the contemplative experience? May one aspire to contemplative prayer? There is no simple answer to these and other questions, but here are a few observations.

Even though contemplative prayer is the outgrowth of grace and faith, it also requires more than ordinary intensity of them. In other words, it is due to a special intervention of God, the precise nature of which is difficult to put into words. No mere human skill can see it directly or appraise its nature.

The contemplative manner of prayer is one of the highest graces that God can bestow. Indeed it has been called the crown of all other graces, heaven on earth, etc., etc. It brings with it an inner certainty in faith and an unusual strengthening in divine love. This is what the scriptures call peace. But for all that, contemplation is not an easy road, as far as this life is concerned. As in the case of our Lord Himself, the journey leads to Calvary as well as to the Resurrection. In addition to the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, there is also a more searching kind of purification that accompanies special graces. They are the result of the soul being drawn closer to God and discovering the bad habits, the selfishness and the deep-seated

⁴⁴see *Lumen Gentium*, chap. V Docs., p. 65

stains which still persist. In contrast to these, the excellence of God is like a searing fire that purifies and heals. Self-love has to be drained out down to the last drop; otherwise the spirit of man cannot receive the Spirit of God. And the inner conflict is a very painful one. Saint John of the Cross says of it that in the beginning, the light of God seems to be black darkness, and His love, emptiness and pain. And this continues until all the stains are cleansed away.

There is another call that all contemplatives know, a call to share in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, to fill up in themselves what is lacking in the sufferings of the Master,⁴⁵ to carry, in union with Christ, that mysterious and terrible burden of sin and wickedness which weighed so heavily on the shoulders of Christ during His agony in the garden. It means grappling with the unseen powers that seek to control the world, evil personified and bent on destroying all that is good.⁴⁶ Much of this must sound nonsensical to the average person of today and even to many a sophisticated Catholic. Not so to the contemplative; for him it is awfully real. It may be that the present upsurge of witchcraft, magic and Satanism with all their dreadful accompaniments, will make it real to others as well. The devil is not a comic character in cartoons, but the avowed and horrible enemy of God and men. All this a contemplative encounters and willingly accepts despite the reluctance of the flesh. His readiness springs from a deep solidarity with Christ on the one hand, and with mankind on the other hand. He experiences the urgent need to be a channel of redeeming love to all men. This is community life at its finest and best, and there is no other way in which it can be built up. It has to spring from the redemptive love of Christ and have its roots in the Liturgy and deep personal prayer. This is yet another area where many mistakes have been made in recent times. A lot of effort has gone in to building up a better world, but the result has often been only a hollow imitation of reality. It was a house built on sand, because the inner bond of prayer, which Saint Teresa compares to cement, has been lacking. A Utopia based on human dreams alone soon becomes a “no-where,” which is exactly what the word means. Certainly, human effort and resources are needed during this life even in spiritual projects. That is the meaning of the petition “give us this day our daily bread.” But more important by far is faith, love, humility and self-sacrifice. These are the real foundations.

XI. MYSTICISM

I wish to conclude with some comments on mysticism. There are few more abused words in any language. Admittedly, it is difficult to pin down its precise meaning, and its basic derivation is not much help. It comes from a Greek verb *muein*, which means to close the lips or eyes, and, by extension, to hide Something. The word mystery comes from the same root. Mysticism, in general, designates a search for what is normally inaccessible. Catholic spiritual writers reserve the name for that branch of theology which investigates the hidden action of God in the soul. But since God’s action is hidden right from the very birth of faith, certain precision’s are called for. It is here that opinions differ. As many as twenty-six definitions of mysticism are forthcoming.⁴⁷ The Oxford Dictionary has the following: “Belief in the possibility of union with the divine nature by means of contemplation; reliance on spiritual intuition as the means of acquiring the knowledge of truths inaccessible to the natural human understanding.” In Webster’s

⁴⁵Col. 1:24

⁴⁶Eph. 6:12

⁴⁷See Inge: *Christian Mysticism*, appendix A

International Dictionary, the word is interpreted as “the doctrine or belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth and ultimate reality is attainable through immediate intuition, insight or illumination, in a manner different from ordinary sense perception or reasoning processes.” From the Catholic point of view, neither of these is entirely satisfactory, but at least, they indicate the common usage of the word. The Catholic theologian would point out that the contemplation and intuition which bring about union with God are not man-made things, but due to the influx of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which render the soul passive to or receptive of God. The mystical experience of a Christian can be summed up in the words of Saint Paul: “I live now, not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives within me.”⁴⁸ This experience of identification, which is the goal of the mystical process, has an important significance. It usually begins with a burning sense of opposition or conflict between the dark stains of self-love and the absolute purity of God. Then as the purification progresses, the feeling of opposition or alienation is replaced by a sense of possession or identification. This brings with it an unprecedented love for God first and foremost and for creation, especially for human beings. It also brings the experience of great freedom from constraints, side by side with a new zeal for God’s life-giving law, and a remarkable appreciation of what is true and orthodox.

This, you will have noticed, is what Saint Teresa calls “supernatural prayer,” in the descriptive definition quoted at the beginning of this paper. In her terminology and that of Saint John of the Cross, this word, “supernatural,” has more than the usual meaning attributed to it by dogmatic theologians. It refers to a direct apprehension of the presence of God by the conscious mind, while all the time, God’s essence remains inaccessible. As we have said, this special consciousness is induced by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The power and action of God are unfathomable. And the essential characteristics of all these states beginning with the fourth mansions and continuing up to the seventh is that they are “ultra human.” This constitutes a problem even for writers of the stature of Saint Teresa; the supernatural cannot be seen by the normal faculties of man, nor easily described in human propositions.

The experiences of a genuine mystic, however hard it may be to put them into words, are the most valuable and the highest that grace can produce. They are the realization of the prayer which Jesus Himself made, a few hours before His supreme sacrifice: “That they may be one, as we are one; with me in them and you in me; may they be so completely one that the world will realize that it was you who sent me.”⁴⁹ This is what Catholic mysticism means.

XII. CONCLUSION

These reflections, long-winded though they may appear to be, only skim the surface of what can be said about contemplative prayer and mysticism. There are many, many questions in relation to both that have to be bypassed here. However, this one seems to be particularly relevant, so I pose it: Does God grant contemplation and mystical graces to non-Catholics or non-Christians? In our age of ecumenism, this matter is being explored as never before, and rightly so. In particular, the value of oriental non-Christian mysticism is being urged. I think we have to say,

⁴⁸Gal. 2:20

⁴⁹John 17: 22-23

however, that some of the conclusions put forward are too precipitant; and reliable guides in this area are not very numerous. This is regrettable, in view of the present interest in mysticism of all kinds. It can be a very dangerous preoccupation, particularly for persons of unbalanced minds or unstable emotions. Among the books listed in our bibliography, several assume quite blandly that all types of religious mysticism are of the same kind. This is surely unwarranted and uncritical. We must of course take into account the teaching of Vatican II concerning our separated brethren and those who belong to non-Christian religions. The Church which Christ founded survives in the world today in the Catholic Church. “But many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure.”⁵⁰ “Since Christ died for all men and since the ultimate vocation of men is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery.”⁵¹ God certainly does not deny the graces of salvation to those who, through no fault of their own, are not formal members of the Church. But do these necessary graces include the gift of contemplation and mystical experience? This is a difficult question, and certainly a positive answer is not to be easily presumed. The authenticity of a mystical experience is hard to prove, even in the most favorable circumstances, as Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross clearly attest. It seems to me that in the case of non-Christian oriental mysticism, one must be especially careful. Experts are surely entitled to examine its claims, but it is not safe to recommend it indiscriminately, as some writers do. Above all, it may not be used as an alternative to the teaching of the Gospels.

Saint Paul writes: “We teach what scripture calls the things that no eye has seen and no ear heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him. These are the very things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God.”⁵² No better summary could be found for the substance of Saint Teresa’s wonderful teaching on mystical prayer. Our main concern here is to explore the content of these writings and to present it as simply and convincingly as possible. For it is not a mere academic interest. It has the practical aim of making every one of us more fervent in prayer, more generous in works of charity, more eager to celebrate the mysteries by which we are reborn. In this way God can bring us to the fullness of grace that belongs to the children of God.

XIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Please refer to the OCDS *Rule of Life*, Foreword and Articles 1 through 8.
2. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Peers and/or ICS edition.
3. For those who would like to pursue further, here is a short list of books, if they are available:
 - a. Saint John of the Cross: *Ascent and Dark Night*, also *Living Flame*, stz. III.
 - b. Poulain, A.: *Graces of Interior Prayer*.
 - c. Farges, A.: *Mystical Phenomena*.
 - d. Watkin, E.: *Philosophy of Mysticism*.
 - e. Butler, C.: *Western Mysticism*.
 - f. Grandmaison, L.: *Personal Religion*.

⁵⁰*Lumen Gentium* #8

⁵¹*Church in Modern World* #22; cf. *Ecumenism* #3 and *Lumen Gentium* #15

⁵²I Cor 2:9-11

- g. Knowles, D.: *What is Mysticism?*
- h. Underhill, E.: *Mysticism*.
- i. O'Brien, E.: *Varieties of Mystical Experience*.
- j. Lossky, V.: *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.
- k. Spencer, S.: *Mysticism in World Religion*.
- l. Happold, F.C.: *Mysticism*.
- m. Leen, E.: *The Holy Ghost*.
- n. Stanley, D.: *Faith and Religious Life*.
- o. Mouroux, J.: *The Christian Experience*.
- p. Gleason, R.: *Grace*.
- q. de Guibert, J.: *Theology of the Spiritual Life*.
