

CHRIST IN THE MYSTICISM OF ST. TERESA

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I. INTRODUCTION

The word “mysticism” is a word that many do not feel at ease with. It is a term in fact that St. Teresa never used. She was even hesitant about the words “mental prayer” and “contemplation,” since, she tells us, they were words her nuns were afraid of; as a result she limited herself to commenting on the Our Father when writing on prayer for her Sisters. Nonetheless, though Teresa tried not to scare people off, she has left careful descriptions of some of the most extraordinary spiritual experiences in the history of religious literature.

Teresa, in looking back, divides her spiritual life into two definite periods. The second period is marked by her clear experience of what she calls the “supernatural.” her term for “mystical,” for the experiences that she was certain she could not have acquired through her own efforts. These experiences are sometimes referred to as “contemplation” or “infused contemplation”; they include the stages of contemplation outlined in different ways by Teresa in various writings .

When she arrives at this second period in her *Life*, she writes: “This is another new book from here on - I mean, another new life. The life dealt with up to this point was mine; the life I lived from this point . . . is the one God lived in me,”¹

In order to speak well of Teresa’s experience of Christ in this second period of her life we should say something beforehand about her relationship to Him in the first period of her spiritual life. During this period which lasted until she was in her forties she was bound more to her own efforts at prayer and the use of her own resources.

Everyone who sets out on the spiritual journey to God faces the same problem, How can I come into touch with God who is infinite and pure mystery to all creatures. The Buddhists might say: with reference to God we cannot even speak; you must sit in the silence, and you might begin by counting your breath. Or a Hindu might give you a sacred word, a mantra, techniques and methods of prayer. Moral and ascetical life have been devised to answer this question.

Teresa, of course, approached this problem as a Christian. Now the Christian believes that God Himself has entered our world and provided us with the way to Himself through Jesus Christ. Teresa observes: “Christ is the one in whom God takes delight . . . He is the one through whom all blessings come. He is the gate to God, the path.”² Now there are these different ways in which we can relate to Christ. Teresa tells us that He is our Brother who enables us to call God our Father. Besides this, He is a friend and companion, a companion particularly in times of difficulty and tribulation; He is our teacher and master, who teaches us how to approach God

¹Life, ch. 23, 1

²Life, ch. 22

particularly in the Our Father: He is in a deeply spiritual way our Bridegroom or Spouse: He is a Lord, the Lord of the world, our King, whom she calls His Majesty.³

II. REPRESENTING CHRIST

It is for you to look at Him, Teresa says, He never takes His eyes off you.⁴ How can we look at Him? Teresa would represent Him within herself. “I represented Him to myself interiorly,” she says. It is not too clear just what she meant by “representing” Christ within her. For further on in her *Life* she complains: “I had such little ability to represent things with my intellect that if I hadn’t seen the things, my imagination was not of use to me . . . I could only think about Christ as He was as man, but never in such a way that I could picture Him within myself . . . I was like one who is blind or in darkness.”⁵

When she is speaking of representing Christ, then, she is not referring to some vivid picturing with her imagination or to the composition of place with all its detail. Her concern is not with the physical details of the physical qualities of Christ or of the particular scene. For Teresa “representing Christ” has more to do with becoming aware of His presence, or becoming present to Him “who never takes His eyes off us.” She goes directly to the person of Christ in His humanity: she brings Him to her consciousness as either within her or beside her. This was her manner of entering prayer. But because of her fragile nature and a mind that was so susceptible to digression, so alert and active, as the reading of her writings demonstrates so clearly, she felt torment over her inability to concentrate her attention. As a result she resorted as well to other supports and strategies in order to be present to Christ.

III. CAPACITY FOR FRIENDSHIP

First, Teresa had a great natural capacity for friendship and for conversation. She used this gift as a means of approaching Christ. Friendship became a major factor in her understanding of prayer and the spiritual life as she worked it out in her writings. Her definition of prayer involves being alone with a friend and sharing intimately. And God in taking on our humanity in Jesus offers us a human as well as a divine friendship by which we may approach Him.

Secondly, Teresa related to Jesus out of her life situation and particular mood at the time of prayer, She discovered that Christ through His early experiences, His earthly mysteries, was always ready to adapt to our situation. “They say,” Teresa writes, “that for a woman to be a good wife toward her husband she must be sad when he is sad, and joyful when he is joyful, even though she may not be so.” It is the Lord who acts this way with us. “He submits to your will. behold Him on the way to the garden.”⁶ Speaking to Christ, spontaneous prayer, was not too great a problem for Teresa. She often in her writings will be carried away into prayer speaking to the Lord in familiar ways, praising His attributes and lamenting her miseries. “Since you speak

³W. P. ch. 27

⁴ibid

⁵L. ch. 9

⁶W. P. ch. 26

with other persons, why must words fail you more when you speak with God?”⁷ But if we don’t have words of our own, there is the Our Father “that He taught us, and continues to teach us as to its meaning. We may recite it slowly and take even a whole hour to recite it once.” Another strategy that came easy to Teresa was to relive the Gospel scenes by relating to Christ as did certain persons in Scripture accounts of the Samaritan woman or Mary Magdalene or St. Paul at the moment of his conversion or St. Peter in tears or the Virgin Mary at the foot of the Cross. The story of Our Lord’s life provided her with many ways by which she could approach the person of Christ and experience the power of His words and the actuality of His divine influence. At the center always was Jesus Christ.

But what in our twentieth century can be said to an approach like this? Was this a medieval custom that can have no meaning for us today with our acknowledgment that the Gospels are not literal or chronological accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus? Why meditate upon or contemplate the earthly history of Jesus? Isn’t that all past. Shouldn’t we be spending our time building a better future ?

IV. NO NOSTALGIA

Let us look at the first-century Christians. They believed that “Jesus is the Lord” and thus is, through His exaltation to the Father’s right hand, more dynamically present in the world than ever He was when He walked the hills of Galilee. A noteworthy feature of the New Testament is that there is no nostalgia for the “good old days,” no attempt to live in the past. Jesus went before His first disciples; the risen Christ was revealed to them as the Son of God who had freely chosen to remain human for all eternity, to love with a human mind and heart.

Why, if the apostle had no desire to live in the “good old days,” do our evangelists devote almost all their written works to the recording of what Jesus began to do and to teach? The author of the Apocalypse hints at the solution to this question when he presents the exalted Lord Jesus as Master of history by means of the symbol of the “lamb standing as though slain.”⁸ Jesus Christ became the Master of history through His earthly life, death, and resurrection. It is through the mysteries of His earthly life that Christ now exerts, through the work of His Spirit, His influence upon the life of the Christian. All the mysteries of Jesus’ earthly history, from the cradle to the grave, have been mysteriously endowed in His glorified humanity with an entirely new, enduring actuality.

How can I relate in a most intimate and personal fashion to the risen Christ so far above and beyond my reach? I can only relate to Christ on the level of the spiritual life at which I now find myself. It is through His human experience His childhood, and public life, with His temptations, triumphs, frustrations, and disillusionment, that I am offered the possibility of relating to Him. Thus it was through the various mysteries of His earthly existence (perpetually real and actual in Himself) that Christ touched Teresa in the innermost recesses of her being and so can touch each of us.

⁷W. P. ch. 26

⁸Rev. 5: 16

In the loving friendship with Christ that Teresa developed through prayer, she felt keenly her own failure to live up to the demands of such friendship. It was during a moment of intense feeling of her own wretchedness that she experienced the conversion that marked the new period of her spiritual life. She tells us: “Well, my soul now was tired; and, in spite of its desire, my wretched habits would not allow it rest. It happened to me that one day . . . I saw a statue . . . (of) the much wounded Christ . . . I threw myself down before Him with the greatest outpouring of tears. I was very devoted to the Magdalene and frequently thought about her conversion . . .” From that moment on she noticed a remarkable change within herself. “It seemed to me my soul gained great strength from the Divine Majesty and that He must have heard my cries and taken pity on so many tears.⁹

V. EXPERIENCE HIS PRESENCE

This experience served as a bridge for Teresa to the other shore where her new life began. She who for many years used these many efforts to bring His presence to her consciousness now began to experience His presence in a way that none of her efforts could have ever evoked. She writes: “I sometimes experienced, as I said, although very briefly, the beginning of what I will now speak about. It used to happen when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in His presence, or even while reading, that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within me or I totally immersed in Him. This did not occur after the manner of a vision.”¹⁰ A transition now took place: from Teresa making the effort to represent Christ within her in the way we mentioned to Teresa experiencing God’s presence within her.

Now this experience of God’s presence was such a delight to Teresa that she was led at one point into an error that she later always considered to have been serious. From certain books that she had read she began to think that her custom of representing and being present to Jesus Christ was an impediment to this passive prayer of quiet and union. These books advised that in order to contemplate the divinity one must rid the mind, the imagination and the intellect from all use of corporeal images and particular thought. It is frequently pointed out by authors that this was the teaching of books by Osuna and Laredo (*The Third Spiritual Alphabet* and *The Ascent of Mount Sion*). But if you read their books you will have a hard time trying to find this teaching. In fact, the explanation has been offered that Teresa simply had not understood them. Recently, however, P. Tomas Alvarez, OCD, has demonstrated that we find this teaching in another book read by Teresa, a book by the Franciscan Bernabe de Palma entitled *The Way of the Spirit*. In this work Palma explains at length how we should let the intellect expand until one finds one self in the midst of an infinite sea of grandeur and goodness. He contrasts this manner of using the mind with the contemplation of God through creatures. That is like trying to look at something through the eye of a needle. “Note that when you contemplate something of God you do not confine your intellect to a limited place but let it adapt and extend to all parts . . . understanding everything equally let it contemplate a plentiful immensity in which we consider ourselves entirely contained and swallowed up much more so than a drop of water in the midst of the sea . . . In

⁹L. 9: 8

¹⁰L. 10: 1

order to walk in the spirit we don't have to keep to any corporeal form and make the effort this requires.”

Teresa does not deny the fact that discursive meditation becomes increasingly difficult as one begins to experience passive prayer. But this doesn't mean that at each stage Christ ceases to play a central role in the spiritual life. In the first place, she says, a person often will have the mysteries of Christ's life in mind because they are being celebrated in the Church's liturgy and liturgical seasons. Secondly, there is a manner of dwelling upon Christ that is contemplative and does not interfere with or impede the most sublime prayer. “We behold Him with a simple gaze,” Teresa says, “and this will suffice us, not merely for an hour, but for many days.”¹¹

VI. VERY BUSY LIFE

There is a third point that Teresa makes here. Although she was a member of a contemplative community, her life was like the lives of most of us, a very busy one, even a hectic one. She was involved in buying property, houses, raising funds, recruiting vocations, dealing with misunderstanding, with opposition toward what she was doing, with persecution, condemnation, wretched health, the whole bit, the stuff of life ! Obviously she was not enwrapped all the time in quiet and unitive contemplation. There were periods in her life of much distraction and trial. At these times Christ was the source of particular strength for her. “Life is long and there are many trials in it and we have to look at Christ our model . . . The good Jesus is very good company for us, too much so for us to turn away from Him.”¹²

Teresa says that during the time of the error she was making, “My soul was in a very bad state . . . All its consolations were coming in small portions, and, once they were passed, it didn't then have the companionship of Christ to help in trials and temptations. I saw afterward that God desires that if we are going to please Him and receive His great favors, we must do so through the most sacred humanity of Christ, in whom He takes His delight.”

A special power and the most extraordinary favors from God then came to Teresa through Jesus Christ. From her experience she had to stress strongly that in any Christian spirituality “the most sacred humanity of Christ must not be counted in a balance with other corporeal things.”¹³

Why is this so? First, it is important to remember that Christ in His risen body is no longer subject to the space and time context in which we live. Vatican II says: “Christ is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of His Spirit.” There is, then, a fullness of graces, a plethora of gifts of the Spirit and of infused virtues which exist in the sacred humanity of the only-begotten Son and of which He desires to make all His brethren participate. The Holy Spirit enfolds the humanity of Christ, glorifies and spiritualizes it, in such a way that the fire and the kindled coals appear to be one and the same. In St. Paul it is revealed that the risen Christ will in turn raise up all the just through love for them and for His Father. The glorious resurrection of

¹¹L. ch. 22, 4

¹²I. C. vi. 7, 13

¹³L. ch. 22

the just will be a visible manifestation of the overflowing love that the human will of the Risen Christ bears them .

VII. A NEW EARTH

But Christ will not limit Himself to resurrecting human bodies. He will also transform the material world, making it a “new earth.” The divine will of the Incarnate Word will move Jesus’ human will, which is perfectly obedient. And Jesus will reach to all creatures in order to complete them by developing their potentialities. The creation subjected to futility by the first Adam will be set free from its bondage to decay through the risen Christ: creation will be made like his glorious body. The whole universe, linked with the glorious Humanity of the Word, will appear as His priestly vestment: through the universe will shine the radiance of His sacred humanity and of His divine Person.

As Teresa progressed through the interior castle to the center room, she experienced ever more deeply this power and beauty of the humanity of Christ. Had Teresa remained in her error, she, in her opinion, would never have received the deeper experiences of raptures and vision by which she came to a fuller awareness of the power and the mystery of Jesus Christ

During the time of her error she was experiencing passively the presence of God in the prayer of quiet and of union. But she explains that such an experience is greatly different from what she calls vision. With regard to her experiences of Christ as she went on, she began first to hear His words to her deep within her spirit. Then later she experienced her first vision of the humanity of Christ. “Being in prayer on the feast day of the glorious St. Peter, I saw or, to put it better, I felt Christ beside me: I saw nothing with my bodily eyes or with my soul, but it seemed to me that Christ was at my side . . . since this wasn’t an imaginative vision I didn’t see any form, yet I felt very clearly that He was always present at my side and that he was the witness of everything I did. In the prayer of union or quiet one understands that God is present by the effects that He grants to the soul. In this vision, it is seen clearly that Jesus Christ, son of the Virgin is present . . . you see that the most sacred humanity accompanies us and desires to grant us favors.”¹⁴

VIII. THE SACRED HUMANITY

Teresa’s next experience of the most sacred humanity came in the form of an imaginative vision. The beauty and majesty of His risen body was shown to her only gradually. Then “One feast day of St. Paul, while I was at Mass, this most sacred humanity was represented to me completely . . . with such wonderful beauty and majesty . . .” She insists that what she saw was not just an image, but the living Christ. His majesty and beauty were the two factors that seemed to touch her most powerfully and profusely. With regard to His majesty she writes: “O my Jesus! Who could make known the majesty with which You reveals Yourself? And, Lord of all the world and of the heavens, of a thousand other worlds and of numberless worlds, and of the heavens that

¹⁴L. 27, 3-4

You might create, how the soul understands by the majesty with which You reveal Yourself that it is nothing for You to be Lord of the world.”¹⁵

The highest of her visions at the time she wrote her *Life* was one in which it was revealed to her through a knowledge “admirable and clear that the humanity was taken into the bosom of the Father.” This vision produced very special effects in the soul of Teresa. In fact, Teresa always insists on the transforming effects of the visions she received from God. Of this latter in particular she observes: “It seems it purifies the soul in an extraordinary way and removes almost entirely the strength of this sensitive part of our nature. It is a great flame that seems to burn away and annihilate all of life’s desires. For even though, glory to God, I didn’t have any desires for vain things, it was made clear to me in this experience how everything was vanity. How vain, how truly vain are the lordships of earth! It is a powerful lesson for raising one’s desires to pure truth. There is impressed upon one a reverence I wouldn’t know how to speak of.

On another occasion her soul became suddenly recollected. In its center Christ, our Lord, was shown to her in an imaginative vision. It seemed to her she saw Him clearly in every part of her soul, as though in a brightly polished mirror. She thinks this vision is advantageous to recollected persons, in teaching them to consider the Lord as very deep within their souls. Within oneself, she concludes, is the best place to look.

The sign of the authenticity of these experiences was for Teresa always the change for good that they effected in her. This was what she put before her doubting confessors. “I was able to show them these jewels because all who knew me saw clearly that my soul was changed.”¹⁶

IX. VISION OF THE TRINITY

Around 1571 Teresa began to enter into the last and highest stage of her spiritual life. It is characterized with the vision now not of Christ only but of the Trinity as well. “On the Tuesday following Ascension Thursday, having remained a while in prayer after Communion, I was grieved because I was so distracted I couldn’t concentrate. So I complained to the Lord about our miserable nature. My soul began to enkindle, and it seems to me I knew clearly in an intellectual vision that the entire Blessed Trinity was present. A month later she wrote: “I have experienced this presence of the three Persons . . . up to this day . . . They are very habitually present in my soul. Since I was accustomed to experience only the presence of Jesus, it always seemed to me there was some obstacle to my seeing three Persons.” Here what we hold by faith is experienced mystically. “All three Persons communicate Themselves to the soul and speak to it and explain those words which the Gospel attributes to the Lord - namely, that He and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell within the soul which loves Him and keeps His commandments.”

Teresa seems to be particularly struck by how interior this experience is. “Each day this soul wonders more, for she feels that they have never left her, and perceives quite clearly . . . that They are in the interior of her soul, in the very, very interior part, in something very deep.”¹⁷

¹⁵L. 28, 8

¹⁶I. C. vi. 8

¹⁷I. C. vii., ch. 1

However, this experience of the Trinity as interior and so deep a spiritual quality did not bring an end to Teresa's vision of Jesus Christ. Her full union with God was sealed by a grace she calls the divine spiritual marriage. It was effected through an imaginative vision of the risen Christ. But it was a vision much different from all previous ones. It took place deep within the interior of her soul where she had never before seen any vision. Teresa points out that there is the greatest difference between the visions belonging to the seventh stage or mansion and all the previous ones. "All that has so far been described seems to have come through the medium of these senses and faculties . . . But what passes in the union of the Spiritual marriage is very different. The Lord appears in the center of the soul, not through an imaginative, but through an intellectual vision (although this is a subtler one than that already mentioned), just as He appeared to the Apostles, without entering through the door." He unites Himself with His creature in such a way that the two cannot be separated from one another. She compares this union to the union brought about by rain falling from the heavens into a river or a spring. It is impossible to separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens. The soul is fully one with Christ, "For me to live is Christ," says St. Paul. Christ is now its life, Teresa says. "This, with the passage of time, becomes more evident through the effects, for the soul clearly understands, by certain secret aspirations, that it is endowed with life by God."

X. DEEP WITHIN HER SOUL

This experience of the persons of the Trinity and of Jesus so deeply within her did not prevent Teresa from experiencing that she was as well within God, like a sponge in water; in fact that all of creation was in God. Finding God so deep within her soul, she came to see herself within God. "It seemed to me there came the thought of how a sponge absorbs and is saturated with water; so I thought, was my soul which was overflowing with that divinity and in a certain way rejoicing within itself and possessing the three Persons. I also heard the words: 'Don't try to hold me within yourself, but try to hold yourself within Me.' It seemed to me that from within my soul - where I saw these three Persons present - these Persons were communicating themselves to all creation without fail, nor did they fail to be with me."

Ten years later, and only one year before her death, Teresa wrote another short account of her spiritual life at that time for her former confessor, then Bishop of Osma. She was still experiencing the deep quiet of the presence of the Trinity and of the humanity of Christ: "Oh, who would be able to explain to Your Excellency the quiet and the calm my soul experiences! The soul . . . goes about so forgetful of self that it thinks it has partly lost its being. In this state everything is directed to the honor of God, to the greater fulfillment of His will, and His glory . . . The imaginative visions have ceased, but it seems this intellectual vision of these three Persons and of the humanity of Christ always continues. This intellectual vision, in my opinion, is something more sublime. Now I understand, as it seems, that those imaginative visions I experienced were from God, for they disposed the soul for its present state. Since it was so miserable and had so little fortitude, God led it as He saw was necessary."

God leads each of us according to this plan and as is necessary. But whatever the plan, he has given us Jesus Christ; a brother, friend, teacher, spouse and Lord, through whom all blessings come to us.

XI. 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.