

IS MYSTICISM NORMAL?

BY

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THE mystic state, surrounded with so much splendour in the lives of the saints—is it really nothing but the ‘normal’ development of the virtues and the gifts? Why, then, do the mystics, a St Bernard, a St Catherine of Siena, a St John of the Cross, seem so different from ourselves? How can the mystical life, which in them abounds in visions, locutions, stigmata and other marvellous experiences, rest on the same principles as our own, devoid of all these things? It would seem to be this consideration that has led many modern theologians and spiritual writers to assume that the mystic state is ‘extraordinary’ in the strict sense, i.e. that it is not in the normal way of sanctity. In fact attempts have been made to divide the spiritual life into two completely separate compartments: the one ascetical and ‘normal’, with an ascetical purgative, illuminative and unitive way, the other mystic and ‘extraordinary’, with the same three ways. There is no necessity to repeat the arguments against this view so convincingly stated by theologians like Saudreau and Garrigou-Lagrange. We would only say that, if this modern theory were true, the unity of the spiritual life, built on the virtues and the gifts, would be broken up, and the traditional teaching of St Thomas, St John of the Cross, and all the older theologians and mystics would have to be at least re-interpreted in a manner entirely different from its commonly accepted meaning.

What is the reason for this change of outlook? If we consider the works of two of the chief modern representatives of the two schools, the Jesuit Père Poulain, and the Dominican Père Garrigou-Lagrange, their different approach to the subject of mysticism is at once obvious. Poulain describes mystic phenomena, Garrigou-Lagrange establishes the theological foundations on which Christian mysticism rests. In other words, one treats the subject as a scientist, the other as a theologian. Now the scientist has to deal with phenomena, he investigates things that can be observed. But the working of grace is invisible, neither the virtues nor the gifts of the Holy Ghost can be seen, heard or handled—therefore the man with the scientific bent of mind will find too little to attract him in these theological conceptions. It is different with the extraordinary phenomena frequently accompanying the mystic state. They afford ample material for the scientist. Even in the lower strata of the mystic life, in the Prayer of Quiet, there is already the ‘ligature’ of the senses, for example the partial inability to move, which becomes more marked in the Prayer of Union. Then there are visions and locutions, and in ecstasy such

striking phenomena as levitation, bilocation, the gift of tears and many other conspicuous graces. But, strangely enough, what attracts the scientist and makes him consider the mystic state as 'extraordinary' in the strict sense, is of comparatively small interest to the theologian. In this respect the latter is a faithful disciple of St Paul, who reprimanded the Corinthians for being too fond of these exciting gifts and who taught them to prefer the edifying ones, and, above all, Charity, the queen of virtues.

The reason for the depreciation of extraordinary phenomena on the part of the theologians is that they are not *gratiae gratum facientes*, but *gratiae gratis datae*, i.e., they are not required for the sanctification of the soul, but given for other purposes, such as the demonstration of the sanctity of their recipient to others, or the conversion of sinners or heretics. Moreover, as they are not supernatural *quoad essentiam* (essentially) but only *quoad modum* (in the way they work) these phenomena may be imitated by the devil, or they may even proceed from nothing higher than a vivid imagination or an hysterical temperament, in which case they are, of course, neither supernatural nor preternatural. For this reason the theologians, though taking account of them, are comparatively little concerned with these external manifestations, and if they investigate them, as St Thomas does in his treatises on prophecy (II-II, 171-174), rapture (*ibid.* 175) and other *gratiae gratis datae*, they do not give descriptions of the phenomena but reduce them to their theological principles, analyzing their essence, cause, relations to the cognitive and appetitive faculties and similar points of philosophical interest. But, being *gratiae gratis datae*, they do not constitute the essence of mysticism, though some of them may frequently accompany it, especially in its higher stages.

There is one more objection made by those who hold that mysticism is something essentially extraordinary, superadded to the ordinary life of grace, and that is the fact that there are so few mystics. We have said that out of the insignificant seed there develop magnificent trees and flowers, and we applied this simile to the spiritual life. But, if this metaphor holds good, why does not grace (to use one of the favourite metaphors of Garrigou-Lagrange) bring forth mystics as frequently as acorns produce oaks? Now, even in the natural sphere seeds do not produce plants and plants do not produce fruits unless placed in congenial soil and given the amount of rain and sunshine they need. Thus unfavourable surroundings and unsuitable direction can go far to prevent the normal development of the germ of grace implanted in the soul at Baptism. Our Lord himself used the parable of the Sower and his good seed, of which yet only the fourth part bore fruit, and even that fourth part not a hundred-fold! The obstacles he mentions in the parable, the interference of Satan, tribulations and persecutions, the cares and allurements of the world, they all enter

into the spiritual life, preventing the full development of grace. For man is endowed with free will. This is the very capacity that makes him fit for the moral and spiritual life, but, and this is the other side of the picture, it can also refuse cooperation with grace, or can cooperate only in a half-hearted manner. Now the mystic life, which is beset with sufferings and temptations, needs the full cooperation of the will, which becomes especially difficult in the two 'Nights' of the senses and of the spirit, the two great crises of the life of contemplation, which mark the transition from the state of beginners to that of proficients and again to that of the perfect. It is especially during these testing times that souls may fall away by their own fault, so that the mystic life is either prevented altogether, or stunted in its growth. It is therefore not surprising that, given all these obstacles of unsuitable surroundings, lack of direction, a particularly 'active' and restless temperament, insufficient generosity, and many others besides, the full mystic life should be very rare here below and appear as something extraordinary, though it is meant to be the normal crown of the Christian life.

And how could it be otherwise, as the supernatural end for which we were created is the contemplation of God in the Beatific Vision and sanctifying grace its beginning here on earth? There is, therefore, almost as much reason to desire the mystical life as there is to desire the Beatific Vision. Its two great effects are a thorough purification from our sins and imperfections, and a corresponding growth in union with God—surely the two things most to be desired by every fervent Christian. Père Poulain himself has proved in his *Grâces d'Oraison* that, excepting the martyrs, all canonised saints, whether belonging to the contemplative, the active or the mixed state, have enjoyed mystic prayer, and normally very exalted forms of it. If, then, it seems almost a prerequisite of heroic virtue, why should we not desire it? Our Lord has said, 'Be ye perfect', and he added, what no human person could have dared to add: 'As your heavenly Father is perfect'. He places before our eyes the perfection of God himself as our supreme ideal and, in another saying, he gives us his own meekness and humility as the pattern we are to follow. Perhaps, if these sayings were less familiar, their boldness would take our breath away—and maybe, also our pusillanimity. We think it presumptuous to aspire to the mystic union—but then what shall we say to our Lord's demands to be as perfect as the Father and as humble as the Son? Should we, like the rich youth, turn back in despair at being presented with such unattainable standards?

God does not demand the impossible. In order to enable us to strive even after divine perfection, he has planted in our hearts a divine seed—the seed of sanctifying grace, and with it the whole supernatural organism of the virtues and the gifts. It is true, we bear this inestimable treasure in earthen vessels, and, by our own

fault, we hardly know that it is there, waiting to unfold itself. We place our light under a bushel, instead of setting it on a candlestick to lighten the household of the faith. 'If thou didst know the gift of God . . . thou wouldst have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. . . .' The mystics have known both the gift and the boundless munificence of the Giver, who desires to bestow it even now as lovingly as he desired it by the well in Samaria. If we but knew the gift of God, and had the confidence of St Paul in him 'who is powerful to do superabundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that operates in us', that is according to the life of grace energizing our whole being if we will but let it do so! If we but knew how to use our supernatural powers, we should also live that mystic union with God, though on a lower plane, that made of a Bernard, a Catherine, a Teresa or a John of the Cross the saints they were, to the glory of God and of the Mystical Body which is the Church.

THE 'DE IMITATIONE'

By

JOHN SEARLE

THE Bible excepted, no other book in Christendom has circulated so widely as 'The Imitation.' It appeared during one of the darkest hours in European history, between the dead or-dying Middle Ages and the alluring dawn of the delusive Renaissance; and as the picturesque Michelet writes: 'L'Imitation de Jèsus Christ, le plus beau livre chrétien après l'Évangile, est sorti, comme lui, du sein de la mort. La mort du monde ancien, la mort du moyen âge, ont porté ces germes de vie.'

The most precious of the early manuscripts is the famous Antwerp Codex written by Thomas himself, with the subscription 'Finitus et completus anno domini MCCCCXLI per manus fratris Thomæ Kempensis in Monte Agnetis prope Zwolles.' Before the war there were still in existence sixty dated manuscripts of the fifteenth century, and about thirty undated ascribed to that century.

Although the evidence is overwhelming in favour of Thomas à Kempis as the author, after his death other claimants to that great honour were put forward, the most notable being Jean Gerson, Chancellor of Paris. This controversy has been continued intermittently to this day, and even so recently as 1936 the Rev. D. G. Barron published a slim volume upholding Gerson's claim. St Francis de Sales, a great admirer of 'The Imitation,' settled the question very satisfactorily by saying that undoubtedly the Holy Spirit must have been the author of such a wonderful book. Yet once again it ought to be said that the evidence weighs heavily, very heavily in favour of Thomas.