

PAULINE MYSTICISM

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AMID THE ABUNDANCE of present day ideas about mysticism, any discussion of St Paul's mystical doctrine could readily gravitate toward those passages in his epistles which seem most relevant to contemporary interest in all that is charismatic. In the light of this topical concern, his teaching in 1 Cor 12-14 on the spiritual gifts operative in the community, and the recall of his own extraordinary visions,¹ might appear to offer the most pertinent clues to his insights and attitudes.

This selection, however, would have its source in the gratuitous assumption that St Paul's perspective and some contemporary views on the gifts of the Spirit are identical. To suggest such convergence is highly dubious. The master of mysticism, St John of the Cross, would hardly have been so severe in his strictures against relying on sensible phenomena if, in his study of the pauline letters which he quotes very often, he had found that these happenings played an essential role in the Apostle's doctrine.

This adverse judgment is not meant to suggest that St Paul and St John of the Cross deny that visible and audible phenomena can be authentic christian realities. Both authors have spoken of such experiences as gifts of the Spirit, though they always add a note of cautious reserve. The fact is that they preferred to lay emphasis on the deeper elements of faith-intuition and faith-response which all authorities on mysticism single out as essential constituents of natural or supernatural contemplation. Whether it be Wordsworth's praise of the 'seeing eye' and 'hearing ear' of the romantics, or St Teresa's esteem for the loving perceptions of the prayer which she calls 'supernatural', all the best authors who have written on mysticism agree that it involves a profound interior activity of mind and heart which cannot be explained by merely reflective processes.

If there is anything distinctive about Paul's doctrine it is his firm confidence that christian life itself, when lived integrally, should lead to a wisdom (*sophia*) and intimate knowledge (*gnosis*) which are warm with devoted love and anticipate the experiential joys

¹ 2 Cor 12, 1-13.

of a vision not yet fully revealed. The prayer he uttered for his converts at Ephesus breathes the hope which he cherished for all Christians:

Out of his infinite glory, may God give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fulness of God.²

Paul's confidence that christian life itself has vital power to produce what he calls perfect men, mature in practical wisdom and adept with the insights of experiential understanding, arose out of the events of his own life and from his unfailing faith in the all-ness of God's ineffable gift, Christ Jesus. The possibilities open to every Christian, therefore, become fully illumined when one studies the writings of the Apostle who was well qualified to boast, 'if you read my words, you will have some idea of the depths that I see in the mystery of Christ'.³

Paul's preparation in the school of Israel

It would be an idle truism to say that Paul is an authority who deserves to be heard. But how many are there who have pondered the precise reasons for his authority? Due to rhetorical exaggerations in rejecting his background in Judaism, Paul's utterances tended to minimize all that he himself had gained as a Jew. Momentarily, he draws the curtain aside to reveal the glories of life in Israel.⁴ He also makes clear that the rich spirituality of Judaism had sanctified his life intimately. In a simple and unaffected statement of his own personal integrity, he confesses 'as far as the Law can make you perfect, I was faultless'.⁵ This affirmation is significant. Though in the light of Christianity, Judaism appeared to Paul like massive darkness, the fact is that God had worked in the obscurity of his jewish faith to make him a truly God-minded man, keenly sensitive to the presence, the providence and the righteous demands of the all-holy Yahweh. If the apostle has been called the Isaiah of the New Testament, it is because his mind and heart had first been seared by God's self-revelation in the words of the Law and the Prophets. By using the sacred scriptures in his prayer, he had

² Eph 3, 16-19.

³ Eph 3, 4.

⁴ Cf Rom 9, 1-5.

⁵ Phil 3, 6.

assimilated the riches which are aptly described by the bishops of Vatican Council II:

The books of the Old Testament give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers; and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way.⁶

As a Christian, Paul never lost the awe-filled reverence for God which ruled his life as a Jew. Because he saw the love and saving purpose of Yahweh as the total source of the Christ-event,⁷ his christian prayer often found expression in words of boastful praise (*kauchēsis*): 'Blessed be God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ'.⁸ More than this, his abiding awareness that God is operative in every christian life to produce a 'work of art'⁹ led him to urge his converts to earnest co-operation with God in their striving for holiness: 'Work for your salvation in fear and trembling. It is God who puts both the will and the action into you'.¹⁰

We are fully justified therefore, in saying that, prior to his life as a Christian, Paul had gained from his Old Testament background a keen sensitivity to the active presence of God, a disposition which provides the cardinal requisite for the insights and experiences which are proper to christian mysticism. This fact points up the urgency of a primary directive for all sound spirituality. If a person is to be resolute in his search for union with God, and if, in the future, he is to live with God in the way which St John of the Cross describes in his *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*, he must first discipline himself with the Old Testament *askēsis* of walking in God's presence with reverent awareness and conscientious fidelity. Even a Christian, and especially because he is a Christian, would make a great step forward if he were to ponder and practise the *Shema' Yisrael*, the confession of faith uttered twice a day by Saul the Jew and all devout Israelites.¹¹

The interiority of Paul's conversion

The spirit and contents of the pauline letters, however, cannot be adequately explained solely by the fact that they come from the

⁶ *Dei Verbum*, 15.

⁷ Cf Rom 5, 8; 2 Cor 5, 19.

⁸ Eph 1, 3; cf Rom 11, 33-36; 2 Cor 9, 15.

⁹ Cf Eph 2, 10.

¹⁰ Phil 2, 12-13.

¹¹ Cf Deut 6, 4-9; 11, 13-21; Num 15, 41.

heart of a fervent Jew who had become a faithful Christian. This characterization would apply equally to the unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews who owes his luminous insights both to his knowledge of the Old Testament and to his meditation on the Gospel which he had received from the early apostolic preachers.¹² Not so with Paul. Though rabbinical schooling had made him expert in the lore of the Old Testament, he received the christian revelation in a profoundly personal encounter which was far more rich and intimate than merely hearing the Gospel in the primitive kerygma and catechesis preached by men.

Despite the apostle's later insistence that the gift of christian faith comes through hearing the preached word of God,¹³ and is maintained intact only through fidelity to the teachings of the baptismal catechesis,¹⁴ the extraordinary fact is that his own experience did not fit four-square into this fundamental rule. Because he was to be the teacher of the nations he learned of the Word Incarnate, not through the words of men, but through an intimate divine revelation. He found it necessary to make this manifest in his polemical letter to the Galatians. In order to bolster his converts' faltering confidence in his authority and competence, he disclosed to them that he owed his teaching to no one but God himself. In one of the most self-revealing sentences of his lengthy correspondence, he declared forthrightly what had happened to him at the gates of Damascus: 'Then God, who had specially chosen me while I was still in my mother's womb, called me through his grace and chose to reveal his Son in me, so that I might preach him among the Gentiles'.¹⁵

If, much later, Paul would affirm that the whole purpose of his prayer and apostolate was that 'Christ might live in the hearts' of men,¹⁶ he himself knew in a unique way, at the very moment of his conversion, all that the intimate and abiding presence of Christ really means. In order to understand his teaching, therefore, one must always remember that his christian faith had its source in the profoundly interior experience of receiving from Yahweh the ineffable gift of his glorified Son. The immensity and efficacy of what he went through defies all human measure. In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross abandons his customary reserve to glorify the moment when the purified Christian hears in his heart

¹² Cf Heb 2, 3-4.

¹⁵ Gal 1, 15-16.

¹³ Cf Rom 10, 14-17.

¹⁶ Eph 3, 17.

¹⁴ Cf Col 2, 4-8.

the 'substantial word' uttered there by God himself to raise the spiritual life of his poor creature to a previously undreamed of level. What, then, can we dare to say of the moment in Paul's life when the divine Word took total possession of his mind and heart? Like the apostles at Pentecost, he owed the very beginning of his life as a Christian to the gift which consummates all mysticism.

This may explain why there is so little doctrinal reasoning in his writings. Though men speak endlessly of the theology of St Paul, even a casual reading of his letters shows that they are singularly poor in efforts to clarify the mysteries of God or to make them humanly reasonable. As a test case, read the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians and try to discover a satisfying explanation of why Paul speaks of Christ crucified as the power and wisdom of God. Notice too how he has nothing to match the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in his peerless explanation of why it was fitting that God's Son should become man in order to be our leader and trustworthy high priest.¹⁷ Most of the frequently quoted texts from Paul's letters are like lightning flashes which dart from the darkness of a disappointing polemical context. His thought pierces the obscurity of ignorance and error with striking affirmations of an intuitive faith which calls for acceptance, assimilation and practice.

Because he writes from the vantage point of an experience already achieved, his cryptic statements express the ultimate goals of lesser people's striving. In a certain sense, therefore, the 'I' which often occurs in his description of christian life is spoken both of Paul's personal attainment and of the fully developed character which a mature Christian should become. When, for instance, he exclaims, 'With Christ I am nailed to the cross. And I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me',¹⁸ he is describing both a reality already experienced in his own mind and heart and, at the same time, an existential fact in the lives of his readers which one day they themselves should somehow perceive.

The mysticism of christian faith

This confidence in the rich potentialities of christian living does not mean that Paul was starry-eyed in dreaming of converts who would perform signs and wonders or who would levitate from one thrilling peak-experience to ever greater heights. In his bitter rebuke to the Corinthians, he shows little sympathy for those who

¹⁷ Heb 2, 10ff.

¹⁸ Gal 2, 20.

put their trust in ostentatious spiritual gifts. He characterized such persons as immature, like babes who prefer pap to solid food.¹⁹ In his judgment, the seeking of human experience merely for the sake of feeling warmth, or hearing the clash of cymbals or mouthing incoherent utterances, spoiled the character with childish self-centredness. Though Paul never used the word mysticism, he was an inveterate enemy of desiring the frills of mysticism for their own sake.

For him the only genuine factor in christian life was a vital and practical faith in God's gift of Christ Jesus living in the Church. In a brief affirmation which sums up all his doctrine, he states that life has only one focal point to which all attention must be directed: 'By God's doing Christ Jesus has become our wisdom, and our virtue, and our holiness, and our freedom. As scripture says, if anyone wants to boast, let him boast about the Lord'.²⁰

If Paul had known anything about the oriental mysticism which seems to be much in vogue today, as an expert *guru* he would have given his converts the phrase 'in Christ Jesus' as a *mantra* to form their mind and heart for real and experiential union with God. This favourite expression of his, which occurs in various forms one hundred and twenty two times in his letters, articulates all that a Christian is and all that he must be. As Israel of old had to depend completely on Yahweh who lived in the midst of his people, so too the Christian must rely totally on Christ who lives in the Church, that by its word, sacrament and ministry he may form each member of his body for a life of union with the Father. Summing up all that he has written about God's ways with man,²¹ Paul affirms that only living faith in Christ can provide ready and constant access to the sanctuary of God's presence:

Through our Lord Jesus Christ and by our faith in him we are judged acceptable and are at peace with God, since it is by faith and through Jesus that we have entered this grace-filled state in which we can boast about looking forward to God's glory.²²

If all christian mysticism is essentially christocentric, it is because Paul's concept of life 'in Christ Jesus' is at the heart of all its purifying trials and rapturous joys. Because the Apostle was convinced that 'God who spared not his own Son . . . cannot fail to grant us

¹⁹ Cf 1 Cor 3, 1-4.

²⁰ 1 Cor 1, 30-31.

²¹ Cf Rom 1-5.

²² Rom 5, 1-2.

with him *all things*,²³ he saw only one way to secure the heavenly blessing of 'the new heart and the new spirit' promised by Ezechiél for 'the fulness of time', the very age in which we live.²⁴ Every directive Paul has given, therefore, centres on man's need to live 'in Christ' through perfect fidelity to the doctrine and life of the Church in which Christ is always present. Loyal and vital faith was for Paul the only 'Open Sesame' to the joy, peace and courage of authentic christian experience. His own life is the best commentary on this need. If he has affirmed, 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me', it is because he could also affirm, 'as far as the life I am living here upon earth, I live it with faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me'.²⁵

Union with Christ in his total mystery

Many of Paul's converts misunderstood or misconstrued his teaching. The Corinthians, for instance, were so fascinated by the wonder of Christ's resurrection that they exulted in the spiritual gifts which seemed to elevate them to likeness with the risen Lord.²⁶ Because others were excessive in vaunting the freedom from the Old Law which the redemption of Christ secured, they claimed libertinism as their prerogative. Faced with such distortions, Paul found it necessary to insist that the mystery of Christ is constituted of two elements, both of them essential to the integrity of his redeeming act and to its authentic resonance in christian life.

The first time he mentions this fact is in the precious autobiographical summary of his own striving: 'All I want is to know Christ in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, that, being conformed to him in his dying, I may somehow attain to the resurrection'.²⁷ From this point on, the pauline letters stress that both the passion and resurrection of Jesus are concomitant aspects of the redemptive mystery, and that each must have its own impact on the lives of men. Writing to the Corinthians, whose theology veered lopsidedly to the glory of the resurrection, the Apostle sought to restore a healthy balance by focussing attention on Christ crucified.²⁸ He etches the two-faceted totality of the mystery of Christ most clearly when combating libertinism in the Epistle to the Romans. To those who would continue in sin under pretext of giving greater glory to God's merciful forgiveness,

²³ Rom 8, 32.

²⁴ Cf Ezek 36, 26.

²⁵ Gal 2, 20.

²⁶ Cf 1 Cor 4, 8.

²⁷ Phil 3, 10-11.

²⁸ Cf 1 Cor 2.

he writes the strong reminder that the real work of God's mercy was to unite them, through baptism, to Christ in his dying and rising, so that thereafter they might be always 'dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus'.²⁹

Any thought of sharing in the joy and peace of the risen Christ without sharing in his death to sin and selfishness was anathema to Paul. Just as the prophets of Israel had to be real men of God if they were to qualify as men of the Spirit, so too Paul taught his converts that they had to be mature in self-control, wise with true humility, and purified of sin by mortification if, here upon earth, they were to seek the gifts and blessings of intimate union with Christ and his Father.

It is significant that St Teresa and St John of the Cross have been acclaimed doctors of the Church and sure guides of true mysticism precisely because their writings are so remarkably orthodox in stressing the two essential elements of Paul's vision of Christ. In her *Way of Perfection*, Teresa does not begin to speak of the comfort and joy of prayer until she has first set forth fifteen chapters on the spirit of mortification, humility and self-denying charity without which prayer lacks substance and efficacy. St John of the Cross is even more exacting than the Mother of Carmel whom he directed. His doctrine of 'nothing' in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and in the *Dark Night* is a 'hard saying' which all will find difficult to accept, unless they keep in mind the resultant joyous experiences which John describes in the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*. Always true to St Paul, these two authorities consistently teach that the life of Christ in us is the work of one who both died for our sins and rose from the dead that we might be acceptable to God.³⁰

The tension of flesh and spirit

The very words which Paul preferred to use in describing the elements of his christian anthropology are a persistent reminder that the principles of death and resurrection are both essential to the union which the Holy Spirit effects between God and man. In his doctrine of the Body of Christ, the Apostle envisages an intimate bond between the *sōma* (the body-person) of the risen Christ and the *sōma* (the whole self) of the individual Christian.³¹ This bond is most perfectly achieved and expressed in the moment of euchar-

²⁹ Cf Rom 6, 1-11.

³⁰ Cf Rom 4, 25.

³¹ Cf 1 Cor 6, 15-20.

istic communion when, as Paul says, 'we form a single body (*sōma*), because we all have a share in this one loaf'.³² Here, as the context makes clear, he is speaking, not directly of the union which binds Christians together, but rather of the union of each one with Christ himself, a personal union which is the only real and lasting basis for christian togetherness. We belong to one another only because each one of us belongs to Christ, or, as Dom Anscar Vonier has forcefully expressed it, because his body is our nourishment and his blood flows in our veins.

Unfortunately, however, unlike the risen Lord, the Christian upon earth is always a man of *sarx* (flesh). In its neutral sense, this word denotes human life as it really is, an existence limited by our inability to see God and to understand the intimate reasons for his providential rule of the world. Living thus in dark obscurity, we can always choose to follow the attractions of this world or we can cower before its intimidations, even when such conduct is contrary to God's will. In the language of Paul, this infidelity transforms the *soma*-self of the Christian into *sarx*, which, when thus used pejoratively, signifies a person who is sinful, self-centred and cut off from Christ. It is in this latter sense, and not merely in the neutral sense, that Paul speaks most often of 'men of flesh'.

The Spirit of Jesus, however, is always present to help human weakness, to prompt and strengthen men to activate their baptismal union with Christ, who died to 'flesh' and to sin. Those who follow the leading of the Spirit live as children of God and as devoted brothers and sisters of the risen Christ. Because their whole life is thus ruled by the Spirit (*pneuma*), Paul speaks of them as 'men of the Spirit' (*pneumatikoi*). Christians of this calibre 'have crucified all fleshly passions and desires'.³³ Through the passion of Christ, the Spirit has strengthened them to practise humility, patience and the mortification of wayward tendencies; thus he has given them a real share in 'the fellowship of Christ's sufferings'.³⁴ Such men and women of the Spirit are, therefore, wide open to 'the power of the resurrection'. Conformed to Christ in the loving obedience of his death, they are true adults, mature with the moral strength of him who is stronger than all the powers of evil.³⁵ There is nothing of sinful 'flesh' remaining in their will to check the working of the Lord and his Spirit.

³² 1 Cor 10, 17.

³³ Gal 5, 24.

³⁴ Phil 3, 10.

³⁵ Cf Lk 11, 22.

The mysticism of humdrum lives

Paul promises that the Spirit of the risen Jesus will fill these 'spiritual' Christians with all the characteristics of Jesus himself; 'charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control'.³⁶ Surprisingly, this text is found in the letter to the Galatians, who were a grievous disappointment to the Apostle because they were so ready to turn from the guidance of the Spirit to the slavery of the flesh. Yet for those who know the heart of Paul, the insertion of this promise in so painful a letter could not be otherwise. Though he was too much of a realist to nurse the optimism of Alice in Wonderland, Paul did possess in full measure the certainty of faith and hope. Even for the Galatians who seemed unworthy of a saving light on their horizon, Paul could not hide his intention to 'go through the pain of giving birth to you all over again, that Christ may be formed in you'.³⁷

This is the unfailing hope which gives substance and verve to all of Paul's letters. Though he was writing to very ordinary people, he was fully confident that this rogues' roster of toilers and housewives, of haves and have-nots, of strutting peacocks and back-sliding wastrels, could become a communion of saints. He had such insight into the love of Christ and his power to work wonders in humdrum lives that, even in writing to the least promising, he sounds a clarion call to awaken desire and to instil new courage.

If Paul holds back from explaining in detail what will be the joyous experiences of union with the Father through his Son in the Holy Spirit, it is because his own experience taught him that 'star differs from star in brightness',³⁸ that the depths of christian life here upon earth are 'hidden with Christ in God',³⁹ and that all the best things in our life with Christ cannot be uttered. For Paul, all the glowing pages in the writings of St John of the Cross would be but a dark shadow cast by the light of the simple words, 'Abba, Father' and 'Christ, the first-born of many brethren'.

Just let a Christian live the truths which Paul teaches, and he will come to experience that, true to its name, mysticism is like the ebb and flow of a compelling tide 'hidden' in the heart. St John of the Cross describes this as 'a sounding solitude and silent music, the quiet night at the hour of the rising of the dawn'. Much better, Paul speaks of it as our coming to know more and more 'the love of Christ which is beyond all human reasoning'.⁴⁰

³⁶ Gal 5, 22.³⁷ Gal 4, 19.³⁸ 1 Cor 15, 41.³⁹ Col 3, 3.⁴⁰ Eph 3, 19.