

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### TRUE MYSTICISM

There is a way of imagining union with God that can bedevil our path with its illusions. I see myself at prayer, my heart beating in perfect rhythm with God's own heart. I see myself being totally absorbed in God's will. I imagine my being totally in the grip of the Holy Spirit. I imagine myself feeling the tremendous uncreated energies of the loving Trinity within during my prayer, and I see myself yielding to this movement.

There is a kernel of truth in this attractive image of the self. A Spirit has, indeed, been let loose upon the world. The very energy of God is at our disposal, an energy that was only thinly tapped when He created the world. That mighty act, before which scientists are in awe, was the work of His little finger, as one of the early Fathers says.

What He offers to us now is that same energy He used when He raised Jesus from the dead! There is a force in the world that transcends all human energies. It will not make us invisible. It will not make us physically invulnerable, or even a bit more muscular. It will not make us move with the speed of light. All these could be measured and located as happening here or there.

What then will it do? It will change our hearts. But this change will not be perceptible to us. We will not see it. We will not be conscious of our new loving. This great power will invade us



without our becoming conscious of any growth in love within us. This energy will open our sealed eyes. We shall see what we have been blind to—the terrible sufferings of others—and we will see a deep-seated insensitivity within ourselves.

Karl Rahner described this experience as “a humble alarm at our lovelessness.” As we become more and more open to the Spirit’s invasion, our humble alarm will grow greater. Yearning for the day when my morning prayer will no longer include alarm at my lovelessness is yearning for what never will happen as we approach God.

Love is that new energy entering me. Love will open my eyes to my neighbor and his needs. Love will draw me out of myself in spontaneous service. There will be no room for self-consciousness. Instead I will feel how inadequate is my response and I will be alarmed by it.

Let us then imagine the true mystic, filled with alarm at his own lovelessness. Will he not despair of his spiritual growth? Not at all. As Durrwell puts it, he will have reached the perfection of humility; he will have “wholly given up seeking greatness for himself.”<sup>15</sup> His eyes and his mind and his heart will be fixed upon the needs of others. He will derive no consolation from any sense of spiritual growth. He will not see any.

This is what Jesus invited his followers into: becoming aware of their radical powerlessness in the world of the Spirit. This helplessness in the area of loving and trusting was their meeting-place with the Lord. In matters of the Spirit, they were to acknowledge their ignorance. They were to come to see themselves as knowing nothing, lacking wisdom. How else could they let the Lord do His work within them?

They were to be in a state of amazement at God’s persistence in loving them since they would see their own shabby response, their own reluctance to give up judging, resenting, and writing others off.

In the area of this new energy which God had let loose upon the world in Jesus, they were to be children, joyful in their humble dependence.

Let us take an image. You enter a bank. You ask the teller for eight thousand dollars. You have no gun. Do you expect to get it? That depends.

If you have no account, you don’t have any expectations. In fact, you don’t go in and ask.

But if you had an eight-million-dollar account in the bank, your expectations would be very high. There’ll be some papers to sign, but you *will* be given the cash, and you expect it.

In human life, our expectations are proportional to our worth. If we feel that we are worth a lot, we have great expectations. If we feel that we are worth little, we have shallow expectations.

But what Jesus was offering was not a salary. He was the one who had already purchased it. It was a gift. He knew that those who felt they were worth a lot would not receive this gift. But, at the same time, to receive this gift, you had to have great expectations. So he was seeking for someone who had no great sense of worth, but who did have great expectations. This is a rare, unlikely combination. We take for granted that “you get what you pay for.” We trim our expectations to our estimated worth. The gift that Jesus offered required someone who knew he was not worthy to receive it and who, despite this sense of unworthiness, nevertheless had great expectations that he would be given this gift anyway. Jesus was searching for a rare person.

He found it in the child. Is he hurt? He runs to his mother, without worrying about Blue Cross, and he *knows* he will be helped. If it is a very minor bruise, he may fear that she will tell him to go back out and play. But if he has a broken finger, he knows she will treat him with tender, loving care. If he needs a lot, he has strong expectations. The child’s expectations depend on how serious is his *need*.

Jesus invited us to take for granted that God would take care of our needs. The greater our needs are, the more the Father will come to us. God will be most active on those most in need. Because of this the saints sought to see themselves as a living



need. That was where they invested their spiritual energies. That is the place of the examen for St. Ignatius. It makes us despair of earning this kingdom that we so desperately need.

The examen, then, is a way that enables me to come before God filled with needs. When I see myself in the grip of jealousy—not just looking at this jealous me with a passing glance, but with a persistent gaze—I will experience my alienation from God's will, I will lose the pedestal I stand on to judge others. But I will not see myself losing that pedestal. Nor will I see myself becoming the gospel child. That would be so nice!

But even as I become the child, I will be seeing more and more sharply the Pharisee within, the one convinced of his own goodness and cooperation and decency, the one who can't help but notice that some others are not like that at all. The vision of the adorable self—even the adorable-self-as-a-gift-of-God—is not what the Lord's coming brings with it.

The self-awareness that comes from the examen enables me to hear Scripture quite differently. The examen brings a searchlight to bear on the darkneses of my heart. During moments of interaction with other people the thrusts of negativity are so powerful that they break through into the consciousness and can be seen with great clarity. Very soon, the defense mechanisms regain control, and suppress the emotion. I will remember it only briefly, and as a somewhat unpleasant moment. It will not disturb my image of myself as basically decent and easy to get along with. This will keep my prayer a charade.

One remedy is to notice the emotions even as I am having them. "My heavens, how furious I am!" Most often the situation calls for a temporary repression. It probably won't help the salvation of the world if I give vent to my feelings and sock the principal—even though he clearly deserves it, and even though it's hard to see what else will really help.

But what we suppress at that public moment, we should notice carefully—especially the emotional storm within. Then,

in a later moment of prayer, it is vital to bring it all back, to rehearse it. Here the face of the enemy plays its vital role. The voice—that pompous voice—and that mouth pouring forth its foolishness! Now in prayer, I will feel again what I once felt—and what I still do feel even if I have not been conscious of it.

Now I will see the nine-to-five "me," the "me" that others have to live with. It will be quite unpleasant, saddening, even alarming. This is the only knowledge of self that leads to change, to growth. In the area of loving every one of us needs to be saved, even the saintliest. The only difference between us and the saints is that they are more in touch with this truth than we are.

Unless this image of myself comes into my prayer, the prayer is useless, and the longer it goes, the more of a waste of time it is. Not being present to myself, I will not encounter the true God. I may have a consoling hour day after day, but it serves no purpose.

What if my God is in agony—as Pascal suggests—and I go into His presence seeking peace and consolation for myself! When we turn prayer into a search for peace apart from honesty, we do not allow the true face of God to appear. The coming of God's consolation is not along that path.

True consolation comes with the discovery of God's torment and with the discovery of what in me is the cause of His torment. As He introduces me to Himself, God is introducing me to a myself I do not know—superficial and unreal, so unlike Him. His true face will betray the horror He feels at the wretchedness of the poor.

It is very easy to pray at length—and even over many years—and never meet this God.

Even the reading of Scripture without an openness to true self-knowledge serves no purpose. St. Thomas calls the Gospels a dead letter, unless the Spirit gives life. That is why the examen was a way of life in traditional spirituality.

While long periods of mental prayer were not added to this practice of self-examination, the reading and study of Scripture



was. During the sixteenth century—that moment when long mental prayer became widespread—the reading of Scripture as a staple of spirituality all but disappeared. Fortunately it is coming back. The lack of familiarity with Scripture naturally leads to confusion. A return to the reading and study of Sacred Scripture will help in sorting out the many suggestions that are around today. Scripture contains in many different forms of expression the radical and ever-new spirituality that flows from the revelation. The central role of God's action, and our need for honesty, are constantly being preached in the texts of Scripture.

The demands of the New Law are preached so clearly and in such an uncompromising way that the honest reader is repeatedly shocked at how the text condemns him.

The glorious nature of God's kind favor is spread out before us in parable, incident, argument, and explanation, as well as in Jesus' own life. For one who has an honest image of himself, the good news comes through as too good to be true—a deliverance when all hope is lost.

The examen enables us to read Scripture effectively and to partake in the liturgy fully. Christian mysticism centers on the liturgy and the liturgical year. Our mysticism is an entering into someone else's story. Because He made our condemnation His, He has become our justification, our sanctification. Our being lifted up to the heights of the divine life is so much a gift that it is imagined as an opening of our mouths and the Lord Himself feeding us. Into our mouths comes His flesh, His blood, and into our hearts His love for our brothers and sisters and His unshakeable faith in the Father.

Such a mystical path does not lead to openly showing *our* affection toward God. Modesty and humility prevent it. The emotion that finds expression is an embarrassed regretting. A momentary awareness of ourselves as obstacles to growth and faith, to love and joy. "There is no one who grasps how much he impedes and obstructs the great things God wishes to accomplish in him." That blessed and joy-filled awareness will never

come, if I do not labor, by means of a persistent, ruthless honesty, to destroy the illusory self-image that my defense mechanisms build.

We do not need to program into our prayer acts of thanksgiving. God is not served by programmed gratitude. Our gratitude is only of value if it is spontaneous. What needs programming is our ingratitude. That is always heartfelt, but ordinarily suppressed.

How much of my life is lived as if I am not a gift! How much of my day goes on as if the gospel is irrelevant!

Jesus wanted to utter "what had not been heard since the foundation of the world" (Matt 12:35). An event had occurred in God. So spectacular was it that it makes refusing to forgive the unforgiveable meaningless. Were we to pass into an awareness of the truth, we would begin living in a world where forgiving is easy! What is it that could have made such a way of living possible?

Jesus urges us to take his yoke upon us, the yoke of loving. Let the love command press you down with its impossible demand—to love as he loves—for you will be exalted, raised up. You will move so strongly into the grip of that resurrection future, you will live in this world, but not of it—straining forward in anticipatory joy.

In Rome there is a Jesuit church called St. Ignatius. In the middle of the nave there is a marble circle. If you stand on that spot and look up to the ceiling, you see a remarkable sight—walls that rise into the heavens, because there is no roof. Clouds and heavenly figures above you in the blue skies!

If you move away from the marble circle, and you look up at the ceiling, you can see it is flat. There is no sky, no rising walls. It is a painting, and you can see what the painter wanted to do, but you no longer experience the effect he intended. The perspective is distorted.

What if you never had the chance to stand on the marble despite many visits to the church—perhaps because of the



crowds? You could still talk very intelligently about the ceiling. But you would never have had that central vital experience.

In Christianity, there is such a marble circle. When you stand on it and face the Scripture, every line falls into place. You realize then that the words are meant for you, standing there. That marble circle is despair. Everything that is written is meant for those experiencing despair. In those moments when we recognize the futility of all our effort, the overpowering hold that unlove has on us, the emptiness of our expressions of faith, we stand in our poverty. St. Francis De Sales says, "Not only can the soul which recognizes its poverty have great confidence in God, but it can *only* have true confidence if it does recognize it."<sup>16</sup>

Because of this the saints cultivate despair. It is not easy to come by. It is not natural to us. But it is the one condition for hearing Scripture meaningfully.

In a film a few years ago, "The Neverending Story," the main character was a boy who was reading a book. He gets very involved in the book, and eventually becomes a character in the book. This occurs when a young princess in the book starts to talk about "the boy who is reading this book." At first, he is very reluctant to believe that her words refer to him. The princess also mentions the many others who are watching the boy as he struggles with the book: the movie-goers!

We do not readily accept the fact that the words of Scripture are meant for us. We are not being addressed—at least, I am not being addressed. I know in a way that it is meant for all and, therefore, for me. But I do not experience myself being spoken to. What a terrible significance Jesus placed upon our free choices.

Jesus himself heard the Old Testament as no one before him. He experienced an invitation to save his brothers and sisters by dying for them.

Most of the time, we know that the text is meant for us but we do not experience it as being spoken to us. It doesn't come alive.

We know it, but we do not hear it. We are not conscious of some other person who is desiring to speak to us here and now through these words.

How to get the words to come to life? Stand in the truth, in despair. Then you will be able to hear the words meant for you—the most incredible of all the texts—"Ask and it will be given to you." Durrwell tells us, "Hope in God begins at the very moment when we despair of ourselves."<sup>17</sup> And George Maloney: "Only when the contemplative enters into a vivid experience of his own utter poverty and sickness, of his incompleteness before his Maker, can he begin to experience something of God's richness."<sup>18</sup>

It is at such moments that we become conscious that, while we are seeking the Lord, as St. John of the Cross puts it, "the Beloved is seeking us much more." From within another story we are being called, and named.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, as the two hobbits struggle forward toward their destiny, they have a quiet moment of rest before their next challenge. They chat about stories, and how people get into them, and how they have such varied endings. One of them muses, "I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?" It is meant for all the readers, too. We have indeed fallen into a tale beyond our understanding. We would prefer a tale of our own telling. That would humor us more with rules that reward our own achievements. It would be painful, but we could identify with it. We like knowing why happiness comes and why it doesn't.

With the good news, another story intersects ours. Its rules are upside down. It promises much more. We apply to it our old rules. They only appear to work. Those moments when we see that our rules do not work, that the promises are all beyond us, that we are locked out, those are the moments when we enter in.

The saints go to great lengths to cultivate such moments. To be present at the liturgy with all its golden promises when my heart is filled with despair at what I see within myself—that is



the goal of my spiritual activity. When I am most conscious that I am not fit to be a character in this glorious story of God's only Son, that is when I can hear that voice speaking with authority. He summons me in. It is the child who in his helplessness can alone enter the Kingdom.

The tradition talks much of compunction. It has two elements to it. I glimpse something of what God is like and what He wants to transform me into, and I see my own selfish ways; and it's rather sad and embarrassing. It does not produce the words, "Lord, I will die for you." It wasn't at the Supper that Peter felt compunction. It was later, when, after his denial of the Lord, Jesus looked at Peter. He knew now what love was all about, and he knew it was not in him, but it would be all right anyway. His God was going His way alone, and saving Peter. But Peter had to accept the fact that he did not understand what was happening, that he was like a child "moving about in worlds unrealized." He had to accept the fact that he could not yet understand what was being done to him, and trust the Lord to be doing what needed to be done. Peter had encountered—in a sudden moment—God wrestling His way forward through the world—carrying us all on His broad back.

So, too, we must become children.

Years ago, I was living in a small village in the Andes. The big event of each day was the coming of the bus. Everyone who could came to the plaza to watch. One day I saw a woman get off the bus with a suitcase. It was a neighbor. Her little son, Jonson, followed. He was about four years old, and she worshiped him. Though she was poor, he was always carefully dressed.

She picked up the suitcase—probably purchases she had made that day—and took Jonson's hand in hers, and began to walk toward her house. But, after a few steps, Jonson pulled his hand free, and ran to the other side, and put his hand up on the handle of the suitcase. He wanted to help. His mother smiled, and they walked on. But, after a few more steps, Jonson began to strike her hand. He did not want her help. He wanted to do this

for her. She kept saying, "It is too heavy for you." He began to cry.

She put the suitcase down. She looked so sad. Jonson reached up, determined. But he could not lift the suitcase. He struggled a bit and then began to bawl. She picked him up in her left arm and held him against her, and reached down and found the suitcase handle with her right hand. She walked the rest of the way with both burdens.

Jonson was not willing to be a child. His mother paid the price. God invites us to be children. What has to be done, only He can do. We constantly forget that. We must allow the Lord to do what we need. We must let Him save us.

We must accept the fact that our spiritual growth is hidden in Christ in God. Loving as Christ loves has nothing to do with seeking to locate God's successes within me. "How am I doing?" In the sight of the wretched of the world—those who so desperately need bread, those who even more desperately need forgiveness—with my eyes newly opened on this, I will find concern for "how I am doing" out of place.

How can I, then, be grateful if I'm going to ignore God's gifts to me—take them with never a word of thanks? First of all, I can thank God for my very life, for my eyes, my ears, my brain, my freedom. I can thank God for my baptism, the Eucharist, the Gospels, Jesus. I can thank God for my parents, my relatives, my friends, my intelligence. There are endless gifts that we can thank God for. Or, if we don't feel the least bit grateful for any of them, we can admit that. "Lord, I know in my head that all these are your gifts, but I do not feel a shred of gratitude. I guess my heart sees them all as facts, things I wake up with each morning. Let me come, Lord, into the truth that I am a heap of gifts constantly flowing from You. Let the mist of illusion clear away and let me see myself with no foundation within, resting entirely on Your kind will. Lord, make me grateful."

Once, a Sister told me about her experience teaching paraplegic children. One boy, Billy, about fifteen, had no



control over his body except for his head. Even his neck muscles were not in his control. Each day he was strapped into his wheelchair, but his head drooped forward on his chest.

This particular day Sister announced, "I am going to teach you today about prayer."

Billie's voice from below. "Sister, I know how to pray."

"Oh, Billie. Then tell us how to pray."

"Each morning, Sister, I say to God: thank you, thank you, thank you."

The Sister told me she immediately left the room. After she had composed herself, she went back in, but she never mentioned prayer again.

Am I ever grateful like that? How powerfully the Lord was at work within Billie, revealing Himself to him, consoling him. What I experience may be more like ingratitude.

This is all a safe thanksgiving—or, even safer ingratitude. But God does not invite us to thank Him for the growth in believing and loving that we see coming into our lives. In fact, this growth is hidden from us, so it cannot be seen anyway. There is no checking on the delivery of God's promises.

And that's the second point. With some people we wait until they fulfill the promise before we thank them. With others, we thank them when they make the promise. "I'll take care of it." "Thanks." It means I trust him. His word is enough. I already know it will be done. I respect that will of his. I touch his will to do it, by his word. I do not need delivery to become grateful. I already feel grateful.

So it is with faith. I hear the Lord's promise: His goal is my salvation. "I will raise you up." That is His Word. He has revealed His Will to me. If I trust Him, I will already experience gratitude, the lifting of the burden. Where He may have already scored some successes within me—that is no concern of mine. I must not seek evidence for His Word. That loving me that He is bringing to birth is His secret working. It is not meant for my admiration. My eyes are meant for others, for loving. He does

not invite us to go through life worried about whether or not He is doing what He said He would. We are invited to trust, to take for granted that all we need will be given to us. We are called to trust that God, despite our self-centered way of living, is indeed fully at work within us and within the world.

The believer affirms, in the teeth of much contrary evidence, that this world is the arena where God's loving will is bringing us forward. Anyone who believes that, anyone who comes into touch with God's decision as it is revealed in His word, will enter into gratitude. It is a spontaneous effect of faith. It does not require a programmed listing of all the evidence of God's love. It springs from faith in His word. We thank Him because He will raise us up, and because He is raising us up. How do we know that He is going to do, and is already doing that? Because He gives us His Word.

Our spiritual life should enable us to come to each Eucharist standing firmly in one reality, and facing squarely another. We stand firmly on the circle of our shabby response to our enemies, and to the poor, and our reluctance to trust God. We face the heavens where, in the words of the liturgy and in the ritual gestures and in the sacramental signs, we find God's loving Will toward us. Our poverty meets His wealth, and we are blessed. Our liturgy is named Eucharist/Thanksgiving because it contains His loving Will toward us—the focus of our gratitude.

The more our consciousness becomes absorbed in our enemies and the poor, the greater will be the power of God's promise within us. This is the atmosphere that the saints dwell in, an ever-deepening compunction. To us, rooted in a world of self, comes a heavenly washing in the forgiving love of God. We are seated at His supper table, and fed with His Spirit. We are led to honesty and joy. It is with such people that God cares tenderly for the wretched of the earth.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Aphorism 125, "The Madman," from *The Gay Science*. Cf. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1962), p. 96.
- <sup>2</sup>Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love* (tr. James Walsh, S.J.; New York: Harper, 1961), p. 83.
- <sup>3</sup>Letter of St. Ignatius to St. Francis Borgia, late 1545. Letter 101, *Monumenta Ignatian I, Epistolae*, pp. 339-342.
- <sup>4</sup>St. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 117.
- <sup>5</sup>St. Francis De Sales. *Entretien Spirituel* 8, *Oeuvres Completes de Sales* (Paris: Louis Vivès, 1866), Vol. 3, p. 371. Cf. *The Spiritual Conferences* (ed. Aidan Gasquet; Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1943), p. 135.
- <sup>6</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 51.
- <sup>7</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, *In II Cor.*, cap. 3, lect. 2.
- <sup>8</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), p. 307.
- <sup>9</sup>Markus Barth, *Ephesians* (Anchor Bible 34; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), p. 126.
- <sup>10</sup>Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 127.
- <sup>11</sup>St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia de Oratione*, PG 63:583.
- <sup>12</sup>St. Augustine, Letter 130, X (20).
- <sup>13</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, 83, 14c).
- <sup>14</sup>Juan Alfaro, S.J., *Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), vol. 2, p. 316.

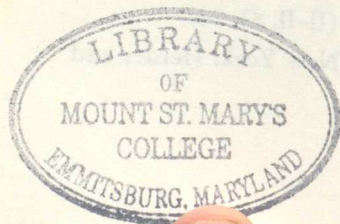


<sup>15</sup>F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *In the Redeeming Christ* (tr. Rosemary Sheed; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 141. "The man who takes delight in his own poverty attains the perfection of humility: he has wholly given up seeking greatness for himself."

<sup>16</sup>St. Francis De Sales. *Entretien Spirituel 2, Oeuvres Completes*, vol. 3, p. 282.

<sup>17</sup>Durrwell, *In the Redeeming Christ*, p. 143.

<sup>18</sup>George Maloney, S.J., *The Breath of the Mystic* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension, 1974), p. 27.





Here is an unusual work that presents the spiritual life in a way different from that one finds in the majority of books on spirituality produced in our generation. Many of these books tend toward a kind of pop psychology—"feeling good about yourself"—understanding grace and the spiritual life not without heavy whiffs of Pelagianism. The author's approach is deeply rooted in biblical and patristic—and of course Ignatian—spirituality. It is very powerful and it is also very radical with the refreshing appeal of something not merely different but authentic. It is designed for the multitudes who have wearied of trendiness in spiritual writing.

William Sampson lives at Gonzaga High School in Washington, D.C. He has done a number of tapes, as well as articles on spirituality for *Sisters Today* and *Review for Religious*. This material is passed around in samizdat fashion and has acquired a word-of-mouth popularity that have given him a wide audience.

Christian Classics  
P.O. Box 30  
Westminster, MD 21157