

## ACTIVE MYSTICISM

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Among the teachings so beautifully woven into the spiritual life, none has been so misunderstood as that of the mystical state. One detects a widespread aversion to this state, not only among those without the pale of Holy Mother Church, but even within the spread of her protecting mantle. To many, mysticism is synonymous with the mysterious, or looked upon as trivial or purely lethargic; the mystic is the dreamer, the unproductive bore of society. It is true that these are days of efficiency, utility, and a host of like sharp sounding terms; but it is also true that "haste makes waste" in spiritual as well as temporal and material things. These days of material influences and achievements seem to disregard the real business of life and abandon life's primary influence—God's love and the true love of God. That from which we draw the very sustenance of our being is either ignored or forgotten,—the inexpressible Love and Goodness of God.

The spiritual life or the interior life of the soul, seeks through the threefold progression of purgation, illumination and unity, its final peace and perfection, God Himself. Since these stages are necessary in order to obtain full perfection in the spiritual life, the passing from a lower to a higher degree is the keynote of its entire development. The mystic state is the intense development of this life of the soul; its realization is the soul's objective. Through the practise of virtue, and an utter responsiveness to the gifts of the Holy Ghost, the soul not only is cleansed from the infirmity of sin and bowed in belief of the revealed mysteries; but, after a time, by its own efforts and the grace of the Holy Spirit, it is gripped by the power of the word of God and lives in an habitual union with God. It is therefore, sweet, loving knowledge and intercourse with God, supernaturally infused by the Holy Ghost.\* It foreshadows heaven's glory through the possession of God in the ascendancy of prayer. "Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God, and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt. vi, 33).

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\* Cf. *La Vie Spirituelle* Ire Ann. Tom. 1 P. 9.—Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, O. P.



St. Catherine of Sienna Receiving the Stigmata



It would be too much to attempt either an exposition of the doctrinal nature of the mystic state, or an analysis of the unsympathetic judgments of which it has been the victim. We propose merely to show its compatibility with activity and achievement. Modern perversions often portray mysticism as the melancholy wanderings of a depressed writer, the impractical vagaries of a poet, or the visionary dreams of a religious reformer. Mysticism is, on the contrary, something vital, that finds expression in action, in superior achievements that continue to live when the memory of the man fades with his age. The superhuman phenomena vouchsafed to the saintly souls, who are the ideals and idols of mysticism seems to indicate that their mystic life and the vehemence of its love and knowledge served well on the firing line of soul saving.

True mysticism leans ever to the sacred teachings of Holy Church, and portrays them in activity of a superior nature, in activity which the world oftentimes first ridicules and then praises. Pseudo-mystics there have been and still are, who clothe their doctrine in terms familiar with and reverential to the spiritual writings but who spread disrespect for this sublime state. They are responsible for those misconceptions of the mystic life which picture it as a handicap in the progression of humanity toward God. From the early days of the Church Quietists, those who could not understand the catholic and apostolic mission of the Church, have always met with its severest condemnation. Such sects as the Messalians, the Beghards, and the Spanish Alumbrados (Illuminati) are good examples of this false teaching. Chief among the sponsors of their tendencies were Master Eckhart of Cologne, Molinos, the founder of strict Quietism, and nearer our own day, Madame Guyon.

The most virulent antagonists of this false mysticism are authorities in the practise in the mystical life, like the eminent Dominican John Tauler and the Ven. Ruysbroeck, the Augustinian. Tauler, in denouncing this extremist movement splendidly sums up its mistakes: "There are false contemplatives. Their characteristic is that the interior repose, to which they abandon themselves is purely natural: it is sloth. . . . Just as a tool waits passively until the master makes use of it, so they await the divine operation in a state of inaction. They remain motionless, without practising any virtue. They will



neither thank God nor praise Him, neither love nor ask nor desire. This they say is culpable. All that they could ask for, they believe that they already possess (Sermons for 2nd Sunday of Lent). Thus differences that arose in the history of mysticism in the Church, portray the root of modern misconception, whereas the lives and achievements of many of its masters evidence it proper spirit.

What a surprising contrast is the spirit of the true mystical life to the false concepts of the modern propaganda, a contrast best displayed by actual exemplification. The real mystic need not be simply a visionary dreamer. History shows that profound mysticism is often the background of an intensely active life led by the most apostolic souls. It cannot be insisted upon too much, especially in the present days, when so much misjudgment is hurled in the face of mysticism, that the mystic state is not opposed or incompatible with activity. On the contrary, reason and all the evidences of history indicate that mysticism is a boon to activity. The soul capable of possessing God is assuredly a strong and capable soul. The soul possessing God is the soul of composure and peace, a leader, whose radiance guides others and performs wonders. Mysticism strengthens, guides and comforts; it yearns for higher activity.

The greatest apostles of the Church and of truth were at the same time the greatest mystics; for example St. Dominic, St. Bernard, St. Vincent Ferrer, and a host of others. These indeed, men of God, from their mystic joys, possessed power over souls and a comfort in all their apostolic labors and sufferings. They were enabled to go forth and conquer for Christ. With this spiritual strength their word and example directed the actions of hardened men. The most learned theologians were those who experienced the true possession of God in their hearts, and, in the mystic joy of possessing their All, they learned and taught the hidden things of God in the wealth of His love. Thus St. Thomas of Aquin, St. Francis De Sales, St. Alphonsus, St. Bonaventure, rich in science, chose first the kingdom of God.

It is the life of St. Thomas of Aquin, which reveals the relation of mystical life and activity. His biographers recount the youthful life filled with action, his manly determination in the adverse circumstances attending the pursuit of his vocation.

They tell us of his forceful and learned preaching in Germany, France and Italy. The militant spirit of St. Thomas in all that was right shows him a warrior true to the standards of Christ, particularly when he rose against the secular leaders of the University of Paris, to uphold the rights and honor of the mendicant orders. In civil activity he also took his place. Chosen by King Louis IX of France as Privy Councillor, he exercised untold influence in the glorious reign of that sainted sovereign. In the government of his order, St. Thomas was repeatedly the choice of his brethren and superiors, who confidently placed in his hands responsible commissions and offices. This too was the recognition of the Holy See, in seeking his counsel in matters of importance and even selecting him as theologian for the General Council of Lyons. St. Thomas, whose activity was of the greatest character, chose as his portion God. He learned from the book of the Cross and drew the abundance of his knowledge, which now guides the faith of men, from the fountain of Divine Love. Constant intercourse in mystical union, and its joys directed him in the study and diffusion of truth, which was confirmed by God Himself.

St. Dominic's was certainly not the life of a dreamer. Though his nights were spent in close communion before the tabernacle of his Maker, his days were days of heroic labors in the vineyard of the Lord, teaching those who lingered in error and darkness, bringing blessings to afflicted spirits, and forming the foundation of that great preaching band, that was to carry his labors into the succeeding centuries. Another humble friar, whose name is engraved in achievement, leaving its impress even in our own day, was Blessed Albert the Great. Though delving into the depths of science and discovery, he turned ever to his God, never ceasing to acknowledge the source of his attainments in the Divine Love Spring, and the debt he owed to his Creator. He lived in God and when God chose to withdraw from him the ways of earthly wisdom, he died to all that was not God.

In St. Catherine of Sienna, the world recognises one of the most active women of her age, whose highly mystical life proves decisively the compatibility of action and mysticism. Led on and strengthened by extraordinary joys and manifestations of her close union with the Divine Master, she became apostle and

reformer, comforter of suffering humanity, adviser and teacher of Pope, prince and peasant. Steeled in supernatural, all conquering love, with the spirit of God Almighty encompassing her spirit, she hesitated not to speak words of reproach to the Vicar of Christ and the ministers of the altar, in the defence of the sacred dignity of their office. As ambassador, she brought about the submission of the rebellious Florentines to their lord, Pope Gregory XI. In great part is credit due to her for the return of the Father of Christendom to the city of Peter's See. These were the influences of a poor, unlettered young woman unsurpassed in the doctrine and life of the mystic state.

Equalled by few was the active career that accompanied the purely mystical life of St. Teresa of Jesus. Her's was a life spent in continuous union with God; in the spiritual fostering of souls; in leading, against the opposition of the troublous Reformation times, a great religious order to the realization of its principles of mystical contemplation. These are some instances of sturdy heroes and heroines, whose deeds have come down through the ages, as outstanding proofs that, while apostolic activity is not always accompanied by mystical contemplation, the highest realms of mysticism erect no barrier against what people call action. It is possible to recount example after example of this intercourse with God in the activity of everyday life. The best instances from the busy lives of holy men and women are justifications of the true mystical life and a reproach to the abuse and ridicule of it. Mysticism to these meant the unlimited application of the first commandment of the Law. Apart from the spirit of the world, yet in its very midst, they drew lives of activity from the source of life and activity. They lingered in loving communion at this source that "they may have life and have it more abundantly" (John, x: 10).

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—Bro. Albert Drexelius, O. P.

Works Consulted:

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