

27. Mystical graces sometimes experienced by contemplatives

Teresa shares with us some experiences that she had during contemplation. At times certain words came clearly into her consciousness. She was aware of the fact that she was not their source. The words came to her with a certain divine authority, and when she obeyed them they bore powerful fruit (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.5). The first time she had such an experience was in 1557, when the following words were spoken to her by Jesus: ‘No longer do I want you to converse with human beings, but with angels’ (*Life*, 24.5). On another occasion she heard: ‘Do not fear, daughter, for I am and I will not abandon you. Do not fear’ (*Life*, 25.18).

In her *Spiritual Testimonies* she records other ‘words’ spoken to her in prayer:

‘Strive to have the right intention and to be detached in all things and look at me so that what you do may be in conformity with what I did’ (No. 8).

‘Give me your hands. Behold my wounds. You are not without me. This short life is passing away’ (No. 12.6).

‘Do not try to hold me within yourself. Try to hold yourself within me’ (No. 14).

‘Progress does not come by trying to enjoy me more, but by trying to do my will’ (No. 15).

She is aware of the danger of being deceived in this matter and advises people who suffer from a flighty imagination to ignore such experiences (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.2.3). No one should take notice of such ‘words’ before seeking the guidance of a spiritual director (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.11). For two years after her first experience her confessors told her to treat these words as a temptation (*Life*, 25.15). She did her best to obey, knowing that God wanted her to obey her confessors even when they were mistaken (*Life*, 26.5). She is confident that if these experiences are from God they will produce a profound peace, and they will lead to a deeper humility (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.11) and to prayer of praise of God. If they are from God they remain, drawing us to a deeper obedience (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.6).

Teresa also had other experiences. She received the promise of spiritual marriage during an ecstasy or rapture.

‘God concludes the betrothal by giving us a rapture which draws us away from the senses’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.2).

‘In a rapture, God carries us off’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.9).

‘The difference between rapture and union is this: the rapture lasts longer and is felt more exteriorly ... We are so occupied with rejoicing with what the Lord represents to us that we seemingly leave the body abandoned’ (*Spiritual Testimonies* 59.7).

In this rapture resistance is impossible. However, there is no loss of consciousness. On the contrary

‘we have never before been so fully awake to the things of God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.4).

Similar raptures were part of her prayer experience in the subsequent years.

‘It will happen that even though the extreme ecstasy ends, the will remains so absorbed and the intellect so withdrawn, for a day or even days, that the latter seems incapable of understanding anything that doesn’t lead to awakening the will to love; and the will is wide awake to this love and asleep to becoming attached to any creature’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.14).

Teresa speaks also of being suddenly caught up in love. In these sudden ‘flights of the spirit’ we see and learn things that cannot be expressed (*Interior Castle*, VI.5.9), and we experience ‘overwhelming joy and delight’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.11.11).

‘Since we go about with such tender love, any occasion that enkindles the fire more causes us to fly aloft’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.6.1).

We cannot earn such favours, but Teresa is convinced that if we give our whole heart and soul to God, God’s love is such that God would want everyone to experience a similar intimacy.

‘Even though it is true that these are blessings which the Lord gives to whomever God wills, God would give them all to us if we loved God as God loves us’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.12).

Teresa tells us of other special favours which she received at this time. Without any image she became deeply aware of Jesus being by her side (*Life*, 27.2; *Interior Castle*, VI.8.2). This made her even more acutely aware of the slightest movements of sin. It also made her more determined to give herself to God and to be available for whatever work God wanted of her.

‘Any fault we commit pierces us to the core of our being, and rightly so’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.8.6).

‘We experience peace and continual desires to please God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.8.3).

‘To surrender oneself totally to God’s service and to a great purity of conscience because of God’s presence by our side, makes us attentive to everything’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.8.4).

On 30th June 1571, she also received the grace of a habitual awareness of the Blessed Trinity dwelling in her:

‘The thought came to me of how a sponge absorbs and is saturated with water; so, I thought, I was overflowing with the divinity and in a certain way rejoicing within myself and possessing in myself the three Persons’ (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 14).

Sometimes an image of Jesus was part of her experience during such moments of intimacy. This happened for the first time on January 25th 1561 (*Life*, 28.3). In her *Life* she records other images that came to her in prayer. On one occasion she had an image of an angel who pierced her in the depths of her heart (*Life*, 29.13). On May 29th 1563, she had a vision of a dove while reading the *Life of Christ* by the Carthusian, Ludolph of Saxony (*Life*, 38.9). She tells us also how she saw Jesus being taken into the bosom of the Trinity (*Life*, 38.17). These were very different kinds of images from any that we might produce from our own imagination (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.8).

Because the danger of self-deception here is very high, she warns anyone who seems to be having such an experience to be completely open with a spiritual director (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.12). In her case, as with the ‘words’ that she heard, she was told at first to treat these visions as a temptation (*Life*, 29.5). She did her best to obey, but found that she could do nothing either to bring these visions about or to stop them (*Life*, 29.2). Furthermore her love kept increasing (*Life*, 29.8) as did her desire to ‘want only what God wants’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.16).

While warning us of the danger of self-deception, she acknowledges: ‘When visions are from God, they should be greatly prized’ (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 65.3). Speaking in general of the many favours given her in prayer, she writes:

‘If our Lord had not bestowed on me the favours he has, I think I should not have had the courage to do what I have done nor the strength to endure the trials, the opposition and the criticisms I have received. And so, since beginning my foundations, I have lost the fears that had previously troubled me when I thought I was suffering from delusions, and I have become certain that it was all the work of God. This led me to fling myself into difficult enterprises, though I always acted on advice and under obedience’ (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 30).

It is true that such experiences are not essential either to prayer or to holiness. Moreover, they are not free of dangers. We can be misled by pride and illusions. The danger is so great that John of

the Cross is adamant that we should pay no attention to such extraordinary graces (see *Ascent II*, 11 and 16-18). If they are indeed from God, their effect is immediate. Teresa tells us that we are to mention them to our spiritual director (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.12), but not dwell on them. Furthermore, along with Teresa (VI.9.15), John warns us not to desire such graces. Let all our desire be for a deeper faith, for it is faith alone that guides us in contemplation. 'The safest way is to want only what God wants' (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.16). One's desire should be only 'to satisfy love, and it is love's nature to serve with deeds' (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.18).

Marie-Eugène writes:

'However extraordinary sensible phenomena may be, they are so complex that, except for cases authenticated by the Church, it is at very least to waste one's precious time and satisfy a vain curiosity to linger with them in the hope of viewing some manifestation of the supernatural, or even of determining their nature and the kind of testimony that they give. A few moments of supernatural recollection or of the prayer of quiet, an act of faith and an act of love, these give God to us more surely and more directly than do all the extraordinary sensible phenomena' (*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 354).

At the same time we should not, in an undiscerning way, dismiss all such extraordinary experiences of God. When these experiences are accompanied by a sincere commitment to the truth, and have about them a simplicity and harmony; when they produce in us true humility, reverence and peace, they may well be gifts from God, given for God's own mysterious purposes.

Marie-Eugène writes:

'These favours usually have considerable influence in the development of the spiritual life of those who receive them and in the realisation of their mission. This was the case for Saint Teresa' (page 268).

'Frequently, at the threshold of the narrow way in which God engages those God has chosen, God places an extraordinary favour which, like a beacon, shows the entrance to it, lights up the way and its steep ascents, and already with its powerful shafts reveals its summit' (page 271).

It may well be that there is, in some cases, an element of mental illness mixed in with experiences of special mystical graces. This may make discernment more difficult, but it does not mean that the mentally ill person is not being especially favoured by God. After all, we are speaking of a God who hears the cry of the distressed. As Father de Guibert writes:

'We can very well believe that God particularly favours such persons, by reason of the immense difficulties and hard trials that they meet with in order to realise their ascent in love, in the midst of the obscurities and tempests of their cruel illness' (quoted, Marie-Eugène, page 365).

Touched by love, we would be wasting our time were we to just be on the look out for the next touch. While we long and wait, let us contemplate Jesus in his mysteries, not as we did when we thought things through in a logical fashion, but with simple faith-filled attention.

'These mysteries will not be apprehended by the understanding: we will understand them in a more perfect way. First, the understanding will picture them to itself, and then they will be impressed upon the memory, so that the mere sight of the Lord on his knees in the garden, covered with that terrible sweat, will suffice us, not merely for an hour, but for many days. We consider with a simple regard who he is and how ungrateful we have been to one who has borne such pain for us. Then the will is aroused, not perhaps with deep emotion but with a desire to make some kind of a return for this great favour and to suffer something for one who has suffered so much himself' (*Interior Castle*, VI.7.11).

Finally, the following from Teresa:

‘The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or the spirit of prophecy, but in bringing our wills so closely into conformity with the will of God, that as soon as we realise that God wills something, we desire it ourselves with all our might, and take the bitter with the sweet, knowing that to be God’s will’ (*Foundations*, 5.10).