

XIX Sunday after Pentecost – St Teresa of Avila, True Mystic

In the name of the Father...

If not a Sunday, today would be the feast of St Teresa of Avila, a great mystic.

Most confuse mysticism with charisms and preternatural phenomena, e.g., secret knowledge, prophecy, levitation, ecstasy, visions, locutions, speaking in tongues and such like, which, however, are not in-and-of-themselves indicative of holiness. Indeed, they can be in evil men, e.g. the pagan prophet Balaam.¹ Also, they are easy for the devil to mimic.

Even when genuine – we can recall Teresa’s experience of a seraph piercing her through with a golden spear – these phenomena sometimes accompany - but do not constitute - mysticism.

St Paul writes: *As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.*² Indeed, Paul chided the Corinthians for their obsession with charisms, pointing out that true Christian perfection – true mysticism – the full flowering of the spiritual life, consists rather in the excellence of *charity*, something strictly supernatural, telling them: *I will show you a still more excellent way.*³

Paul writes: *charity never ends.*⁴ Like prophecies and tongues, even *faith* and *hope* will cease on attaining the Beatific Vision. *Charity*, however, will remain - the same in heaven as now. Indeed, *charity* unites us to heaven now and will determine life in heaven. It is the one thing which is necessary, as the man without a wedding garment discovered to his eternal loss.⁵

Articulated by Our Lord in the Beatitudes, advancing in holiness, then, is progress in *charity*. Authorities on the spiritual life recognize three distinct stages.

The purgative stage arises due to sin. St Paul again: *[P]ut off... the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error and... put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth.*⁶ So that *charity* might take firm root, the disorder resulting from Original and actual sin must be uprooted. In this vein, Paul writes that *charity... is not jealous nor boastful... is not arrogant nor rude... is not irritable nor resentful.*⁷ The purgative stage culminates in the Beatitude of those who mourn, decrying their former attachment to sin. Quite worldly as a youth, Teresa was twenty years in a

¹ [Num 22](#)

² [1 Cor 13:8](#)

³ [1 Cor 12:31](#)

⁴ [1 Cor 13:8](#)

⁵ [Mt 22:11-12](#)

⁶ [Eph 4:22-24](#)

⁷ [1 Cor 13:4-5](#)

convent dogged by worldly living before her personal reform began. One biography notes: *She came to an understanding of the awful terror of sin, receiving a rich blessing of tears.*⁸

Passing through the *Night of the Senses* which purges attachment to sensible consolations, the soul enters the illuminative stage wherein *faith* begins to dominate, accompanied by the fruitful exercise of other infused virtues in the Beatitudes of the just and the merciful. According to St John of the Cross, here begins mysticism proper – God starting to teach the soul directly – although the Holy Ghost’s influence through the Gifts still is weak.

St Paul writes that *charity... believes all things.*⁹ In the illuminative stage, for incipient infused contemplation of the mysteries of faith the Creed no longer is just an object of memorization but the foundation of prayer. Our Lord asked his apostles: *who do you say that I am?* Receiving Peter’s confession of his divinity, Our Lord promised: *on this rock I will build my church*¹⁰ - yes, a promised conferral of universal jurisdiction to the person of Peter, but also referring to the confession of the Incarnate God as the foundation of the Church and indeed of each authentic individual spiritual life.

St Paul continues that *charity... endures all things.* Becoming a true mystic is arduous work. Our Lord teaches: *For the gate is narrow and the way is hard which leads to life, and those who find it are few.*¹¹ We can recall St Theresa’s remonstrance with Our Lord: *if this is how you treat your friends... it is no wonder that you have so few.* Spoken in a moment of trial but with a degree of familiarity, it also articulates a truth: Our Lord has few true friends, i.e., those well advanced in *charity*, due to the necessary self-denial and perseverance, the necessity to *endure all things* by which God would purify us. We can recall Our Lord’s teaching of his Father pruning the vine that it might bring forth more fruit.¹²

Unlike charisms, mysticism is not essentially extraordinary. Rather, it is the culmination of the ordinary progression of the life of grace such that all possessed of grace are – at least remotely – called to it. Indeed, Our Lord observes that... *many are called.*¹³ Mysticism is, however, accidentally extraordinary in that so few people attain to it, not only because of the necessary *endurance*, but also because it is only by God’s proximate call. Again, Our Lord observes that... *few are chosen.*

Passing then through the *Night of the Spirit* – a period of intense aridity which purges all selfish self-interest – the soul enters the unitive way wherein *charity* dominates in souls habitually united to

⁸ [Wikipedia: Teresa of Avila](#)

⁹ [1 Cor 13:7](#)

¹⁰ [Mt 16:16-18](#)

¹¹ [Mt 7:14](#)

¹² [Jn 15:1-2](#)

¹³ [Mt 22:14](#)

God, who live continually in his presence. The Beatitude of those who will see God, it is the culmination of the spiritual life, the proximate disposition for entering heaven immediately upon death.¹⁴

Our Lord described this life of heaven: *This is eternal life, that they may know you the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*¹⁵ This proximate disposition, then, is the infused contemplation of the mysteries of faith, no longer is laborious and uncertain as under the impulse of reason, but prompt and penetrating under the Holy Ghost's impulse especially through the Gifts of *understanding* and *wisdom*.

St Paul writes that *charity... rejoices exceedingly in the truth*. The perfection of that most definitive innate human instinct to seek the truth, this dimension of *charity* is the essence of mysticism. Augmenting the Gift of *understanding*, the Gift of *wisdom* brings *joy*, that first fruit of the spirit,¹⁶ for truth is not a good unless it is loved.

St Teresa summarizes: *Contemplative prayer... is nothing other than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him whom we know loves us*. If – the gospel still being explicated - the illuminative stage is characterized by Our Lord's single question to Peter: *who do you say that I am*, the gospel having been explicated, the unitive stage is characterized by his three-fold question: *do you love me?*

The call to holiness is universal: mysticism is not essentially extraordinary but rather is the culmination of the ordinary development of the life of grace. Indeed, *many are called*. In that sense, Teresa was not extraordinary. Achieving it, however, is accidentally extraordinary: it requires us to *put off... the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error and... put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth*. It requires *enduring all things*. In this sense, Teresa was extraordinary: she was one of Our Lord's too few true friends. The path she traversed is steep and narrow. Yet we must look to follow her, according to the first and greatest commandment: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*¹⁷ Let us so strive.

St Teresa of Avila, pray for us.

In the name of the Father...

¹⁴ Purgatory's existence demonstrates that all sin could have been avoided or at least expiated, and further highlights the necessity of asceticism.

¹⁵ [Jn 17:3](#)

¹⁶ [Gal 5:22](#) – wisdom judges all things relative to the first cause; charity unites us to the first cause; its fruits are joy, peace, ...

¹⁷ [Mt 22:37](#)