

the Absolute, and to reduce his own stature before him. For the rest of his life Charles de Foucauld was always looking for ways of doing God's will better, adoring him better, humbling himself better. It must not be forgotten that it was given him in his conversion to meet the Lord Jesus intimately in the eucharist. The side of our Lord's life which appealed to him most was his lowliness, his poverty. He, of whose sacrifice he partook after his confession, is Jesus the poor infant of Bethlehem, the stranger from Nazareth, the despised man of Calvary, the one who had willingly given himself to the end. Charles de Foucauld's one desire was to imitate Jesus more and more, with him to empty himself more and more. On the day of his death he wrote, 'Our self-emptying is the most powerful means we have of becoming one with Jesus, and doing some good for souls'.

All this may seem rather discouraging to people who admire Charles de Foucauld, but find themselves incapable of following him. The response of this convert to God's call certainly had something heroic about it. But we should remember that de Foucauld's gift of his life to God, for all its kingly generosity, was also thoroughly simple. His sacrifice was accomplished in the humdrum activities of daily life, in ordinary things—a confession, a communion, a church like any other, a parish curate, a week-day, nothing very unusual on the surface. His all-embracing sacrifice was made in a secret hidden way. In a very real sense the poverty and humility which he offered to God were perfectly in keeping with that acute perception he had of God's transcendence. It is in his awareness of his insignificance before God that he can also be aware of the only gift he can really make to God, the gift of himself. Because he is feeble and weak, the only thing to do is to offer himself to God with complete simplicity of heart.



CONTEMPLATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

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BY contemplation here I am not referring to any merely natural operation of the intellect, however sublime it may be, but to an operation much more elusive, namely, supernatural contemplation, called also mysticism. It may be

defined as *an immediate or experimental knowledge of God*. Our ordinary knowledge of God, of his existence and of his nature, comes to us not immediately but only mediately, that is through intellectual concepts or ideas in the mind derived from reason and faith. By our natural reason it is possible to know of God's existence and to some extent his attributes, but only by faith can we know his inner nature, for example, his threefold personality. But mysticism, or mystical knowledge of God which is supernatural contemplation, is something quite different. This is immediate knowledge of God and experience of his presence through union with him by charity. It is knowledge obtained through the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the soul made connatural by the infused gift of wisdom—the highest possible knowledge obtainable in this life of God himself, the cause of which is in the will, but its essence is in the intellect. Such knowledge is therefore entirely above our natural knowledge; it is completely supernatural. No one by the mere use of his natural powers, even with the assistance of ordinary grace, actual or habitual, can attain to this knowledge, arrive at such a state of contemplation. Though this is impossible to man's own powers, nevertheless we cannot place limits to God's power, nor to his will. Consequently it would be no doubt possible for non-Catholics, or even non-Christians, to have such mystical knowledge; but if they do, it can only be by the gratuitous power and will of God. It would be God's free gift and would not be natural but supernatural. On the other hand, it is also possible for one to be heroically virtuous, that is to be a saint, and yet not to be gifted with any mystical experience, not to attain to this supernatural contemplation of God. However, though a saint may in fact not be a mystic, nevertheless it would seem to be impossible for one to be a mystic without being a saint. This being so, the mystic whoever he may be, cannot be truly said to have *discovered* God; indeed such knowledge of God cannot even be *sought*; that is cannot be sought *directly*, and by one's own efforts. Indirectly of course it can be, namely by preparing one's soul for it, and even in desiring and praying that God might give it to one, if that should be his will. To the true mystic God makes himself known 'experimentally', the person so favoured contributes nothing, at any rate directly, to this result. God takes possession of certain mental powers (intellect and will), and focuses them upon

himself, and those other powers, which from their nature cannot be so focused, are left idle. There are no conditions by the fulfilment of which mystical experience may be ensured. The mystic is the mere recipient of the favours bestowed on him. Now if and when he receives such favours he is quite certain in his own mind of the divine communication, though he cannot prove it; and his conviction that the communication is indeed divine (that is, from God himself) is unshakeable. Nevertheless this subjective certitude cannot be taken as a proof that the experience is a genuine mystical one. Such a person, for example, may be subjectively certain, and yet this may be due to nervous excitement, hysteria, memory association, or disease. Therefore there can be no mystical experience without certitude in the mind, yet this certitude is no guarantee of its genuineness. To repeat, then, the essence of mysticism is direct contact with a transcendental reality, that is, God himself; and this from its nature, is incapable of being described in the terms of ordinary sense-experience to which human language is necessarily limited. Thus the consciousness, however certain, of the actual divine presence admits of no adequate description. Hence the so-called relations and attempted descriptions of mystical experience by saints or mystics or ordinary theologians are necessarily quite inadequate, to say the least. That is not to say, however, that they are of no value.

Now the powers of the soul are divisible into the cognitive or intellectual power, and the affective or will power. Mystical knowledge of God is the object of the affective power, while speculative knowledge is the object of the cognitive power. The Divine mystical presence is known, not as an abstract idea or concept resulting from thought, but as an immediate object of love. The experimental knowledge indeed takes place through the agency of the natural powers of the soul, mind and will, but the experimental factor is the gratuitous divine communication which the soul receives. The will is supernaturally united with God in love, and the intellect is made conscious of that union. And so we say, mystical contemplation is the sight or vision of God: not of course sight or vision as obtained by the bodily organ of sense, the eye; nor metaphorical sight, when we mean the intellectual perception of an idea or a truth presented to us from without; not therefore bodily sight, because God is invisible in that sense, being a spirit; not ordinary intellectual perception

because it is not an idea that is seen; but the consciousness of a *living reality*. In mystical or supernatural contemplation it is *God himself* who is the object perceived—not an idea of him, nor any thoughts about him. The soul indeed still exercises its natural powers, or some of them, but it does so under entirely abnormal conditions, created by the character of the object with which it has to deal and that object is God.

When I say above that mystical contemplation is the sight or vision of God, and again that it is God himself who is the object perceived, it must not be understood by this that the essence of God is seen as it is in the beatific vision; God is not seen by the mystic 'face to face'; there is no new revelation of God's being. The mystic sees no *more* than is known by faith, but he sees more *deeply* into the truths of God, and is conscious with certitude of his union with him in love. If we are in the state of grace, we have within us the infused virtue of charity or love; and as our Lord says: 'If anyone love me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and *make our abode* with him.' (John xiv, 23). And again: 'He who loves me will win my Father's love, and I too will love him and will *reveal myself to him*'. (ibid. 21). And St Paul tells us: 'Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?' (I Cor. iii, 16). God then is within us if we have charity, however weak it may be. But we are not there by conscious of that. In fact, 'Man knoweth not whether he be worthy of love or hatred'. (Eccles. ix, 1). Only if God should reveal it to us can we know with certitude if we are in God's grace.

However, if we should have arrived at a degree of charity sufficiently great, though we shall not necessarily receive from God the gift of contemplation, that is, an experimental knowledge of his presence, nevertheless he may give us that gift, and if so, we shall be certain of it. In other words, we shall then have with certitude an experimental knowledge of God within us by love, which obviously implies a state of grace. However, this experience of God's presence is only a transient, not a permanent one, and similarly the implied knowledge of our being in a state of grace at that moment is also only a passing knowledge. Nevertheless, that high degree of charity which would seem to be required before God will grant such mystical experience, is indeed of its nature permanent and cannot be lost, except by grave sin. Such

a soul then may certainly be called a contemplative and said to be living a contemplative life.

Now it may be asked in what way can the soul, endowed with this mystical knowledge, be said to *see* God, since the proper functions of the soul are to think, to understand and to will, and these functions presuppose abstract ideas? For it is not an abstract idea that the mystic contemplates. But the same difficulty is involved in trying to understand the beatific vision of God by the saints in heaven. This may be explained as follows: The vision of God in heaven by the saints is not mere vision but union. The blessed see God not from a distance, as objects of the senses are seen, nor by a discursive intellectual process, as intellectual ideas are perceived, but, so to speak, from within. They are not however pantheistically merged in God, but united to him by his supernatural action, so that the consciousness in the soul of the divine presence is akin to its consciousness of itself. As our self-consciousness is intellectual and yet immediate, although only habitual, so also is the beatific vision of God both immediate and intellectual. For this, however, a special divine assistance is required, namely, 'an abiding form', called 'the light of glory'; and in mystical contemplation, too, a similar divine assistance is present by the fact of mystical union.

From what has so far been said, it should be obvious that no one can rightly claim to have a natural aptitude to mystical contemplation. Nevertheless, since, as St Thomas points out, grace does not destroy nature but rather perfects it, it follows that one must have the use of one's mental faculties in order to be able to receive this gift, and so be perfected by supernatural contemplation. Moreover, it must always be borne in mind that though the gift cannot be acquired by the natural exercise of our intellectual powers, yet if it is to be given to us, it is ordinarily speaking necessary for our souls to be prepared for its reception. Yet no amount of preparation can *ensure* God's making himself known to us in this manner. The kind of preparation necessary is chiefly of a negative kind, namely the complete purification of the soul. This demands first of all the *active* mortification of our external senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Thus we must deny ourselves the sight, as far as we can, of all that is a danger to our morals or virtue, and even sometimes of what is innocent or good, so as to practise self-denial and to check the

possibility of the growth of undue attachment. And so too in the same way with all the other senses.

We have also to mortify, to have proper control over, our internal senses, the imagination and memory, especially. Then there are the passions to control and moderate: love and hatred, joy and sorrow, desire and aversion, hope and despair, courage and fear, and anger. All these have their proper and lawful objects to which they should be directed when necessary or desirable, and also their unlawful objects from which they must be diverted. But even when directed towards their proper and good objects, they may still have to be moderated and even sometimes denied.

Furthermore, besides the senses both external and internal and the various passions, even our spiritual faculties, the intellect and the will, have also to be brought under control. Thus for example we have at times to deny ourselves the gratification of our intellectual curiosity, which though probably in itself harmless and perhaps even good, may nevertheless, owing to circumstances, be not good, or at any rate, not advisable. And as regards our will power, that obviously has always to be properly directed and often denied. So therefore, for active mortification or purification there is a very wide field.

Our necessary purification however will not be complete without another kind, which is called passive purification. This means that, whatever comes to us, or happens to us, without or apart from any deliberate action of our own, must be accepted with full conformity to the evident will of God, from which at least it ultimately comes. It will come to us in all sorts of ways, such as in bodily, mental or spiritual afflictions, in contempt, misunderstandings, injustices, and even, maybe, by persecutions. I said above that the kind of preparation necessary to make oneself more or less ready for the gift of God is chiefly of a negative kind. But there is something also of a positive nature that needs to be attended to, and that is the matter of prayer, vocal and liturgical, but particularly mental prayer. To progress in holiness means also to progress in the practice of prayer, which again usually means to progress chiefly in the practice of mental prayer. We shall never arrive at the highest form of union with God by mystical contemplation, which is a purely gratuitous gift on God's part, until we have arrived at the other higher forms of mental

prayer short of this, and these higher stages of prayer short of the mystical union are quite within the reach of our own powers assisted by God's grace. By the sufficient active and passive purification of our souls and our progress in prayer, we shall render ourselves at least less unworthy of receiving God's greatest favour in this life, if such should be his gracious will.

Now to this high condition of perfection and union with God even all Christians are called, as our Lord himself says: 'Be ye therefore perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.' (Matt. v, 48). But for religious there is an obligation to tend to the perfection of charity by excluding from their lives everything which impedes the movement of the soul towards God. Religious by their state of life are bound under sin to strive after this highest perfection or love of God, at least by putting no obstacle in the way of its attainment, and by striving to prepare themselves for this gift of God—mystical union with him by love. Religious are thus said to be in a state of perfection, that is, in a state of life so constituted by its obligations and regulations as to be specially conducive, as far as can be, to the highest holiness. Now religious life may be divided into three classes, namely, active religious, contemplative religious, and religious whose state of life is a mixture of the contemplative and active lives. But in all three there is the same obligation for the members thereof to strive, as far as may be, after this summit of perfection or holiness. So far as this end in view is concerned, there is no essential difference between any of them. The so-called contemplative religious state endeavours to cut itself off more completely than the other two, from active contact with the world and its activities, so as to be able to devote itself more to actual prayer and recollection, in the hope and belief that thereby it may or will be the better able to prepare for the possible divine gift of supernatural contemplation of the Godhead. It must always be remembered, however, that this supernatural contemplation or contemplative life, as explained above, is possible to *any* state of life, whether religious or otherwise; and it is the more likely to be attained in that state, whatever it may be, to which God calls us. There have always been and still are, I'm sure, true contemplatives in all three sections of religious life, in the ecclesiastical state, in the married state, and indeed in every lawful and good condition of life in this world 'The Spirit breatheth where he will.' (John iii, 8).