

light of the mystery which is hidden beneath the sign. 'It is given us all alike to catch the glory of the Lord, as in a mirror, with faces unveiled; and so we become transfigured into the same likeness, borrowing glory from that glory, as the Spirit of the Lord enables us' (2 Cor. 3, 18). These symbols of the Old Testament are not dead signs, they are living symbols which gradually disclose their meaning as we meditate upon them, and work a transformation in our souls. We have not merely to think them but to live them: to let them take possession of us like poetry. It is the function of the poet, according to Hölderlin, to 'name the gods'. The symbols of the Old Testament are the 'names' by which God is brought near to us and enters into our lives.



MYSTICISM AND THE SACRAMENTS IN THE EARLY EASTERN CHURCH¹

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RECENT discussion has led to a recognition that christian mysticism differs fundamentally from that of the non-christian religions. It was necessary, first of all, in face of the historical positivists to show where this difference lies. The answers so far proposed indicate at least that this is to be sought in the trinitarian structure of our theism. It is remarkable how little this has been taken into account by the theologians of the last centuries, and how little influence it has had on christian life. In theory the West has never lost sight of the unique nature of christian, i.e. trinitarian, theism, but in practice the christian and non-christian mystic differ less markedly. We do not account for this difference simply by saying that the revelation of the Trinity and the substitution of trinitarian forms for monotheistic characterise christian mysticism, for this would be to beg the question which is precisely how this reference

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to the Trinity makes christian mysticism so unique a thing. If the christian applies to the tripersonal God only those religious experiences or expressions elsewhere applied to the One it would seem that our distinction is only verbal, and that we have done no more than indicate the direction in which the solution is to be sought.

It is well known that during the first four christian centuries doctrinal development and the piety of the Church centred upon the specifically christian conception of God as Trinity. The controversies, Trinitarian and Christological, give us but a faint idea of how vital this truth was throughout every level of christian life—had not that life been founded on that truth in baptism. Though we often deceive ourselves into attributing these controversies merely to the Oriental's delight in speculation or to the Greek's notorious liking for a quarrel or for dogma, they sprang from deeper sources which we must explore and know for ourselves if we wish to grasp the unity which underlies all this early theology. That they are concerned with this most inscrutable of all the revealed truths is no reason why we should consider ourselves dispensed from the necessity of co-ordinating the facts disclosed by these discussions. Reason can of itself discover nothing of this order of divine truth, but precisely for this we have perceived the wisdom of the Cross, proceeding as light from the bosom of the Father, and poured into our hearts in the fullness of the Spirit. As life to death, as light to darkness, so is this divine truth to unaided human reason. Expressing thus an opposition between nature and supernature, we must not understand the Fathers to imply a contradiction between them. They would have us understand that we must let ourselves be guided in the supernatural order by supernatural light. This new knowledge has its order, its constructive principle, in the inner life of God. The course of this life, the relations of the persons, is the only law governing christian mystical experience, and our experience of this divine life can alone reveal to us the content of christian mystical experience.

Two conclusions follow from this of which the first is that a correct definition of christian mysticism must be by its formal object, and the second that the essence of christian

mysticism is inconceivable except through an experimental knowledge of the inner life of God.

To the question how is such knowledge attainable there can be but one answer: through knowledge of the three divine Persons, in whose relationships one to the other the inner life of God consists. But there seem to be insurmountable difficulties here. First of all the Persons have never fully revealed themselves to us, and then in any case such a revelation would seem to be incomprehensible to human reason.

The common essence of the three divine Persons has never been revealed to us. Their existence, their names, something of their activity in their relations with one another and with creatures we learn from Scripture. From these data we can deduce something of their essence, but we must admit, as St Gregory Nazianzen did, the more we look at the sun of the Trinity, the less do we see. (*Orat.* 20, 10. P.G. 35, 1077.) Inevitably, as creatures, we are blinded by the fullness of its light. Our understanding, concerned as it is with universals, can never attain the divine Persons, absolutely unique in their individuality; and then this very uniqueness, absolutely active infinity, is so unlimited that the limited nature of a finite intelligence cannot know it. Analogy, whatever its possibilities, without faith can never offer us knowledge of the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. Hence St Athanasius wrote: 'The Godhead is not learned by rational demonstration, but in faith and through reverent, devout contemplation.' (*Ad Serapion* 1, 20. P.G. 26, 577.) Previously in the same letter he had written: 'That which has been presented to our faith is not to be grasped according to human wisdom but in the submission of faith. For what word can adequately explain what surpasses created nature? And what understanding can grasp what it is impossible for man either to hear or to express?' Thus far can man's limited understanding bring him, but at this point 'the cherubim with their wings forbid any further view'. Discursive reasoning cannot lead us further, and yet there is a way. The Father, source of all being and abyss of silence,² reveals himself only in the Son, i.e. the Son is the revelation

² Cf. St Ignatius of Antioch. *Ad Magn.* 8, 1, and *Ad Eph.* 15, 1-3.

of the Father in person, and as such, in turn, he can only be grasped in the Holy Ghost. St Gregory Nazianzen put it thus: 'In the Light-Spirit we contemplate and preach the Light-Son, proceeding from the Light-Father'. (*Orat.* 31, 3.) Ultimately then the Spirit is the strength and the faculty in us, revealing to us the Son, through whom we are enabled to contemplate the life of the Father. Yet it remains that the contents of this contemplation are ineffable, they do not admit of formulation and cannot be immediately communicated from one human soul to another. To grasp in contemplation the inner life of God is possible only in a concrete union with the Persons, only by participation in the Person of the Holy Ghost, incorporating us into the Son, in whom we are led to the Father as his children.

But how does this union come about? We have already seen that it is not to be brought about by discursive reasoning. The prototype of this one-ing is the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In his Incarnation in the power of the Holy Ghost, the fire of the Godhead glowed again through a human nature, in such wise that God constantly found expression in its being and doing. The divine life is experienced and revealed in the human nature of Christ, the Word made flesh embodying for us the life of God. The Incarnation is the principle of all sacraments and only to be grasped in the Holy Spirit, its author. This is fundamental. Only in the Holy Ghost does Christ reveal himself and give himself. It is only in the kiss of the Holy Spirit that the disciple sees in this man the Son of the eternal Father. Hence the insistence of the Fathers that a truly spiritual exegesis is necessary for understanding not only the Holy Scriptures but every situation of the christian life. Thus allegory is essential to patristic spirituality and mysticism.

We must not overlook the fact that the Incarnation has nothing of the showy attractiveness of the gnostic mysteries. Quite the contrary it is essentially an act of humility and remains incomprehensible to the proud. For the power of the Holy Ghost and the true riches of the divine Word are not revealed in any merely natural development of human powers but through the abdication of created personality and the *kenosis* of the creature before the riches of the

divine Person. Mysticism must then, because the Incarnation is its fundamental principle, lead us to experience the depths of our present lowliness—in no other way are the power of the Spirit and the fullness of the Son of God revealed to us.

For man, labouring under sin and the judgment of God, there is only one possible path of return to the Father. This path is indicated by the God-Man, by his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Christ alone could tread this path, for, not bound by sin, he could enter the realm of death not as a prisoner but as a conqueror and liberator. He trod the path through the gates of hell on account of the flesh he bore, on account of us who as Adam's children are the prey of death, not avoiding the judgment of his Father, but transforming it by his willing submission. Therein lies at once the essential accomplishment of the Redemption and the preparation of human nature for participation in the events of the divine life. Resurrection and Ascension are the return of man before the face of the heavenly Father, whose splendour he had not contemplated since the expulsion from Paradise. Christ alone is qualified for this ascent; in him however all ascend who have attached themselves to him, and who in the death of this flesh have overcome death. . . .

This participation in the life of God is first and perfectly presented in the God-Man, Christ. We are, however, incorporated into him to participate in his acts of redemption as well as to communicate in his divino-human being. This participation takes place in the sacraments, primarily in Baptism-Confirmation and in the Eucharist.

Baptism effects the divine birth in man, and thereby makes us participate in the Incarnation of Christ. Obviously this does not take place substantially as in the God-Man, but yet in such a way that in this sacrament Christ becomes present in man through the Holy Ghost, and man is born anew as child of the Father.³ As the risen Christ takes shape in man through Baptism, so the fulfilment of the divine judgment of Genesis is realised in him and the ascent to the Father begun. So this sacrament provides the judgment,

³ Cf. St John Chrysostom. *In Gal.* 3, 5. P.G. 61, 656.

victory over death and the beginning of the new life.

This new life of participation in the life of God and communion with the divine Persons, must however be correctly understood. The Fathers, having the danger before their eyes in the falsely named gnosis, constantly faced the possibility of misunderstanding. This participation does not take place mechanically as a fruit of the *opus operatum*; it must be grasped interiorly, or else baptism remains but the laying of a foundation. St Gregory of Nyssa makes bold to say: 'Spiritual birth depends on the force of the one who is born.' (P.G. 45, 97.) He is not thus attributing to him the action of the sacraments, but affirming that man's benefit from the action of the Holy Ghost is proportionate to his own cooperation. In other words, death and resurrection are realised in the neophyte not as a physical phenomenon but progressively and organically, so that there is a more or a less according to the preparedness of the individual. As a consequence of divine judgment it remains imperative that the old Adam be gradually mortified—or, as we say, must die to sin—if Christ in the Holy Ghost is really to take shape in him, and if the way to the Father is to be trodden to the end. The christian is subject to that judgment until he has completely reached his goal.

It is here we may first speak of mysticism, and the Fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa, speak of true mysticism only when this new life begins to be an ascent to the Father. Even in its further development mysticism remains fully sacramental, for mysticism manifests itself not only when the Holy Eucharist . . . brings to gradual fulfilment what had been outlined in its foundations by Baptism; but the baptismal state, by itself and within itself, carries the power of the Holy Ghost, through which it finds quite naturally its growth and development. The Fathers go a step further. The sacraments are effective, as St Gregory of Nyssa said, in the measure we prepare ourselves for their action. The best preparation for them and their action—the forming of the Word in us to be the way to the Father—is interiorly to grasp them in their essence. That is impressed not only on the catechumen preparing himself for baptism by a living faith, but also on the neophyte desirous of experiencing the

depths of the riches of the sacraments. True christian gnosis grows, then, out of the sacraments. Such gnosis in its further development is the pledge that the salvation contemplated and longed for in the sacrament is really brought about. According to this conception, then, the sacrament is efficacious in the measure in which it is gnostically grasped and penetrated. We must not let ourselves forget, though, that gnosis does not mean an intellectual knowledge of theology, but an inner assimilation to the Word of the Father, a spiritual contemplation of his Being. As it increases, the reception of the sacraments leads to an understanding of and a hold on the mysteries of faith. The East has only one word for both: '*Mysterion*', and this is not without significance, for both are ultimately the real consummation, the physical realisation of the Christ-life in us—a realisation inconceivable apart from the sacraments, for through them Christ first becomes truly present in us.

It is under this aspect that we are to understand the so-called spiritualism of the Alexandrine Fathers, Clement and Origen, when they say of the Eucharist (with no intention of denying the real presence) that it is not the bread in its material existence which is the Body of Christ, but the power of the Word dwelling in it. In other words, Christ is rendered present in the word, in the life-giving power of this bread, only through the action of the Spirit⁴—the latter communicating himself to man as the actual presence of our Lord. On the other hand we shall understand why the Eastern Christians insisted that meditation and mystical contemplation grow out of the sacrament . . . Christ is rendered present in us by every activity based on the *Sacramentum magnum*, by reading the Scriptures, by prayer and by every form of inner edification. Admittedly, there were, particularly in Egyptian monachism, quite early attempts to free the spiritual life from the sacramental, but the decisive resistance of the Church showed how convinced she was that contemplation on its own is without reality, and on the other hand that the sacrament without spiritual growth in contemplation is without fruit.

We must not forget either that, if the true beginnings of

⁴ Cf. Origen *in Matt. Ser.* 85. P.G. 13, 1734.

mysticism are to be sought in the sacrament since it is there that the living Christ is present, then too it is in the sacrament that preaching and spiritual converse must have their source. They must have Christ living in the sacrament as their foundation. And there are many patristic instructions that illustrate this truth.

Faith is preparation for the divine birth in us, contemplation is the realisation and experiencing of it. Once more we must recall that contemplation is not knowledge in a discursive, academic sense. It is rather a devoted gazing upon the divine Word communicating himself to us, differing in several respects from rational, sense-bound knowledge.⁵ The most conspicuous difference is love. Theologians may argue; but mystics seek the peace of love, for what they contemplate is accessible only to love—love alone finds expression for it. Quite simply it is not possible to talk academically about mystical experience, since it stands or falls with the uniqueness and incommunicability of Christ's presence in us—dispute is shunned for it cannot be imprisoned in words. Such wonders are shown not to curiosity but only to a love begotten of the Holy Ghost.

We may draw from this several conclusions that may be less well-known to us, but help us to grasp the essence of mysticism as the Fathers conceived it. Mysticism leading to participation in the life of the Trinity is essentially a Christ-mysticism, for it is in Christ, in his divine person, that the redeemed soul is introduced into the oneness of the divine life. In the power of the Spirit the redeemed becomes a member of Christ, and as a member of Christ he ascends before the face of the Father, to whom he may already blissfully cry out: *Abba*, Father. The perfecting of this ascent to the Father through Christ in us in the Holy Ghost is the primary work of mysticism. The Fathers teach that mysticism reaches its consummation in ecstasy since we are led to a goal far above us, but they are careful to distinguish this christian ecstasy from that of the primitive religions, above all of the mystery religions. The christian mystic's

⁵ Cf. St Gregory of Nyssa: *De Orat. Dom.* 2. P.G. 44, 1136-48 (*Life of the Spirit*, Nov. 1951, pp. 189-195) and the homilies of the Cantic of Canticles. P.G. 44, 755 sqq.

ecstasy of itself does not destroy, degrade or contradict anything in man; rather is his whole being raised to the level of the divine self-consciousness. In it he experiences the light of the divine essence, the whole of creation, and himself in a manner proper to God, to the Holy Ghost.

The end of this mysticism is ultimately participation in the heavenly liturgy before the face of the eternal Father. This patristic mysticism has been justifiably called a liturgical mysticism, not only as springing from and building on the sacramental liturgy, but as striving towards that fundamental and ultimate liturgy, in which the heavenly hosts participate, led by Jesus Christ, eternal mediator and High Priest. Hence, too, when the Fathers experienced the presence of God they never considered this as a private affair but as a manifest revealing before heaven and earth of God's glory.

By way of recapitulation we can say that patristic mysticism is essentially an ascent to the Father through Christ in the Holy Ghost. This ascent begins in the sacrament, and from the victory over sin and death it proceeds, in a spirit of self-abandon and penance, motivated by a constant consciousness of the divine judgments, to the vision of the divine splendour. The interior experience of Christ's presence, the contemplation of Christ revealing himself to us is the formal fulfilment of the ascent, which in this life always remains and is only brought about by the *sacramentum*. As contemplation of the truly divine realm this experience embraces the whole world and every grain of sand in it, revealing in everything the riches of the infinite splendour of the Triune God. How could human thought find expression for this fullness pouring from God's limitless activity, flowing forth from the Father, Source of all being, receiving its form in the Son and its perfection in the Spirit by its return in him as an exultation before the face the Father? Its diversity is so inexhaustible, its reality so immediate to the enlightened spirit, its presence renders the soul so blessed that only the *Verbum bonum*, proceeding from the bosom of the Father, nearer to us in our inmost being than we are to ourselves, can express our wonder, our exultation and our gratitude.