

16. SIXTH MANSIONS

(Understanding the Spirit)

I have taken considerable time away from writing on the Sixth Mansions in this series of reflections on IC. This part of the work sounds really mysterious and tedious to read and understand. I have no personal experience of this kind and therefore I find it hard to write on this theme. Having said this, I want to complete this commentary on the IC because it gives me a chance of knowing the mind of Teresa.

In the world of mysticism, we all feel lost at one moment or the other to explain it to someone else if we do not have a minimum of experience of the matter. I on my part still want to attempt to complete this commentary on the IC because at least this will give me an opportunity to know this work intellectually and then perhaps make it as simple as possible for myself and then to those who would like to have an idea of her writings on her mystical experiences.

Of course to complete this section of reflection of IC I would begin with the words of Teresa herself who says “You will laugh at my saying this and will think it's foolishness” (IC VI,4,ii). The mystical favours and painful experiences that accompany them cannot be just expressed until the Lord himself grants a favour: “Our nature is very timid and lowly when it comes to something so great, and I am certain that if God were not to give the courage, no matter how much you might see that the favor is good for us, it would be impossible for you to receive that favor” (IC VI,4,ii). This indicates clearly how Teresa was struggling to put in words her experience and at times she found herself lost in this whole process.

The Two Worlds

There are two words according to Rudolf Otto, one of the keenest, profoundest thinkers of this age and has written a deep and a monumental

work called *The Idea Of The Holy*. He uses two words in that book: one is *tremendum*, the other is *mysterium*. When you first reach this troubled spot called by these two words, the whole thing is such a tremendous phenomenon, it is *tremendum*. You are lost in it, you cannot sort out what is happening; you simply go crazy, as if the mind cannot function. This is the last point up to which mind can function. Now the mind has to be left behind. A *tremendum* happens—when an earthquake, an inner earthquake, a volcano erupts: everything of the past is broken and thrown and shattered. If you can pass through this *tremendum*, then there arises *mysterium*, the mysterious. What is the mysterious? The mysterious is that which cannot be explained in any way, the mystery is that which is blissful, beautiful, ecstatic, but cannot be solved. It is the source of existence—you cannot go beyond it, there is no beyond. You can experience it but you cannot analyze it. You can know it but you cannot make knowledge out of it. You can feel it but you cannot create any *theoria*, any theory out of it. Hence it is the *mysterium*, the ultimate mystery.

The State of Betrothal

Now in the state of spiritual betrothal of the Sixth Mansions, the experience takes hold of the exterior senses and gives the person a glimpse of mystical ecstasy, of being “outside of one's senses.” Teresa's presentation of the mystical life is thus a process whereby the Holy Spirit gradually takes over more and more of the soul's inner recesses and eventually has measurable effects on the bodily senses. When seen in this light, the mystical experiences themselves are not important in the state of spiritual betrothal, but only that Spirit is deepening his penetration of the soul. The experiences themselves are nothing more than effects of this ever-deepening penetration and should be understood and appreciated as such. Teresa advises her readers that these experiences are gifts of God and cannot be obtained through human effort. “I want to put down here some kinds of rapture that I've come to understand because I've discussed them

with so many spiritual persons. But I don't know whether I shall succeed as I did when I wrote elsewhere about them and other things that occur in this dwelling place” (IC VI,4,ii).

Suspended Activity

The spiritual gifts are not to be actively sought out and should not be the primary focus of one's prayer. God alone must be the sole object of one's prayer. Teresa's presentation of the mystical life, moreover, is extremely Christ-centered. She asserts that contemplating the mysteries of Christ with a simple penetrating gaze will enable a person to grow in humility and self-knowledge and lead to the most sublime state of prayer. She also asserts that those who consciously try to forget about Christ will fail to make further progress into the heart of the soul's interior castle. The goal according to her is that apart from Christ one should not look for anything else in this adventurous journey.

The Power of Discernment

Teresa offers a number of guidelines for discerning whether the locutions come from the Lord. For example, one should not pay any attention to what one has heard unless it *conforms* strictly to what the Lord has revealed in the Scriptures. Regardless of whether the Lord speaks to the soul from without (through one's ears), from within (through one's imagination), or from above (through one's spirit or intellect), authentic locutions from God possess power and authority in themselves, *give peace to the soul*, remain in one's memory for quite some time, and eventually come true. They will remain with a person in the midst of great turmoil, even when trusted counselors implore them to pay no attention to them.

As stated earlier, authentic locutions come from without, within, or above. In the final case, the person hears no audible words and receives no impressions through the imagination, but has a *direct communication* from

God in the highest part of the soul. Teresa tells her readers how one can be certain that such a spiritual or intellectual locution has taken place.

From the Evil One

Locutions from the evil one, by way of contrast, stir *confusion and anxiety* in the soul. Even though he can appear as an angel of light and is capable of great deception, he cannot produce the effects in the soul of the authentic locutions enumerated above. What is more, authentic locutions give a person a deep sense of one's smallness and sinfulness before God. Teresa concludes by saying that, if God blesses a soul with authentic corporeal, imaginative, or spiritual locutions, one must listen to and act on them. One's sole concern should be to please God by forgetting oneself and doing his will.

Practical Conclusion

Locutions are not uncommon. As I understand locutions are helpful and can make a person joyful because they help us come closer to God and our neighbour. While we may not all experience this intense supernatural prayer of jubilation, there's an underlying spiritual paradox we can all enjoy: **Joyful people forget self.** These individuals practice self-care, but they avoid the all-consuming, self-focused questions of: What do people think of me? Are they unhappy with me? How do I control others? What will it cost me? What do I get? Why don't they make me happy? How can I get more attention?

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17. THE STRAW DRAWN BY AMBER

God attracts as fire attracts. God is powerful and certainly more than fire is. That is why anyone who is enamored by God has no limits to his/her thirst for Him. Teresa continues the narration of her experiences and comes to a point where she finds herself explaining a very important moment in mystical life, that is flight of the spirit. “There is another kind of rapture – I call it flight of the spirit – which, though substantially the same as other raptures, is interiorly experienced very differently” (IC VI,5,i). The soul is determined now to do no more than what the straw does when drawn by the amber – if you have noticed – and abandon itself into the hands of the One who is all powerful, for it sees that the safest thing to do is to make a virtue of necessity. And that I mentioned a straw is certainly appropriate, for as easily as a huge giant snatches up a straw, this great and powerful Giant of ours carries away the spirit (IC VI,5,ii). The soul need courage, total dedication and surrender to God’s will. This is a crucial period of time for the soul to keep God in its centre and allow him to take charge of its life. Teresa compares this state of experience to a small boat or a bark that is not in control of itself when engulfed by massive waves of the sea “A bark cannot prevent the furious waves from leaving it where they will; nor does the pilot have the power, nor do those who take part in controlling the little ship. So much less can the interior part of the soul stay where it will, or make its senses or faculties do other than what they are commanded; here the soul doesn't care what happens in the exterior senses” (IC VI,5,iii). She says that in this rapture persons are not sure whether they are in or out of the body. They seem to be in another

region of extraordinary light where many things are taught to them. These things are experienced as imaginative visions. Understanding is given without words. She says that at other times the soul experiences intellectual visions, and without seeing anything with the eyes of the body or the soul, knowledge is represented in a way Teresa can't explain.

Take it from this Exile

When there is intense experience one feels lost and found. The intensity of the experience makes one to forget and recall. That is what happens when the soul is with God and experiencing the authentic touch of his care and love. There is a strong yearning to die and to be with him forever: “With the strongest yearnings to die, and thus usually with tears, it begs God to take it from this exile. Everything it sees wearies it. When it is alone it finds some relief, but soon this torment returns; yet when the soul does not experience this pain, something is felt to be missing.” (IC VI,6,i). The soul desires to not to offend God and at the same time involve itself in great works for God’s kingdom. That is why Teresa advises her sisters not to be distressed at so many things happening in the world but pray for the conversion of sinners. “Obeying and not offending our Lord, it thinks, is the complete remedy against deception. Thus, in its opinion, it would not commit knowingly a venial sin even were others to crush it to pieces. It is intensely afflicted upon seeing that it cannot free itself from unknowingly committing many venial sins” (IC VI,6,ii).

Then Teresa says, “A woman in this stage of prayer is distressed by the natural hindrance there is to her entering the world, and she has great envy of those who have the freedom to cry out and spread the news abroad about who this great God of hosts is.”

We marvel at the great wisdom and accomplishments of Teresa. We also know Teresa was careful about what she wrote, what she said, and how she

led. Although she doesn't specifically identify herself in the above passage, she notes a woman's lack of "*freedom to cry out*". Commenting on this passage, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez say, "Teresa . . . is actually telling of her own suffering, doubts and trials with her confessors because of her extraordinary experiences in prayer. One cause of distress for her was the contemporary view of appropriate roles for women, which prevented her from being able to speak in public about the greatness of God."

Tears: Real and False

People cry. Crying is a normal emotional response. Some people cry more than others. Crying is not a sign of weakness, in fact, some people with great emotional strength cry. Teresa is not criticizing crying in this section of the IC. She is, however, concerned about what she calls "*false tears*". These are contrived spiritual experiences or emotional displays for attention or manipulating others.

Emotionalism leads to self-deception, the deception of others, and deception by the devil: "*A thousand times they will be led to think they weep for God, but they will not be doing so.*" Instead of emotionalism we should focus on the work of spiritual formation and cultivating virtue. "*Let's not think that everything is accomplished through much weeping but set our hands to the task of hard work and virtue. These are what we must pay attention to; let the tears come when God sends them without any effort on our part to induce them.*" (IC VI,6,vii).

We all know that Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. It was a moment of deep feeling because he loved him. God will engage us emotionally, but we must "*let him give us what he wants, whether water [tears] or dryness. . . . With such an attitude we shall go about refreshed, and the devil will not have so much chance to play tricks on us.*" (IC VI,6,vii).

Practical Conclusion

What is absolutely clear is that all our spirituality and experience of God depends on our hard work in the sense that we need to be prepared of God's grace. We have to do our part and not become too emotional with spiritual experiences. That is why Teresa boldly says: "Let's not think that everything is accomplished through much weeping but set our hands to the task of hard work and virtue." (IC VI,6,ix).

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