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Spiritual Direction Course on Mysticism

*Excerpts from
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translated by Fr. Jonathan Niehaus, 2005

Introduction

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Second Conference

{41} We need a starting point. What is it? How do we define mysticism?

Finding such a definition is not so easy...

We could use the reverse tactic and formulate the definition at the end, but this way is better – providing at least a provisional definition. With

it we can proceed to use the threefold light of theology, psychology, and pedagogy to clarify our position.

An unequivocal definition cannot be found.

Denifle, one of the top experts on mediaeval mystical theology (about 1887) said: “*The term ‘mysticism’ is the most fluid one in all of theology.*”

So we must find our own way.

Definitio circumscripтивa

We ask the average Catholic. Everyone with a sense of the mystical agrees it deals with **something mysterious**.

But defining this “mysteriousness” produces a host of conflicting answers, for mysteriousness can be of different kinds.

{42} When it is in the realm of natural science, one speaks of natural mysticism.

When it is ascribed to the influence of the devil, it is called demonic mysticism.

It is supernatural mysticism when it belongs to the supernatural order.

This general definition is not very helpful.

Let us ask history. How does history understand mysticism? Or what kind [of mysticism does history claim]? Natural and demonic mysticism fall by the wayside.

What is mysterious in the supernatural life? Something higher always looks mysterious to those on a lower level. For instance, for someone only familiar with rote prayer and no other will find meditative prayer mysterious. Or higher studies are mysterious to those still on lower levels of studies. But if we pursue this path, mysticism will only be something subjective. (...)

A different solution would appear if one could define mysticism as “*that which absolutely surpasses the ordinary life of grace*.” Then we would have a solid concept of mysticism. In other words, that which is extraordinary in the life of grace. It would be an elegant solution.

But is that correct? Who would we need to ask? To which source do we turn?

Mysticism is a science of experience. We must therefore distinguish between the *quaestio facti* [“What are the facts?”] – something only practical mystics can answer for us – and {43} the *quaestio juris* [“Is it possible, and how?”], a question reserved to the theologians and philosophers. Their task is to clarify for us that the experiences made by mystics is really possible. But if mysticism is a science of experience, outsiders have a different interpretation.

I can consider all the angles:

- a) *Practical mystics* . For them it is an experience they have made. Practical mystics can sense what is genuine.
- b) *Theoretical mystics* can also form an opinion on what others say they have experienced. An Italian psychologist said: One must accept their statements as true and try to explain them. Teresa [of Avila] once said: How can it be that someone who has not made the experience himself still explain it so well? (...)

c) *Non-mystics*, who reject such things from the outset.

Read in Richstätter [1](#) how great men of the past have complained that the ranks of “non-mystics” have included even priests and theologians.

What is the reason? On page 64 St. Bonaventure says, “*If you want to know how it happens, then ask grace and not science, longing and not understanding, the Groom and not the teacher.*”

We also need to distinguish between mystical writings and writings by mystics. Not everything written by mystics belongs to the realm of mysticism. The *Imitation of Christ* would be an example. Except for perhaps I,3; II,1; III,34, it is {44} mostly not a mystical book, even though its author was mystically gifted.

To learn something about the grace of mysticism we must ask the mystics themselves. What answer do they give?

Definitio essentialis

According to Bonaventure, the mystical grace is

“*Cognitio experimentalis Dei.*” [1](#)

Mystics and books about mysticism agree on this definition. But it does not yet solve our problem. The words can be interpreted differently. All agree that it defines the essence of the mystical grace, and that all other things, like visions or locutions, are only secondary features.

Searching for an essential definition of mysticism also forces one to ask about the essential definition of contemplation. It is the same: *Cognitio experimentalis Dei*. (....)

Let us investigate contemplation from the theological, psychological, and pedagogical points of view.

The *psychological investigation* focuses on the act of recognition.

{45} The *theological investigation* considers the content.

The *pedagogical investigation* will try, in spite of the confusion, to help us do the right thing in practical life.

Because we only have a few days, I can only give very few examples. I must restrict myself to the basic principles of the mystical life...

But do not forget to pray, for this is the most important.

Third Conference

{46} We pick up our thread with the definition: *Cognitio experimentalis Dei* ...

Part I: Psychological Investigation

I begin here because the main problem is the psychological investigation of the act of recognition. This is also because we must form an opinion right away on the two opposing interpretations found in works on mysticism.

How is the *cognitio experimentalis Dei* to be viewed? Does it differ from the ordinary [*cognitio*] only in degree or in kind? Does mystical recognition differ from the recognition of ordinary faith in degree or in kind?

(....)

1. *Mystical Recognition is Different*

{47} Depending on the position I take, my interpretation of the definition – *cognitio experimentalis Dei* – will differ.

{48} Those who say that the prayer of quiet and the prayer of simplicity only differ by degree must translate it this way:

A strongly affective, supernatural recognition of God.

According to this view, what is the difference between the two kinds of prayer? A strong interior grippedness by God and things Divine.

The others who suppose that the difference is one of kind, must say:

The prayer of quiet is a supernatural, extraordinary immediate becoming-aware of [God and] things Divine [1](#).

The *main point* is “an immediate becoming-aware,” for ordinary prayer only perceives [God and things Divine] indirectly.

(....)

a. *Quaestio facti*

{49} What do the mystics think?

It seems to me that all enlightened mystics see mystical recognition as essentially different from the recognition of ordinary faith, and so much

so in fact that no amount of human effort will let one attain even the slightest degree of contemplation. See Richstätter, page 74, letter of St. Teresa: “Supernatural recognition is something we cannot acquire through our own effort, no matter how hard we try.” (See equates supernatural with mystical.) The most we can do is to predispose ourselves for the gift. Father Mager [1](#) notes on page 76: “The soul is unable to find a way or an image to communicate it. For the insights are very simple and spiritual. This is why the perception of the senses fails to grasp it.” John of the Cross says something similar...

Lucy Christine [2](#), page 149 and 229: Those who want to grasp such truths through mental deliberation make themselves blind to such revelations. (...) {50} When someone sees something never seen before, he cannot describe it. How much less in the case of contemplation.

After all, the senses cannot perceive any of it and therefore cannot express it.

Two clarifications

Now I must add two clarifications regarding the question: Why is it that different authors interpret the same words [of the definition] differently?

First, because the term *contemplation* is not always uniformly. This is why there is a tendency today to distinguish between infused and acquired contemplation.

To the scholastics the word contemplation meant both – sometimes one, sometimes the other. The same goes for the Jesuits, such as Lercher [1](#), who suppose only a difference of degree. He bases his position on Suarez [2](#), but only to the extent he finds him useful. When we speak here

about contemplation, we should accustom ourselves to meaning only *infused* contemplation.

Second, scholars often do not understand what mystics have written.

To only give you an idea: Suppose mystical contemplation [in a particular case] took place without any images. What happens then?

The organ is missing which can convey the experience. This is why mystics struggle to express what they have felt. (...)

{51} Thus far I have shown the testimony of the mystics. From it we can conclude that infused contemplation differs from acquired contemplation in kind. The prayer of quiet differs in kind from the prayer of simplicity...

b. *Quaestio juris*

How is this possible?

Cognitio experimentalis Dei – to repeat our translation: A supernatural, extraordinary, immediate becoming-aware of God.

Every word here is carefully weighed.

{52} We distinguish between the *quaetio facti* [what] and the *quaestio juris* [how].

First the word and concept “*becoming-aware*” [3](#).

Why not just “recognition”? Why don’t I say “*being* -aware” or “*making* -aware”? Why “*becoming* -aware”?

When I use the expression “becoming-aware” I am indicating that contemplation also directly influences on the will. Gerson [4](#) takes the position that “*perceptio*” would be a better word than “*cognitio*”

Becoming-aware, not being-aware. In other words, [there are] many gradiations of recognition all the way to the beatific vision.

There are theoreticians who say that, formally speaking, the will is the organ of contemplation. So St. Bonaventure and the Franciscans.

Others join with St. Thomas [Aquinas] in saying that, formally speaking, it is the intellect. The difference stems from the basic perspective of the two schools. For Thomas the intellect always has pride of place and the savoring of the will comes after. This is also the position of Dionysius the Carthusian.

For us it does not matter where contemplation is rooted. What is essential for us is that both intellect and will must be encompassed.

{53} Because such a “becoming-aware”-ness cannot be acquired by our own efforts, infused contemplation is also called passive – as opposed to acquired or active – contemplation.

But if we think that the soul is inactive during passive contemplation, then we misunderstand “passive.” Discursive thinking is turned off, but this does not mean that the intellect is totally turned off. So much to the word “becoming-aware.” (....)

Fifth Conference

{74} The definition says: *An immediate becoming-aware* [of God and things Divine].

We must now give this some speculative thought [1](#). How is such a thing possible? This is important for making a judgment about mystical souls and their experiences.

Preliminary remark: *Status quaestio[n]is* [2](#).

Hugo of St. Victor, Peter Lombard, and with them the entire scholastic tradition differentiate three kinds of knowing:

- a) *Visio beata* [3](#) – *in heaven*;
- b) *Cognitio discursiva* – *discursive knowledge* [4](#);
- c) *Cognitio media* – *a middle-knowledge between the other two*.

Hugo of St. Victor calls it *cognitio angelica* , or – from the human vantage point – Adam and Eve’s way of knowing, before the fall.

Thomas examined the essence of Adam and Eve’s knowledge of God. First, they had knowledge *per discursionem* [through the intellect]. They saw the creature and could conclude its cause [i.e., the Creator]. Moreover, they had an immediate “becoming-aware” of God.

What is the point of comparison? Is it “immediate” as in the beatific vision or as in discursive knowledge? Only as in the latter.

Our normal way of knowing is through intellect and imagination. But the knowing of mystics takes place without such {75} perception images. This knowledge is immediate when compared to intellectual knowledge, but not immediate when compared to the beatific vision. Otherwise such persons would already be in heaven. Sanctifying grace could no longer be lost; nor could Adam and Eve have sinned.

What is the organ of immediate knowledge?

It is the soul. But what part of the soul?

I am sure you have often read in mystical writings about the spark of the soul, the ground of the soul, the inmost dwelling of the soul (the apex mentis). This is the organ of the soul which immediately sees God and God's perfections.

The question is given more attention again today. Even the old scholastic approach differentiated between the soul of the body and the spiritual soul, which are really two ways of looking at the same thing. It is the soul of the body inasmuch as it informs the body; as spiritual soul it is viewed as pure spirit. Thomas and Teresa try to illustrate the concept this way: In a fire, the flame is the spiritual soul, the fire – what we see burning – is the soul of the body. In mystical contemplation, one tries to grasp and penetrate God with the spiritual soul, with the spark of the soul. But it is not a recognition of the essence as in the beatific vision...

(....)

Sixth Conference

{82} Can one conclude from these examples that there is really such a thing as immediate infused contemplation? Yes! For they all have the following features:

a) The soul which is so gripped mystically, that it finds itself in infinite awe, an awe which keeps increasing, an awe {83} for God's greatness, beauty, and love such as it has never experienced before and which it never experiences in normal conditions. This cannot be explained without infused contemplation.

b) In such conditions it is normal that the content of contemplation remains unchanged over a long time, but is seen with fresh clarity again and again. How is this possible? It cannot be discursive thinking. It can only be immediate aware-becoming.

c) Bonaventure says, "*Only those who have experienced it can understand what is seen. One cannot grasp it with the ordinary faculties of knowing.*"

Thomas says, "*The pleasure which it causes absolutely exceeds all human faculties .*" Such seeing cannot be a direct vision like in the beatific vision. But neither is it our ordinary way of knowing. It can therefore only be the middle way of knowing.

(....)

Ninth Conference

{112} One should not encourage souls to long or strive for mystical graces. Instead, one should encourage them to cultivate an interior prayer life and anything else that can prepare for the mystical life of grace. (....)

{113} Such higher paths of prayer are something psychological, interior, of the soul. The danger of self-deception is great, especially for women. One easily self-imagines stages of prayer, accruing to oneself all that others have felt. Through self-suggestion one feels the same thing others have experienced. Do not encourage this, for the danger of suggestion is great.

In practical terms: If the soul is truly on the path to mystical graces, then the experience will fill it with humility, since it dares not think of such a thing.

{114} But if it is not on the path and does not take self-denial seriously, then it will never receive such graces.

Those who say the difference is of kind will totally agree with this.

Those who say the difference is of degree must admit that a soul striving [for contemplation] must proceed organically. Even they will say: the soul must proceed by first striving for the next step and not try to reach the highest step right away. Because most do not strive seriously, [their spiritual directors] do not direct them to desire contemplation.

We speak so much of organic growth. I can view it from God's perspective or from man's. In both cases God can suddenly give his grace without preparation. The reason is then God's mercy or my long period of thorough self-abnegation. (...)

Do not forget the step "*make sacrifices for God* ." We must educate [mystically inclined souls] to a spirit of sacrifice.

FOOTNOTES

1:

Richstätter, *Mystische Gebetsgnaden und ignatianische Exerzitien* (Innsbrück, 1924), one of the main works cited by Fr. Kentenich in this course.

1:

See Bonaventure In 3. dist. 35 q.1. (as cited in *Texte zur Mystik*, p. 174). The word “cognitio” is open to a broad spectrum of interpretation here, from knowing to recognition to perception. Following Richstätter, Fr. Kentenich opts to translate it into German as “Innewerden,” which can approximately be translated as “becoming-aware” or “to perceive.” This choice of German word deliberately creates space between the “cognitio” of the mind (the usual meaning) and a deeper kind of “cognitio” that is more mysterious and beyond the grasp of our usual sense-criteria. The main agent is not ourselves or our faculties, but God.

1:

German: “Das Gebet der Ruhe ist ein übernatürliches, außergewöhnliches, unmittelbares Innewerden göttlicher Dinge.”

1:

Fr. Alois Mager, OSB (1883-1946), modern German theologian.

2:

Pseudonym used by a mystically gifted lay woman (1844-1908). She was married for 22 years and then 21 years a widow, and the mother of five children. See note in J. Kentenich, *Aus dem Glauben leben*, Vol. 9, p. 165.

1:

Fr. Ludwig Lercher, SJ (1864-1937), modern German theologian.

2:

Fr. Francisco de Suarez, SJ (1548-1617), renowned Spanish theologian of the Counter-reformation.

3:

German: *Innewerden* .

4:

John Gerson (1363-1429), French theologian.

1:

That is, rational analysis.

2:

Here: the status of the question in past theology.

3:

The beatific vision.

4:

That is, the knowledge that comes from the intellect and rational thinking.