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Mariano Ballester S.J.

Prayer that transforms life

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Mariano BALLESTER S.J:

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

For some time we have wanted to publish a Supplement of PROGRESSIO entirely dealing with prayer. We felt it as a necessity, as an answer to the restlessness of many of our members. And so we looked for some material that would help those who feel the necessity of prayer that transforms their life... Many have expressed this desire to us and we were not sure as to how to meet their need. On the other hand, we asked ourselves : is there not an abundance of literature that has already been published on this subject? we hesitated...

Then, while one of us was reading an issue of the magazine "Apostleship of Prayer" (International Bulletin of Leaders) he found an article precisely entitled "Prayer That Transforms Life". It was part of a series of eight articles published by the said magazine (December 19 1976 - December 1977).

We read the entire series and discovered that it corresponds to what we were looking for!

We proposed to the author, Fr. Mariano Ballester, to have the complete series published in a Supplement of Progressio. He wholeheartedly agreed. Therefore, in this issue we gladly present to you the result of his rich experience and reflection on prayer.

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One of the most positive points we find in these articles is the invitation given by the author to integrate "in

terior light" with "action", or, as Fr. Ballester himself says: "...instead of a disintegrated search marked by self-ishness, encounter the beauty of constructive, harmonious, and above all, of loving reality... Interior light and action blending themselves little by little into a unique, personal and completely original reality: that of contemplation in action, or that of prayer that transforms action".

This element is so fundamental to our spirituality - ("Our groups are for those who feel a more urgent need to unite their human life in all its dimensions with the fullness of their Christian faith" GP 3) - that we believe the perusal of this Supplement will help us towards this integration.

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In the work of Fr. Ballester you will find "orientations" and "practical exercises" (suggestions so that each one could practice them freely as mentioned in the orientations). It is, therefore, not a text to be read with haste. You need to be attentive, relaxed, interested and to put it into practice.

The author knows well how to combine the purest form of Christian tradition in prayer (and in a special way the Ignatian inspiration) - with modern psychological methods, taking into account also some forms of prayer from ancient oriental tradition.

We believe, therefore, that this Supplement will be well accepted by our readers and our CLC's and that the articles will aid us towards a greater understanding of prayer (its necessity, pedagogy, etc.) -

We wish to express our very sincere gratitude to the Apostleship of Prayer and to Fr. Ballester for the help extended to us so that this Supplement could be published.

Justo G. TARRIO s.j.

PRAYER THAT TRANSFORMS LIFE

"Look at the lilies of the field..." (Mt. 6,28)

The Legend of the Musk Deer

According to a popular, old legend, one day a musk deer became aware of a mysterious scent. This scent attracted it so much that it allowed itself to be drawn into seeking for its source by a vague and intangible, yet at the same time very near life and very powerful force. The deer's life became an anxious wandering about in this search without ever discovering the source. The last act of its life thus became a tragedy. It became more and more obsessed and beside itself because of the invisible attraction being exerted upon it. During a desperate leap from one cliff to another, while following its heart's desire, the deer plunged to its death. It was only then that the source of the scent was revealed. It was in the unfortunate beast's body; even after his death the musk gland continued to emit its potent attraction from the deer's entrails(1).

The legend of the musk deer can be found in numberless versions in different cultures and folklores. All of them lead to the same conclusion : the dramatic senselessness

(1) Cf. H.Caffarel, *Présence à Dieu*, Ed. du Feu Nouveau, Paris.

of a quest to transform life by following a path that was wrong from the very beginning. What is sought is nothing less than a treasure capable of changing one's whole life, of turning it into a paradise. The legend teaches us that the treasure is never to be found, or, if ever, it will be found too late.

If we look for a parallel of this legend in our every day reality, we find variations of it. To begin with we have to admit the fact that this kind of passionate, transcendental quest is rare. Few of us ever decide to embark upon a radical quest, however distant and mysterious, that may change our lives into new life adding unimaginable dimensions that can transform and enlighten our routine everyday living.

Secondly, those who choose to undertake such a quest and who possess the patience of authentic seekers (be they saints, mystics, or contemplatives in action) show us ways of pursuing it that have nothing to do with the anxiety-ridden obsession of the musk deer. Instead of a disordered and markedly egoistic quest, we find in them the beauty of harmonious, constructive and, above all, loving action inspired by a light of wisdom welling up from within. Interi or light and action, though forming a duality at the beginning, become more and more integrated into a single, unique personal, and completely original reality: that of the contemplative in action or that of prayer transforming itself into action.

Fortunate persons who have achieved such harmonious integration may be said to have discovered the musk gland and its aroma even before their death. Some of them are known in history, and they are precisely well-known because of their brightness that enlightened their contemporaries directly. Others live their lives in obscurity, without ever being noticed because they belong to "the little ones" of the Kingdom, the little ones whom Christ blessed especially and to whom He revealed many things. Both have elevated and divinized the whole of their life giving it a completely luminous dimension, a wholly unutterable vision of God in all things and all things in God.

Jesus Christ, our model in this, left us the light from that transforming and illuminating vision. When he tried to teach his disciples to look beyond a shortsighted calculating and materialistic view of life he said simply:

Look at the lilies of the field...
I tell you that not even Solomon
In all his glory
Was arrayed like one of them.

An insensitive person would undoubtedly find Solomon and his wealth much more splendid and attractive than the humble lilies of the field. Christ looked at those flowers and saw in them something that made them much more precious and splendid. That something is also seen by others who, upon seeing the earth (yes, our earth which to many seems to be beyond remedy!) break out in songs of love because they see in it the Creator's love and also the Creator himself in his creatures:

My beloved, the mountains, the solidarity, wooded valleys, the strange islands, the sonorous rivers, the whisper of the amorous breezes, the tranquil night, at the time of the rising of the dawn, The silent music, the sounding solitude, the supper that recreates and enkindles love (2).

*Praised be my Lord God with all His creatures, and especially our brother the sun, who brings us the night; fair is he and shines with a very great splendour;
O Lord, he signifies You to us. Praised be my Lord for our sister the moon, and for the stars which He has set clear and lovely in heaven. Praised be my Lord for our brother the wind, and for the air, and clouds, calms and all weather by which You uphold life in all creatures. Praised be my Lord for our sister water, who is very serviceable to us and humble and precious and very clean (3).*

I will try to present prayer in its aspect of transforming reality: prayer projecting into life and transforming it, converting life also into prayerful activity, or, if it be preferred, into active contemplation. A series of simple considerations will help those who feel themselves called to be "seekers" drawn by interior wisdom, those who have resolved in hunger and thirst for God to take up, un-

(2) St. John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle, 13-14.
Translated by E. Allison Peers. Image Book, p. 44.

(3) St. Francis of Assisi, The Canticle of the Sun.

dertake all means of discovering his face veiled in ordinary reality and to succeed in becoming contemplatives in action.

Our orientations will end in practice. We will make a number of suggestions one can freely put into practice and do so inside or outside of the exercise of prayer.

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I. THE PROBLEM

"Is It Really Possible?"

The problem poetically symbolized in the legend of the musk deer is as old as man himself. It is to be found in practically all great religious currents of thought. Unfortunately man most frequently thinks that the easiest way to face it is to be skeptical and to ask: "But is this idea of life transformed into 'contemplation' through interior light and so on really possible? Is it a practical proposition for the man of the street in our concrete human conditions?"

The person who poses this question implicitly gives a negative response and extinguishes the minimum amount of faith needed to begin the way. Our mentality retains an unavoidable primitive tendency to regard what is does not know as being categorically impossible or not feasible. The more limited the person's thought, the greater will be his skepticism. As a prominent psychologist has aptly said: "Few will take the trouble to go deeply into a question about which they are making judgements. Others are held back by theoretical suppositions. Nothing limits vision so much as does a 'system', because it excludes from view all other aspects of the reality that do not fit into the enchanted castle of the intellectual system" (4).

(4) Dr. R. Assagioli, Psicosintesi, Edizioni Mediterranee, Rome, p.24

Deep down we are hardened positivists, refusing to see any further than the exterior form, the size, and the specific weight of the lilies of the field. Knowing them thoroughly means touching them, analyzing them with acid tests, determining their molecular structure and reactions to various chemicals. For this reason and in this context we give greater value to King Solomon's lavish and costly garments. We find them much more agreeable and profitable than the poor pieces of colored cellulose of the lilies of the field...

*And yet, I say to you,
Not even Solomon in all his glory
Was arrayed like one of these.*

So here we have the great enigma of the lilies of the field. Since, inspite of everything, we continue to call our selves followers of Christ, we have to find a solution to the problem of the lilies; for, after all, it is a problem that Christ himself raised. What do we do? One after another, then, we shift to a thoroughly familiar sphere, the sphere of intellectual conceptualization where the Western mind swims as a fish in the water.

A man belonging to Western culture who has an average intelligence regards his mind as a Pandora's box: he conjures up theoretical solutions for all cases and problems with extreme pleasure and ability. So we have to begin by taking a look, at the risk of being too brief, at the principal concepts that men have formed by way of providing solutions to the riddle of the lilies of the field.

First Solution: Theoretical Faith

The first step cunningly taken by our reasoning mind consists in asserting that "it is a matter of faith". Being contemplatives in action, therefore, would mean believing that God is in all things. The fault then lies in our lack of faith; because in our anxiety for the concerns of daily life we forget that faith is needed to remind us constantly of God's presence.

The world of faith becomes an idea taken out of Pandora's box to explain the unexplainable. We are not speaking here of true faith that is vital but of a theoretical

faith. We do not notice, then, that in trying to solve the problem in terms of greater or lesser faith we intellectualize faith and the terms of the problem as well: this would mean then that seeing God in all things is "thinking" of God in all things. At best this would result in some sort of pious exercise of Christian reflection that has nothing to do with the world of contemplation. The main difference is that faith of the contemplative in action (real faith) is faith-experience whereas that of the thinker of pious ideas is faith merely on the intellectual level which is much more limited than authentic vital experience of Christian faith. As regards the capacity of normal people to go on "thinking of God" all the time, I doubt if they could keep it up for long without causing a breakdown, as happened to the musk deer, and yet never succeeding in obtaining even a drop of real musk. To avoid reaching that deplorable state we come quickly with the decision "we have not yet reached such a high level of faith" so as to be contemplatives in action.

Second Solution: The Two Sisters

The second theoretical solution has been centered for centuries on Martha and Mary, Lazarus' two sisters. Tradition has regarded them as symbols of action and contemplation respectively. The two sisters are generally depicted as not getting on very well together. We cannot be both at the same time, we assert with relief. It is a question of vocation; God calls some to the state of purest contemplation and others he sets apart to be experts in Christian action. It is something that does not depend on us; it depends on the realm of graces from which the Creator gives freely to his children. The most that could be done especially by religious in the active life - would be to dedicate part of the day to prayer as the time for gathering strength. God then requires man to commit himself to his daily task with the same fervor and interest that he gives to prayer and that task is hallowed by his preparatory prayer.

We will not go into an analysis of the controversy that has filled so many pages of commentaries through all the centuries of Christianity. Those who wish to enrich their minds with reflections of that type can turn with profit to traditional exegetical commentaries on the gospel passage about Lazarus and his sisters. We are now concerned with discovering the main thread running through all these intricate and complicated arguments for and against one or the other sister. This leading thread may be described as the theoretical intellect. The problem of

the two sisters becomes a problem that cannot be untangled if we take it from the point of view of being Martha and Mary at one and the same time, and this cannot be admitted by human reason which has always confused itself with unity and multiplicity. To see God in everyday life produces such allergy and fear in us that we become strange and unnatural, like the man in the street in Israel when he suspected that God was nearby (Jn 6:22; 13:22). We become alarmed because we think of it as abnormal, as acting with two personalities like a schizophrenic. This is hardly a desirable goal for a normal human person. Hence it gave rise to ingenious intellectual acrobatics that have occupied so much space in the history of exegesis on the story of Martha and Mary, in a vain attempt to reconcile them in one way or another.

The Third Solution: "Praying = Living"

A third solution exists. It is much more modern and simplistic. It consists in calmly declaring, "for me prayer is life". A beautiful phrase, in truth, that eliminates costly explicit practice of prayer providing a global answer and then we joyfully launch into living which we hope would be Christian living. We are not denying that it is possible to "make a prayer of life" because this is exactly what it means: it is a matter of discovering new life in the light of the interior wisdom that has enabled contemplatives to see God in all things. But unfortunately the testimony of those who have turned this quest into a formula ("for me prayer is living") is not comparable by far to that of authentic contemplatives in action. We will say something more concrete about the authenticity of such testimony later on. For the present it will be enough to draw attention to the theorizing, or in this case, verbalization, of the two terms of the problem.

* *

All this playing with words and ideas has a common denominator: it dissociates itself from a mysterious and inexpressible vital experience.

Neither of the solutions indicated nor any of the others more or less like them that we might mention really sees anything beyond the color, size, shape and specific weight of the lilies of the field. Everything is reduced to "ways of thinking" about lilies. Yet Christ simply said to his disciples:

*Look at the lilies of the field,..
I tell you that not even Solomon
In all his glory
Was arrayed like one of them.*

In this very simple manner Christ puts an end to all our complicated playing with words and once more places a great mystery before us: the riddle of some poor plants worth more than all of King Solomon's glory.

He wants to make us understand that the riddle posed by the lilies of the field cannot be solved by pure Euclidean reasoning but only by embarking on a new road. The first step along this new path is what Oriental mystics would call "leaving the cave of conceptualization" (5). Once put of the hole we have only to travel inwards, not outwards as we are accustomed to do. We have to shut one door in order to be able to open another. We need to get a vital grasp of the experience of that great seeker who, with the enlightenment of interior wisdom, exclaimed:

*And being there admonished to return to myself,
I entered into my interior, thou being my guide,
and I was able to do it, for thou wast my helper.
I entered in, and saw with the eye of my soul,
such as it was, above that same eye of my soul,
above my mind, the unchangeable light of the Lord
not this common light which is visible to all
flesh... it was not such light as this, but quite
another thing, very different from all these
things... He that knoweth the truth knoweth this
light. And he that knoweth it knoweth eternity.
And it is charity that knoweth it (St. Augustin,
Confessions, VII 10, 16).*

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- (5) "Conceptualization is a deadly hindrance to the Zen yogis, more injurious than poisonous snakes or fierce beasts... Brilliant and intellectual persons always a bide in the cave of conceptualization; they can never get away from it in all their activities. As months and years pass they become more deeply engulfed in it. Unknowingly the mind and conceptualization gradually become of a piece. Even if one wants to get away from it, he finds it impossible. Therefore, I say, poisonous snakes and beasts are avoidable, but there is no way to escape from mental conceptualization". (Chang, ancient Zen master, quoted by W. Johnston, Silent Music, Collins, London, p.57).

It is a matter of a radical change of method. Not outward but inward. Not by guiding but by being guided. It is above all a matter of love. It is love that knows and penetrates all secrets (I Cor 13:1-13). It turns into reality what for conceptual understanding is absurdity: "My beloved, the mountains..." (St. John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle). Therefore to begin to love is to begin to glimpse:

Thou art my God; for thee I sigh day and night. And when I first began to know thee, thou liftedst me up, that I might see that there was some thing to be seen, but that I was not yet one that could see it. And thou didst strike back the weakness to my sight, shining upon me with an excessive brightness, and I trembled all over with love and fear, and I found that I was at a vast distance from on high: "I am the meat of those that are grown up: grow thou up and thou shalt feed upon me; neither shalt thou convert me into thee like thy corporeal food; but thou shalt be changed into me" (St. Augustin, Confessions).

"The light shines in the darkness" (Jn 1:5)

II. THE ROAD

The Paradoxes of a Journey

The type of prayer that transforms life cannot be im-
proved. The road to be taken, as I have previously said
has already been discovered and travelled by hundreds of
seekers throughout the course of human history.

It will be very important, then, to examine the prin-
cipal characteristics of this fascinating pilgrimage so
that we do not lose ourselves in a senseless or harmful
quest.

Even then, each traveller will inevitably have to
face the unknown and even the bewildering; reality is that
the more he progresses along the way, the more he finds
himself walking alone. The light will certainly give gui-
dance, but, still, it is a light that gives rise to fear
even while it attracts and somehow it combines love with
repugnance (St. Augustin, Confessions, VII, 10, 16). The
traveller will experience the typical reaction of one ven-
turing into foreign land - a strange land with uncharted
terrain, strange too because of the constant pressure of
trying to decipher a new language.

It seems now to the soul that it is going forth

from its very self; with much affliction. At other times it wonders if it is under a charm or a spell, and it goes about marvelling at the things that it sees and hears, which seem to it very strange and rare, though they are the same as those it was accustomed to experience before. The reason for this is that the soul is now becoming alien and remote from common sense and knowledge of things, in order that, being annihilated in this respect, it may be informed of the Divine - which belongs rather to the next life than to this. (6)

The Resistances

Most of these inevitable reactions in the face of the unknown can be summed up in the word "resistance"; they are the resistances naturally linked with one's own being. Almost everyone is familiar with the well-known resistance the psychiatrist faces as he tries to draw disturbing experiences from the depth of the psyche into consciousness in helping the patient. Something similar happens to the contemplative, though there is a big difference in this case. Here the process moves towards the opposite direction; instead of drawing something to the surface, it penetrates in to the innermost depths of one's being. It is certainly possible that the two processes might encounter each other along the way. (7)

(6) St. John of the Cross, Dark Night of the Soul, II, IX, 5.

(7) In the process of interiorization we leave the secure dwelling we had constructed for ourselves. Everyone builds a house in which he lives, but from time to time it is necessary to leave it and go abroad. It is necessary to undertake a journey. The house surely protects us from possible danger, yet the fixed abode also impedes the influence of God: we find ourselves too much enclosed by it. In the process of interiorization we leave the comfortable house we have been enjoying and begin to walk. Through this we become more exposed to temptation but also, primarily, more exposed to God's grace. Here, I would like to point out that there is no true meditation without danger. (J.B. LOTZ, S.J. A Conference delivered at the "Centrum Ignatianum Spirituality" in Rome on Nov. 15, 1974).

There are subtle differences in these two kinds of resistance. We could say that in the psychoanalytical field the individual refuses to face the darkness to bring it into the light. With the contemplative, on the other hand, the experience of resistance is in the opposite direction. A completely different light wells up when confronted with the holiness of the interior light: light-truth, light-eternity light-love (St. Augustine). Man has always trembled in the presence of the holiness of that light which shines in the darkness -- even beyond the darkness -- a light that knows no eclipse (Jn 1:5, Easter Vigil Proclamation).

Because of this the traveller will feel surging from all the pores of his being these intimations of approaching dangers, these irrational fears that urge him to stop, to turn back, "to be like everyone else". This is so because the traveller is from now on an adventurer...at the point of hurling himself into the unknown: as a newborn babe quitting the security of his mother's womb, a parachutist on the brink of leaping out into space for the first time. Human resistance in the face of the unknown, especially when that unknown is something to be experienced, is an inexorable thing, irrational, independent of whether or not what one seeks to achieve is proportionately worthwhile.

Jerusalem

The best thing to do in the face of resistance is to lift up our eyes and focus them on Jerusalem.

When the pilgrims of Israel were preparing themselves for the paschal visit to the Holy City, they knew well that a tiring journey lay ahead. If the caravan had come from the North, the rises and dips of the road to Jericho, the suffocating heat of the region near the Dead Sea and the wastelands of the desert of Judah were far from pleasant for travelling. But once they had passed through the Valley of the Patriarchs and reached Kahn Lubban, the vision they saw transformed their fatigue into chants of hallelujahs: up above, like a golden crown rising from the mountains, shone Jerusalem with the goldplated cupola of Herod's temple glittering from the height. This dazzling sight was so exalting that the pilgrims, forgetting all the sufferings of their journey, would brake into chanting the splendid "ascension psalms":

I lift up my eyes to the mountains... (Ps 121:1).

To lift up ones eyes to the mountains, to contemplate -- in whatever manner--a vision, certain and luminous, of the goal will always be an effective tonic against all the doubts and resistances of our nature. The vision of Jerusalem, without obscuring the difficulties and risks along the way, confirms the authenticity and validity of the journey as a whole. For this reason, from time to time, it would help to fix our gaze on those who have already arrived. A simple look at so many people of such diverse psychological, professional and social backgrounds will be enough to convince us that for all its diversity, there remains something unchangeable and mysteriously precious, in life something which blooms in each one of them that distinguishes them from ordinary man.

It could be a poor country priest considered by his fellow seminarians as a nonentity and an intellectual failure who would be seized by the interior light that will set him apart from his contemporaries to the extent that he will attract to his humble rural church the intellectuals and famous preachers of France (the Life of St. John B. Vianney).

One of the seekers could be a Manichean philosopher (Confessions of St. Augustine, Book IV), just one more thinker among the impressive group of philosophers throughout history. But this time the light will single him out and elevate him so high above all schools of thought that his works will be read indiscriminately by theologians and simple people, by young and old, and going beyond the boundaries of time will reach immortality.

Or the desire to seek the light may seize the heart of a poor artisan in Czarist Russia (8). In such a case, the very simplicity of the language he uses to tell us about his experiences, will carry an unmistakable echo of geniality. His only work, as simple and humble as himself, will travel around the world, translated into all the principal languages, reprinted and esteemed even today as a precious jewel of literary and spiritual heritage for mankind.

Then a woman, "restless and always on the go", sets out to seek the light and finds it (Autobiography of Saint Theresa of Jesus). Her personality acquires gigantic and

(8) "The Way of Pilgrim", London, 1943.

unsuspected dimensions and she will influence thousands from every walk of life to follow faithfully her footsteps. She will found institutions to perpetuate her work and her writings, though in complicated and irregular style, will be studied to the last comma and commented upon by theologians and men of the spirit of all ages and races.

Or it could be a seeker of the light who wishes to remain unknown and hides himself in a veil of anonymity to fulfill this desire. Then, in spite of the very anonymity he himself had sought, the inevitable will happen: one single book of his, the smallest, will suffice to immortalize this man forever. Throughout the ages men will call him the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" and they will continue to print and to comment on his work throughout the six centuries after his death (9).

Finally, when the luminous spark breaks out in fire in the heart of an apprentice, be he a tailor, a carpenter or a painter of no status, and when he allows himself to be drawn to the culmination point where the spark of light becomes "the living flame of love" where the light is converted, then that flame will enlighten the wise men and theologians of all Churches of the East and of the West and it will continue to do so in all cultures and throughout the ages (10).

Now we can see the significance of the vision of Jerusalem which can be a soothing as well as a stimulating experience to counteract the resistances and hardships of the way. This is true for all, no matter what the status be of the one involved, whether a philosopher, a peasant, a woman on the move, an anonymous writer or a tailor's apprentice. Each one of them has given us a message of the secret which is "lift up your eyes towards the mountains! look at Jerusalem!"

(9) This anonymous English mystic wrote in the XIV century and his best-known work is The Cloud of Unknowing (Doubleday Image Book, New York).

(10) We know that in his adolescence St. John of the Cross was a humble laborer. Through his work he helped his widowed mother alleviate the poverty of their home which she tried to run the best she could. He worked as a tailor, a painter, a carpenter and had various other jobs in the Castilian city of Medina.

It is not that these pilgrims sought to be known or to have their works translated into different languages so as to cross the boundaries of time. On the contrary, not only was this accidental but they tried hard to avoid it. What happens is that the true light, wherever it may be, is immediately recognized as an inescapable fact. It is true that this light changes the lives of the pilgrims, but it is no less true that what they seek, above all and always, is not the transforming effects of the light, but the light itself.

Allergy for Islands

Modern man, so accustomed to move in stereotyped patterns, where the normal is what is "standardized" and the due measure of things as set by the "consumer society", might, in the face of this display of singularity, think all this business of light and darkness sounds like celestial music. To be converted overnight into an unusual character does not appeal to him. "No man is an island" our contemporaries will quote from a phrase immortalized by the well-known Trappist monk, Merton. As a matter of fact, the prospect of becoming an island is against the social nature of man and even more so against Christian charity. It is just one more misconception brought about by our resistances. Whoever takes the trouble of looking deeper into the lives and personalities of those who have been transformed by the light will discover something significantly different from an island. The contemplative, in the cloister or on the street, is a contemplative in action. This means that he is a person who is open, understanding and attentive to the needs of his fellowmen, fully integrated into his social environment and, at times, even very popular, full of sympathy and good humour.

Some years ago, Kenneth Wapnick, a psychiatrist, made a comparative study of mysticism and schizophrenia. For his study, he used the autobiographical writings of St. Theresa of Avila and the diary of a schizophrenic (11). The principal difference established by him was precisely that the schizophrenic showed all the characteristics of an "island being", poorly adjusted and estranged from ordinary life. On her part, St. Theresa revealed her luminous depths to be integrated with the activities of her daily life. The light certainly made her different but, instead of separating her from reality, it was a light that transformed and vitalized

(11) Kenneth Wapnick, Mysticism and Schizophrenia, Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, vol. I, n.2 (1969).

her reality into contemplative action. Those who know the Saint, her sense of humour, her ability to be in harmony with persons of all cultures and frames of mind, her creativity and talent for organizing, etc. will certainly not classify her among the far-flung islands of the human ocean.

The same conclusions can be drawn upon a closer look at the incredible activity and influence of Saint Bernard on the religious and political thought of his time; at the continuous flow of people who flooded the village of Ars in search of its humble curate; at the curious gallery of characters of Czarist Russia and the thousand adventures that filled the life of the Russian pilgrim.

Possibly our intellect, resisting to the end, could cite other examples of those who, in following the light, became isolated in the cell of their cloisters. Agreed. But what I am trying to say is that the contemplative in action is a real possibility because he is a historical reality. More over, I have already mentioned that I believe it would be very rare, even for the isolated contemplative -- if he has really been led into isolation by the light -- to find that he is not also an integrated being in harmony with himself even if his world has been reduced to the small circle of his brothers in the monastery. If ever the reader passes through Spain and pays a visit to a convent of the Discalced Carmelites, he may be surprised to discover that people as "contemplative" as the austere Carmelite nuns could sing and dance, compose happy ballads and even play the guitar during recreation.

The fact is that the interior light is not cold, but warm and responsive, drawing near to men as "unto its own" (jn 1:11), independent of whether or not they want to receive it.

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These are, then, some of the characteristics and resistances we encounter as we move along the road towards the light. It remains for us, as we have promised, to give some practical guidelines to help those who wish to venture into this journey.

ELEMENTS FOR PRACTICAL ORIENTATION

Today going through the 'religion' section of a bookstore we are struck by the enormous quantity of material on prayer. Prayer is undoubtedly a fashionable subject. The works of classical treatises are mingled on the shelves with those of contemporary authors whose names we hardly know yet. It is evident that people buy more books on prayer today than ever before (12). Nevertheless, if the buyer would take the trouble of finding out how many of these books deal directly with the practice of prayer, he will discover that their number is proportionately small. The classic treatises do not give much details and concrete exercises on how to practice prayer. Handbooks dealing with them can be counted on the fingers of one's hand. For example: St. Ignatius' book of Spiritual Exercises contains but a few dozen pages. In them he teaches us how to pray with the help of proper breathing, control of discursive thinking, how to use the richness of our imagination in prayer, how to regulate light, diet, bodily postures, and even how to sanctify our sleep by means of the well-known "additions". (Exercises 73). This little-book, its practicality was an exception during his time. In order to find such concrete and practical advice in the works of St. Theresa of Avila and

(12) See the interesting article by Daniel Maria Agacino, S.J., Resurge en España el espíritu de oración a partir del Vaticano II? (Datos y reflexiones para un estudio), Ecclesia (1976), 233-237.

of St. John of the Cross one would have to search very carefully only to discover a few suggestions here and there scattered throughout the hundred pages.

The modern authors certainly tend to be more practical than their predecessors when writing books on prayer. Nevertheless, it is enough for us to leaf through a few titles to see that the "theoretical" elements far exceed the practical ones. Once more we realize that it is far easier to produce beautiful theoretical reflections as those that have been handed on to us in our Western culture.

Also we have devoted two parts of our subject to this theme of theoretical reflection on the binomial 'contemplation-action', while it is only now that we start to give more practical orientations. Nevertheless, even so, there will be readers who will feel more or less astonished reading these lines because they can hardly avoid asking: "Up to what point can practical rules on a subject like contemplation in action be given? Are we going to turn this sublime ideal into a recipe?"

As I have said such questions are inevitable. But I would like to add that exactly because of having considered contemplation in action solely as a 'sublime theme, cut off from practical realization, many are finding themselves without those indescribable riches we referred to in the legend of the musk deer.

This present article aims to give a concrete, gradual orientation to the discovery of that interior light all children of God possess since their baptism: the light that has to become separated more and more from the darkness of our being, to shine in our daily life and finally to transform it ineffably. Those who discover and develop within themselves this silent light are those who can look at the lilies of the field with tranquility and see something more in them than what appears to the eyes (Mt. 6 : 28).

The Three-fold Vital Cleansing

In order to go deeper into prayer one has of necessity to cross a certain threshold to enter into the marvelous adventure of a life enlightened by continuous contemplation. The person has to go through an indispensable cleansing of the principal dimensions of his being. Without such

purity, which is three-fold as we will see, it is useless, and even harmful to try to achieve contemplative life that will only be illusory. For this reason the exercises given below should be understood as a continuous process; it is a matter of forming attitudes and not of isolated activity.

a) Exercises to purify physical activity

The first step in purification is the basic control of our physical activity.

In general a slow and tranquil pace in physical movements (not synonymous to a lazy rhythm) is conducive for contemplation. Needless to stress that the pace of our modern life is not exactly one of basic calmness essential and beneficial for physical and psychological health.

If we only could have a notion of the enormous amount of physical energy we waste each day in useless movements and muscular tensions we will surely be surprised. Go into the street and watch the people. You will observe an endless number of signs of useless consumption of physical energy: hands tightening, jerks and grimaces, fingers tapping nervously, feet impatiently beating the pavement at bus stops... Powerful sources of energy escape from the control of so many people engaged in continuous, useless chatter and gestures so as not to have to be still, to have to say something because others expect them to speak or else they would be thought of as being unsociable if they don't... Frequent headaches, nervous tensions, stomach ulcers and other illnesses so much part of modern man are proofs of the invisible and continuous waste of physical energies. This is happening more frequently than we can imagine.

If you know someone who possess a certain depth, whose inner spirit radiates before you, then you surely cannot count him among the worried and tense people filling our society today. An old Tibetan proverb confirms this inner richness that goes with a restful pace of physical movement:

*When the hen broods it hatches out much.
When the regal peacock remains still
it displays a splendid tail.*

*When the steed walks gently
then does it show its grace.
The calm of a holy man
is the sign that he is a Sage (13).*

All the exercises in bodily relaxation which we have recommended in earlier articles (14) are applicable here. A simple handbook of Hatha Yoga—the yoga of bodily control gives a wide range of exercises and practical advice suitable for physical relaxation. These exercises arouse remarkable energy potential in the individual which otherwise would have remained dormant, dormant because of certain muscles being wasted. However, let us not forget that this energy is not to be squandered in useless activity. In order to avoid this I offer a very simple exercise: it consists in frequently, simply and calmly observing our bodily postures throughout the day. As I have already mentioned the direction of these exercises is towards re-education of posture and carriage (or physical attitudes). For this reason the possible difficulty that may arise will come from the consistency required to repeat it during the day and not from the exercise itself. It is necessary to acquire the habit of muscular relaxation both during work and in ordinary activities. Keep on observing your muscles. Stop whatever you are doing for a moment and by means of a rapid "muscle check-up" pay attention to the parts of your body that are tense and where you feel any contraction of muscles, however small. At the start you will almost immediately become aware of the tensions which are more marked and felt: unnecessary elevation of the shoulders, frowns while reading, strains of the eyes, chest, shoulders, stomach... Simple attention or an inward glance at the tense part is enough for it to become relaxed once more. This exercise must not be done with any hostility towards your own body, but on the contrary it should be done like teaching a child. Little by little this exercise will become like a second nature and you will spontaneously discover more subtle tensions until finally you obtain a general rhythm of calm and continuous control of your physical energy.

Satisfactory results will occur as soon as you begin to practice it. Habitual states of tiredness will diminish and work will be done with greater accuracy and effectiveness. This means that all those tensions that used to put

(13) A.C. de Koros, *Tibetan Studies* (n.XIX), Calcutta, 1912 Text 20

(14) Directors' Service, February, 1976, pp.44ff. There is also a bibliography on the theme of muscular relaxation.

so much strain on your efforts will continue to vanish, to give way for the healthy and harmonious use of your energy.

What has been said about control of physical muscular energy should also be applied to the use of verbal energy, that is, to controlling the continuous flow of words being wasted each day. The words of the Apostle St. James about the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue are well-known (Jm 3: 1-18).

To achieve purification in the physical dimension, it is also advisable to have a balanced and well-ordered habit of eating. It is not a matter of fastings or exaggerations but of order. The book of Ecclesiasticus gives us wise advice on this point (Eccl 31:12-31; 37:27-31; Prov 23 20ff). In the New Testament, we find orientations of a higher spiritual level on this subject than those given in the Old Testament. For example, Christ recommended to his disciples, not to worry about food but rather to seek first the kingdom of Heaven (Mt 6:25-33). St. Paul explained to the Christians of Rome that the Kingdom of Heaven is not to be found in food and drink but in the peace and deep joy of the Spirit (Rom 14:17).

b) Exercises For Purifying Emotional Life

Parallel to muscular-physical relaxation we have to acquire emotional calm and harmony. We cannot imagine how a life disturbed by continuous emotional over-excitement could possess the capacity to reach into the inner depths and find the beauty of the silent light that shines in the contemplatives (Jn 1:4-5,9).

Now we apply the same exercise of patience and continuous observation to the emotional dimension of the person. There are entertainments, shows, television programs, etc. which arouse tension and emotional over-excitement in us by means of, more or less, suggestions of violence, sex, criminal activity, the world of uncontrolled passions, etc. If any reader doubts this, let him simply pick up the newspaper and take a look at the various titles of films and other shows advertised in the entertainment section.

To learn to observe our emotional tensions, as if we were merely outsiders looking on will assist, in the relaxation and purification of this important level of our per-

sonality; observing, watching, taking account of. I want to point out that it is not a matter of thinking about these emotions or passing moral judgements on their advantage or danger. Rather, it is a question of isolating an emotion as a simple impression received, or a simple recognition of an experience being looked upon peacefully until it dissolves as salt in water. Once we have achieved the dissolution of emotional tension it is no longer necessary to go on with the exercise.

Certainly, once we have learned to look at it in this manner, without reasoning or passing judgment, then the emotion previously hidden in darkness will now come into the light of calm and simple observation and it will be this light that weakens the tension and frees the individual from the poisonous burden.

People to whom I have recommended this exercise usually think, before practicing it, that it is very strange and difficult to take a closer look at various emotions of violent antipathy, rancour, egoism, etc. like a spectator. But once they have experienced it, the tensions disappear. Psychologists know full well that an important law of our psyche lies underneath this exercise.

One main aspect in the control of the emotions is related to the people forming the individuals' environment. We have said that there are persons who radiate peace and interior calm. But it will be impossible for us to acquire emotional harmony if we are frequently in the company of restless, boisterous persons who seem to be in constant need of absorbing our vital energy in order to nourish and maintain their own. (15)

For a person who has purified his emotional level it can be said that he will radiate joy and optimism. Instead of being constantly disturbed and negative and bitter about things, his personality would know how to go beyond bitterness and suffering and spontaneously pour out the deep peace Christ spoke about in the Beatitudes. But, above all, the fruit of the purification process of man's emotional level is the progressive emergence of a powerful love which before was imprisoned in darkness, a luminous and universal

(15) Concerning other exercises for emotional relaxation see the article mentioned in the Directors Service for a number of techniques that could be used to help a person get into deep prayer.

love freed from narrow and exclusive attachments and inclinations resulting from egoism. The signs of a purified emotional life and of the emergence of this boundless love are clearly enumerated in the famous verses on charity in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 13: 4-7). All these signs stand, act as a constellation heralding the coming of the light at the depths of a person's being from where it will find easier and easier channels along which to shine.

c) Exercises for the Purification of the Reasoning Mind

During courses on meditation I ask the participants to do a simple exercise for the purification of the mental level. It consists in simply observing the thoughts as they come during the day, as we have shown for the other levels. Persons who have never done this exercise are surprised at the continuous flow of thoughts that keep coming to the mind even when there is no need to think of anything in particular!

We have to learn to make surprise visits to our reasoning mind during the course of the day. Watch your thoughts calmly. Take an account of yourselves in the middle of your work to see if your mind is restfully set on what you are doing or, whether on the contrary, it is engaged in parasitic thoughts that steal your energy, divide them and estrange them from your main occupation. The energy lost each day in these useless thoughts and reasonings is also precious and the continual leakage of this kind of wealth is a source of mental weakening and fatigue. The practice of mental vigilance ensures that sooner or later useless or irrelevant thoughts will disappear from consciousness and the mind will then remain relaxed and calmly concentrated on its principal objective.

It is also useful, especially at the beginning of this mental clearing process, to deliberately let the thoughts flow out freely for about ten minutes each day. When we allow ourselves to relax after some intensive work or are beginning a series of activities, this exercise can be extremely beneficial and soothing. Just as the body relaxes, so the mind voluntarily calms down, relaxes and takes flight while we quietly watch the thoughts come and go. Only a few minutes of such relaxation each day under our conscious and vigilant guidance will be enough. This activity is clearly different from loss of mental energy because in this case

we deliberately control or rather observe our mind while it enjoys its few moments of diversion. We know what we are doing. On the other hand, in the case of uncontrolled mental chaos, it is our own rationalizing that imposes parasitic thoughts on us and we become confused and let ourselves be carried away and be submerged in its activities.

One of the more salutary effects of such mental control and calm is that of a greater clarity and precision in the process of thinking. The person who does not waste his mental energy can concentrate on his affairs with more rapidity and facility and can focus his attention with greater precision on ordinary events. Despite the intense concentration, no signs of dullness or mental fatigue occur as happens so often to students and others who devote much time to mental work each day.

A mind cleared by this simple training is neither lazy nor egoistic. Its field of interest is no longer centered mainly around matters exclusively useful to itself : "I am interested in what I like in order to obtain it or in what I do not like in order to avoid it". A clear mind has open horizons and it does not look at things in terms of their immediate utility but, instead, views them in the light of their natural depth, a depth that properly entered, explored and valued will then reflect Him who clothes the lilies of the field with the light of divine splendour.

The man with a clear mind has constructive and positive thoughts: he can clearly see the imperfect dimension of creatures but perceives it as a limitation that has to be made up for in the universal reckoning, the cosmic accounts of the unapproachable divine economy of Providence.

Therefore, the man with a clear mind does not fall in to the trap of negative thinking, of continual bitter criticism, of corrosive and vicious circles of obsessive thoughts. He is a free being in full control of the enormous potential of mental energy in order to use it for building the Kingdom of God not to confuse nor to destroy himself or the others.

Sometimes it is said that today we have forgotten or even have banished the ascetic element from our projects for Christian living which was once very much part of Christian life. I would say that an asceticism suited to the

needs of modern man is that of the re-education and cleansing of his faculties. In this asceticism modern man could make use of all the technical resources that present-day development of the human sciences can provide. This is where the Christian of today should exert his ascetic efforts. The main difficulty often lies in the fact that man, lacking control and training in the three dimensions we have mentioned, is not aware of the gravity of his situation and blames the degeneration within him to factors outside of himself. Like the musk deer of the mountains he is desperately seeking a treasure he will never find.

Today we certainly can no longer use the methods of discipline and penance of our ancestors for mortification. But the poisons that before could degenerate a human being, actually have the same power of disintegrating man today. To do away with what no longer is in fashion without replacing it makes the matter worse. Therefore, an approach adapted to the dangers today is necessary and it would be ingenuous to disregard them. This is the reason why I have used a suitable language and have spoken about modern man's lack of control in terms of wasting physical, mental and emotional energies. This energy crisis is much more serious than the oil crisis. For clarity we have divided our discussion of this lack of control into three parts. If now we take a general look at the problem, we get an idea of this striking disorder and disintegration in which so many of our contemporaries live without being conscious of it. Let us imagine a person in his house who would have his television set on all the time, his radio in full blast, cooling and heating system working simultaneous, refrigerator on, heating, lamps and other electrical appliances functioning needlessly day and night... If we should call his attention to this waste of energy, and if he replied: "What would you like me to do? I cannot live otherwise because it is my way of life..." In such a case, what would you think of him?

* *

In our proposed practical orientation we have seen the necessity of a basic, triple cleansing of faculties for one who would like to open his life to the light of contemplation in action. It is a first step without which the impurities in any of the three dimensions of being, as we have pointed out, will not leave the passage free for the light to shine in the darkness. All the roads taken by the contemplatives throughout history demonstrate that, in one way or another, they have passed through all these three

stages. We believe that modern man is no more, nor less able than his predecessors to follow the way of the contemplative in action. Perhaps in view of this perspective someone will say, like the consumerist of our example, that this purity is too much for him and that his life is structured in another way. But his answer is only one of his many illusions, fruit of his own darkness. Because it is not a question of forcing our human faculties to do something extraordinary but purely and simply to educate them to be what they ought to be, in order to respond more adequately to God's plan for them.

God did not create man for confusion, tension and darkness, but for the light. At the start the patient love of the father is needed for the work of re-educating his child who has been out of control for a long while; but re-education is possible because it simply consists in directing our faculties, towards their natural fountainheads. Without it, divine grace will always meet the obstacles of a rough and hostile terrain where it will not be able to sow the seed and bring it to fruition.

EFFECTS OF A PURIFIED LIFE

In the previous article we have seen the need of the triple vital cleansing as an indispensable condition in the life of a contemplative in action. This purification aimed at the 3 essential levels of the personality (physical, emotional, mental) produces some characteristic effects which we can summarize as the "depth of life". Being profound does not necessarily mean being contemplative, but this deep and radical purification is necessary to become contemplative in action.

A Section of My Life in the Laboratory

The possibility of doing a check-up of one's life, in order to know its degree of depth and consequently the degree of purification that our faculties possess, exists. For this I offer a simple exercise.

Exercise:

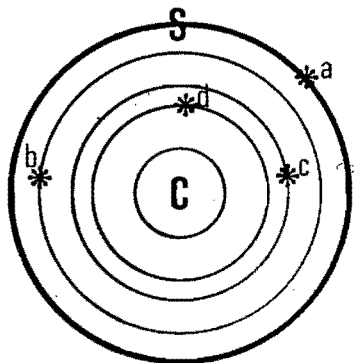
Be seated or place yourself in a comfortable position, calm yourself with some simple techniques for relaxation. Once relaxed, focus your attention on some scenes in your life that have happened recently; for example, the events lived from the time you woke up until this moment as you read these lines. From that period choose a brief sequence, say of about ten minutes.

Now, step by step, minute by minute, second by second, try to re-live that sequence of your life you have chosen with the help of your imagination and memory.

An important observation: it is not a question of thinking about what you did, that would be easy, but it falls outside of our proposal. It is a matter of entering as intensely as possible into contact with the same sensations you lived then, the same feelings, big and small reactions, subtle apprehensions, etc. just as they had all happened during the period you have chosen.

Possibly, while doing the exercise some will encounter what we might call "blank zones". What I want to say is that in re-living the sequence step by step some might discover themselves suddenly unable to continue doing the exercise. It will be due to the fact that it is completely impossible at a certain stage to regain consciousness of what happened. Let us suppose that during the exercise I am re-living all that happened since after breakfast until the moment I went out into the street. I see and feel myself finishing breakfast, folding the table napkin, saying good-bye to those who are with me, leaving the room, crossing the hall and putting the hand on the door knob to open it. I re-live the characteristic sensation of the metal knob of the door in my hand and then...nothing. Then I logically "deduce" that I must have entered the elevator and gone down to the street, because I remember perfectly well how I greeted the porter on leaving. But we have said that it is not a matter of making deductions or of reflective thinking. Reality is that I find myself unable to recall how I lived in the elevator

What happened? Simply that my consciousness decided that I was not very interested in living with much attentiveness the sequence in the lift. A ride in the elevator is absolutely routine and there is nothing surprising about it. A few moments were lived there, superficially. A graph will make it much easier to see all this:



Let us suppose that this circle represents our life. If our life attitudes are mainly located in the zone S (surface), then we will be superficial; that means our life will just be a series of dull, uncolorful sequences that will leave hardly any trace in our memory. If, on the contrary, we live ordinarily in zone C (centre), our actions and our whole life will be profound and enriching.

We can locate the "blank zone" of the previous exercise at the point a; that is, at the peak of superficial living. Nothing has been lived or enjoyed deeply there; nothing has been assimilated; there is no real experience. It has been an empty, fleeting passage, without the slightest trace of richness. It is like a dead life.

Points b, c and d indicate the progressive interiorization of essential attitudes. A person who has lived in zone c, at his centre, on some occasion, possesses true vitality. His perception will be indelible, clear, very deep and enriching. The degree in which all our life attitudes go on approaching point C will determine our depth and the inexhaustible vital wealth which we possess. We shall lack depth to the degree in which we are closer to point S, however great the noise we make and however much we agitate ourselves. In zone C the water is still and crystal clear because it is deep water. In zone S, the water is turbulent and dark; therefore, what is lived in S dissolves immediately and vanishes without leaving any trace. But, what is lived in C remains for always like the treasure hidden at the bottom of the sea.

Some Witnesses of Profound Life

When the personality has acquired the triple vitality we spoke about, numerous profound experiences flow. There are moments in life when, no matter at what place or on what occasion, a person finds himself silently integrated within himself and deeply in harmony with what he is living. We will look at 4 testimonies manifesting this. Later on we will be able to understand how these four experiences flow from great depth.

Witness A: The Yellow Envelope

At this moment I can ask myself whether I have ever really enjoyed the beauty of a yellow envelope, an ordinary thing - which is on my table and is

tracting my eyes as I write these words. I look at the envelope, because of this question. I close my eyes and think of the color of this object. Then I open them and have even better vision of the richness of this color yellow which is nourishing my mind. I experience a new pleasure and intensification of life as the immediate result of this action, slight but fruitful, and recognize with pleasure the agreeable company of this little yellow thing (16).

Witness B: The Rain

We had spent several weeks in southern Spain, at the hottest time of the year. Early every morning my young son went to the balcony of our hotel to see what kind of day it would be, and every day it was the same - inexhaustibly sunny - until one morning I heard a whoop of joy and the exultant words, "Hurray! It's raining!"

Glorious to see the dusty streets and rooftops running with rain. Delightful to breathe the cleansed air, to smell the wet earth!

Through the whole of that streaming day, Longfellow's poem sang in my mind:

How beautiful is the rain!
After the dust and heat,
In the broad and fiery street,
In the narrow lane,
How beautiful is the rain! (17).

Witness C: The Cherry Tree

I am nine years old. I go down the familiar boulevard towards the halting place for the college buses. I put down my schoolbag for a moment so as to tie a lace, and suddenly, as if I had never seen them before, I see the cherry trees in blossom spreading their boughs among the cars. The wind is carrying the petals away like a rosy snow. I am surprised, flooded with inexplicable happiness, and cut off from the noise and motion by a ring of fire. I have implicit but vi-

(16) E. Wood, Concentration, An Approach to Meditation. 1966 Adyar, Madras, India.

(17) Elizabeth Starr Hill, "Hurray! It's Raining!", quoted from Mark Link, S.J. In the Stillness Is the Dancing, Argus Communications, Niles, Illinois, 1972, p.40.

brant consciousness of my own existence and of the overflowing gratuity of those trees. All is well. (18)

Witness D: Evening on the Steppe

Evening was approaching. We were travelling over the southern part of the steppe all filled with the mellifluous scent of grass and hay and gilded by the soft light of dusk. Far away the nearest mountains of the Caucasus were already beginning to be tinged with blue. I was seeing them for the first time. I contemplated them avidly, breathing in the air and light, and listening to the revelation of nature. For a long time I had become accustomed to seeing in nature no more than a dead desert only veiled with beauty, as if disguised by some deceitful cosmetic mask.

Suddenly my soul was filled with joy, and it trembled: "And if it were true?... If it were not a desert nor a mask, nor dead, but were He, the good and loving Father, if nature were but his veil, the veil covering his love...."

And my soul shuddered with wonder. And everything that had gleamed for an instant, but had then faded away in the evening on the steppe, now echoed in songs in my heart... The first day of creation shown before my eyes (19).

All the witnesses quoted presuppose the threefold vital purity, at least on occasions, at the moment when the experience occurs. None of our witnesses would have been able to perceive an experience of this quality if any one of their three vital levels had happened to be obstructed by interference and noise. Nevertheless, the profundity is different in each case:

* In the witness of A, it is an experience of simple admiration. This is provoked by the color of an object which until then had passed unnoticed. Through the limpid message brought about by the sense of sight, the person receives all the richness that the color yellow of an envelope could possibly offer to someone who looks at it with new

(18) Quoted from Nys-Mazure, La Grâce d'Attention, La Vie Spirituelle, 611 (1975) 792-793.

(19) Serges Boulgakov, la Lumière Sans Déclin, quoted from Giovanni Barra, Vangelo vissuto, Gribaudo, Torino, 1973 p. 357.

eyes. The admiration also arouses feelings of gratitude and of a certain fraternity with the present object.

* In witness B, the vital wonder has a wider range of awareness. The impressions received through the different senses form a whole: "the whole of that streaming day". It is also evident that the perception goes deeper and is richer, as revealed, for example, in the intensity of the joy and the loftiness of the feeling that reaches the poetic level.

* Witness C goes further, despite the fact that the subject perceiving the vitality is a little girl. Her experience reaches a greater depth, and so is the degree of spiritual elevation stimulated. There are expressions which show feelings overflowing from that area of the spirit which is near to religious sentiment: a certain fullness in her joy: ("I am with inexplicable happiness"). This mysterious mystic tone, is obliged to have recourse to symbolic language in order to express itself ("cut off from the noise and motion by a ring of fire"). Rooted silence where in appears the most intense vitality (cf. the features of previous isolation).

* Witness D is the deepest of all. The vitality reaches the spiritual level of an intense religious feeling. He is a young man 25 years of age who had experienced interior emptiness and disbelief for a long time. His experience, in an instance, fills his religious emptiness to the brim, without doubt unforgettable for him. He has the impression of receiving a revelation, of "listening to the revelation of nature" ("caeli enarrant gloriam Dei"), and he clearly perceives beyond the mask, or rather, beyond the superficial zone, which until then was all that he had been accustomed to see. The peak of this experience, which happens in an instant, is the perception of a spiritual vibration: "suddenly my soul was filled with joy, and it trembled". The name of God the Father, his goodness, his love, his glory in the creatures were revealed. When the experience itself has disappeared, the result shows the unmistakable signs of the passage of the "good spirit" into man's interior. The heart resounds with songs of joy and life begins to be seen distinctly, positively, full of hope and clear possibilities: "the first day of creation shone before my eyes".

The Miracle of an Ordinary Day

I invite the reader to discover in his own everyday

life the thousand treasures that the threefold purity of personality can undoubtedly produce. We are now much closer to a life transformed in prayer, even though we have not yet reached its final stages.

Each one can discover his own yellow envelope, his marvellous rainfall, his cherry blossoms and his evening that reveals the unmeasurable love of God; but we must try to captivate the last also in the yellow envelope. All the realities of creation can reveal to us this immeasurable love and lift us up towards Him. When the vitality of love and the elevation continue, that is, when it is transformed in to a state of life, then we move towards contemplation in action. In the meantime we have to begin by becoming aware that this unutterable revelation can also originate from an insignificant flower, as it happened in the last years of the life of St. Ignatius, or from a tiny drop of water, as affirmed in this sentence taken from Taoist mysticism:

There are times when the sight of a flower or the sound of a raindrop plopping into a pool tells you more of reality than all the words in the gigantic K'ang Hsi Encyclopedia (20).

In other words we might say that we have to open our eyes to the miracle of each day. Once more it is a matter of seeing, or becoming aware. But now, instead of looking at the distinct levels of our being, we take a look at the immense miracle all around:

The greatest gifts, o Theogene, are those of every day and every moment, so common that we fail to notice them, taking them for granted. What strikes us is exception to the rule, while we forget that the rule itself may be a series of great wonders.

The daily spinning of our globe around itself, the revolutions of the stellar bodies, their fixed orbits, the rising and the setting of the sun, the regular succession of the seasons, the drifting of the clouds across the skies, their condensation and conversion into rain, the amazing process of a sprouting seed or growing plant, the air we breathe, the water

(20) John Blofeld, Beyond the Gods, (Buddist and Taoist Mysticism), George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1974, p. 25.

which we sip, the solid ground that carries us and entire cities...all the marvels have ceased to make us wonder (21).

The capacity to be filled with wonder and to admire a drop of water and the growth of a seed has to be re-discovered. As A.H. Maslow points out the great ignorance of modern man is of not knowing the miracle in which he lives continually enveloped:

The search for the exotic, the strange, the unusual... has often taken the form of pilgrimages, of turning away from the world, the "Journey to the East", to another country or to a different Religion.

The great lesson from true mystics, from the Zen monks, and now also from...psychologists - that the sacred is in the ordinary... and that travel may be flight from confronting the sacred - this lesson can be easily lost.

To be looking elsewhere for miracles is to me a sure sign of the ignorance that everything is miraculous (22).

The anxious search for wonders that go beyond the marvels of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air is like the feverish search of the musk deer ending in a fall down the precipice in its disorientation. You have to stop open your eyes, and look. If your interior is clear, if silence and peace freed of poisons and interferences is your habitual state, then you are already living the daily miracle. It does not matter where you go or what you have in your hands, because all is miracle and you perceive the continuous revelation of the miracle. It is as if you were seeing God passing by each day in his car throwing thousands and thousands of miracles to the right and to the left. If someone opens his eyes and feels dazzled by the sight, it means that God's own light, that which shines in the darkness of the world, has shone on him, illuminating him like a flash emerging from within him, and lighting up the miraculous symphony of colors and treasures of creation.

(21) Gaspar M. Koelman, S.J. Sparks, Papal Seminary, Pune 411 014, India, p.86

(22) A. H. Maslow, The Father Reaches of Human Nature, quoted from Mark Link, S.J., o.c., p.18.

The last adventure, the most transforming of all on the road of a contemplative in action, is that of the search and final encounter of the origin of the light itself.

THE CENTRE APPEARS

We have seen how the triple cleansing of being produces the effect of living with certain depth. To the degree in which purification is more definite and radical, treasures, new richness are discovered daily which before have passed unnoticed, until life becomes a continuous miracle around us. God offers it freely to anyone who has eyes to see. This presupposes, as we have seen, a certain transformation of life in the light of initial contemplative reflection. Certainly, the deeper our grasp of this wonder surrounding us in daily life, the closer we come to religious experience because God is the Marvellous One. Therefore, a person who is constantly pursuing this triple purification as a state of life will be drawn, sooner or later to the source of all wonders, the Sole Wonder. From the moment his vital outlook is directed decisively and definitely towards this original centre, we can say that the person is already a contemplative.

The Centre

The last step of the contemplative pilgrim is, therefore, the discovery of this centre. Centre is a word, sufficiently precise, to indicate with some clarity that something is transcendent and inexpressible; it is a general

term to which all the metaphors in the language of the mystics refer.

The centre is also an enormously symbolic reality. Students of the history of religions tell us that it is one of the most venerable and ancient archetypes since the dawn of mankind. (23). For this reason, as a symbolic reality, the centre has a religious sense. All the religious traditions have bequeathed us a host of data about this centre. In mystical description the centre is a sacred space where man, in some mysterious and ineffable way, can meet God. If the centre is a place, it appears in the form of a temple or a site inside the temple like the Holy of Holies in the temple of Jerusalem. The holy mountains like Tabor, Calvary, Meru in Hindu traditions, Garizim which literally means "Navel of the Earth", etc. also reveal to us of the mystery of the centre as a sacred place where heaven and earth meet : the Columns of Hercules, the Trees of Life, the labyrinthine mandalas of oriental Tantricism and many other religious symbols all lead us, by different ways and expressions, to one and the same Central Reality.

Each one of the various manifestations of the centre supposes a dynamism created around it, a "way towards the centre". As it happens in symbolic reality, this road is often ambivalent and appears contradictory. Thus, one goes up to the centre, as in the pilgrimages to the temple of Jerusalem or in the ascent to the Potala, the "Shrine of Shrinés" in the holy city of Lhasa (Tibet). But also one can go down to the centre as in the descent to initiatory caverns in order to obtain a "second birth" (24). The centre can likewise be inside or outside. Thus, for example, in the techniques of Kundalini-Yoga, the continuous process of penetration into the various "subtle centres of energy", the chakras, is directed towards awakening Kundalini, the serpent-energy asleep in every human being. This energy, going up from centre to centre through the spinal cord, finally reaches the centre of the head. There, it encounters Sahasrâra, the lotus with a thousand petals. When Kundalini reaches Sahasrâra, enlightenment is produced and fullness of

(23) Cf. the deep investigation carried out by Professor Mircea Elaide into symbolism of the centre, in Images and Symbols, Search Book, New York, 1969, translated from French by Philip Mairet, pp.27-56.

(24) Cf. R. Guénon, Symboles fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée, Gallimard, 1962, pp.210-217.

ecstasy, that is, the "ascent of self" and union with Reality. (25).

As we have seen, all these characteristics of one and the same incomprehensible and mysterious reality are also reflected in some way in the centre of Christian contemplative prayer.

We have proposed the threefold vital purification as a "way to the centre" adapted in its technique and vocabulary to the contemplative in action of the 20th century. But the forms of this dynamism in each era and culture are different, even though all share in one and the same radical purification. Now, let us take a look at some of the Christian concepts in which the centre is described in we will only deal with 2 important ones, leaving the rest for later on. Because of the difficulty of the mystical language, an examination of the different central modalities will facilitate the clarification of this last and definite stage. At the same time, it will serve as a help to those who are already committed to follow the contemplative way. As we will see, the clothing of the centre differs according to characters and circumstances, but the most important point for the contemplative is precisely to learn to discover his own supreme centre and to continually hold on to it. Few things are so clear and doubtless as the gradual awareness that the centre being discovered is God, or at least indisputably linked to the divine essence. God is the centre of centres, and as Nicholas of Cusa says, "the poles of the spheres coincide with the centre, that is God. He is the circumference and the centre; He is everywhere and nowhere" (2).

(25) Arthur Avalon, The Serpent Power.
The inside-outside bipolarity of the centre appears in this very old Kundalini-Yoga text. It describes the interior of the Thousand-Petal Lotus (inside), in which all beings share (outside). We are reminded of the beautiful description given in the Old Testament Book of Wisdom:

In the interior is Niervāna-Kalā, that which excels excellences. It is subtle, like the thousandth part of the point of a hair, and it has the shape of a waxing moon. It is the everlasting Bhagavati, the Devata which pervades all beings. It grants divine wisdom, and as luminous as the light of all suns shining at once.

(26) Quoted by Chevalier and A. Geherbrant, Dictionnaire des Symboles, Seghers, Paris, 1973, Vol. I, p. 299.

1. The Centre as Light

God is light. All Scripture and the traditions of the Fathers seem to be sown with the revelation of the light - God. In the well-known description of Wisdom we are told that she is a "reflection of light eternal" (Wis 7: 26, 29-30). (Note that the symbol of light is applied to the very essence of the divine). It is not a matter of presenting God as surrounded by light, clothed in light, creating light, etc. though these are also frequent expressions in the Scripture. What is important for us is to see how already in the Old Testament light is directly related to the divine essence itself. The New Testament also presents the light in the same sense. St. John also tells us that "He himself is light and in him there is no darkness" (1 Jn 1: 5). James called God "Father of lights" (James 1:17). Later on we will see how Christ is the light and the revelation of God-light.

From a very early time Christian contemplative tradition presents the mystical centre as a centre-light. A school of thought centred only around the mystery of the light exists. One of its principal representatives is Simon the New Theologian. From his writings and those of his biographer, we can see how for him the centre of contemplative attraction is light and that it is a matter of a light directly related to divine essence.

God is light and the contemplation of him is like a light... When someone contemplates it openly, he sees a light and this vision fills him with admiration, but who it is who is appearing to him, this he does not know immediately [27].

At the beginning, therefore, one goes towards the light with a certain insecurity and timidity. The centre is only starting to emerge. One of the most beautiful passages of the mystic tradition of light regarding this timidity is narrated to us by Simon in the third person. A neophyte tell his spiritual Father of his experience of the centre:

If (the neophyte) knows of anybody who has explain

(27) "Discours de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien", Sur Ceux qui s'imaginent avoir le Saint-Esprit inconsciemment, Orientalia Christiana, t. 9, 2 (1927), p.192-194.

ed these things to him through having previously known God, let him go to find him, and say to him: I have seen. - The other will respond. What hast thou seen, my son? - A light, Father, very gentle. - Gentle? But what was its nature? - Well... to tell the truth, Father, I have not sufficient understanding... When this light appeared to me, Father, the space of my cell was elevated, and the world passed away, and, seemingly, fled before its face, and I remained alone in the presence of that light. Nor could I even say, Father, whether this body was then in its place or had risen out of itself... I do not know... but I felt an unutterable joy, which continues in me until now, and at the same time an immense love and immense desire, so that my tears flowed in torrents down their furrows just as you see now.

And the Father then answers him: It is He, my son, it is really He. With these words the other goes on talking, reckoning, and little by little purifies himself completely. To the degree that he purifies himself, he goes on gathering spiritual strength, until he goes so far even to put queries to the vision itself: Is it you, my God? And the reply comes and tells him: Yes, it is I. I am the God who become man for thee. It is I who have converted thee, and will go on converting thee, just as you see, into God. (Ibid).

Although he relates this experience in the third person, Simon the New Theologian leaves us no doubt that he himself really lived it either in the person of the master or in the person of the pupil. Let us see how he describes to us a personal experience of the light:

I see a light which is not of this world. Sitting in my cell, I see within me the Maker of the world; I converse with Him and love Him and I feed on this one Divine Image (Divinorum amor liber, Hymn 13, p. 120, 526 c-d.

The words quoted above show us how it is a matter of an interior, central light. However, as we have pointed out when presenting the centre symbolically, the inside-outside antinomy appears again in another passage, this time narrated by Nicetas, the biographer of Simon:

From on high it shone like a dawn light....; it

increased little by little, causing the air to glow more and more; and he then felt that he was rising with the whole of his body out from earthly things. As this light went on shining with greater and greater intensity, and appeared to be over him as the splendid sun of midday, he became aware that he himself was in the centre of the light... He saw how that light was beginning to flood his body little by little, his heart and his entrails... (28).

The light as centre of attraction for the contemplative also appears in the writings of Saint Theresa of Avila. In her, however, the interior light almost always takes on the aspect of a luminous fire. Here is how she describes the incipient luminous attraction, comparing it to a tiny spark:

This prayer, then, is a little spark of true love for the Lord which He begins to enkindle in the soul.

...
This little spark, then, planted within us by God small though it is, makes a loud noise; and if we do not quench it through some fault of our own, it is this that begins to kindle the great fire which (as I shall say in due course) sends forth the flames of that most ardent love of God with which His Majesty endows the souls of the perfect (Life, c. XV; also XIX, 4).

St. John of the Cross also speaks of light-fire in his well-known comparison of burning wood. He makes us see how the purification of being is indispensable before the light can rise and how the light is central, at the contemplative's very root, transforming him into a luminous being. After describing the burning wood, he adds:

We can understand how the very light and the loving wisdom which are to be united with the soul and to transform it are the same that at the beginning purge and prepare it; even as the very fire which transforms the log of wood into itself, and makes it part of itself, is that which at the first was preparing it for that same purpose (Dark Night of the Soul II, c. 10, n. 3).

(28) Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, par Nicéas Stéphanatos, n. 69, pp. 94-95. Quoted by J. Lemaître in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, Beauchesne, Paris, c. 1853.

Purification by the central light itself appears even more emphasized in this other passage:

For, as this flame is of brightest light, and assails the soul, its light shines in the darkness of the soul, which is as dark as the light is bright; and then the soul is conscious of its natural darkness, which opposes itself to the supernatural light...

And thus it will be conscious of this its natural darkness for so long as the light beats upon it, for souls can have no perception of their darkness until they come near to the Divine light, and only when the darkness has been driven out is the soul illumined and able to see the light, its eye having been cleansed and strengthened (Living Flame of Love, Stanza I, 18).

We cannot study in detail here the characteristics of the mysticism of light. For our purpose, (orientation towards facilitating the life of transforming prayer), it is enough that the person who is purifying his three fundamental levels, keeps himself open and attentive to the centre of attraction which manifests itself in him or before him. It is possible that, in one way or another, this centre may be revealed to some as a luminous centre. For such persons their contemplative dynamism will consist in opening up for themselves a way towards the light. God-light will be discovered little by little. At the beginning as a luminous point, but with continuous adhesion to this point the small spark will be transformed into an intense flame. As St. Teresa would say, this flame "will grow impetuously", and "will rise out of itself" and in its transforming dynamism it will turn everything it touches into a reflection of the everlasting light, that which was once only a tiny spark in the centre of the contemplative.

2. The Centre as Darkness

We have said that one of the paradoxes of the contemplative centre is the apparently contradictory signs in which it begins to manifest itself in different people. The central awakening can certainly appear, not only as a form of light, but also of darkness. A completely incomprehensible and mysterious darkness because it is a darkness that attracts. What human explanation can man find for allowing himself to be drawn by something which is obscurity, darkness and nothing?

Scripture tells us that God reveals himself as light but also as darkness, because in Him all contradictions are resolved. The cloud that led the Israelites in the desert "was dark" (Ex. 14:20), but it was at the same time luminous (Ex. 13: 21 sq.). The Bible speaks to us on numerous occasions of God revealing himself in the obscurity of a cloud or of the night. A text charged with "centrality" is that which presents the Word of God to us as being launched right in the middle of the night (Wis. 18: 14sq). Psalm 18 is another example where God is spoken of as placing around himself, like a tent, "a circle of clouds" (Ps. 18: 12). But the Scripture text that forms the basis of the "mysticism of darkness", parallel to that of light, is that of Exodus where God tells Moses that he will come to him "in a dark cloud". Later on, Moses will be drawn to it and penetrate its centre (Ex. 19: 9; 20: 21; 24: 16).

The transcendence and inaccessibility of the divine essence is symbolized by the darkness. Here, too, it is a question of something deeply related to God's very essence even though the language used is not as direct as that of the light.

Clement of Alexandria and Origen already speak to us of darkness in this sense. But they are more theologians than experts in this attraction by the centre. In his last writings Saint Gregory of Nyssa conveys all the originality and authenticity of someone who has had living experience of darkness. The darkness progressively attracts the contemplative because God is in it:

Thus, leaving aside everything that appears, not only what the senses perceive but also what the understanding believes it sees, the contemplative goes further and further inward, until, thanks to the activity of his spirit, he penetrates the invisible and the incomprehensible... and it is there that he sees God (29).

St. Gregory has also grasped the paradoxes of the centre:

Here seeing consists in not seeing. Therefore, the

(29) Contemplation on the Life of Moses: Introduction and translation into French by J. Daniélou, Sources Chrétiennes, 44, 376c-377a.

sublime John, who entered into that luminous darkness, tells us that no one has ever seen God; by this negation he defined that knowledge of the divine essence is inaccessible, not to men only but also to all intellectual nature (Ibid).

The commentary on the Song of Songs gives St. Gregory of Nyssa the chance to express in lyrical terms all the beauty of the mysticism of darkness. The inside-outside is poetically expressed as follows:

Encompassed by the divine night, the soul seeks what is concealed in the dark. It certainly possesses love of Him whom it desires. Yet... He evades the grasp of his thoughts [829c-893c].

The soul is encompassed by the divine night, wherein the Spouse makes his presence known to it... yet does not show himself (Ibid. 44, 1001-6).

If you receive me (says God) and let me dwell in you, then in recompense you shall have the dew that covers my head and the dewdrops of the night that soak the curls of my hair (Ibid. 44, 1004-a).

Perhaps one of the clearest and most 'practical' expressions about what the gradual attraction of the darkness is and where it leads is the following:

Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves behind all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness [30].

(30) Ibid. quoted by G. A. Maloney, S.J., in the Breath of the Mystic, Dimension Books, Denville, New Jersey, 1974, p. 75.

We have seen how St. Gregory speaks of the term 'cloud', referring to the darkness in which the contemplative finds himself. "The cloud of unknowing is another familiar term in the mysticism of darkness, such as it appears, - for example, in Pseudo-Dionysos, another great representative of this school:

Thus, separated from the objects and also from the same means of contemplation (the contemplative) penetrates into the cloud, truly mystical, of unknowing (Mystical Theology, p.1, 1001a).

But the author who has described this cloud with great precision is the humble, anonymous English writer of the 14th century, whose well known work carries precisely the title, The Cloud of Unknowing. The essay is written in a style which, without avoiding the depth and difficulty of the theme, contains features of genuine humour, and above all shows an optimism and takes away from the darkness all that could instil excessive fear or give it over tragic tones:

Now you say, "How shall I proceed to think of God as He is in himself"? To this I can only reply "I do not know".

With this question you bring me into the very darkness and cloud of unknowing that I want you to enter... Thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I can know, choosing rather to love him whom I cannot know. Though we cannot know him we can love him. By love he may be touched and embraced, never by thought. Of course, we do well at times to ponder God's majesty or kindness for the insight these meditations may bring. But in the real contemplative work you must set all this aside and cover it with a cloud of forgetting. Then let your loving desire, gracious and devout, step bravely and joyfully beyond it and out to pierce the darkness above. Yes, beat upon that thick cloud of unknowing with the dark of your loving desire and do not cease come what may [3].

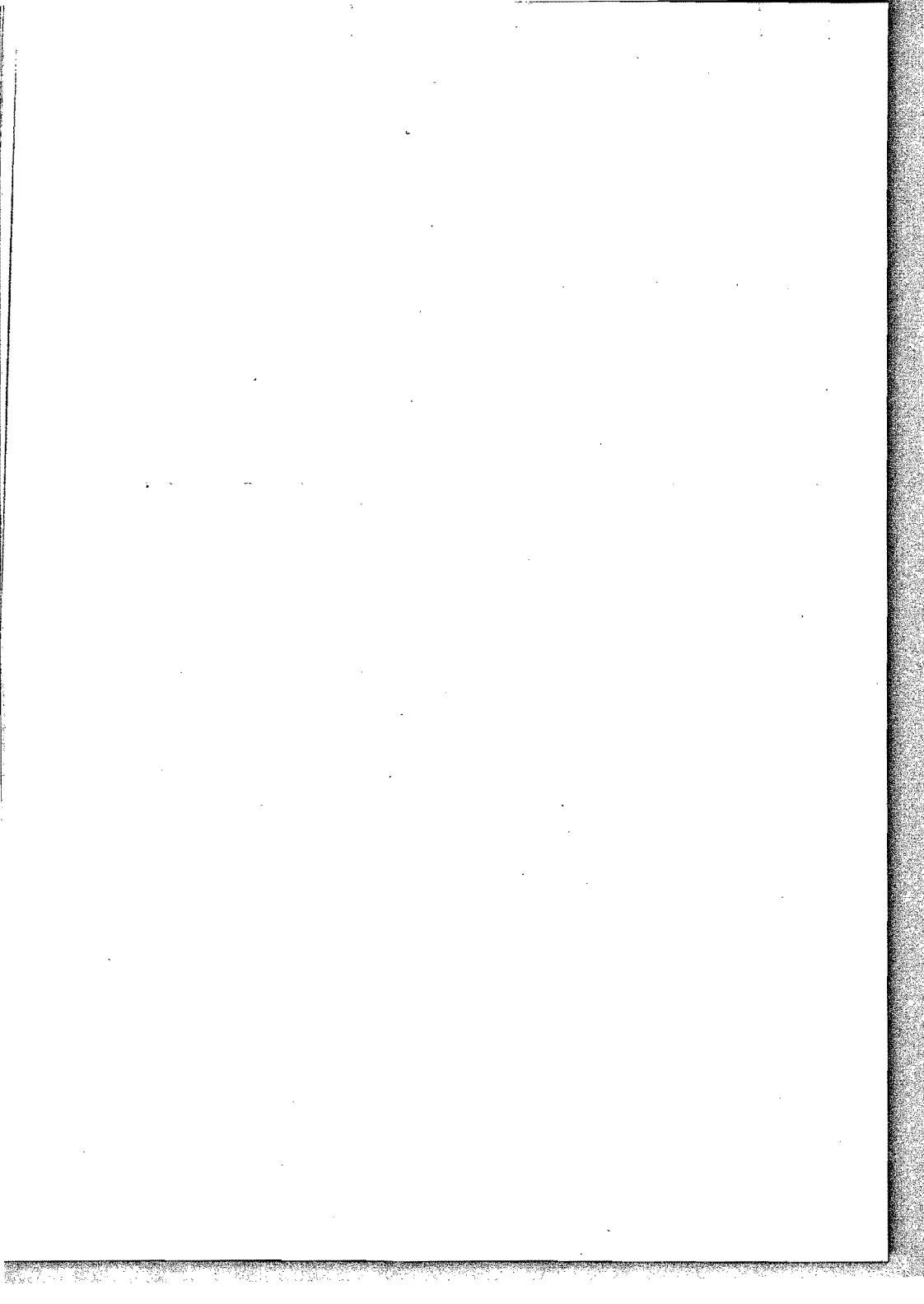
All the terminology of the mysticism of darkness appears in The Dark Night of the Soul of St. John of the

(31) The Cloud of Unknowing, Image Books, New York, 1973 pp 54-55.

Cross. However, the insistence on the purgative and painful aspect of darkness is more marked in him than in any other author:

This darkness should continue for as long as is needful in order to expel and annihilate the habit which the soul has long since formed in its manner of understanding, and the Divine light and illumination will then take its place. And thus, in as much as that power of understanding which it had aforesaid is natural, it follows that the darkness which it here suffers is profound and horrible and most painful, for this darkness, being felt in the deepest substance of the spirit, seems to be substantial darkness.
(Dark Night, II, c.9, n.3).

This is the short summary of the other great signs of the "mystic centre". The person who feels himself attracted to contemplate this dark centre will have to exert himself to become more and more aware of it. He ought to gaze at it and feel it as an obscure pole of attraction. Not to fall away, never to grow weary, and, above all, never to descend to the beaten tracks of analysis and logical thinking. Like one who must pass through a mist relying on his eyes only or, still better, like a blind man yearning to cross the darkness and stubbornly focusing his desire on the infinite obscurity, so must the contemplative fix his loving desire on the so-called darkness that attracts him. Let him not think, nor meditate, nor reflect nor analyze. Because only when the triple purification has revealed to him the existence of the ineffable centre, this and only this will be the sole path and the only thing necessary to go further.



"I am standing at the door,
knocking" (Rev 3:20)

CHRIST AS CENTRE

Christ is the most characteristic and frequent centre of attraction in Christian contemplation. It is not that the other forms of centre do not also constitute a Christian nucleus, but, as we have said, all signs lead to the same divine reality and Christ is the revelation of the Father. But, we are now concerned with a form where the pole of attraction that emerges in the interior of the contemplative is not that of a centre of light, of darkness, or of some other form but the person of Christ himself. Christ the mediator with the Father, is present in some way in all the characteristics of the other centres of contemplative attraction: He himself is light, darkness, and the only way to the "centre of centres".

The Mysterious Christ at the Centre

During retreats and in prayer groups when Christ is talked about or meditated upon, the words and reflections remain most of the time on the superficial level, separated and far from the centre, as we have illustrated. The same can be said of many movements and visual representations fashionable today like the Jesus Movement and Jesus Christ Superstar, pictorials about Christ in Palestine and modern Christological works; these may limit us to only a partial

the contemplative, already cleansed by the threefold purification that has put his being at peace, can aspire to discover progressively. But if man clings stubbornly to an idea a feeling or a superficial image of Christ, mistaking it for the true and unique reality, then, like the father miserably clinging to the wrong ashes, he will lose his true centre of attraction forever.

"I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him" (Rev 3:20). Yet, even people who are in the habit of praying, find themselves frequently too occupied to pray and moan on the surface, holding on to their small coffer of ashes. It cannot be denied that many beautiful reflections about the Christ of the surface can be composed, theological studies written and artistic images created, etc. But should someone be able to penetrate the very centre of his being and there open the door to Him who says "I am calling", that person will know the real and mysterious Christ of the centre, in a more personal, deep and transcendent way than all those who gathered around him on the shores of the Sea of Galilee or those who passionately disputed the issue of "homousion" at the Nicean Council, even though these ways of knowing him are not to be despised.

Who, then, is the Christ of the centre? St. Paul certainly knew him:

*He is the image of the unseen God
and the first-born of all creation,
for in him were created
all things in heaven and on earth:
everything visible and everything invisible,
Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers ---
all things were created through him and for him.
Before anything was created, he existed,
and he holds all things in unity. [Col 1:15-17].*

These words are not a theological embellishment or a poetical flight. They are undoubtedly from his own experience of the centre. Only in this way can we understand the power and mysterious grandeur of the words of the man who one day, on the road to Damascus, asked this mysterious Christ himself: "Who are you"? The same or similar terms, to describe a mysterious, inexpressible experience, are used by those who in the course of history, have discovered the Christ of the Centre:

This incomprehensible light enlightens the understanding of the spirit that has entered into itself, because it is the eternal Wisdom engendered in the soul... Thus man is transformed from brightness to brightness, that is to say, from created brightness to uncreated brightness, by means of his eternal image, which is the Wisdom of the Father [33].

The Christ that Ruysbroek speaks of is not the "Jesus Christ Superstar" nor the Christ of theological treatises but the mysterious Christ of the centre. In this case we see also how he possesses the characteristics of the light. William of Saint-Thierry, with his dose of scholastic style, describes the difference between that which we might call Christian experience of the surface and that of the centre. Without putting aside the usefulness of reflective meditation about the different aspects of the person of Christ, he gives us an insight into "a knowing that is not of the flesh", that is, knowledge of the mysterious Christ of the centre:

One may put before the beginner, as many other images for meditation, the Humanity of the Saviour, his birth, his Suffering, his Resurrection... The Lord presents himself to us as mediator: to turn the gaze of thought towards him in order to consider God under human form is not in any way to depart from the truth... But afterwards faith becomes an affectionate sentiment (= a knowledge of love), drawing close in a delicate love embrace in the midst of his heart to Christ Jesus. Then one begins to know him, not now according to the flesh, although one cannot yet meditate on him fully as God (Ep. ad Fratres, lib, 1, c. 14, No. 43. PL 336ab).

St. John of the Cross speaks to us about Christ of the centre whom he situates symbolically at the very depth of a cavern:

And then to the deep
Caverns of the rock shall we go,
which are well hidden,
and there shall we meet... (Spiritual Canticle, Strophe 37).

(33) Ruysbroek, The Kingdom of Lovers, c. 39. Cf Collationes Brugenses, t. 26, 1926, p. 441 sq.

"The rock is Christ", the contemplative poet tells us in his explanation of his own verses. And if, in case we have not understood that he is telling us about Christ-deep, central, inexpressible, he adds:

However many the mysteries and marvels that holy doctors have discovered and holy souls have understood in this state of life, there still remained everything more to say and even to understand, and so there is much to be fathomed in Christ, because he is like an abounding mine with many veins of rich ores. The more these abound, less is an end or limit to them to be found, but rather we go on finding fresh veins of new riches in this place and that. This is why St. Paul said, speaking of Christ himself: "In Christ are lodged all treasures and hidden wisdom" (Ibid. ed.B).

Here we have "the unfathomable riches of the Heart of Christ" which can be received and enjoyed only at its proper centre. Away from it, everything will be more or less "thinking about Christ", to the same degree that one approaches the surface area, before it merely becomes a "dispute about Christ". But the Christ of the unfathomable riches, the mysterious one, He whom we have so many times superficially named "Heart of Christ", is precisely the Christ of the centre.

William Johnston speaks to us about the union of the two centres: that of the contemplative who has descended into the depths of his own heart and that of Christ the mysterious one who is discovered there:

The living and re-arisen Christ of Paul, he who is always in man, is the unknowable Christ, coextensive with the universe and concealed in the most secret recesses of the human heart. In the most intimate, deepest part of Paul there is no longer Paul, but there is Christ; Paul does not cry out, "Abba, Father!", but the spirit of Christ which is in him utters that cry. For Paul to live is Christ, to die is Christ, and everything is the same thing. And if this is the truth about Paul, it is the truth also for everything that he creates. For a believer, the deepest part of his being is not himself, but Christ. (Christian Zen, cap.6).

"Look at this heart"

With regards to all the other aspects under which the

centre may present itself, we have said that what the contemplative, who is faithful to his discovery, should do is simply look at what attracts him so much in the centre of his being. Do not think, but look. Do not discuss, nor even try to understand, much less try to analyze it with a microscope, but look and let oneself be drawn more and more by this attraction. This is equally true in the case of the mysterious Christ of the centre. When he invites man to know him in such a full and transforming way, he does not say anything else except: "Look at this heart"; that is, "look at this centre of centres". This is the paradox, ever old and ever new, of the fathomless riches of Christ: let him who can look, look; let him who has ears to hear, listen. But one should know how to look in the darkness and learn how to listen even to the faintest sounds. Everything else will link, keep man to the surface. This is why a legendary abbot of the desert, speaking about the mysterious Christ of the centre, told a disciple:

"Science gnosis of Christ has no need of a dialectical soul, out of a seeing soul (= that knows how to see); for dialectics can be acquired by the impure as well, whereas contemplation resides only in the pure" (Euagrius of Pontus, Cent. 4, 90 Frankenburg, 317).

We now know what this threefold and radical purification means in terms of getting to know how to see and how to listen. Once attained, one has only to let oneself be drawn and taught, tirelessly, again and again, by him who says: "look at this heart", and also "I stand here at the gate and call".

Little Baruch's game

In his well known "Journal" Julien Green tells the story of little Baruch, the rabbi's son, playing hide-and seek with his friend. The boy stayed longer and longer in his hiding place and no one could find him. Finally, he came out by himself and went to look for his friend who then had disappeared. Baruch began to cry and ran to his father, saying: "I am hiding myself and nobody comes to look for me!" On hearing this the rabbi, not being able to hold back his tears, said: "God says the same thing: I hide and no one tries to find me".

This is, therefore, the paradox: he who is calling at

the door and he who says "look at this heart", is also in a certain way hidden and speaks from his hiding place. The rules of the game of little Baruch have to be accepted if we want to know who is calling us from there. Anyone who thinks that he can open his door for him or hear him from the surface will find only the Christ of the surface. He will not enter the game but will be left alone to return to the enchanted castle of his dream and schemes. But someone who has already been purified in the three levels, will break through the enchanted circle at the surface and will one day hear the mysterious call from the centre, once he has accepted the rules of little Baruch's game and has placed himself on the road; he only needs to be drawn more and more into the game ("game" is what St. Alphonsus Rodriguez called his own coming and going from the centre). Then Christ, who lives by faith in our hearts, will enlighten him with his mysterious and unique light.

"A good tree cannot bring
forth bad fruit" (Mt 7:18)

THE SIGNS

The last stage in our review of the different aspects of prayer that transform life will make us consider briefly some signs that become visible in the life of the contemplative in action.

"Each tree is known by its fruits", says the Lord (Lk. 6:44). Later on, St. Paul will specify what are the fruits by which men belonging to one or the other camp can be recognized; that is, the true discoverers of the centre and those who have "desires contrary to the spirit" (cf. Gal 5: 16-26). It should be noted, however, that the signs we are going to mention are not infallible when taken one by one. It is in their totality that we find the best guarantee in knowing to what degree a person who bears these fruits is a contemplative and has discovered the centre.

I would like to emphasize, once again, a special aspect of these signs or, as St. Paul calls them, "fruits of the Spirit". Since they are above all fruits, it is not therefore a matter of trying to find them or forming them directly. A real fruit is something that appears; it is a result, not cause. The fruit is the unmistakable sign that a tree already exists and that someone has devoted himself to cultivate and develop that tree as his prime task. And so, it would be a mistake for a person to put all his energy in searching directly for the fruit above all for those fruits which are signs and which we are about to

mention. In that case, such signs would no longer be authentic as coming from the trunk, from the roots. They would be like artificial fruits, empty, and fastened as to a false tree by way of decoration; they would lack the essence of the real sign. A person seeking to widen his horizons of neighbourly love, will no doubt be doing good, but he will not have that special characteristic of love for one's neighbour that emerges spontaneously from the contemplative centre; the same is true for one who seeks directly to be peaceful, to have greater love for God, etc.

Now let us see what are the signs present in a real contemplative.

a) JOY

It is clear that joy emerges spontaneously from the interior of one who is able to contemplate the full splendour of the lilies of the field. It is enough to recall here what we have said about the radiance and optimism that surrounds and constitutes as it were the life of one who has purified the three levels of his person. If God has already begun to exercise his most subtle attraction in the contemplative's centre, then his life will be more and more immersed in that atmosphere of healthy, silent joy.

"To me it seems indeed that contemplation is the joyful song of the love of God taken into the mind, with the sweetness of angelic praise. This is the joy which is the end of perfect prayer and of highest devotion in this life... This is the finest and most perfect of all deeds in this life. The Psalmist therefore says: "Blessed is the man who knows jubilation" in the contemplation of God (Richard Rolle, The Amending of Life, Chapt. 11).

These words sum up one of the points which masters of meditation and contemplative prayer have repeated more than anything else. Throughout all ages and even in all religions joy is inherent to contemplation. Paramahansa Yogananda describes the emergence of contemplative joy in this way:

Since your soul is a reflection of the Spirit, which is everlastingly happy, it is substantially the same happiness. If you keep the eyes of your concentration shut, you will not be able to see the sun of happiness shining in your breast. But, however much you shut the eyes of your attention, the fact remains that

light of the fruit emerging spontaneously and gently as a result of a fundamental attitude of man: to seek his Creator in all things,

In this peace and serenity, the vagaries of this world, took on the appearance of some kind of a dream for St. Theresa of Jesus during the last years of her life. The saintly contemplative sees life as if all its complexities and noise have no more force or power over her than do the pale and fleeting images of dreams:

As I am now out of the world, and my companions are few and saintly, I look down upon the world as from above and care very little what people say or what is known about me. I care more about the smallest degree of progress achieved by one single soul than for all the things that people may say about me... He (the Lord) has given me a life, a kind of sleep: when I see things, I nearly always seem to be dreaming them. In myself I find no great propensity either to joy or to sorrow. If anything produces either of these conditions in me, it passes so quickly that I marvel, and the feeling it leaves is like the feeling left by a dream. And it is really true that, if later I should want to be glad about that occasion of joy or to feel sad about that cause for sorrow, I am no more capable of doing so than is a sensible person of either grieving or glorying over anything he may have dreamed. My soul has been awakened by the Lord from a condition in which I used to feel as I did because I was neither mortified nor dead to the things of the world; and His Majesty will not let me become blind again (Life, chapter 40, n. 22).

This quotation is taken from the last chapter of her autobiography and, as such it constitutes therefore, a sign of the most mature and lofty stage along her contemplative journey. However, the peace we speak about does not always bear such radical features. All will depend on the concrete stage through which the person in deep meditation is passing. Someone beginning to enter into the ways of deep meditation will be surprised, for example, at how he acts with more self-control, and that those very situations which once were so exhausting, have lost their force and tensions, etc. In the work we have previously mentioned Fr Lassalle tells us:

The third fruit is retention of inward peace and self-command in all contrarieties of daily living (Op. cit., p. 147).

c) COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the points least dealt with when speaking of the signs seen in the life of a contemplative in action is the progressive expansion of consciousness. Modern studies about oriental meditation, called "Natural Enlightenment", etc., do describe this important aspect which is undoubtedly reflected also in Christian contemplative prayer.

Starting with its most intense aspect, we may say that when the contemplative's consciousness discovers its "centre of centres" in some way, something like an expansion of the interior horizon is produced. This expansion can have many different degrees and aspects (we know that Enlightenment itself has them), varying according to intensity and continuity. Let us see what constitutes an example of intellectual expansion appearing almost suddenly and with a notable intensity. St. Ignatius of Loyola will never forget the day early in his life when he sat down to rest beside the river Cardoner. His mind had by that time already become accustomed to contemplation: so that we may say that he was now an expert and diligent practitioner of prayer. At the moment which he refers to in his account, his mind was peacefully immersed in the thought of God. Let us listen to the account in his autobiography which he had dictated, as we know, to Fr. Gonzalez of C nara:

And as he sat there the eyes of his understanding began to open. It was not that he saw any vision, but he was understanding and knowing many things, both spiritual and things of faith and letters. And this was with so great an illumination that all things seemed new to him. And it is not possible to state the particular things he understood then, although they were many, but that he received great clarity in the understanding. This was in such a fashion that all the course of his life, the whole sixty and two years gone by, did not seem to him to have attained so much as in that one moment, even taking into account all the aids he had received from God, and all the things he had learned, and even if they were all joined into one. And all this was in such a manner of remaining with his understanding illuminated that it seemed to him as if he were another man and had another understanding than the one he had before(36)

(36) Obras Completas, BAC, Madrid, 1963, 2nd ed., pp.104-105

But the expansion of consciousness in the interior of one who meditates daily can very well happen gradually. William Johnston speaks of it as a continuous aspiration and an ever more cosmic way of thinking, in modern man who walks along the path of meditation:

We live in an age of planetization. That is to say, we live in an age when man longs to be liberated from the confining narrowness of nationalism in order to build the earth. Seeing the place of our little planet in the complex totality of the infinite universe, modern man thinks more and more in cosmic terms and aspires to act in a cosmic way...

If the meditation discussed in this book holds an appeal for contemporary people, this is to some extent because of its cosmic implications... Because meditation entails an expansion of mind, a loss of self, an entrance into altered states of consciousness, a thrust into a dimension beyond time and space, in such ways that not only man's spirit but his very psyche and body become somehow cosmic. (37).

The cosmic consciousness of an authentic meditator is an unequivocal response to the treated and often discussed contemplative isolation. The more a man is an authentic contemplative, the more cosmic he becomes in his vital attitudes. He will be open-minded even in the apparently most insignificant details of his life. With regard to a Christian meditator we may say that he will gradually develop a consciousness of being part of the Mystical Body of Christ.

The teachers of Raja Yoga give their disciples a discipline called Niyama in Sanskrit. Its aim is precisely the widening of the horizons of the consciousness of one who has entered into profound meditation. Objections might be raised here against directly seeking the expansion as a primary goal as contrary to what we said at the introduction of this chapter; we stated that in this, cosmic consciousness would no longer be a sign and consequence -- of a life of contemplation. But the masters of Raja Yoga do no more than help the disciple discover what is already present within and which now can become a forceful habit, thanks to his level of contemplation. On the other hand, cosmic consciousness is a realist's attitude that has repercussions on immediate, everyday life.

(37) Silent Music, Collins, London, 1974, p. 132

Open your eyes, look around you, and observe how the world is suffering from this lack of Cosmic Consciousness. Know therefore that it is not a matter of abstract idealism or of a form of "spiritualism". It is truth, and truths are facts, which can be proved by the physical and psychological sciences. It is realism... This Cosmic Consciousness is really a habit of thinking that all can develop. Its reality is this: if what I desire is a good only for me myself and not for others and for the whole of nature, in the long run neither is it a good for me. Satisfaction of those desires will but come back to me in the form of suffering. But if they are a good for all, in all their manifestations, then they have to be cultivated with enthusiasm, so as to arrive at fulfillment of them: There does not exist any desire howsoever small and insignificant that does not possess a much wider aspect. Desires are energy, energy that penetrates walls, mountains, time and space [38].

d) HEALTH

Much can be said about health of body and psyche as fruits in the life of the person who prays in the way we have described. Naturally, there are exceptions and history has shown us that a contemplative life can be compatible with sickness. But we want to emphasize the fact that deep meditation brings body and spirit in perfect harmony. It will be enough to remember what we said when speaking of the triple purification of being. The deeper contemplative meditation, the stronger is the force with which it sends its beneficial vibrations to the body. Psychosomatic medicine, so well-known today, proves it:

Recent times have seen a good deal of interest in meditation as therapy. Western medicine, it is now recognized, has been desperately one-sided, largely ignoring the role of the mind in the healing of the human body. Assuredly it is acknowledged that up to eighty per cent of modern sickness is either psychosomatic in origin or has a psychosomatic dimension.... Only now with the growing influence of the East and talk about acupuncture, about the life-force, about kundalini and the rest - only now do we begin to grasp again the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of healing. But interest is growing fast. And it is not unlikely that meditation will be one of the principal means of therapy in the future (William Johnston, S.J. op. cit., p.107).

(38) C.E.S. Rai, Lezioni di Rja Yoga, vol. II, Edizioni Mediterranee, Rome 1975, pp. 147-148.

e) CAPACITY FOR MYSTERY

Anyone who is familiar with the writings of the contemplative will perceive through their expressions this sign which we term "capacity for mystery". Capacity, that is: power, facility, familiarity... in the world of the mysterious. The mystics are faced with the difficulty of expressing the inexpressible, but they have succeeded somehow in communicating their unutterable experiences and now more with agility in their strange world. The difficulty lies not with the mystics but with modern man who considers the strange and transcendental world of prayer transforming life as impossible or too idealistic to attain; and it is clear why this is so : some know how to look beyond the lilies of the field while others see nothing except Solomon and the reflections of his riches. They are two worlds, two languages, and it is difficult to find a common ground:

*... researches in consciousness have no vocabulary that will encompass the whole complex issue and they are anxiously looking for one. Perhaps that is the reason for their growing interest in mysticism and in the mystics. The problem is by no means easy because it is impossible to speak accurately about altered or expanded states of consciousness in terms taken from ordinary, normal, waking consciousness. It is like citizens of two different world or universes trying to communicate with one another. Hence mystics usually resort to silence or to symbolism.
(William Johnston, op. cit. p.55).*

It is, therefore, no wonder that the mystics have been considered many times as extravagant beings, dreamers, and even madmen by their own contemporaries. A man with a rationalizing mind has only to read the comparisons which St Theresa draws in her Mansions or the intricate metaphors in St John of the Cross's poetry to feel that it is nothing but heavenly music. But that is exactly what it is. It is a music and a mysterious language which only contemplatives are able to hear in all its subtlety. It is as if they alone have the key, the tuning-fork of those mysterious sounds, which no ordinary tuning in can achieve, neither comprehend according to the normal standards of things and events: "he who has ears to hear, let him hear" says the Lord frequently after relating a parable.

f) THE THREE SIGNS OF ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

In two classic passages of his writings, St. John of

the Cross gives us three key signs by which to recognize contemplatives. Let us say that they are like three traffic lights giving the go signal to contemplative prayer and the stop light to all discursive prayer. St. John of the Cross is very careful to let us know that it is a matter of the simultaneous revelation of these three signs: anyone of them by itself immediately loses its value as a sign of the contemplative (cf. The Ascent, II, 13).

"Now I can't do anything in prayer"

We often hear persons who have been praying discursively for many years say something more or less like this: "I believe I am not getting anywhere in prayer" or, "I am wasting my time doing it". This doing nothing in the case of the contemplative is different from spiritual idleness; for them it is a matter of doing nothing along the lines of theoretical and discursive conceptualization. Instead, the contemplative begins to understand vaguely that there is another way to pray, always another path. It is a matter of above all, learning to behave more passively. Entering into the world of paradoxes, so much part of this type of prayer, we say it is a matter of "acting passively". Care should be taken, however, that the person who is already accustomed to spending long periods of time in prayerful reflection does not fall into the temptation of giving up his prayer when he begins to feel a lack of interest, powerlessness and no appetite for prayer like before: it can be nothing less than the first signal light giving him the free way to go beyond the lilies of the field.

"I have nothing to look forward to"

The second signal, easily confused with states of nervous depression, is a general lack of desire for the material things of the world which St. John of the Cross calls "not to put the imagination and feeling in other specific things". This sign is equivalent to the states of withdrawal which St. Ignatius of Loyola termed "indifference". It is well-known in oriental meditation. Let us not forget, however, that it is a sign: it will, therefore, be a lack of interest for things and an indifference not looked for but discovered and appearing spontaneously in the personality of the contemplative.

"The Surest Sign"

This is what St John of the Cross calls his third sig

nal light. It is the surest sign because it qualifies and determines in a more radical and unmistakable way the contemplative orientation of the other two. Following the vocabulary that we have been using until now, we can say that the third signal is the discovery of the centre as the *unum necessarium*, that is, how the loving God attracts in an absolute and total way:

"The third and surest sign is that the soul takes pleasure in being alone, and waits with loving attentiveness upon God, without making any particular meditation, in inward peace and quietness and rest, and without acts and exercises of the faculties-memory, understanding and will - at least, without discursive acts, that is, without passing from one thing to another; the soul is alone, with an attentiveness and a knowledge, general and loving, as we said, but without any particular understanding, and adverting not to what it is contemplating." (The Ascent, II, 13, n.4).

We see, therefore, that the clearest and most authentic sign manifested by the contemplative is nothing less than the sign of love. It is, after all, the first and second commandment, the summary of the law and the prophets, even more, it is "beyond the law" (cf. Gal. 5: 22-23) so it is also "beyond the lilies".

* *

Through these pages we have dealt with some aspects of the most radical and deepest prayer: contemplation in action, the prayer that transforms life. Upon examining the different stages of this gradual transformation of the human being, we saw that all began with a search, first fearful and dark at first, then becoming more diversified and concrete in different individuals, but always enveloped in the unutterable dimensions of the mystery of God. It was necessary to discover a certain path of purification, a triple approach, so that the first impulse to seek is not lost in useless ways, like that of the musk deer. We also saw how the triple purification of the physico-muscular, emotional and mental levels had some concrete effects causing the brightness of everyday life to dawn before the contemplative's gaze in such a way that life becomes to him a continuous, dazzling miracle. The most authentic and definitive step in the search was, however, the opening up of the "contemplative centre": this interior point of attraction is revealed in different forms, according to the different cultures and unique personality of the search but always in

direct relationship with the personal God. From this moment onward man does nothing except to look at the centre, that is, to continually hold on to that pole of supreme attraction of all his being. That will be, with the nuances noted during the course of the study of this theme, his main activity and the surest way to reach the highest degree of spiritual maturity without wasting energy.

It is easy to deduce from here, to what extent it is important for man to seek and to discover his own "centre of attraction". In the measure in which a human being lacks contact with that supreme pole upon which to set his hearings or possesses it only as a theoretical and ineffective concept, he will lack the necessary strength in order to give unity and cohesion to his life, to elevate his destiny and to transform it with a constant vision that transcends materialism and the narrow limits of a conception of a mere earthly, fleeting and shortsighted life. Man - young or old - without this divine centre of attraction, will live with a mind exposed to continuous influences from the environment, without the capacity to genuinely discern the good from the evil ones, without a definite course, and above all, without a guiding force that will arouse his better ideals and qualities, elevating them to the highest level and incorporating them in a personal unity and originality as it is revealed in the true contemplative in action. On the other hand, if the seeker comes to discover his supreme centre, all good things arrive with it: the miracle of life will be revealed to him, his personality will gradually develop, the upward and the inward way will remain amply open in breadth and in length, with cosmic dimensions because energy's true centre leads nowhere else but to God, whatever its external garment is, and God is boundless. All will depend on the constancy and intensity with which the contemplative looks at "the centre of centres"; but the way is definitely already discovered: there is nothing more except to follow it to infinity. It is a mystery of love, with all the mysteries and greatness that the unique and true love brings with it.

I like to end these pages with some words from Father William Johnston that express all the vast beauty and power of this way to love: we cannot doubt that contemplative prayer is prayer that radically transforms man's life and elevates it way above simple, passing activism:

It is love that builds the earth and carries for

ward the thrust of evolution. It is love that brings together the great traditions in a union which cross fertilizes even when it differentiates. It is love that leads them on towards Omega, the point of convergence which is also

'the mountains,
the solitary wooded valleys,
strange islands...
silent music'.

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