

Supernatural Prayer

We know the pretty little parable confided by Saint Therese of the Child Jesus to her novice Marie of the Trinity, and who relayed it to us: the story of the child at the bottom of the stairs; he hardly knows how to walk and sees his mother at the top of the stairs and would like to join her. So, said Therese, he lifted his little foot but he was too small to reach the first step. If he gives up, his mother will think he changed his mind and will leave him there. But, if he insists, he will not climb anymore. His mother will then go down the stairs, take him in her arms and, in one swoop, will take him upstairs.¹

The comparison of Therese is brilliant. In addition, she is right in line with the thinking of her *Madre*, Teresa of Avila, who conceived her masterpiece, the Interior Castle, according to a two-fold schema: the first three *Mansions* describe the behavior of a person who is on a self-propelled quest for God with the aid of ordinary grace. These efforts, as with the gesture of the child, are necessary and radically inadequate to reach infused contemplation. The last four *Mansions* discuss what God wants to do with a man when He gets a hold of him and allows him to taste, so to speak, who He is; or in other words, communicate Himself by free acts of grace to this person who could not do better by his own efforts than to offer himself to this experience.

In the life of interior prayer, we are led to distinguish two very different forms. First, there is interior prayer as it is described in the first part of this book, and for which Teresa of Avila gives appropriate advice, according to a 'way' that belongs to her alone. And then, there are the supernatural forms of interior prayer that are not accessible through human effort, even aided by ordinary grace, which are a free gift from God. Theologians reserve the name infused for these forms, or simply contemplation, as long as the notion of acquired contemplation is rejected. But

here, we are getting into a scholarly discussion into which we will not enter.

Perhaps it could be asked what the point is for the ordinary Christian to study these questions of supernatural prayer. This reserved attitude could be defended if we were satisfied serving God as a good manager serves a respected master. But the Judeo-Christian belief is in a loving God; a God inviting His creature into a father-child, spouse to spouse relationship. A beggar God, lost in love, father or mother with a heart full of tenderness, whose greatest desire is to give Himself. A God who knows how to stir up in His creature bursts of crazy love, way beyond a rigorous observation of principles. In such a way that, all throughout the history of salvation, in the old as in the new covenant, men and women have been possessed with the desire of union which made Teresa of Avila say as a child: "I want to see God", and which pushed her to leave for the Maure country in order to be decapitated in the name of faith.

This attraction to the mystical life has been lived more or less intensely based on the era and the country. It however makes up a permanent given of religious phenomenon, and especially in Catholic life in the west. However, with the rise of the Charismatic movement, it could be thought that we are living in a time of increase of these hopes and perhaps even of these graces; thus the increased need to find our place. Because, on the one hand, these stronger desires cause an increase in illusion; on the other hand, doubt is growing too, bringing fear to the recipients and an excessive caution in those who guide them. It is not surprising then that two important mystical doctors, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, came along at a time of intense religious fervor in Spain, but also of more or less counterfeit experiences and maintained illusions in a group called by a vague term, the Alumbrados, the Enlightened.

¹ Told in the older editions of *The Story of a Soul*, in the chapter, Advice and Memories. It is not to be confused with

the divine elevator, of which Therese talks of in Manuscript C 3r, even if the texts come from the same inspiration.

Putting ourselves in the school of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, we will try to describe the supernatural prayer experiences of which they speak; Teresa with her talent as a writer and her ability to analyze; and John, with his theological science, in addition to his genius as a poet. We will try at the same time to make the connection with current experiences, some common, others more exceptional. It is not, as in the first part of this work, about describing the art of interior prayer, but rather about recognizing divine initiative; then, after having recognized it, outlining some practical attitudes to adopt concerning it, when we run into it on our own path, or that of another.

Types of Supernatural Prayer

When Teresa of Jesus undertook the telling of her *Life*, she paused before discussing the period following her final conversion in 1554. She felt the need to introduce a sort of description of the different degrees of interior prayer in the form of a fable: the four ways to water the garden. The garden is the soul. The watering represents the diverse forms of interior prayer which allow the plants to give through their colors, their scent and their fruit (V 11 through 21).

We can proceed, said Teresa, by getting water from the well with the help of a bucket and then watering it ourselves. This method represents interior prayer to which we give ourselves through our own efforts helped by grace. But there are other methods of watering. It is possible to use a noria, operated using a little mule. This of course makes the task much easier. But even easier is bringing the water with the help of an aqueduct to promote better irrigation. Lastly, if the sky allows an abundant and peaceful rain to fall, it would only require letting it happen and the result would be achieved under the best conditions.

When Teresa wrote the *Vida*, around 1565, she was not yet in possession of all the experience that she would later acquire. She did not yet have the command of her subject as when she would review the *Vida* for Rodrigo Alvarez from the Inquisition, a

relationship established in Seville in 1576, and especially in 1577 with the *Interior Castle*. In her last two works, she realized that the second and third ways to water the garden characterized two different forms of interior prayer in intensity but not in nature; and that only the fourth depended on another theological understanding. To be clear, we can therefore say:

-that the second and third ways to water the garden correspond to what is called in technical language, the supernatural prayer of quiet that she addresses in the fourth *Mansion* of the *Interior Castle*.

-that the fourth way characterizes the supernatural prayer of union—a superior and more rare gift—and to which she consecrated the last three *Mansions*.

We have just indicated the principal texts where she explicitly treats these subjects. The *Way of Perfection*, another important work of Teresa, essentially gives advice for ordinary interior prayer and only touches in passing on supernatural interior prayer.

Let's stop a minute following Teresa in an attempt to get a clear and sufficiently theological idea of what this is all about.

“Supernatural” interior prayer is, we could say, a form of prayer where all the initiative belongs to God. The first part of this book dealt with a form of interior prayer called ‘recollection’ which can be practiced by anyone who wishes to. Without a doubt, grace is at work. But, it acts, if it can be said, incognito. We are invited to put ourselves in the Presence of this God that only faith allows us to know, but that we believe is there in front of us in the tabernacle for example, or in the depths of our soul. We force ourselves, in order to remain before this Presence, to let go everything that is soliciting our exterior senses and triggering our desires, our fears, our preoccupations, etc. Besides, to carry on an ‘exchange of friendship’ with this Presence, we have to, from time to time ‘throw some twigs’ to rekindle the flame: we can use Gospel texts, conversations or scenes from the Gospel;

occasionally express this or that desire or love impulse; struggle against recurring distractions, etc. In short, we employ a certain activity which, though not physical, is nevertheless tiring. On the other hand, this activity, brought about surely by our faith in this God that we do not see, in this Christ only visible as bread, this activity is not any less like what we could use when applying ourselves to think about a secular subject or when we recollect ourselves to live an artistic or other emotion more intensely. We are “operating”, one could say, in a human manner.

When it pleases God, on the hand, to grant us the grace of supernatural prayer, things do not happen in this way. We feel ourselves seized, captured, in a way that we cannot reproduce by our will. Or else, we are blessed with joy—or pain—which occur with apparently no cause. But we get insights which shed light which seem to us to be explicitly for us. In short, our activity takes on quite another tone, which has the taste of the divine. We do not have a direct experience with God, but we experience what it is to live in unison with God or, to go back to the first image, what it is to ‘function’ God’s way.

These divine interventions assume that we are sensitive and receptive to the action of the Holy Spirit who ‘prays in us with inexpressible groans (see Rm. 8:26 and Gal. 4:6).’ Everything happens as if the soul, in a state of grace, were blessed with a supernatural mind permitting it to capture divine waves. A theology of the gifts of the Holy Spirit has been elaborated. When one fully accepts it, or even with reserve, the soul has the privilege of experiencing a docility, a passivity rather, which renders it flexible to God’s action and therefore recipient, under Divine initiative, of experiences that have the taste of God.

The First Supernatural Prayer- Quiet and Recollection

Let’s go back to what Saint Teresa told us about this in the *Fourth Mansions*. She promised us earlier to explain the difference between ‘*gustos*’

and ‘*contentos*’, in other words two different ways to enjoy God’s company.

The ‘*contentos*’ are associated with the first three *Mansions*. They are natural satisfactions, the result of the attainment of a goal or of a circumstance that meets our expectation. Teresa gives the example of the joy of a woman whose husband or son is at war and who sees him return safe and sound. These joys have a cause, it is evident why one feels them. And, upon reflexion, they are explainable as are all natural joys. Here, without a doubt their goal is religious: we have overcome a temptation, we realize that we have acquired a virtue or a type of interior prayer agrees with us and, so we are happy. It is about religious joys, but they are produced in keeping with the ordinary laws of psychology, according to our human manner of ‘functioning’.

It is completely different from what Teresa calls the ‘*gustos*’ which are characteristic of the *Fourth Mansions*. To make herself understood, she again uses a comparison. Let’s let her speak:

“Let’s consider, for a better understanding, that we see two founts with two water troughs....These two troughs are filled with water in different ways; with one the water comes from far away through many aqueducts and the use of much ingenuity; with the other the source of the water is right there, and the trough fills without any noise...This is the difference: the water coming from the aqueducts is comparable, in my opinion, to the consolations I mentioned that are drawn from meditation. For we obtain them through thoughts, assisting ourselves, using creatures to help our meditation, and tiring the intellect. Since, in the end, the consolation comes through our own efforts, noise is made when there has to be some replenishing of the benefits the consolation causes in the soul, as has been said.

“With this other fount, the water comes from its own source which is God. And since His Majesty desires to do so-when He is pleased to grant some supernatural favor-He produces this delight with the greatest peace and quiet and sweetness in the very interior part of the ourselves. I don’t know from where or how, nor is that happiness and

delight experienced as are earthly consolations, in the heart. I mean there is no similarity at the beginning, for afterward the delight fills everything; this water overflows through all the dwelling places and faculties until reaching the body.”

“I was now thinking, while writing this, that the verse mentioned above, Dilatasti cor meum, says the heart was expanded. I don’t think the experience is something, as I say, that rises from the heart, but from another part still more interior, as from something deep. I think this must be the center of the soul... (IC 4 2, 1 to 5).”

To be understood, this long quote deserves to be compared to a note of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the Exercises. *“It belongs to God alone, Our Lord gives consolation to a soul without any prior cause. Because it is inherent in the Creator to enter a soul, to leave it, to excite movements in the soul which attract it to the love of His Majesty.”*

‘I say ‘without cause’, in other words without any prior feeling or perception of any object from which this consolation came by means of its acts of intelligence or of the will (Spiritual Exercises note 330).”

The conciseness of Saint Ignatius contrasts with the prolixity of Saint Teresa. God, present in the deepest part of the soul, is able to bring about in it movements which invade it and which speak to the entire being, including sometimes even the body.

This is the first form that Teresa calls **the prayer of quiet**. A number of her readers will identify somewhat. As for us, we have often seen it during both spiritual direction and retreats.

Here for example is what Christine² wrote: “Very often during interior prayer for several years...I have been accompanied by this presence (of the Lord)...and, I had no trouble recollecting myself or finding this presence which filled me with joy and gave me a great strength to accomplish whatever I was doing.”

The awareness and joy that invade you without apparent reason can happen during interior prayer, but also at anytime, unexpectedly; joy to be loved by God, to be His child. Joy that can sometimes be followed, without apparent reason, by a period of sadness or anxiety: “I am going to “pay the price”, said Lucienne leaving the retreat, but Jesus will be with me. When I saw what was waiting for me, I was full of anxiety and did not sleep all night. And then, this morning, all of a sudden, just like that, I was invaded with an immense peace. Since that is what He wants, He will not leave me alone.”

Without a doubt, it is necessary to exercise discernment. ‘Avoid imitations’, said an old billboard. ‘A tree can be recognized by its fruits’, said Jesus, and it is only after the fact that we can discern a visit from the Lord. Nothing would be more dangerous than to think you ‘have a direct line’ to the Holy Spirit. But, on this note of caution, it is good to be able to recognize a relatively common, basic form of supernatural prayer.

It is necessary to add, as Teresa said, that in these things, there is the more and the less. As we were saying, she herself placed, as the third way to water the garden, experiences that later she would recognize as analogous to the prayer of quiet, but only in a greater intensity. Chapter XVI in the *Vida* describes a form of praise “*where the soul would only want to be tongues to praise the Lord, saying a thousand crazy things, wishing for a thousand deaths (V16 4)*”. Chapter XVI had led commentators to compare what Teresa says here to what is seen in the Charismatic Renewal. As a result, those familiar with this movement will understand without any trouble.

All the same, outside of these circles similar experiences can be found. Here is what Christine, already mentioned, wrote: “This was a true passion, an exchange, a mutual gift, a devouring fire...it was something profound and intense that I could not refuse. The senses did not play any role in it. Everything in me was a gift, welcome...I only

² By discretion, the first names have been of course changed.

desired to be surrendered more and more deeply and that the Lord would be in the deepest part of me and that I understood that it was truly like that.

Right after having described the prayer of quiet in the *Interior Castle*, Saint Teresa describes another experience that she calls **supernatural recollection**³ and which she tells us often happens before the prayer of quiet. Let's let her tell us: "*Let us suppose that these senses and faculties have (for I have already mentioned that these powers are the people of this castle, which is the image I have taken for my explanation) have gone outside and have walked for days and years with strangers—enemies of the well-being of the castle [...] Once the great King, who is in the center dwelling place of this castle, sees their good will, He desires in His wonderful mercy to bring them back to Him. Like a good shepherd, with a whistle so gentle that even they themselves almost fail to hear it. He makes them recognize His voice and stops them from going so far astray so that they will return to their dwelling place. And this shepherd's whistle has such power that they abandon the exterior things in which they were estranged from Him and enter the castle (IC 4 3, 2).*

What our doctor is saying, in her way, a lot of people have experienced. They come to interior prayer one morning, and that day they feel overcome by the presence of the Lord, in the tabernacle or in the deepest part of their soul. For a time more or less long, nothing interests them except this presence. The preoccupations of the day, memories could return to their consciousness, but they are not tempted to let themselves become absorbed by them. If a thought about the Gospel comes to them, an aspect of the faith holds their interest, they bring it back to the Lord who is there, and who has taken hold of them. Completely happy, they tell themselves that maybe: "This time I believe I have it, I know how to do interior prayer", and when they return to it and try to recreate this state of mind-- profound disillusionment! They do

³ It is noteworthy that it is about a supernatural recollection and not about the way of recollection suggested by Saint Teresa herself in the *Way of Perfection*.

not succeed and find themselves in their usual state of heaviness. They then realize that this was given to them as a purely free gift and there is not a recipe to bring it about.

Quiet and recollection are two forms of supernatural prayer that are elementary and relatively common. They allow the confirmation of the joke of the novice master: "A few little drops of contemplation (of the supernatural) happen to everyone!" This example would not be complete if we neglected to listen to the complementary teaching of Saint John of the Cross.

The 'Nights' of John of the Cross

He gives, in the *Dark Night*⁴, a few signs which allow the seeker of God, or more often the one directing him, to recognize another way in which God communicates supernaturally.

The soul goes through dryness, a sort of emptiness. Nothing happens during his interior prayer time. Worried by this vacuity, he tries to either read the Gospel or other spiritual authors but very quickly he puts the book down unable to continue. Faced with this powerlessness, he wonders if he is not undergoing punishment for some sort of unfaithfulness; if the Lord has not withdrawn because he let Him down first; but, no. There are certainly some weaknesses or frailties in his life, but he is not intentionally refusing to give anything to God, even in less serious matters. Finally, this worry is accompanied by an increasing desire to serve the Lord, to be loyal to Him, even as the dryness continues.

It is, says Saint John of the Cross, a form of authentic, infused contemplation. God communicates in a way that allows the person to experience who He is but in a negative way: He is above all, the one we cannot see, nor feel, nor touch. To come back to the distinction already

⁴ *Dark Night*, Book 1, ch. ix. He also talks a little differently in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book II, ch. Xiii.

mentioned, we were living out our faith according to our human manner of 'functioning'. Now, says Saint Jean of the Cross, it is God Himself who infuses His light and, like a bird of the night exposed to the light of day, we are blinded, immersed in a dark night that he calls **passive night of the senses**.

Another night can manifest, afterwards or even simultaneously, even more difficult, that John of the Cross calls the **passive night of the soul**. This divine light exposes our sinful nature. The soul suffers an intolerable pain, realizing how resistant it was to God. It is not only, as in the night of the senses, too small and too weak to adapt to the divine light, but is in addition, soiled by sin. A whole part of itself---and in that moment, it seems that it is the entire soul--- seems impure, contrasted with God. It is a sort of insight into one's own hell.

It is really rather a purgatory because it is infinite Love communicating in this manner with the soul. Initially, He allows the soul to realize in an acute manner its isolation from this love. We know the comparison used by John of the Cross of the log thrown in the fire which, before becoming a source of lively flames or glowing embers, must weep, blacken, smoke and crackle.

It is important that the spiritual director of this soul be able to recognize this passage. Our author severely chastises the confessors who do not know how to respect the liberty of the Spirit in souls and inflict a straightjacket of methodical prayer of which they are incapable. A great, contemporary spiritual master even wrote that these forms of dry contemplation are, today, more common than those spoken of by Teresa of Jesus.⁵ He wrote in the fifties and we can wonder if, with the end of the twentieth century approaching, it will be this way in the future. But in any event it is important to recognize these negative forms, if we can call them that, of supernatural prayer.

The recognition is all the more important since these experiences, in light of their character of purification, can manifest in all sorts of trials: sickness, depression, professional or family difficulties, etc. and as a result it is possible to not understand anything and to limit oneself to a 'natural' reading of events, putting aside their spiritual dimension.

When John of the Cross speaks of the 'nights', it is not specifically about what happens in interior prayer. He describes the state of the soul, a type of general climate. Teresa of Jesus herself, never clearly makes the distinction between interior prayer strictly speaking and the life of interior prayer. In a way, what has been described up to this point can also be found during the intense moments of prayer but also at all times of the day or night.

The Prayer of Union

All that was just said characterizes, once again, relatively common forms of supernatural prayer. Even the passive night of the soul presents with relative frequency; a lot of God seekers will identify. From the *Fifth Mansions* on, however, a sort of bottleneck occurs. Teresa mentions that the supernatural prayer of 'union' is a much rarer gift.

What is it about? The genius of our Doctor is her ability to find comparisons that hit the nail on the head. This time, it is about the famous image of the silkworm (IC 5, 2). This fat, widespread, dull, ugly animal builds a cocoon in which it buries itself and dies only to be reborn a gracious, colorful and agile butterfly. It is an amazing transformation that fills Teresa with enthusiasm. Yet, it is still less surprising than her accomplishment of the supernatural prayer of union. The soul is grasped by God and completely taken over at its essence. It is no longer the power of the will, the intellect or the imagination that is fixed on the divine object. It is the whole being that is captured, seized, so much so,

⁵ Father Marie-Eugene de l'Enfant Jesus, I want to see God, Editions du Carmel, 1973, p. 518.

that all psychological activity is suspended which would normally bring about a loss of consciousness, of time and of one's surroundings. Because we have in fact—excluding exceptions contrary to the laws of nature---no awareness of our 'me' other than a manifestation of a physical or psychological activity.

The soul who has been 'thrust' like this into God realizes, once restored to consciousness, that it was introduced into another world and came out of it totally transformed. Sometimes this encounter is so rough—the soul feels transported "*in the arms of a giant*", writes Teresa—that she feared for her life. And she spontaneously cited, saying what happened, the expressions of Saint Paul according to whom we are 'buried with the Christ to be reborn to a new life' or that 'Christ is our life' (Col.3:3; Rm. 6:4).

We are facing a much rarer experience, one that is, at the same time, much more difficult to recognize and to explain. Teresa, after having described the prayer of union, was mainly interested in its effects, loyal to the Gospel principal of discernment according to which you recognize the tree by its fruit. This gift of union results in a new life for the person, blessed to received it, a life in unison with Christ's life. Not that the thoughts are always enmeshed with those of Christ, which would render executing the humble tasks of daily life impossible, but the will submits willingly to the smallest promptings of the Holy Spirit as they occur throughout the day.

Our author will continue with the *Sixth Mansions*, a description of the graces that accompany---at least for her---the prayer of union. She insisted on the emotional repercussions of such gifts, showing that the whole being was consumed and not only at the level of knowledge. She added an enumeration of the experiences of all sorts, hardly compatible, at least with this loss of consciousness that we were talking about, which punctuated this period of her life where she was blessed with the prayer of union. She will then experience visions in images which will be lavished upon her---visions deep inside---; profound insights into certain mysteries that she

will call intellectual visions; as well as the impression of the presence of Christ at her side that her confessors will also call intellectual visions. She herself, remained reticent about merging the two visions (IC 6 8, 2).

John of the Cross, according to his grace and his own genius, will talk of similar experiences in the last stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle* and especially in the *Living Flame*.

As for the graces of the prayer of union, should we really talk about exceptional gifts or rare experiences? It would seem in fact that they are not found on every spiritual path. All the same, not all canonized saints, nor those able to be canonized, have had these gifts. Here is the witness of a simple person, who at this moment, does not really understand what happened to her. "This happened during the communal prayer in the chapel. I was overtaken by the presence of God, as I am at times. Jesus was there, I was not thinking about anything, but He was there and I was with Him. When it was over, I was surprised; everyone had gone. The others thought that I had gone to sleep. I was certain not to have gone to sleep, but during this time I was not aware of anything going on around me." The knowledge of the person and of her habitual nature of behavior allows us to think that something ecstatic happened there.

As far as intellectual visions or visions in images of which Teresa of Jesus spoke, they are not directly related to a life of interior prayer. However, it is possible that we can contrast them with certain relatively frequent experiences noticed during or outside of interior prayer.

It sometimes happens that a Gospel verse, read so often that it is known by heart, comes up during prayer but this time a whole new sense is revealed. It seems to us to be 'right on target', adapted personally to us or illuminating an aspect of our life to an unexpected depth. This leads us to think about Bergson according to whom "the mystical life

consists in reviewing the letter of doctrine as having the nature of fire.⁶

Likewise, this apparently insignificant detail from a Gospel scene appears to us all of a sudden, revealing a profound truth of faith. It becomes a symbol which introduces us into the heart of a mystery. Sometimes we receive this assurance. A religious vocation was decided by a young girl at the simple suggestion that the Lord of Gethsemane had looked at her. This detail, ‘seen’ interiorly, bore for her the message that Pascal had Jesus say: ‘I thought of you in my suffering, I spilled this drop of blood for you.’ With a thirty year interval, this grace has kept all of its strength. It is similar to the experience to which Therese of Lisieux makes allusion when she reports the feelings that overcame her at Sunday Mass seeing the bloody hand of Jesus on the Cross come out of the pages of her missal. It is not about a ‘vision’, such as Teresa of Avila speaks of in the *Sixth Mansions*, but of a supernatural and completely free gift that the Lord gives when He wants.

Furthermore, it may be plausible to consider that the grace of visions, granted to the great mystics, has the goal of allowing us to recognize, as through a magnifying glass, the more modest gifts, just alluded to, that the Lord often enjoys giving. These are, once again, the ‘little drops of contemplation’ which would probably go unnoticed, if the more exceptional visions of a Teresa of Jesus—or others—did not allow us to see them as if through a magnifying mirror. But, this leads us to a few theological questions as this rapid overview draws to a close.

What attitude should be adopted towards these Graces?

How should these supernatural graces of interior prayer be considered? There is no black and white answer but two opposite pitfalls must be avoided:

⁶ Bergson, *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*, Pairs, Alcan, 1932. P.253.

one that says that these graces are not a sign of holiness, so they are not important, and the other affirms that this is what we should be asking from God with the risk of remaining at the half-way point on the path of salvation. Let’s take a look at both points of view.

These graces are not a sign of holiness

It is apparent in the lives of the Saints that the graces of supernatural prayer—and all that is related to them—hold an extremely variable place. According to certain of his biographies, Saint Vincent de Paul hardly experienced this type of interior prayer but was nevertheless invited to take his place in the gallery of Saints, even if it wasn’t strictly speaking in the area of prayer. Comparing the lives of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Teresa of Lisieux, we are struck at the extreme difference between the two from the point of view that interests us. In the latter, very few things were out of the ordinary, while with Saint Teresa of Avila a lot was, but she knew the same simplicity in the last ten years of her life even though they were the busiest and the most productive. Both, however, were two great Saints. Therefore, we cannot say that these graces are really appropriate criteria to evaluate the degree of union with God. If we can --- and must—evaluate it.

Manifestations of this type can find their origin, or at least a favorable terrain, based on temperament. It is certainly not false to affirm that there is a natural predisposition to mystical life and even to its different forms, not to mention that the spiritual traditions, with which different temperaments find affinities, can also have an influence. Father Marie-Eugene stated in a casual conversation during a meeting with the professional body of a big seminary: “In Carmel, there is hardly anyone with stigmata, this is more often found in the Franciscan tradition. With us, it is more often the graces of interior prayer.”

We are on mysterious ground which requires exploration. What we can conclude is again from Teresa of Avila: *‘...God doesn’t lead all by one path...so, not because all in this house practice prayer must all be contemplative; that’s impossible. And it would be very distressing for the one who isn’t a contemplative if she didn’t understand the truth that to be a contemplative is a gift from God; and since being one isn’t necessary for salvation, nor does God demand this, she shouldn’t think anyone will demand it of her...the Lord leads her as one who is strong, saving for her what she doesn’t enjoy here below so as to give it to her all at once. (W 17 2).’*

Thus, should we be concerned with these graces? This would seem to be the other pitfall to avoid.

These graces are helpful and even precious

If they are, as we have seen, a way that God intimately communicates with souls, to consider them null and void would be to ignore God’s love and His desire for union with His creature. Thus, John of the Cross, like Teresa of Jesus, did not hesitate to say that if these graces were not encountered more often, it is not God’s fault. Let’s listen to Teresa again: *“So I say now that all of us who wear this holy habit of Carmel are called to prayer and contemplation...this precious pearl of contemplation that we are speaking about. Yet few of us dispose ourselves that the Lord may communicate it to us...but in the practice of virtues that are necessary for arriving at this point we need very, very much and cannot be careless in either small things or great. (IC 5 1).*

The fact is that these graces are precious. Their price is linked to the fact that God is communicating Himself. We need to remember the word that God gave to Aaron and Myriam concerning their brother Moses to whom God did not communicate through dreams or visions, but face to face (Num.13: 6-8). These graces are also precious because of the fruits they produce. We

only need to recall the joys that Teresa called ‘gustos’, or the insights that warm as they enlighten and dramatically increase enthusiasm for the good. And what is there to say about the prayer of union which transforms its recipient from a fat worm into a light butterfly, in other words, allowing the person to live a brand new life in which the Lord is always served first.

The effects of these forms of supernatural prayer and their usefulness to the recipient or to God’s people determine their value. First of all, we notice that the Lord acts as the Spouse in the Spiritual Canticle: He stands at the door and He knocks. A person who is still attached to earthly food, or tempted to return to Egypt, becomes the object of these favors, ‘gustos’ to be exact. The Lord certainly wants to give the person a taste of the divine in order to turn him away from fallacious food, from the cracked cisterns of which Jeremiah spoke. For those involved in contemporary pasturing, coming into contact with many ‘lapsed’ Catholics, adults who after having erred from the church, find or re-find the paths of the Christian life, we notice that they often have an easy, initial period, full of opportunity, where much is ‘given’ them: joy to serve God, bursts of generosity, easy recollection, etc. The laws of psychology can explain this phenomenon in part, but to stick to this explanation would be oversimplifying.

The divine gifts can overtake the mind of the recipient resulting in spiritual progress, but no man is an island. A soul who is raised up, raises up the world and it would seem theologically quite healthy to consider the graces of supernatural prayer and all that goes along with them, such as the ‘spiritual gifts’, in the technical sense of the word, or graces given for the people of God.

As a matter of fact, the recipient of these graces becomes a witness. He speaks from experience and could take as his own the formula of Andre Frossard: “God exists, I met Him.” His burning experience warms all those who approach him. This heat can remain discrete, but is not any the less of a modest realization of what Bergson wrote about the mystiques-- their life is a calling. To come back to

what western Christians have been living for several decades now, we remark that many of these returning ‘lapsed Catholics’ of whom we were speaking, came back to the faith through contact with the Charismatic movement. It is here that they found witnesses who were living and talking about experiences that allowed us to easily recognize the second or third way to water the garden of Teresa of Jesus.⁷

What can we say about the prayer of union and the exceptional gifts associated with it? Would it not be possible to find yet another key explaining it in Teresa’s *Fifth Mansions*? After having talked about the effects of the prayer of union, in other words, total submission and flexibility to the will of God, she adds: “*This union with God’s will is the union I have desired all my life; it is the union I ask the Lord for always and the one that is clearest and safest*” (IC 5 3, 5). To do the will of God in each moment is sainthood. And Teresa, concluding her description of the supernatural prayer of union presents it as a ‘*short cut*’ (IC 5 3, 4) to reach sainthood. To reach a liberty where, the old man being dead, the soul is perfectly delivered into the hands of God.

Can we not say, if only hypothetically, that if the Holy Spirit gives someone, man or woman, the experience of this ‘shortcut’, He has destined him/her to carry out a special mission: start a new religious order, Teresa of Avila; influence the course of history, Catherine of Sienna or Joan of Arc; or, more simply, as with Teresa of Lisieux and Bernadette of Lourdes, and many others, practice for a significant amount of time the heroism of the virtues in such a way that the Church could recognize their saintliness and raise them up on altars as accomplished models of Christian life for the holy people? ‘Strong drink for an impossible mission’, has been written about these superior graces. We cannot say that all the mystics blessed with these graces will be canonized saints—other factors, certainly more human, intervene in a

canonization—but there are many worthy of being canonized, and though their influence be more modest, it is not less real.

We have spoken of ‘mission impossible’, impossible for man, but possible for God once a crazy love has been ignited in the human heart. This love is none other than God, Himself. This also means that the recipients of this love do not necessarily have a desirable lot in life as seen from a purely human standpoint. Exceptional difficulties will abound in their lives. Love, when it is real, at least in this world, is always joy and suffering. When love is exceptional, suffering too will be exceptional. Without a doubt, their sufferings will tend to cool off the zeal of those who would be tempted to be jealous of the gifts given them. This is the significance of Jesus’ response to the sons of Zebedee who coveted the seats next to Him: “Can you drink from this chalice?” (Mark 10:18).

But this should not stop the enthusiasm of generous souls, candidates for crazy love. It is one thing to want to get your hands on the—free-- gifts of the Lord; it is another to be open to all He wants, and even to desire the heights of love whatever form that would take. Such an attitude would avoid the two pitfalls spoken of earlier. God wants us to become saints, in other words, that we merge our wills with His in each moment and forever. If He chooses to give us mystical graces, we would be able to truly appreciate the gift given us. But, this is very far from declaring perfection. We are only to recognize it as a gift He entrusts to us to use for the good of His people and any additional responsibilities.

⁷ We cite the Charismatic movement as an example, but not exclusively.