**Home Retreat 2024 June Prayer of the Saints**

In recent months I have had occasion to study Padre Pio a little. Out of this has come some contact with mystical prayer. Mystical prayer is in one way, perhaps the highest kind of prayer, a sort of entering into the divine by prayer. The word MustikoV is of course a Greek word derived from musthV, which has something to do with initiation, penetration to the inner secrets. In classical Greco-Roman religion only those who were initiated into the mysteries were allowed a certain secret knowledge of the cult of various gods. The secrets were so fiercely protected that we still know little about these cults. On the other hand, currently a ‘mystery’ is anything I don’t properly understand, like the working of a computer. Thus ‘mysterious’ and ‘mystic’ are different; the latter is used only in a religious context. The concept is therefore related to revelation of the divine and closeness or intimacy with the divine. An important feature, therefore, is that it is not obtained by the usual methods of sense perception, and is a special gift, granted by God. There is plenty of room for confusion: the fifteen Mysteries of the Holy Rosary are fifteen different holy topics, not necessarily unintelligible, whereas to call the Holy Eucharist a mystery means that I do not fully understand it, either because I do not understand how it is effected, or that I do not know in what sense the ‘is’ is meant when I say that Christ is fully present. To select one sense, I would say that the prayer of a mystic is a special prayer, a mystical prayer granted only to those who have a specially close link with the Lord.

I would begin by looking at two NT examples. The most obvious is Paul’s own (disguised) account of his visit to the third heaven in 2 Cor 12.3: ‘I know that this man - whether in the body or separate from the body I know not, God knows – was caught up into paradise and heard unspoken words that no human being can speak’. The Greek expression arrhta could mean ‘**un**spoken’ or ‘unspeak**able’**; the latter makes more sense, so that Paul is claiming that he was given an understanding of things which could not be put into words, an experience of the unspeakable, presumably of things divine, which he cannot put into words. Presumably Paul is here speaking of the understanding of heavenly mysteries, the foundation of all the teachings which he pours out in all his letters as well as in his spoken teaching. For a second example I would choose the Transfiguration. I think the synoptic gospels (the scene of the Transfiguration does not occur in John) are trying to represent a direct experience of the divinity of Jesus, using terms familiar from the OT. It is remarkable that Peter is so frightened that he cannot think straight; this is the awe at the divine. In the OT one might add such scenes as the vocation-vision of Isaiah, with the thrice-holy, in Isaiah 6, and Isaiah is bowled over by a sense of his own unworthiness and the impurity of the people among whom he lives.

Two examples from the early Church are instructive, both stressing the joy of the experience. Cassian in his tenth Conference on prayer eventually comes to a description of pure prayer, which cannot be taught, but only experienced, not dependent on any word or concept, ‘a visit of the holy spirit, a sudden illumination bringing ineffable joy of heart’ … ‘a fiery outbreak, an indescribable exaltation, an insatiable thrust of the soul, free of what is sensed and seen’ (*Colloquies* 10.11*, Sources Chretiennes* 54.93). I would say that there are three important elements here: the special presence of the holy Spirit, the joy and the indescribability.

A more descriptive passage is given by the great Augustine in that wonderful scene of his last meeting at Ostia with Monica, his mother, before she died Augustine mentions: ‘a kind of lightning-flash, if it maybe so termed, of light eternal’. He says, ‘We lifted ourselves in longing yet more ardent towards That Which Is and step by step traversed all bodily creatures and heaven itself, which sun and moon and stars shed their light upon earth. Higher still we mounted by inward thought and wandering discourse on your works and we arrived at the summit of our own minds, and this too we transcended to reach and to touch that land of never-failing plenty where you pasture Israel for ever with the food of truth…And as we talked and panted for it, we just touched the edge of it by the utmost leap of our hearts. Then, sighing and unsatisfied, we left the first-fruits of our spirit captive there and returned to the noise of articulate speech, where a word has beginning and end’ (*Confessions* 9.24). Here I would say that the principal elements are the intense joy and the sense of privileged access to a fuller knowledge than is usually attained. An unusual element is that it is shared by mother and son.

Linked to this joy is often another element, ecstasy. The ecstatic seems to be beyond the reach of ordinary life. A delightful story comes from the Fathers of the Desert. ‘At one time Zachary went to his abbot Silvanus and found him in an ecstasy and his hands were stretched out to heaven. And when he saw him thus he closed the door and went away; and coming back about the sixth hour and the ninth, he found him even so, but at the tenth hour he knocked and coming in found him lying quiet and said to him, ‘What ailed you today, Father?’ And he said, ‘I was ill, my son’. But the young man held his feet saying [a sort of pinioning, I suppose], I shall not let you go until you tell me what you have seen. The old man answered him, ‘I was caught up into heaven and I saw the glory of God.’ (*Vitae Patrum, PL* 73, 993). According to his friend P. Agostino, Padre Pio at one period of his life would go into ecstasy for 30-45 minutes several times a day, at which times the uninstructed were alarmed that he seemed to be inaccessible to ordinary sense impressions, and even seemed to be dead, though those who knew him well (for instance, P. Pannullo) were not at all phased by this. Aquinas compares it to the loss of normal consciousness in a paroxysm of anger or of love, in which the normal consciousness is blotted out. A very ordinary friend of mine, a tough Yorkshireman, described to me one such, unique, experience after communion when he seemed entirely wrapped up in the Lord, so that nothing else mattered. Here I would focus on the lack of control by the subject, as in the extremes of anger or of love, to which Aquinas compares it.

It is striking that Teresa of Avila divorces this sort of ecstasy from all conceptual or intellectual knowledge. The experience is of the arrhta, the unspeakable, which cannot be put into words. The same is true of the extreme emotions of anger and love; they are beyond the rational. Teresa writes, ‘I fell into a deep ecstasy. It seemed to me that my soul wanted to leave my body. Already my soul, losing itself in the ecstasy lost also vision of the eyes. My soul came to rest; with joy came repose and I remained in ecstasy. When the soul has visions or hears words of this kind it is never in my opinion at the time when it is united to God in ecstasy, for at that time its powers are totally absorbed in God and it can neither see nor hear nor listen.’ (*Dict de Spirit* 4.2.2156)

A lovely description of the joy of such prayer is given by the medieval English mystic Richard Rolle (c. 1350 in *The Fire of Love* 1.15.69-72, quoted from David Knowles *(The English Mystical Tradition,* 1961, p. 57)): on the occasion when hefelt ‘in all reality the fire of eternal love’:

I was sitting in a certain chapel, and while taking pleasure in the delight of some prayer or meditation I suddenly felt within me an unwonted and pleasant fire. When I had long doubted whence it came, I learnt by experience that it came from the Creator and not from some creature, since I found it ever more pleasing and full of heat. Now from the beginning of that fiery warmth, inestimably sweet, till the infusion of the heavenly, spiritual harmony. The song of eternal praise, and the sweetness of the unheard melody, which can be heard and experienced only by the one who has experienced it and must be purified and separated from the earth. I perceived within me, I know not how, a melody and delightful harmony from heaven which abode in my mind. For my thought was straightway changed into song, and even when praying I gave forth the selfsame sound in the presence of my Maker alone. Wonder seized me in that I was taken up into such joy, and that God should have given me gifts which I knew not how to ask for and had not thought that even the most holy would receive in this life.’

The strangest thing of all is that the immense joy seems often to be linked to pain. Joy is perhaps the predominant factor, but there is also a sort of agonising pain. Padre Pio described the joy to P. Agostino, ‘It seemed as if an invisible force was immersing my whole being into fire. My God, what fire! What sweetness! I felt many of those transports of love, and for some time I remained as if out of this world’ (p.95). Or again, in his own words, ‘O Jesus, another thing – I love you, very much. I want to be all yours. Don’t you see that I am burning for you. You ask love from me; see, I love you, let us tarry together, let us tarry alone’.

Teresa of Avila gives a striking description of the union of love and pain: ‘Either in this life the fires of divine love will consume the rust of our sin and give charity to our souls or after this life the fire of purgatory shall torture our souls… Oh good Jesus, scourge me here, pierce me here, strike me here, burn me here that in the future I have no evil but may feel your love here and for ever. It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me on my left hand an angel in bodily form, a type of vision I am not in the habit of seeing. In his hand I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it, and he left me completely afire with a great love of God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several groans, and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by the intense pain that one could never wish to lose it, nor will one’s soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain but spiritual, though the body has a share in it – indeed a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks I am lying I beseech God in his goodness to give him the same experience’ (quoted by Shirley du Boulay, *Life*, p. 179).

This desire to share the Passion of Christ reaches its extreme form in the stigmata, such as its was granted to Francis of Assis and to another friar, Padre Pio. This must be seen as an expression of the desire to be assimilated to Jesus at the moment of his greatest and most extreme love for humanity, a desire to join him in his Passion and to share his sorrow for the offence to his Father which is sin.

This element of suffering and in particular of sharing the Passion of Christ is a feature of Julian of Norwich, c. 1400. She was an anchoress, who shut herself up, with very strict and minimal possibility of visiting, in an annex (a little room off the side) to one of the churches in Norwich which can still be seen.

She had a strong sense of sharing the Passion of Christ, and in two ways:

1. She had a severe illness and to everyone, including her mother, seemed to be at the point of death. The parish priest was summoned and brought a cross. Looking upon it ‘suddenly I saw the red blood trickling down from under the garland of thorns, hot and fresh and right plenteously, like the drops of water that fall of the eaves of a house after a great shower of rain, and for roundness they were like to the scale of herring.
2. She made three serious requests of the Lord:
   1. A bodily sight of the Passion of Christ that she might share his sufferings.
   2. To have a serious sickness including the pains of imminent death that she might be purified from love of all earthly things.
   3. Three wounds of sorrow for sin, that she might share Christ’s suffering.

This feature of Julian’s *Revelations of Divine Love* 15-16 is that the devotion to the Passion alternates with the certainty and bliss of love:

After this he showed a most excellent spiritual pleasure in my soul: I was completely filled with everlasting certainty, powerfully sustained without any painful fear. This feeling was so joyful and so spiritual that I was wholly in peace, at ease and in repose, and there is a portion of his passion near his death. I saw his sweet face and it was dry and bloodless with pale dying and deathly ashen, and after that more pale, grievous, distressing, and then turned more lifeless into blue and after that more dark-blue as the flesh changed into more profound death.’

Suich a visionary experience of the love of Jesus in his Passion is perhaps the highest form of mystical prayer.