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MYSTICISM, MONASTICISM, AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION ARCHIMANDRITE NICHOLAS ZACHARIADIS AND BENJAMIN MANN

“If God exists, He must be felt. If He is Love, it must be experienced and become the fact of one's inmost life. Without spiritual enlightenment, all is an idle talk, like a bubble which vanishes under the least pressure. Without the awakening of the religious sense or faculty, God is a shadow, the soul a ghost, and life a dream.”

Soyen Shaku, Zen For Americans

Put out into deep water, and lower your nets for a catch.

Luke 5:4

The first two topics of this article are not often associated with the third. Many people think of Christian mysticism and monasticism as strictly “in-house” matters, too remote and esoteric to have any bearing on the Church’s re-evangelization of the post-Christian West.

While Catholics generally respect the contemplative vocation, they may see it as peripheral to supposedly more urgent concerns – like improving catechesis and the liturgy, or bearing witness to faith and morality in public life.

Those concerns are critical. But we believe the New Evangelization of historically Christian countries also requires a rediscovery of Christian mysticism, and a revival of the monastic setting which is its natural home.

The Church has a new task in our time: to re-evangelize regions that are falling away from the faith. Most inhabitants of this post-Christendom are not atheists: many of them are open to “spirituality,” though skeptical toward “religion.”

This public hunger for spirituality reflects a legitimate need. Christians must rediscover the mystical core of the Gospel, and present it to the world through the witness of monasticism.

We have written this article to outline the urgency of both tasks, and their inseparability from one another. To re-evangelize the West, the Church must recover its mystical heritage – but this task requires contact with the living monastic tradition. Monasteries are thus essential to the New Evangelization.

1. SYMPATHIZING WITH THE “SPIRITUALLY INDEPENDENT”

Though their cultural prominence is new, and their identifying label of recent vintage, the “spiritual but not religious” are no new phenomenon. Great heresies, and even some major world religions, have sprung from the minds of those who sought mystical experience without structure and authority.

Ultimately, we need both mysticism and structure. The spiritual life is not just about connecting with God, but also involves public worship and communion with others. With no doctrinal and dogmatic center, it is hard to tell true experiences of God from delusions – and hard, too, to discern God’s will among the morass of human opinions. For these reasons, and many more, “spirituality” needs “religion.”

Critiques of spiritual individualism will not solve the problem, however. Moved by charity, the Church must respond to whatever is legitimate in the desires of the “spiritual but not religious.” In a misguided way, many of them are seeking something essential: a transcendent, transformative experience of God.

The Christian faith, in its diverse Eastern and Western forms, is the definitive answer to man’s search for transcendence and meaning. Yet the swelling ranks of the “spiritually independent” – many of them originally baptized into the Church – indicate a vast public ignorance of Christian mysticism.

Worse still, many Christians share this ignorance. They neglect their own mystical tradition, often due to misconceptions about what it actually is. Unschooled in their own rich spiritual heritage, they cannot evangelize those for whom “spirituality” and “religion” are at odds.

This ignorance of mysticism must cease – especially if we care about the New Evangelization of historically Christian nations, which are now the breeding-ground for “spirituality without religion.”

Monasticism has always been a privileged vehicle for the transmission and spread of mystical spirituality, especially among Eastern Christians. Our tradition exists to foster the same intimacy with God that the first hermits sought in the Egyptian deserts. The same is true of traditional Western monasticism, especially in the Benedictine lineage which drew so much from the Desert Fathers.

We hope that the Western Church will rediscover its own great monastic tradition, and the practical mysticism at its core. Nothing else will suffice for the evangelization of those who seek “spirituality” but mistrust “religion.” Indeed, nothing else will satisfy the needs of the human soul.

2. WHAT IS CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM?

Mysticism is often misunderstood, and thus treated as off-limits to the average person. So before speaking of what it is, we must make a clarification. The term “mysticism” does not refer to the extraordinary gifts sometimes found in the lives of saints: visions, private revelations, supernatural abilities, and the like.

These things are not essential to the mystical life, and the saints themselves tell us not to seek them out. We cannot understand the mystical dimension of faith, if we imagine it filled with apparitions, ecstasies, and unusual charismatic gifts. The essence of Christian mysticism is more profound, and more subtle.

Mysticism means relating to God on the deepest level of our being. It means knowing and loving him in a transcendent way, in keeping with his infinite and unfathomable nature. This profound communion with the Triune God is the reason for our existence, the true meaning of our lives.

Christian mysticism is rooted in the soul’s encounter with the Risen Christ, and our reception of the divine life that is his gift. The grace that Christ gives is not merely a created substance, but the indwelling personal presence of the Holy Spirit. The “Spirit of Sonship” conforms us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29) – allowing us to share, by grace, in Jesus’ own relationship of oneness with God the Father.

Mysticism thus revolves around a central paradox – a central mystery. That paradox is the closeness of the transcendent God, which makes it possible for us – finite creatures though we are – to be united to him.

We humble ourselves before God’s infinitude; but in this very act of worship, we find he is – as St. Augustine said – “closer to us than we are to ourselves.” We cannot reach God by our own power – yet by his grace, we are re-united with him as the very ground of our own being.

The mystical relationship with the Trinity goes beyond human thoughts and words, although thoughts and words can help us enter into it. Mysticism is also deeper than emotions and desires – though they, too, can help us reach the depths of spiritual life. The mystical life is neither mindless nor emotionless, but it puts the intellect and the emotions at the service of something greater.

The word “mysticism” is related to the idea of “mystery.” From a mystical perspective, the paradoxes of faith are not intellectual puzzles to solve, but sacred realities to approach with awe. God reveals himself, yet remains infinitely mysterious – always more unknown than known.

There are different schools of Christian mysticism, with different vocabularies and methods. But they are all responses to the same truth: the absolutely transcendent God has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ. The wholly Other has become one of us – sharing in our death and rising again to give us his everlasting Life. The Lord Jesus wants to give us his Spirit, and make us sons of his Father.

These are revealed truths, the factual basis of our faith. But they are also mysteries that we can never fully comprehend. To be a mystic is to found one’s life on the truth of the Incarnation, while striving to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ and the life of the Trinity.

Christian mysticism is not for a select few. Christ tells us that this union with God is for all: *“Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make a home in him”* (John 14:23, NJB).

3. DANGERS OF DISCARDING CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

Understood in this sense, mysticism is not optional. If we strip the Gospel of mystery and mysticism, we cut out its heart. For the Church is Christ’s Mystical Body, united to the Lord in the Paschal Mystery.

Yet there is a temptation to substitute other things for that direct encounter between the soul and the Lord. We often shy away from that transforming union with God, replacing it with something else: something we can comprehend or control, which takes less discipline and sacrifice.

This temptation is pernicious, because most of our substitutes for mysticism are good and necessary in themselves: doctrine and theology; moral virtue and good works; sacred music and art; social action and reform. All of these things can support a transcendent relationship with God – but none of them can take its place. They cannot substitute for our spiritual union with God in Christ.

When lesser goods occupy the place of the mystical life, we become spiritually blind. Doctrinal orthodoxy, moral uprightness, and the externals of Church life become substitutes for God’s very presence. Surrounded by the paraphernalia of holiness, we believe we are close to God, when in fact our hearts and souls are far from him.

The Church exists to unite us with God, as partakers of the Divine Life – and every other aspect of our religion serves this ultimate purpose. We must never forget this, in our practice and proclamation of the faith.

The neglect of Christian mysticism has severe consequences. If they are given doctrine and morality with no clear path to union with God, Christians are tempted to seek the very inverse: spirituality without objective truth, mysticism with no moral or intellectual guiderails.

If the Church does not offer instruction in the spiritual life, believers will not give up their desire for it. Often they will seek it in a non-Christian setting, looking to New Age teachers or Far Eastern religions.

The modern “spiritual marketplace” is a challenge for all Christians: Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. But it is a particular challenge for Western Christians – whose mystical and contemplative traditions have (since at least the 16th century) been less prominent, and less accessible to the lay faithful, than those schools of mysticism native to the Christian East.

By encountering our Eastern tradition, Western Christians can reconnect with their own mystical and monastic roots – as they must, in order to evangelize the spiritual seekers in their midst.

4. PRACTICAL MYSTICISM: THE PRAYER OF THE HEART

The mystical life, then, is essential to the Christian faith. The gift of union with God, in Christ, belongs to all the baptized – who comprise “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9, RSV-CE).

This means, too, that mysticism is inseparable from the liturgy and the sacraments – for worship is the central, definitive act of God’s people; and it is through the sacraments that we first become partakers of Christ’s life.

Within these guidelines, there are various approaches to mysticism. It would be dangerous, however, to attempt a reconstruction of Christian mysticism “from scratch” – as though the centuries of Church history, and the lives of the saints, had not occurred.

Nor is it prudent to approach the mystical tradition alone, simply by studying texts without personal guidance. It is best to make contact with the tradition through its living recipients and representatives.

For Eastern Christians, this means looking to monasteries – the traditional setting for the transmission and spread of practical mysticism.

This was also the case in the Western Church for most of its history. Thus, we suggest that Western Christians should also look to monasticism, as much as possible, as a point of entry into the living mystical tradition.

We hope, too, that monasteries in the West may regain their historical status as cultural centers, places of pilgrimage and spiritual direction. Eastern Christians are well equipped to help the West recover its heritage in this regard.

Western Christians have no need to “Easternize” themselves, however. The Christian West should look Eastward, not for externals to adopt, but to gain a deeper understanding of itself.

This was the approach taken by the renowned Trappist monk Thomas Merton, in several of his works. A helpful example of Roman Catholic engagement with the Christian East is found in his book The Climate of Monastic Prayer (also published with the title Contemplative Prayer).

Merton’s interest in the Christian East arose partly from his desire to recapture the spirituality of the early Desert Fathers, from which his own Cistercian-Benedictine tradition descended. St. Benedict had drawn from Greek and Egyptian traditions, through the writings of St. Basil and St. John Cassian, in establishing the Benedictine Rule.

For Merton, the “strict observance” of that Rule was not enough: one also had to return to the wellspring of Patristic teaching and practice, which meant looking to Eastern monasticism.

In doing so, Merton hoped to remind Roman Catholics of a heritage which belonged to them just as much as to the Eastern churches. He understood the universal value of certain Eastern Christian practices – above all, what is called the “Prayer of the Heart,” or the “Jesus Prayer.”

Contrary to some presentations, this practice is not a “technique,” physical or otherwise. There is also no single, mandatory set of words that one must use. The words “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*” are widely used; but other formulas – longer, shorter, or completely different – are legitimate.

As the 19th century Russian bishop St. Theophan taught: “The words pronounced are merely a help, and are not essential. The principal thing is to stand before the Lord with the mind in the heart. This, and not the words, is inner spiritual prayer.”

Thomas Merton was an avid reader of St. Theophan, and of earlier monastic fathers like St. John Climacus and St. Diadochus of Photike. Through his study of these Eastern sources, Merton understood the Prayer of the Heart as something simple and universal.

In *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, he summarizes the Prayer of the Heart, as a practice consisting in “interior recollection, the abandonment of distracting thoughts and the humble invocation of the Lord Jesus with words from the Bible in a spirit of intense faith.”

“This simple practice,” Merton writes, “is considered to be of crucial importance in the monastic prayer of the Eastern Church, since the sacramental power of the Name of Jesus is believed to bring the Holy Spirit into the heart of the praying monk.”

Though different prayer formulas may be used, we are warned against changing the words often. In calm persistence, we repeat one simple prayer, calling upon the Lord in a spirit of inner poverty. No discursive thought, imaginative meditation, or emotional exertion is involved. This is the Prayer of the Heart.

This prayer, as Merton notes, is not merely one feature among many in monastic life. Ideally, it is the core of all spirituality and asceticism:

“The practice of keeping the name of Jesus ever present in the ground of one’s being was, for the ancient monks, the secret of the ‘control of thoughts’ and of victory over temptation. It accompanied all the other activities of the monastic life imbuing them with prayer.”

We concur with Merton, that the Prayer of the Heart is not a just an Eastern practice. It is, as he says, “the essence of monastic meditation, a special form of that practice of the presence of God which St. Benedict in turn made the cornerstone of monastic life.” The Prayer of the Heart is for all Christians, in every walk of life.

Merton also saw Eastern monasticism as preserving the connection between personal and liturgical prayer. Elsewhere in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, he notes that “liturgy by its very nature tends to prolong itself in individual contemplative prayer, and mental prayer in its turn disposes us for and seeks fulfillment in liturgical worship.”

Byzantine monasticism preserves this connection, through its strong emphasis on both liturgical prayer and the Prayer of the Heart. At Holy Resurrection Monastery, we have incorporated the silent practice of the Jesus Prayer into the community’s liturgical life.

Merton's research drew on writings from the Christian East, and parallel aspects of Western monasticism. But his exposure to our tradition was hampered by a sad fact: in Merton's day, there were practically no Eastern Catholic monasteries observing the authentic Byzantine tradition in the western world. For much of the 20th century, in fact, there were relatively few traditional Eastern Catholic monasteries anywhere.

This situation is slowly changing. Holy Resurrection Monastery hopes to make a difference, by providing a setting in which all Catholics can participate in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Christian East. By encountering Byzantine monasticism, and discovering the Prayer of the Heart, all Christians can grow in their appreciation of the Gospel's mystical dimension.

5. NEW EVANGELIZATION: RE-INTEGRATING "RELIGION" AND "SPIRITUALITY"

At first glance, the subjects we have taken up – Christian mysticism, monastic life, and the Prayer of the Heart – may seem unrelated to the work of evangelization. Yet this only goes to show how badly we have neglected and marginalized the mystical heart of the Gospel.

Karl Rahner famously said that "the Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he will not exist at all." This may be an overstatement, but it points to an important aspect of the crisis of faith now sweeping many of the Church's historic heartlands.

Increasingly, we can expect that those unaware of Christian mysticism will dismiss our faith as shallow, or abandon it for something that seems more "spiritual." Many clergy and lay faithful, ignorant of the mystical tradition themselves, are powerless to stop this trend.

The New Evangelization must offer many things – including sound catechesis, moral guidance, social action, and reverent worship. All of these things, however, must be put into their proper context. They are ultimately not ends in themselves, but aspects of the path to union with God.

Without this transcendent dimension, our New Evangelization runs the risk of simply creating new institutional structures, to offer doctrine and morality as if they were ends in themselves.

The closeness of the transcendent God is not a theoretical abstraction. It is a fact – the most important fact there is. The divine presence must become the basis of the believer's whole life, through that harmony of liturgical and contemplative prayer which is the foundation of Christian mysticism.

We cannot recreate the mystical tradition anew, nor can we learn it from books alone. If the Church is to recover the primacy of the mystical life, the living tradition of monasticism must lead the way.

To those who doubt the value of monasticism for the New Evangelization, we say: "Come and see!" (John 1:39) For the witness of our tradition cannot be conveyed by words alone.

To those who doubt the need for both "religion" and "spirituality," we extend the same invitation: Come and see! We hope you will see how monastic life, for all its discipline and structure, exists for the sake of a supreme freedom – "the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Rom. 8:21, RSV-CE)

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