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PAUL: THE MYSTICAL APOSTLE

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Problems arise when interpreting the term *mystic*. On the level of research, the term was studied more profoundly by Lutheran theologian Albert Schweitzer, whose book, *The Mystical Life of the Apostle Paul*, was recently translated into Italian. In it, he says: “According to its basic nature, the Pauline spirituality is mystical. Of course this is also taken into consideration in his eschatological doctrine and in his juridical doctrine of the redemption, but it’s true and proper life is found in the mystical realm. Paul is therefore a mystic. But he does not have the mentality of a mystic.”¹

Paul is a mystic and, at the same time, an apostle. Is he first of all an apostle and then a mystic? In reality, the two dimensions are united. When Paul himself speaks about the vocation he received on the way to Damascus (cf. Ga. 1:15-16), he does so in terms of a *mystical experience*. So then, what do we mean by the term “mystic”?

The word is ambiguous because it prompts us to think of something exceptional, above and beyond the normal. Those who have mystical experiences are in touch with God in a special way. Paul makes use of mystical/mystery language in other accepted meanings of the term.

AN OUTLINE OF PAUL’S MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

1. A direct relationship with Christ. Paul’s mystical experience put him in direct contact with Jesus Christ (cf. Ga. 2:19-20; Phil. 1:21). It was not a direct relationship with God, but instead with Christ, the continual and central point of reference in his mystical experience.

2. The everyday nature of the experience. Here the paradigm of “mystical” as an exceptional experience begins to shift because the rapport between Paul and Christ was not marked by something exceptional but by what could be considered an “everyday experience.” It was a continual, progressive relationship—a dynamic, ongoing search for Christ (cf. Phil. 3:8) and a never-ending effort to get to know him. Paul made the mystical experience normal—he transformed it into an everyday affair.

However, the *exceptional nature* of his experience should not be forgotten. Paul did not deny that he had special experiences of Christ. The best-known of these is narrated in 2 Co. 12:1-10, in which he says he was “caught up to the third heaven,” where he heard “words said that cannot and may not be spoken by any human being.” It is very true that Paul had exceptional contacts with Christ but he did not consider them to be profitable (“I am boasting because I have to. *Not that it does any good*, but I will move on to visions and revelations from the Lord.”) because they were so intimate that it would prompt one to forget the reference point of every mystical experience, namely: *one’s relationship with Christ*.

3. Ecclesiology. Let us take a closer look at another innovative aspect of Paul’s knowledge of Christ: it was not only a personal but also a communitarian and ecclesial knowledge of him. Paul emphasizes that the Christian life is a mystical life. All believers must enter into a personal relationship with Christ. Fr. Charles Bernard, sj, underscores this very well in his article, *Paul: The Mystical Apostle*.

¹ A. Schweitzer, *La mistica dell’apostolo Paolo*, Ariele Editions, Milan 2011, p. 20.

It is true that there are unique features in Paul's personal mystical experience, but it is equally true that statements such as "For me, life is Christ" also serve as examples. They are statements that are true of himself and that should be true of all believers, who must enter into a profound relationship with Christ.

4. *The action of the Spirit.* We often forget that, for Paul, the principal subject of the Christian life is the Spirit, who establishes us in a relationship with Christ that transcends time and space. He enables us to dwell in Christ and at the same time he enables Christ to live in us (here the language of Paul the mystic comes into play).

HOW TO GROW IN THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE OF CHRIST

The most significant text in this regard is 2 Corinthians 4:14–5:10:

Since, then, we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed, therefore I spoke," we too believe and therefore speak, knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in his presence. Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.

Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.

For we know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven. For in this tent we groan, longing to be further clothed with our heavenly habitation if indeed, when we have taken it off, we shall not be found naked. For while we are in this tent we groan and are weighed down, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now the one who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a first installment.

So we are always courageous, although we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yet we are courageous, and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord. Therefore, we aspire to please him, whether we are at home or away. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.

In short, don't stop at externals but look inward; do not be concerned about the exterior self but the interior one. The exterior self will undergo corruption: this is inevitable, while the interior self will be transformed from glory to glory.

This is the mystical gaze: a person grows in mystical experience (a level that all believers are called to reach) when he/she is able to look beyond the exterior and see with the interior eye—the eye of the heart—and recognize that a transformation process is underway. What is being transformed *day by day* and *from glory to glory* cannot be seen. A mystical gaze is necessary. A person becomes mystical by moving from exteriority—external weaknesses (for Paul, this consisted of the regret of not having met the historical Christ; the thorn in the flesh he was given; his imperfect knowledge of Greek, etc.)—to interiority. What counts is not the exterior self but the interior one.

HOW PAUL'S MYSTICAL LIFE SHAPED HIS APOSTOLATE

Paul underscores that his relationship with Christ is not an end in itself. *Everything is at the service of the apostolate.* Paul's writings are marked by a continual outpouring of his personal experience of Jesus Christ, which must become the experience of all believers.

In the apostolate, Paul does nothing other than pass on to everyone his knowledge of Christ. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ leads him to spontaneously communicate him, to bear witness to him in his communities. Paul's mystical life is the reason for his apostolate and gives shape to it. Every believer is called to unite him/herself to the death and resurrection of Christ. The whole purpose of the Christian life is to be united to the death of Jesus so as to participate in his resurrection.

In his apostolate, the most important mystery Paul transmits is first of all "the mystery kept hidden through all the ages in God and revealed in Christ" (Eph. 3:9). Paul understood that God has called everyone to be holy and spotless in love. Therefore everyone, without exception, can be saved in Christ. In spreading the Gospel, this is the extremely important mystery Paul wants to communicate. He came to understand it by meditating on the mystery of Christ's death for all people: if Christ died for everyone, then he must be proclaimed to everyone. Thus Paul's universal apostolate ("all to all") finds its source in the mystery that was revealed to him. Here we touch on the originality of Paul's apostolate: he was an apostle *for everyone*.

The content of his apostolate is the Gospel, that is to say, Jesus Christ himself. Therefore, there is no apostolate without the Gospel. We tend to link the Gospel with culture, with human promotion, etc. These are very important aspects of it, but sometimes we forget that we are apostles only because there is a Gospel to communicate. The very nature of the apostolate is linked to the Gospel. In the mystical experience of Paul, the Gospel itself—which is Jesus Christ—becomes the content of his apostolate.

Thus it is a universal apostolate—an apostolate whose content is the Gospel; an apostolate that is rejected by some, above all Israel.

Not everyone to whom Paul was sent accepted the Gospel. Indeed, it was precisely those to whom he was first sent who rejected it. The relationship between the universality of the Gospel and its rejection must be re-read in the light of this mystery, in the light of Paul's mysticism. Chapter 11 of his Letter to the Romans is very enlightening in this regard. The unique content of this mystery is that in the end the whole people of Israel will be saved. Exterior evidence says that those who reject the Gospel will be judged and condemned. This is the path the Church pursued for centuries. But Romans 11—a chapter dedicated to the inscrutability of God—does not come to this conclusion. It is true that the Gospel is Jesus Christ; it is true that in the end God will judge everyone through his Gospel, which is Jesus Christ. But this is not to say that those who reject the Gospel will be condemned in the end: the mystery of God also includes this rejection. Paul opens a tiny crack in this huge mystery: from his point of view, rejection—whether on the part of Israel or on the part of unbelievers—is functional and momentary. *Functional*: so as to avoid falling into presumption. *Momentary*: compared to God's "time," this rejection is temporary.

Therefore, Paul's response is to reread everything in the plan of God, because the gifts of God and his call are irrevocable. This is a very timely subject—one that recurs repeatedly and with great insistence in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. For Paul, there is no other way to salvation: the content of salvation is the Gospel, that is, Jesus Christ. But it is equally true that he does not close the door to rejection—no matter what type of rejection it might be—because the paths of Lord are inscrutable: God is able to re-graft onto the holy root of Israel those who rejected the Gospel.

Once again we are faced with mysticism, with mystery.

MYSTICISM AND APOSTOLATE

What must still be revealed? It is up to the mystic to grasp things profoundly and up to the apostle to transmit to others his/her mystical experiences in daily life, but there is still something more to know... Paul's mysticism is continually open to the future.

What is still unknown:

- *The fact that the Gospel has not yet reached everyone.*
- *The relationship between Christ and his Church:* “This is a great mystery: I speak in reference to Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32). This mystery must be continually sought. Consequently, our knowledge of Christ must progressively grow. The relationship between Christ and the Church thus becomes a “locus” of the mystery of God. It is a knowledge that is not closed or acquired once and for all. Instead, it is in continual evolution. This knowledge is always a mystery. There is a “place” in which this mystery can be concretely verified: Christian spouses. Because of this, Paul points to the love between a man and a woman as a visible expression of the love between Christ and his Church.
- *The mysterious relationship in the Church between the Eucharistic body of Christ and the ecclesial body.* We are familiar with the expression “Mystical Body.” But it is necessary to clarify this language. If by “Mystical Body” we mean the symbolic dimension of the body of Christ and therefore something that cannot be concretely touched or experienced, then we are not in harmony with the vision of Paul. With regard to the Church, Paul does not call it a “Mystical Body” (a term that came into use during the Middle Ages). The Church is the body of Christ in the same way that the Eucharist is the body of Christ. For this reason, it is wrong to say that the Eucharist is the real body of Christ and the Church is his mystical, symbolic body. The Church is the real body of Christ. There is no split between the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the presence of Christ in the Church. 1 Corinthians 11 can help us reflect more profoundly on this reality.

Elements of the mystery which need to be deepened:

- *The relationship between the sacramental life and mysticism.* How should Baptism and the Eucharist be considered in this mysterious relationship with Christ? Paul often uses mystical language to question the vision of Baptism. Baptism and the Eucharist can be considered as individual experiences of Christ. When the Gospel precedes the sacraments, we truly enter into Pauline mysticism. The original mystery is the Gospel, not vice-versa. Baptism and the Eucharist are important when they are marked by a personal and communitarian experience of Christ.
- *The relationship between mysticism and the apostolate.* Paul understood that Christ had to be taken to everyone without exception. His universal apostolate sprang from his understanding that salvation is universal: everyone is called to be saved.
- *Being in Christ so as to proclaim him.* The more profound one’s experience of Christ, the more one is open to the apostolate. Therefore, it does not concern an inward-looking mystical life, but a mystical life that is open to the spread of the Gospel. But it is equally true that every dimension of the apostolate must be re-read in this experience of the mystery. Therefore, one must move not only from the mystical life to the apostolate but also from the apostolate to the mystical life, and from evangelization to mystery.

In conclusion, why does Paul use mystical language to speak about his relationship with Christ? He never uses the term “following Christ” but rather the expression *being in Christ*, to indicate that what happened in his life should happen in the life of every believer. God’s revelation is for everyone!