PART – II

MARIAM THRESIA - THE MYSTIC

Introduction

The great commandment given by God through Moses to the people of Israel in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut.6:5) is perfected by Jesus the Son of God, in the New Testament as “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mk.12:31).

The love of God and love of neighbour are two sides of the same coin. Mysticism is the science and experience of the perfection of this love of God and love of neighbour. Mariam Thresia was a great mystic who loved God with all her might and neighbour as well. Different characteristics of mysticism are exhibited in her life from her childhood.

In the present Part II we try to explore the mystical experiences in the life of Mariam Thresia, her spiritual journey towards the highest experience of union with God. Though from the beginning of the Church there are elaborate studies on mysticism by eminent authors, the references made here are mainly to the classical mystical writers like St.Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.
CHAPTER – 4

MYSTICISM IN GENERAL

In this chapter we discuss in brief the common understanding of Christian mysticism. To be a mystic is a call to live the Christian values in the most perfect way. Citing a few definitions of mysticism and its various characteristics and stages of spiritual growth given by the scholars, we shall try to coin a definition and work out a model to illustrate the spiritual journey of Mariam Thresia in this chapter.

1. Christian Perfection

Christian perfection consists especially in the perfection of charity. Lord Jesus the divine teacher preached the same holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples alike. He said “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). Therefore all the people of any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.¹ To be perfect, the most essential characteristic element and the principle element is charity. In this sense the measure of charity in a person is the measure of his/her perfection. Anyone who attained the perfection of love of God and of neighbour can be called perfect.² Jesus Christ says that upon the love of God and of neighbour depend the whole law and the prophets (Mt. 22:35-40, Mk. 12: 28-31). In the letters of St. Paul, this truth is very explicitly stated in many places. “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14), “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10), “So faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love”(1Cor. 13:13). St. Thomas Aquinas explained this doctrine theologically in his Summa Theologica. He says that the perfection of a person consists in the attainment of the ultimate end. It is charity that unites him/her with God which is the ultimate end of a person. Therefore Christian perfection consists especially in charity.³

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¹ Lumen Gentium, 40.
³ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II,q.184.a.1.
2. Christian Perfection and Mysticism

“Mysticism is the flowering of the life of grace and the crowning achievement of the perfection of charity.” At baptism, the sanctifying grace is given in the form of a seed to everyone. Seed by its nature demands an increase and growth in favourable conditions. The soul as it grows with the aid of sanctifying grace disposes itself more and more for the intense and frequent actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Christian perfection consists in the full development of this sanctifying grace received as a seed at baptism. The development is verified by the growth in the virtues, especially the virtue of charity. For a soul, the virtues can attain their full perfection only with the help of the gifts of the Holy Spirit operating in a divine manner. The action of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a divine manner in any person constitutes the essence of mysticism. As Christian perfection coincides with the perfection of virtues, especially the virtue of charity, it can be concluded that mysticism is impossible without the Christian perfection or Christian perfection is impossible outside the mystical life. The call to perfection is universal; hence the call to the mystical life is also universal.

The spiritual life is very mysterious and complex. God created the world according to His wisdom (Wis. 9:9) and it was created for the glory of God. God created human beings in his own image and likeness (Gen.1:27). The first parents disobeyed God and committed sin and thus sin entered into the human history. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4,5). By the death and resurrection of Jesus the Son of God, the whole humanity which was under bondage of sin is saved (1Cor.15:21, 22; Rom. 5:19, 20; Phil. 2:8). The Christian faith in essence, is the person of Nazareth, the only Son of the Father…who suffered and died for us and who now after rising, is living with us forever. This Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make

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5 *CCC*, 247.
7 *CCC*, 293.
8 *CCC*, 390.
9 *CCC*, 426.
our home with him” (Jn.14:23). Mysticism is the direct intuitive awareness of the presence of God who made home within a soul and it is the highest spiritual experience possible for a person in this life.10

Jesus before leaving the world promised a helper, the Holy Spirit “If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father, and he will give you another counsellor to be with you forever” (Jn.14:15, 16). The Helper, the Holy Spirit breathes where he wills, and leads the people in various ways to the heights of Christian perfection (Jn.3:8). There are variety of manifestations and experiences when the Divine Spirit acts on individual souls and it is difficult to categorize them. Thus mysticism as the word signifies is a mystery and the mystical experience is something that is ineffable. Still a few authorities attempted to define it. The following are some of them.

3. Mysticism – Definition

The phrase Mystical Theology was first used by Dionysius the Psuedo Areopagite,11 for whom the approach to God is entirely governed by His self disclosure in Christ and in the Bible.12 The early Christians used the word ‘mystical’ to describe the deeper meaning of Scripture and Liturgy. Later it was defined as loving union with God by grace.13 Late medieval writers stressed that the height of the Christian life could be understood only by experience and hence mystical theology was considered as an experiential knowledge of God.14 St. Bonaventure defined mystical theology as “Raising of the mind to God through the desire of love.”15 For St. John of the Cross, “mystical theology is a secret wisdom infused into the soul through love”.16 David Knowles in his book What is Mysticism, defined mystical theology as “an incommunicable and inexpressible knowledge and love of God or of religious truth received in the spirit without precedent effort or reasoning.”17

11 The word ‘mystica’ was introduced into Christianity by an anonymous Syrian Monk, a Christian Neo-Platonist of the late fifth or early sixth A.D., who composed several theological treatises, one of which was named ‘Mystica Theologica’. To his works he quietly affixed the name of Dionysius the Aeropagite who is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts.17:34) as a convert of St. Paul.
In modern usage mysticism refers to immediate knowledge of the Ultimate Reality by direct personal experience. A modern writer on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill states that “Mysticism in its pure form, is the science of the Ultimate, science of the union with the Absolute and nothing else, and that the mystic is the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it.” Richard P. McBrien states that “Mysticism is the graced transformation of consciousness that follows upon a direct or immediate experience of the presence of God leading to deeper union with God.”

A person initiated into a deeper knowledge and love of God through mystical experience is a mystic. A mystic can be defined as: “One who seeks by contemplation and self surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the deity, or who believe in the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the understanding.”

Taking into consideration the different definitions for mysticism, we can understand mysticism in a most simple way as an awareness of the divine activity on the soul by which the soul loves God with its whole strength, might and will and love others in Him (Deut. 6:5). The ineffable joy, infused wisdom and knowledge are the outcome of this union of the soul in love with God.

4. Characteristics of Mystical Experience

Mystics of all times, races, cultures and religions claim to have an experience which had certain similar characteristics. One of the main elements on which that all of them agree is that it is an awareness of the divine activity on the soul. It is a passive experience. Only the Holy Spirit can produce it in the soul by the actuation of His gifts. After detailed studies and investigations on the experiences of the mystics, scholars have put forth a number of characteristics of mystical experience. A few mentioned in William James’s ‘The Varieties of Religious experiences’ are the most commonly accepted ones.

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18 Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 1127.
21 The Oxford English Dictionary gives this definition for the mystic.
22 William James, The Varieties of Religious experience, Refer Encyclopedia of Religions,6341.
4.1 Ineffability

Mystics try to express their experiences openly, however very few have taken effort or were given the grace to write their experiences, but they fail to capture words for expressing their true experience. They find incommunicable because of the unusual nature and content of the experience. All those who have written, have expressed mostly in allegories, comparisons or poetical expressions.

4.2 Noetic quality

“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how you can believe if I tell you heavenly things” (Jn.3:12). Jesus has promised us that if we obey His commandments, he will ask Father and He will send the Spirit, who will reveal to us the truth about God. (Jn.14:15-17). Mystics get the glimpses of truth and intuitive insights during the mystical experiences. Those are the moments of illumination in which heavenly matters of immense significance are revealed to them.

4.3 Passivity

Passivity is the most distinctive characteristic of mystical experience. One cannot acquire mystical experience by oneself even if one practices severe ascetical practises or meditative techniques. One can prepare for it. As a dry wood remains alone as long as it is not kindled with fire, so too however much a person may prepare for it, he/she cannot enjoy mystical experience unless it is given by God. To prolong the experience too, divine grace is needed.

4.4 Transiency

The mystical experience differs in duration at different stages of spiritual growth. In the early stages mystical experience consists in acts which are transient. In the advanced stages the experience will be more or less habitual. The duration of experience depends upon the intensity of the experience. The most intense experience is the shortest of all. Great mystics have remained for long periods in the enhanced states of consciousness.

4.5 An experience of Love

A mystic’s love is a total dedication of the will, to God. The love that a mystic experiences in the culmination of union with God is the one for which Christ prayed in the gospel of John. “May they be in us just as you are in me and I am in you … that
they may be one as we are one” (Jn.17:21-22). Referring to the experience of love, St. Teresa of Avila writes “There grew within me so strong a love of God that I did not know who was inspiring me with it, for it was entirely supernatural and I had made no efforts to obtain it.”23 As she said, this experience of love is neither acquired nor can be resisted. At times this love is so strong that weak human constitution cannot bear it and the mystic falls into a rapture or ecstasy. This will be explained later.

5. Mysticism – a Journey

Mysticism is an inward journey. Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter says “It is a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications. But it leads in various possible ways to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as mystical union.”24

Pope identifies here four basic principles that underlie this spiritual journey. 1) Only with the grace of God can successfully complete the journey and attain the union with God. 2) It demands intense effort from the part of the soul, though one’s effort alone is not sufficient to attain this ecstatic union. 3) As the soul is led through the mysterious path, it has to undergo painful purifications and 4) finally, reaching that stage, the soul experiences the ineffable joy of union which St. Teresa of Avila named as spiritual marriage, or St. John of the Cross as transforming union.25

The spiritual journey made by each soul, though essentially one, is different in many details. It is under the direction and with the gift of the Holy Spirit that soul progress in its journey. The masters of the spiritual life have given various classifications concerning the spiritual growth. Pseudo Dionysius, the Areopagite was the originator of the division of the three ways or three stages of the spiritual life. The first is the way of purification, second is the way of illumination, and the third is the way of union.26 These three principal classifications which had been proposed in the history of Christian spiritual tradition profoundly influenced later Christian mystics and have been accepted as the classic description of spiritual growth.27

24 Novo Millennio Ineunte, 33.
26 Aumann, Spiritual Theology, 51.
27 Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism, 19-20.
The main object and the leading idea in the writings of the classical mystical doctor St. John of the Cross is the rise of the soul to union with God. He asserts that in order to attain union with God or the state of perfection the soul must pass through two principal kinds of nights. These nights are the purification of the two main parts of the soul, the sensory and spiritual, and are wrought in a double manner: actively through the soul’s own efforts and passively through God’s work in it.28

Another major attempt for describing the different stages of spiritual journey is given by the classical mystical doctor, St. Teresa of Avila. Although the explanations on spiritual journey are spread out in all her writings, the book Interior Castle also known as Book of Mansions gives a very systematic and orderly description of the soul’s gradual journey to mystical union. This book Interior Castle is one of the most celebrated books on mystical theology in existence. In the book she compares the soul to a castle made of a single diamond or a very clear crystal in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many rooms. The figure is used to describe the whole course of the mystical life – the soul’s progress from the first mansions to the seventh and its transformation from an imperfect and sinful soul into the bride of a spiritual marriage.29

Taking into consideration the various classifications given by the different authors and in the light of Pope John Paul II’s understanding about the basic principles of the spiritual journey, a classification of the spiritual journey of Mariam Thresia is attempted taking into account the nature of her mystical experiences as well. The mystical journey of Mariam Thresia is discussed in the following chapters as spiritual awakening and practice of prayer; active purification; practice of virtues; mystical contemplation; passive purification; mystical union and finally certain extraordinary mystical phenomena found in Mariam Thresia. The order of the research will be, first a discussion on the experiences involved in each stage as stated and explained by the mystical doctors, especially St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross and then, citation of parallel examples from the life of Blessed Mariam Thresia.