CHAPTER – 8

MYSTICAL CONTEMPLATION

The soul journeying towards union with God reaches a stage where God starts to work on it which then spontaneously experiences the spiritual delights without any effort on its part. Here the soul is entering a passive stage called mystical contemplation. The soul simply looks at God in admiration and love. Contemplation can be defined as a direct and immediate loving mutual gaze between soul and God.\(^1\) Tanquerey defined contemplation as a “simple and affectionate gaze on God or things divine”.\(^2\) Thomas Aquinas defined it more briefly as a “simple gaze on truth”.\(^3\) Mystical contemplation or infused contemplation is a free gift. One cannot enter into this experience by one’s own effort. “Lord gives when He wills and as He wills to whom He wills, as the gifts are His own”.\(^4\) The mystical contemplation is experienced in a soul through the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit such as those of wisdom and understanding. These gifts give an intuitive knowledge of God and perfect the virtue of charity giving the infused love of God.\(^5\) In this chapter the degrees of contemplation according to St. Teresa of Avila are explained first and then the nature of Mariam Thresia’s contemplative prayer is explored. Thresia has not given any treatise on prayer as such; we have attempted to study the nature of her contemplative prayer from her experiences of prayer and its effects on her life.

1. Grades of Contemplative Prayer

St. Teresa of Avila distinguishes various phases in the development of contemplative prayer. They are infused recollection, prayer of quiet and its two concomitant phenomena, the sleep of powers and inebriation of love.

1.1 Infused Recollection

As the soul enters into the fourth mansions, St. Teresa of Avila says: “it begins to touch the supernatural”.\(^6\) The term supernatural is used to denote that the soul starts

3. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* II a, II ae,q.180,a,1.
to experience the infused graces. The soul which is in the active recollection, moved with love, longs for divine union, and it begins to experience a powerful inclination for infused recollection. It involuntarily closes its eyes and desires solitude. The senses and all external things gradually lose their hold on the soul, while the latter on the other hand regains its lost control. This is the experience of infused recollection. Here intellect is united with God, and is withdrawn from the other faculties and enters into the depth to meet God. It happens by the operation of the divine gifts of understanding, knowledge and counsel which helps the intellect to penetrate the ineffable divine truths. As a result the soul receives a vivid light and illumination concerning God and the divine mysteries followed by delightful admiration which fills the soul with joy and gladness.

### 1.2 Prayer of Quiet

In the infused recollection, if the intellect is affected, in the prayer of quiet, the will is affected. In this prayer intimate awareness of God’s presence captivates the will and fills the body and soul with ineffable sweetness and delight. St. Teresa of Avila calls this stage the prayer of quiet because of the tranquillity which it brings to all the faculties while the soul experiences great happiness. The soul in this stage prefers to remain motionless, as if it is not in this world and has no wish to see or hear anything but God. Intellect and memory are left free to busy themselves and become more efficient in the service of God. The sanctifying effects produced in the soul by this prayer are enumerated by St. Teresa of Avila, 1) great liberty of the spirit, 2) filial fear of God and great care not to offend Him 3) profound confidence in God 4) love for mortifications and sufferings 5) deep humility 6) disdain for worldly pleasures and 7) growth in all the virtues.

St. Teresa of Avila speaks of two concomitant phenomena which accompany the prayer of quiet – sleep of the powers and inebriation of love. In the *Life of St. Teresa*, they are mentioned as a separate grade superior to prayer of quiet, but in the later writings it is considered as the effect of the prayer of quiet in its highest degree of intensity.

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1.3 Sleep of the Powers

St. Teresa of Avila says: “In this state there is a more profound union of the will with God. The intellect is so illumined that this light becomes capable of fixing it in contemplation, and of holding its attention in such a way that even the movement of the imagination is stilled. The soul experiences a profound state of recollection in God and is absorbed in a kind of drowsiness. That is why this state is termed as sleep of powers”. She describes this stage as soul experiencing great delight and sweetness and a complete death to everything in this world and a fruition in God. She terms it as a heavenly foolishness in which the soul learns true wisdom.

1.4 Inebriation of Love

The intense delight produced by the sleep of the powers sometimes causes a divine inebriation. It is manifested externally in a kind of foolishness of love. The soul is so delighted that it starts to praise God with words even it cannot understand. St. Teresa of Avila says “I know no other terms in which to describe it or to explain it, nor does the soul, at such a time know what to do, it knows not whether to speak or to be silent, whether to laugh or to weep, this is a glorious folly, a heavenly madness”. The soul enjoys not only delights but at times a delectable pain. This pain is so pleasant that it is prepared to undergo any suffering in order to have it.

2. Mariam Thresia the Contemplative

Mariam Thresia was essentially a contemplative. Thresia’s contemplative life started from her childhood. She had an extraordinary gift of prayer and meditation, endowed with keen intelligence and filled with infused knowledge. She had a perfect judgement on every matter and great conviction of her goal and all the more her heart always burned with ardent love for God.

2.1 Experience of Contemplation

In the autobiography Thresia used two terms, ‘prayer and meditation’ to indicate her contemplative prayer in the childhood. She used to meditate on the sufferings of Lord Jesus and the sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary at midnights; she

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12 Gregory D’Souza, Teresian Mysticism and Yoga, Manglore: (Carmelhill, 1981), 69.
14 St. Teresa of Avila, The Life of St. Teresa, 96, 98.
would meditate on the passion of Lord Jesus for an hour with arms outstretched. Her 
favourite time for meditation was midnight as Jesus went in the nights to pray (Lk.6:12). Once Thresia asked her mother “You ask me to sleep, does our Lord ever sleep?” The certitude of God’s ever living presence impelled her to get up in the nights to meditate and pray.

A soul in the prayer of quiet never wants to offend God. In her prayer to Mother Mary she prayed for help to be always in a state of grace and to the guardian angel to keep her away from all impurities. Thresia would run away from bad companions and feel sad on seeing them do anything wrong. She gave up games and enjoyments in order to maintain the memory of the presence of God.

Thresia did not write much about prayer. However, the short prayers she wrote for her visits to the Blessed Sacrament are highly spiritual. These prayers reveal an experience of deep contemplation which arose from her deep affection for God. The expressions “Let all my pulsations be a prayer of love for you….You have no sleep because of your love for us. You are not weary in keeping watch over the sinners. Beloved Jesus, sweet Jesus, lonely Jesus, let my heart be a lamp burning bright for you.” In this prayer the operation of the will or affective prayer predominates over the discursive action of the intellect. It can be the result of infused contemplation.

Fr. Vithayathil has mentioned another instance in the Diary that while Thresia was meditating alone in her room, she seemed to be fully conscious but was not aware of what was happening outside the room. The walls of her room were of simple mat made with coconut leaves through which light and sound could easily penetrate. There were occasions like while praying with her friends, Thresia spontaneously sang praises through songs which she never sang before or even never heard. These are examples for divine inebriation.

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18 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 16.
20 Vithayathil, Diary, 142.
21 Vithayathil, Diary, 119.
2.2 First Holy Communion

Thresia’s first Holy Communion was a great memorable experience for her. Only after long waiting and frequent requests she was allowed to receive Holy Communion. Her requests were granted at the age of ten, before the customary age of twelve22. After receiving Jesus in the heart, Thresia remained in contemplation for a long time. Her spiritual father wrote that she received Jesus with great devotion. Thresia attained the fulfilment of both her heart and eyes. Lord Jesus appeared to her as a child, caressed and kissed her and after expressing happiness for some time, disappeared. Though she longed for receiving Holy Communion frequently, in the beginning she had permission to receive it only once a month and gradually once a week. However, she was enjoying spiritual communion many times a day.23 Each time while she received Jesus, she was contemplating on His love and enjoying his presence. Experiencing the presence of God in admiration and joy is a characteristic of the infused contemplation. Owing to her great devotion to the Eucharistic Lord, when Thresia was not able to go for Holy Mass, she had the joy of receiving Jesus in her room. Angels would give her Holy Communion. There were occasions when Jesus himself celebrated Mass in her room and gave her Holy Communion.24

2.3 Infused Knowledge

“Behold fear of the Lord that is Wisdom” (Job.28: 28). A soul in contemplation gets intuition of divine truths. Child Thresia did not have the privilege of normal schooling. She learned only to read and write from a local teacher in the village (refer back p). However, certain expressions in the autobiography display that Thresia have infused wisdom and knowledge. As a child of six, Thresia had unusual faith and admiration towards the Eucharistic Lord. Neglecting the ridicules and sarcastic comments of her companions she insisted that her mother take her everyday for Holy Mass. She told her mother that ‘one does not have to reach a certain age to love God’. Six-year old Thresia’s remark of course surpasses a normally intelligent child’s knowledge. She also added: “I don’t have the obstinacy natural to small children. On your way to the church, therefore, please come to the school and pick me up.”25 This manifests the self-knowledge and decisiveness that she possessed at such a tender age.

22 According to the Cannon Law of those days, the age for boys to receive first communion is fourteen and that of girls twelve. Mellano, Statutes and Decrees, 23.
23 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia 17.
24 Vithayathil, Diary, 40, 57, 74, 118.
God gives to the soul in contemplation an experiential and intellectual knowledge of His presence.²⁶ Little Thresia had the infused knowledge of God’s ever-transcendental presence. She asked her mother: “Does our God ever sleep?” and she used to get up in the nights many times to pray and meditate.²⁷ She also wrote in her short prayer: “My divine Jesus, in how many tabernacles you dwell all alone without having any visitors during this night…. You have no sleep because of your love for us.”²⁸

Thresia had infused knowledge about sin and deep faith in the sacraments. Hence her filial fear of God and great care not to offend Him prompted her to confess and receive Jesus before the customary age. Once Jesus revealed to her a divine truth about the Holy Eucharist, “I myself am the offerer and the offering”.²⁹ This experience increased her faith and devotion to the Holy Eucharist. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil wrote in his Diary that God revealed many truths to Thresia.³⁰

Thresia in her letter 11 has expressed, “At the time of meditation what all visions I see, what all thoughts come to my mind. It is impossible for me to explain to you what they are like.”³¹ This indescribability is a sign of mystical contemplation. The soul experiences a profound state of recollection in God. It can be the experience of the sleep of the powers too, as Thresia finds it difficult to explain them.

Thresia was endowed with the infused knowledge about the wretchedness of the self, which enabled her to be deeply humble. Together with this she was gifted with deep faith in God’s infinite mercy. This intuitive knowledge became her state of mind. Most of her letters express it. For example: “My body is given by God. Likewise I have given Him my soul, body and will. But I don’t know why this has happened to me. It is only because of my sinfulness. I do have the hope that God will save even the worst sinners.”³²

²⁶ Aumann, Spiritual Theology, 332.
²⁹ Vithayathil, Diary 108; Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 78.
³⁰ Vithayathil, Diary. 177.
³¹ M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 56
It was like a revealed truth and a strong conviction of Thresia that God grants eternal reward to all those who convert the sinners and help the destitute. This not only gave her great consolation when she came to think of her spiritual father’s hardships in guiding her, but also enabled her to do challenging and heroic acts of charity towards sinners and the destitute.

From her childhood Thresia was detached from worldly enjoyments, ornaments, decorations etc. She was gifted with an extraordinary knowledge on the vanity of worldly affairs and the need to be always in the state of grace. Her letter 16 is an obvious example:

I too believe that the life in this world is just a sojourn! If so isn’t not madness to worry much about worldly affairs? Even if we hoard much money at the end we will have to renounce everything and go. If our heart is like a mirror nobody can take it away from us. We will shine like a lamp in the presence of God at the end. Is there any other great treasure like this?34

2.4 Infused Love

In contemplation the Holy Spirit’s gifts of wisdom and understanding perfect the virtue of charity in the soul. The soul experiences a happy blending of cognitive and affective powers providing a great delight. Thresia from her childhood experienced an extraordinary/supernatural touch of God’s love. Hence she felt great affliction in her heart to fulfil the intense desire to love God. This intense desire prompted her to do varieties of sacrifice, penance, fasting etc much more than an ordinary child could do. Thresia’s expressions on God’s love are various that we read in her autobiography:

“One doesn’t have to reach a certain age to love God”; “Wasting time would be painful to God and this thought makes me sad”; “Went to church daily because of my desire to love God”; “I would feel very sad about not having a chance to say a good word (about God)”; “Offer all the ridicules for the glory of God”; “I took all the troubles in order to find a way to love God peacefully”; “A thought of going to the forest haunted my mind”; “Realising my sorrow and grief, and because of my repeated requests, finally (a

34  M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 61
35  Aumann, Spiritual Theology, 333; Panakal, Intimacy with God, 103.
Carmelite priest) allowed me to receive Holy Communion”. Thresia loved God with all her heart, mind and will (Deu.6:5). “Her measure of love of God is to love Him without measure”. In her later life the complete surrender to the will of God, the readiness to accept all the sufferings, physical, mental and spiritual, and the desire to suffer more for the love of God, proved the infused nature of the love she experienced. About suffering her attitude was “If this be God’s will, I accept it joyfully and with great satisfaction”. Thresia firmly believed that “God will not ask to suffer anything beyond our capacity”. As a result of this immeasurable love, Thresia was given the gift of a share in Jesus’s suffering on the cross and the various mystical touches (explained later).

Infused love in a soul imparts extraordinary courage to take risks. This love leads the souls through dynamic ways to fulfil the will of God. From her childhood Thresia manifested great courage in all the fields. Though she was humble and obliging, she was powerful in her decision to love God. Despite the objections of her parents she did severe acts of penance, fasting and prayer. She appealed to many priests, one after the other, to fulfil her desire to receive the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion. In her physical illness Thresia did not agree to have expensive treatments and requested her mother to put her trust in God. Then her mother exclaimed “I don’t have the kind of courage you have.”

The desire to be united with God gave Thresia heroic courage to think of leaving her home and beloved people and disappear in the thick forest in her teens. However, complying with the will of God she surrendered her desire. In the fierce active and passive purifications she exhibited enormous courage and went through all her trials successfully. The same heroic courage derived from the infused love, inspired her to walk ahead of the times and start a new mission to take care of broken families. This will be explained in Part III.

42 The last stage in the Indian Sanyasa is Vanaprastha, to leave everything and go to the forest. Thresia’s desire to go to the forest for the love of God explains her thinking in the Indian context.
From Thresia’s extraordinary experiences we can easily conclude that she entered the contemplative stage at a very tender age.

3. Mystical Ecstasies

In contemplation God unites with the soul and mystically exchanges the promise of love and fidelity. The soul experiences that it is in God and that God is in the soul. The soul is in complete concentration that all the faculties are absorbed in this union accompanied by the suspension of the senses. The intensity of the mystical union is so great that the body cannot withstand it and falls into ecstasy. The suspension of the senses in the ecstasy is the outcome of the absorption in God. It takes place gradually and does not reach the same degree in all. The ecstatic person does not see, hear or feel anything. It seems to be dead or asleep; however, the expression of the face will be radiant as if it has been transported to another world. The duration of the ecstasy varies greatly. Complete ecstasy generally lasts for a few moments, at times for half an hour. It may extend for several days since it is preceded and followed by moments of incomplete ecstasy. The principal forms of ecstasy are gentle and delightful ecstasy and violent and painful ecstasy. The sweet and delightful form of ecstasy is simple ecstasy. The painful form is called transport, flight of the spirit or rapture.  

3.1 Simple Ecstasy

In simple ecstasy, the soul gradually loses its contact with the surroundings and gets united with God. All the faculties are united with God and none of them is able to function. The intellect is as though in awe, the will loves more but does not understand how much it loves, memory works no more, senses are also not at work. This union passes away quickly. This ecstasy results in a profound knowledge of God which causes the soul to have great disdain for all created things. At the same time soul grows in humility as it becomes aware of its own misery, its failures in serving God and its indebtedness to God. It feels ardent love for God and is glad to accept martyrdom.

45 St. Teresa of Avila, ‘Spiritual Testimonies’, 356.
3.2 Rapture

Rapture lasts longer than simple ecstasy. It is felt more exteriorly and intensely. The breathing diminishes and one is unable to speak or open the eyes. The body becomes frozen and stretched out like a stick and remains kneeling or standing. But the soul is so occupied with rejoicing in what God represents to it, forgets to animate the body and leaves the body abandoned. In this rapture God reveals more of Himself to the soul and it gets tremendous desire to love and praise God. This experience gives the soul an intense desire to work for the salvation of the souls and to make God known and praised.47

3.3 Transport

Transport comes swiftly through certain knowledge that the Lord gives in the intimate depth of the soul when the soul is not engaged in prayer. This ecstasy is a distressing type. It makes the soul feel that nothing created can satisfy its desires, but at the same time it cannot possess God as it desires. It feels deep loneliness and total abandonment. It feels suspended between heaven and earth. This experience gives a great understanding of the power of the Lord and so the soul devotes itself entirely with fear and love for Him. It is also left with deep repentance for having offended Him and also desires that no one should offend Him. It gets great desire to work for the salvation of the souls.48

3.4 The Flight of the Spirit

The flight of the spirit is something that rises up from the most intimate part of the soul; suddenly and delicately it rises up to the superior part and goes wherever the Lord wills it to. St. Teresa of Avila says that she cannot explain it more than this. It seemed to be a flight and can not be stopped. It seems that like a little bird the spirit escapes from the misery of the flesh and the prison of the body. Here the soul is bestowed with the knowledge of the greatness of God, self knowledge and humility and a supreme contempt for earthly things.49

47 St. Teresa of Avila, ‘Spiritual Testimonies’, 356, 357.
48 St. Teresa of Avila, ‘Spiritual Testimonies’, 357; Aumann, The Spiritual Life, 349.
49 St. Teresa of Avila, ‘Spiritual Testimonies’, 357, 358; Aumann, The Spiritual Life, 349.
According to St. Teresa of Avila, the different forms of ecstasies refer to the same. She says “I should like, with the help of God, to be able to describe the difference between union and rapture, or elevation, or what they call the flight of the spirit or transport; it is all one. I mean that these different names all refer to the same thing, which is also called ecstasy.”

3.5 The Ecstatic Union in Mariam Thresia

Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, Thresia’s spiritual father, noticed various extraordinary experiences in Thresia and asked her to write down her daily experiences. This happened in 1905. In a sheet of paper she wrote down her supernatural experiences on those days. In what she wrote down there is the mention of the experience of ecstasy twice: “During my meditation I used to be rapt in ecstasy and see visions … Jesus came to me together with Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph and gave His heart to me. My spiritual father was with me at that time. I was in ecstasy.”

Fr. Vithayathil has recorded Thresia’s first experience of ecstasy on 26 June 1904. It was a simple ecstasy experienced during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. When the priest raised the Holy Host, she prostrated and somebody gave her Holy Communion and then she was lost in ecstasy. She had a vision of Jesus and Blessed Virgin Mary seated on a throne and angels singing praises. She was not aware of what was happening in the church. When she was awake the Holy Mass was over. At that time she was completely absorbed in the vision and all her senses were suspended.

The same year on July 19 Thresia was rapt in an ecstasy for one complete day. That time too she had the vision of heaven. Holding rosary in her hand she remained motionless for twenty four hours. She felt the time pass by like a second. On another occasion of ecstasy she had a vision of the Purgatory. This time Mother Mary entrusted her a new mission, that is, to pray for the souls in the Purgatory. On 01 January 1905 while Thresia was meditating at midnight, she fell into rapture till the

50 St. Teresa of Avila, The Life of St. Teresa of Avila, 119.
51 Vithayathil, Diary, 84.
53 Vithayathil, Diary, 37, 38.
54 Vithayathil, Diary, 40.
55 Vithayathil, Diary, 43.
next day noon. Others felt she was dead. Fr. Vithayathil has recorded that on most of the days after receiving the Holy Communion Thresia used to fall into ecstasy and remain motionless for long hours. Since people came to see it, she prayed that might not happen to her while in this world, and expressed her desire to die soon.

3.6 Effects of Ecstatic Union

The ecstatic union gives rise to certain effects in the soul: a perfect detachment from creatures, an immense sorrow for sins committed, frequent and tender vision of our Lord’s humanity and of Blessed Virgin Mary, marvellous patience to withstand courageously the new passive trials which God sends to purify the soul, etc.

In Thresia’s life we see the effects of this experience mentioned in her letters. The greatness of God revealed to her is understood from her expressions like, God is God; Isn’t God God etc. Her self-knowledge and humility are manifested in her expressions like, great sinner, a wretched sinner, I am not worthy etc. After the vision of hell she had great courage and strength to suffer for the Lord and an increased hatred towards the worldly matters. More of her visions and extra ordinary experiences will be discussed later.

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56 Vithayathil, *Diary*, 76.
57 Vithayathil, *Diary*, 128.