GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Mysticism is an inward journey, a venture from the personal to the transpersonal. It can be defined as: “Any philosophy, doctrine, teaching or belief centred more on the world of the spirit than the material universe, and aimed at the spiritual union or mental oneness with the universal spirit, through intuitive and emotional apprehension of spiritual reality, and through various forms of spiritual contemplation or discipline.” Mystical experience in its simplest and most essential meaning is the experience of the spiritual union with the absolute. It is the direct intuitive awareness of the presence of God and it is the highest spiritual experience possible for a person in this life. No human being can claim for this experience as of right, nor compel God to grant it. It is a gratuitous gift. It is an incommunicable and inexpressible knowledge and love of God or of religious truth received in the spirit without precedent effort or reasoning.

A person initiated into a deeper knowledge and love of God through mystical experience is a mystic. A mystic dedicates himself/herself totally to the divine will. “He who has my commands and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father and I will love him and manifest myself to him” (Jn.14:21). A mystic is the one who keeps the commands of Jesus and is loved by God. God reveals Himself to him in various ways infusing His wisdom and knowledge. This is indeed a gift by which the mystic is actively and passively purified. This is to say that the mystic’s soul and its powers cannot have the purity and strength to receive the supreme bestowal of union unless they have been refined and strengthened by the tests of physical and mental suffering. Mystical purification of the soul is effected through darkness and trial.

Blessed Mariam Thresia was a great mystic of the twentieth century. She lived in a remote village in Kerala, underwent active and passive purification, and attained the highest level of union with the absolute. Strange stories have spread among the common people regarding this mystic soul. She is enshrined in the minds of the people as an exceptional woman having extraordinary and supernatural experiences.

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There were people who saw her hanging on the wall without touching the ground, with bleeding wounds, diabolical obsessions, and heavenly visions and ecstasies. The supernatural experiences of Mariam Thresia are indications to the mystical realities of her life.

The research on the mystical experience of Blessed Mariam Thresia is an attempt to uncover her deep spiritual experiences and find the true meaning of those extraordinary experiences in the light of Bible teachings and the lives and teachings of the great mystical doctors of the Church, St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila.

Choice of the Theme

Mariam Thresia, the saintly woman, and mystic was widely known and honoured for years in her native place, Puthenchira and its surrounding areas. Through her followers, the members of the Congregation of Holy Family, the sweet fragrance of her sanctity has spread all over India and abroad as well. However, strange indeed are the stories about her among the common people projecting her as an exceptional woman with extraordinary experiences. The theme taken up in the thesis is intended to delve more into her mystical experiences and find meaningful explanations on the basis of the mystical teachings of the Church, so that everybody can understand, appreciate and imitate her holy and virtuous life.

Statement of the Thesis

The purpose of the research is to interpret the mystical experiences and the literary works of Blessed Mariam Thresia in the light of Christian mysticism and to establish that she was a mystic of the highest order and that her mystical experience affected the society around her and brought about its transformation.

Scope and Relevance of the Research

Today technology and psychology are developing fast in the modern world catching hold of the minds of the people, and making a mockery of spirituality. The spiritual values are deteriorating and giving way to worldly values. At this juncture, to convey the richness of spiritual values through the life of a mystic though greatly challenging, is the need of the time. Moreover, in this period of history known for charismatic experiences, visions and prophesies among the common people, the
mystical experiences of Mariam Thresia could be understood in a better way. Hence the scope of this research comprises:

1. An objective study of the mystical experiences of Mariam Thresia and thereby to prove the genuineness of her extraordinary experiences. These experiences are to be substantiated and supported with Biblical references and cited with relevant quotations from the teachings of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila who have been declared by the Catholic Church as Doctors of the Christian mystical contemplation.

2. To prove that Mariam Thresia has reached the highest order of mysticism, that is the transforming union or the spiritual marriage, through her life of total kenosis.

3. To reveal that mysticism is not a personal matter, rather it transcends the mystic to have a deep social consciousness, and to give herself/ himself totally for the uplift of the society. This is proved through the life of Mariam Thresia. She, with an impact of her God realisation, visited families, spent herself in charitable activities such as helping destitute, comforting the dying, nursing the sick, effecting moral transformation of the people, teaching the ignorant and caring the suffering humanity.

4. To point out that the foundation of the Congregation of Holy Family was the effect of her mystical union and her holy and virtuous life is a model for all the generations especially for the members of the Congregation of Holy Family.

**Significance of the Research**

The unique contribution of the thesis or the significance of the research lies in the fact that this is the first attempt in studying methodically and systematically the mystical experience of Blessed Mariam Thresia and as the effect of her union with the Lord, her contribution to the society. Studies have been done on her virtuous life and apostolate. However this particular area remained unexplored so far. While this fact limits us from obtaining sufficient literature, it adds also to the significance of the study. This study will give a meaningful explanation for her spiritual experiences, severe ascetical practices and mystical phenomena. Her ardent love for God and the deep faith in the midst of tortures and sufferings will help others have faith in the constant heavenly support and protection in life as one grows in love and trust in God.
Method of Research

The method used in the research is a systematic monographic study based on the writings of the Blessed Mariam Thresia and the written testimonies and documents of those who associated themselves directly with her in her spiritual and social itinerary.

The mystical writings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross and the teachings of the Doctors of the Church in mystical theology are referred to in order to examine the authenticity and depth of the mystical experience of Blessed Mariam Thresia in terms of the Christian tradition.

The mystical life of Blessed Mariam Thresia had a transforming impact on the lives of her contemporaries. Her mission is continued to this day by the members of the religious community, the Congregation of Holy Family founded by her. The different apostolic activities of the members of the Congregation and the present statistics of the Congregation are reviewed on the basis of the literature related to the life and activities of the members such as constitution, synaxis reports, directories, newsletters etc.

Limitations of the Research

Mystical experience is ineffable. Human words are inadequate to express the experience of a mystic. The mystics are given the grace to enjoy God; however, a very few like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila are given the ability to communicate their experience. Thanks to the compulsion of her spiritual Father, Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, Mariam Thresia wrote a very brief autobiography. Understanding the depth of Thresia’s spirituality, Fr. Vithayathil preserved safely all the letters she had sent to him, which were written as simple notes to inform him of some particular events or to share with him her difficulties and sufferings. Fr. Vithayathil noted down Thresia’s spiritual experiences in the form of a diary. This turned out to be the most valuable source. In addition to these writings we have a few collections of the testimonies and chronicles of the first three convents started by Mariam Thresia as primary sources. Lack of sufficient literature limits the scope of the research. As we strictly stick mostly to the primary sources, there are repetitions occurring in the references given.
Structure and Content of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into three parts besides the general introduction and the conclusion. In Part I the historical background pertaining to Blessed Mariam Thresia’s birthplace, family setting, a brief life history and a short description on her writings are given in order to understand the background of Mariam Thresia that went to moulding her into a contemplative. Part II is the heart of the thesis in which we delve deep into the mystical experiences of Mariam Thresia and prove that she has attained the spiritual marriage, the highest spiritual experience a person can have in this world. Part III deals with the effects of her union with the Lord. In this Part, Thresia’s apostolic activities, the values she conveyed through her activities, the context of founding the new congregation for the continuation of her mission and its present statistics are discussed.

In this modern world when spirituality is giving way to psychology and technology, our study on the mystical experience of Blessed Mariam Thresia aims at exploring the truth that effectiveness of our life originates from our mystical union with God. The mystical experience of Mariam Thresia should be a great inspiration for all those who commit themselves to the love of God and the service of people.