PART – III
EFFECTS OF MYSTICAL UNION 
IN MARIAM THRESIA

Introduction

Jesus proclaimed: “If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water” (Jn.7:37, 38). “He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (Jn.15:5). The spiritual journey is not to end when the soul reaches the highest mystical state, the union with the Beloved. Nor is it a state for the soul to take rest in the arms of the Beloved. It is the time when the soul has to redouble its efforts and work. As mentioned before, in this state the soul manifests a great desire to serve God and to work for the salvation of souls. Thus the living water will flow through them bearing much fruit.

The fire of God’s love that burns in the mystics cannot be kept to themselves. They infect with it all with whom they come in contact and kindle the latent fire in them. From the mere encounter with their persons others begin to live a more real, a more spiritual life. The spirit of God received by the soul will become a spreading light.1 When the soul reaches the true union “They will swing like a pendulum between contemplation and action, between adoration of God and service of humanity.”2

St John of the Cross gives a specific description. He says that when the soul is surrendered to the Beloved in union of love, the soul and all its faculties are dedicated and devoted to His service. “The intellect is employed in understanding and carrying out the things that are more for His service, the will in loving all that is pleasing to Him and attaching it to Him in all things, and memory and care in what most pleases and serves Him.”3 St Teresa of Avila has very clearly noted: “Oh my Sisters, how little one should think about resting, and how little one should care about honours, and how far one ought to be from wishing to be esteemed in the very least if the Lord

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2 Evelyn Underhill, The Essentials of Mysticism, 52.
makes His special abode in the soul. For if the soul is much with Him, as it is right it should be, it will very seldom think of itself; its whole thought will be concentrated upon finding ways to please Him and upon showing Him how it loves Him. This, my daughters, is the aim of prayer: this is the purpose of the spiritual marriage, of which are born good works and good works alone.”  

4 After the experience of union, St Teresa’s feet were always on the move in quest of other souls, persuading all to come closer to Christ.

The souls which experience the union with God are distinguished by their heroic and unselfish activities. According to the infused graces given to them, they are missionaries, preachers, prophets, social reformers, poets, founders of institutions, servants of the poor and the sick, patient guides and instructors of the souls, etc.

5 Mariam Thresia’s life was beautifully interwoven with deep spiritual experiences like contemplation, ecstasy, mystical phenomena, tests, tortures, temptation, passive sufferings and heroic charitable deeds. She was especially entrusted through revelations with certain missions to be fulfilled. She was called to launch a new apostolate called ‘family apostolate’ at a time when women were confined to their homes. She became the foundress of a new congregation to continue her mission to the families. In this third part of the thesis, we shall discuss the effects of the mystical union in Thresia’s life which resulted in the emergence of the family apostolate and founding of the congregation of the Holy Family. This is explained in three chapters. In the first chapter the sources of inspiration for the mission are discussed. In the second chapter her heroic activities and in the third chapter the founding of the congregation for the continuation of the mission and its relevance for today are discussed.

4 St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, 228.
5 Evelyn Underhill, The Essentials of Mysticism, 53.
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INSPIRATION FOR A MISSION

St. Teresa of Avila says: “My Sisters, we should desire and engage in prayer not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for the service … believe me, Martha and Mary must work together when they offer the Lord lodging, and must have Him ever with them, and they must not entertain Him badly and give Him nothing to eat. And how can Mary give Him anything seated as she is at His feet, unless her sister helped her? His food consists in our bringing Him souls, in every possible way, so that they may be saved and may praise Him forever.”

Thresia’s sole desire was to work for the salvation of souls in order to quench the thirst expressed by the crucified Christ on the cross. It was through the path of suffering and struggle that Thresia was able to give spiritual help for others. The disciples of Jesus who are called to participate in the mission of Jesus had to undergo a long process of prayer and discernment to get clarity of Jesus’ vision about the kingdom of God. It was through the power of the Holy Spirit that they fulfilled their mission. Thresia’s inspiration for action that came through various sources can be categorised into three. First, the natural realities which inspired her to come out of herself, second, her sense of gratitude for the extraordinary gifts that she received, and third, the intense love she had for Him Who He is, is much stronger, and the most delightful inspiration for her charitable activities.

1. Natural Factors

Thresia’s family situation and the various needs of the society around were the natural factors that inspired her for the selfless service for the people.

1.1 Family Situation

Both positive and negative influences from the family were the impelling forces on Thresia for her choice of a life for others. Her zealous mother Thanda who taught her lessons of piety and sowed precious seeds of faith and charity which

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1 St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 231.
4 M. Ezhaparambil, *Formation to Discipleship*, Bangalore: (Claretian Publications, 2004), 75.
sprouted at the favourable time was a visible positive influence. The financial depression of the family and her father’s and brother’s drinking habits and their irresponsible attitudes, though seemed to be negative, became positive influences as they helped Thresia grow in deep love of God. We read references to it in the letters to her spiritual father. “I am badly in need of cloth and a jacket. For a long time I have been asking my father for the same. So far he hasn’t given me these things. I am wondering what to do. I count on your advice and God’s help.” She seeks God’s help in her poverty without any complaint or murmuring against her irresponsible father.

The helplessness of herself and the failure of her family members even to express gratitude are mentioned in a few letters: “If this help had been done to someone else, they would have worked for you and helped you in many ways. But we, myself and the members of my family are not capable of saying a word of thanks to you in any way.” In letter 35 she has mentioned how she could remain happy over the life of her brother and father. Thresia was greatly distressed because of the lack of peace among the other members of the family, especially the oppressions caused by her brother who came home drunk. As Thresia was usually ill, tormented and ridiculed, her brothers, sisters and relatives sometimes showed disapproval and hatred of her life and activities. Thresia prayed fervently for the conversion of her brother; however, no evidence of his conversion is mentioned anywhere. In this precarious family atmosphere, Thresia experienced the bitterness of a broken family. Most probably the brokenness and peacelessness in her family would have become an inspiration for her to understand the difficulties and problems of other families. Her deep union with God changed these negative experiences from her family into a strong positive force and flowed out as a river of compassion to become a solace to the broken families and broken hearts.

1.2 The Needs of the Society

In the early twentieth century, during the time of Thresia, her village Puthenchira was in an abandoned state. Women were not given freedom to go out of

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9 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 46; M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 77. May be they were not able to understand her extraordinary experiences.
10 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 47.
11 Refer Part 1, p.
their homes. Caste system was prevailing. There was no possibility of education in the village other than literacy with the help of a village master. In this situation young Thresia took interest in teaching children who were poor in studies. In the autobiography we read about the risk she took in teaching the children in spite of the criticism and ridicules.12

The spiritual condition of the people was very low. With the special grace received from God to read the hearts of people, she felt the need to work for the conversion of sinners. In two of her letters to the spiritual father she exhibited great courage to ask him to give an exhortation to the people during the Holy Eucharistic celebration.13 At that time there were many poor and sick people left without any care. A contemporary of Thresia, Mr. Joseph Vithayathil, a retired judge of the Kerala High Court testified: “Thresia in her youth used to go to the homes of the poor, the sick and the dying, giving them relief. She used to collect alms and help them with it and give religious instruction to the children.”14

We can conclude that Thresia was very sensitive to the needs of the people around. She had the great courage to go beyond the social customs and conventions of the time to reach out to the poor and needy in their distress.

2. Gratitude for the Gifts Received

From her childhood Thresia proved to be ‘different’ from others in her way of thinking and behaviour. The deep contemplation on the love of God from the tender age of five15 filled her with infused knowledge about herself and of others. Hence from the childhood she started to give herself, her time and service for others.16 The vision of the Purgatory17 gave her the awareness of the need to help the souls in the Purgatory. The vision of hell18 gave extraordinary courage and strength to suffer for Jesus and an increased hatred towards worldly matters.

15 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 15.
17 Vithayathil, Diary, 43.
18 Vithayathil, Diary, 157.
The special gift of reading the hearts of others enabled Thresia to do extra penance and prayers for the conversion of sinners. Fr. Vithayathil has recorded: “This virgin made use of the special God given grace to read the hearts of others for winning them all for God.” These extraordinary gifts inspired Thresia to work for the salvation of the souls.

3. Love for Him, Who He Is

This is the most delightful and excellent cause which inspired Thresia to give herself totally for the service of others. According to St. John of the Cross the most remarkable delight of a soul which is united to God is that the “soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures.” What made Thresia ‘different’ from others must be the same. She saw the suffering humanity through God rather than God through them. In the childhood itself Thresia received the infused knowledge about God ‘Who He Is’. As a child she fasted several days in a week, prayed in the nights, meditated on the passion of Lord Jesus, did unusual penance etc for the love of God ‘Who He Is’. She could offer for the glory of God all the ridicules and criticisms which she came across while doing good for others. Her expressions in the letters, ‘If God is God’, ‘Isn’t God God?’, are examples which manifest her infused knowledge of the grandeur and power of God.

A soul which is united to God in love surrenders herself and all her faculties for His service. St. John of the Cross says: “All the ability of my soul and body (memory, intellect, will, interior and exterior senses, appetites of the sensory and spiritual part) move in love and because of love. Every thing I do, I do with love, and everything I suffer, I suffer with delight of love.” Whatever service Thresia rendered to others was the fruit of her deep love and union with the Beloved Lord.

Thresia worked for the conversion of sinners so that Jesus who suffers owing to the sins of people may be consoled. From her childhood Thresia had the belief that sin is painful to God. Whenever Thresia had the vision of Jesus carrying the cross,

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she used to cry thinking that it was because of her sin that He was suffering. Then He used to say that He suffered owing to the sins of people and asked her to offer her sufferings for the conversion of sinners and invited her to share in His sufferings.26 There are references for this in her letters to spiritual father. For example, in letter 15, she asks her spiritual father to give an exhortation to the people so that they may not sadden the Sacred Heart.27 On another occasion Jesus told her that she would be given more sufferings and that she had to suffer all for the conversion of sinners.28

Thresia was also inspired to work for the sinners and destitute thanks to her deep faith and hope in the promises of God, ‘Who He is’. In the letter 4 she says: “God will grant eternal reward to those who convert a sinner and bring him to the right path, and to those who help the destitute. I do hope that God will bless them and their families too.”29 In the letter 5 she writes: “Nobody knows how great is the reward that God would give to those who help the destitute.”30 She stressed again in other letters that one who loves the poor and labours for them will have his/her family too blessed.31 Thresia has also expressed her faith that anyone who labours for God will have long life and grace of perseverance till the end.32 She manifested immense joy when she saw anyone doing selfless service to God.33 This great faith and hope which she expresses arose from her deep love for Him Who Is. Experiencing the greatness of God, she asked her followers to work always for the greater glory of God.34

Thresia’s desire to love God and to fulfil His mission kept burning in her throughout her life.35 It is very clear that Thresia’s inspiration to work for others was the result of her great love for Him Who Is. As the fruit of her union with the Lord, these inspirations took various forms and shapes of an apostolate itself.

26 Vithayathil, Diary, 98, 141, 182.
35 M. Thresia, Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia, (ed.), 16.