

## CIRCULAR LETTER OF 1999

Rome, January 26, 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In my circular letter last year on the occasion of the Ninth Centenary of the founding of Cîteaux, I wrote you about our monastic identity as Cistercians. I also invited the nuns of our Order to interpret and explain the Cistercian charism from their own hearts, as women. And I also offered you my vision of the world, the Church and of consecrated life at the present time.

Now I write you again, just as we are about to leave the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. First I wish to present here a view of **contemporary culture**, although I realize that my vision is limited to the flow of culture in the western countries of the North Atlantic. It seems to me, however, that in one way or another, the present cultural changes in this part of the world are affecting the large majority of local cultures. Due to the worldwide process of globalization, different elements of this North Atlantic culture are now found everywhere, either as friendly "guests" or as unfriendly "invaders". Everything indicates that, in a not too distant future, this culture will tend to replace many other forms of cultivating human life. It is destined to be the existential framework in which we live. It will also be the context in which we will have to develop what is the central theme of this present letter, that is, the **mystical dimension** of our Cistercian life.

You have already heard me say, on many occasions, that our inculturated spiritual renewal depends on three basic realities: our following of Jesus, our formation as cenobites and our orientation to the Mystery. However, these realities do not exist in a vacuum. They can only be real within a specific cultural context. That is why it is so important for our inculturated spiritual renewal to discern the world's cultural environment.

As Cistercian monks and nuns, we are following the poor Christ in communities where communion is "*totally oriented towards an experience of the living God.*" (GCh 1969, DCL). Translated into the language of our Constitutions, this means that: *Our "Order is a monastic institute wholly ordered to contemplation"* (C.2).

From its very beginning, the Cistercian charism has been able to respond in an inculturated way to the needs of the Church and the world. The phenomenal success of Cistercian life can only be explained by what was at its very roots, that is, **spiritual and mystical experience**. The deepest needs of the moment in which we are living are not too different from those of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, which explains why our medieval mystics turn out to be so relevant to humanity today, to men and women who thirst for mystery and experience. But it is not enough that they were mystics. *We* have to be, too. We will be, if we open our heart to the work of the Spirit and collaborate with him, knowing that:

*This [mystical] way of thinking about God does not lie at the disposal of the thinker. It is a gift of grace, bestowed by the Holy Spirit who breathes where he chooses, when he chooses, how he chooses and upon whom he chooses. Our part is continually to prepare our heart by ridding our will of foreign attachments, our reason or intellect of anxieties, our memory of idle, absorbing or even sometimes necessary business. (Wm of St.Thierry, Golden Epistle, II,14)*

So let us look at the panorama of today's changing culture and at the place religious awakening has in it. Then we will understand more easily the importance of mystical experience for mankind's future and the challenge which this represents for us.

## I. CULTURES

The reality of culture is always a subject of controversy, especially at times of transition like our own. Nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary to look at culture, especially when it is a question of making a diagnosis of it. It helps to realize that the **structure** of reality is considered today from three points of view. There is:

its Infrastructure: the economic dimension;

its Superstructure: the political dimension;

and its Omni-structure: the cultural dimension.

We can add something more: during the last 15 years the world has been experiencing a downturn of the political dimension and an increase in the cultural dimension. This return to culture is principally a return to culture's religious dimension. The upswing applies to the great traditional and historical religions as well as to the other innumerable manifestations of mysticism and of the religious spirit. In the past, the different crises of religion favored political activity, but now it is the reverse: the political crises of our day favor religion.

All human beings - and monks and nuns are no exception - live, choose and act in a particular cultural universe. Any change in this cultural world causes changes of behavior, due to the change in one's general perception of reality. The mass media of social communication have created a "cultural industry", that is, they produce symbols, values and meanings which change the way we see ourselves and how we relate to ourselves, to others, to *the* Other and to other things.

We are all aware that we are living in a period of history which is not only an epoch of changes, but also a change of epoch. Any such change of epoch is experienced in a complex fashion, since it is a process of unknown implications without a timetable and without any foreseeable end-point. Such an historical transition, or change of epoch, explains why our culture at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is one of transition. Our moment in history marks the end of modern culture and a passageway to... we know not what!

Perhaps we can characterize the present western culture of the North Atlantic - and that of the rest of the world influenced by it in different degrees - like this:

There is radical *modernity* in the scientific and technological sphere.

And, in the cultural sphere, a *postmodernism* which has no alternate goal in view.

Before going any further, I should say a brief word about the facts of modernity and postmodernism. The broad meaning of the term **modernity** is in relation to the last five centuries of western history. Modernity can be broken into periods as follows: the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries were preparatory; the so-called "Enlightenment" in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century was central; followed by increasing development in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Modernity in the strict sense would run from the French Revolution up to the student revolution of May 1968 or until the energy crisis of 1973. Among the causes of modernity, the following should be pointed out:

- The geographical discoveries which put Europe into a global context.
- The Protestant Reformation, which favored the development of the personal con-

science, with its defiance of the principle of authority alone.

- The Copernican and Galilean revolution, which removed us from the center of the cosmos.
- The growth of the experimental sciences, which has led to modern technology.
- Reflexive philosophical thought, which questioned the accepted vision of the relationship between the human person and material things.
- Capitalism as a rational means for producing goods.

In synthesis, the two main characteristics of modernity are the autonomy of the person in relation to any form of subjection, and the use of reasoning in opposition to any form of religiosity or faith. Though running the risk of excessive simplification, we can describe the modern point of view with five key words:

**Reason:** which was deified during the French Revolution.

**Humanity:** as something more than just the sum of all peoples, states or nations.

**History:** that is, time lived as a unit of continual progress.

**Emancipation:** from ignorance, dogmas, authorities, powerlessness, and so forth.

**Progress:** as an optimistic and limitless development in which utopias can flourish.

Not everyone has lived this process of modernity as something personal, but all have shared in it to the degree in which it has been exported by the Western countries of the North Atlantic. However, there still exist a few human groups who are rooted in a type of pre-modernity. There are others who "modernize" their culture without necessarily assimilating the spirit and values of modern North Atlantic culture.

It is not easy to speak about **postmodernism**, for the simple reason that it does not exist, but is in a state of becoming. Without yet being a fixed point of view, postmodernism is a "mood", a frame of mind alive in the average person, especially among the youth in western countries. It is a mood which is gradually expanding throughout the world. Here is a case which shows the truth in what someone has said, that philosophers are simply notaries who have arrived late on the scene and make official note of what has already happened.

Some such commentators tell us that postmodernism is a worn out modernity that has not been replaced. A worn out modernity means that it can neither produce nor create anything new, since the principles which inspired it are themselves worn out. But modernity has not been replaced, since postmodernism still seems like modernity without the latter's great, optimistic myths. Postmodernism would be a onesided reaction to modernity's onesidedness, caused by a desire for light and stability after modernity's relative fiasco.

Others are more nuanced in their analysis and distinguish three types of postmodernism, namely:

- **Neoconservative** postmodernism, which is, above all, a defense reaction on the part of the consumer-oriented production system in order to protect itself in time of danger. It is the western capitalist system reacting against its own crisis. The accent is put on economics: cleansing of the economy, capitalization of companies, production increases or selling off state-held companies. On the level of the man in the street, this type of postmodernism is characterized by a set of slogans, such as, "Life consists in elbowing through the crowd and pushing." "He who does not compete does not succeed." "You have to get ahead in the world." "If work is not productive, competitive and profitable, it serves no purpose." "Time is money." "Professionalism means excellence." The postmodern heroes among the neoconservatives are those who succeed by speculating on the stock market, or the financiers who author books like, "In Praise of Benefits" or "An Apology for Success".

- **Contentious** postmodernism would be a vast movement of deconstruction governed by a rejection of any underlying ideal or any thought of globalization. It is a process of "unmaking" starting from a basic metaphysical doubt. It stresses pluralism, decentralization, differences, happenings, breaking with the past, openendedness and immanence. The leaders of this postmodern trend are still "rebels with a cause". Some of them describe their position in words like this: "Instead of uniformity, differentiation. Instead of absolute values, a plurality of standards. Instead of efficiency, communication and, instead of lasting commitments, conditioned agreements."

- **Disenchanted** postmodernism emphasizes the reasons for its disappointment with modernity. It points out that human reason has not opened to truth, but rather to knowledge for the sake of controlling others; progress has become retrogression by going against human rights and natural laws; equality is based on one-sided agreements which are broken for any reason; and the happiness that was promised is late in coming: right now everything is unhappiness. Most of these disenchanted postmoderns are "rebels with nausea". One of them has said that, "In the world in which we live, there is only one thing that keeps me going: my next vacation." Another one of them said with a smile, "The goddess of reason wants to get me, but I run faster than she does." A third one described the situation like this: "Yesterday it was yoga, tarot cards and meditation. Today it is alcohol and drugs. Tomorrow it will be aerobics and reincarnation."

We should be aware that our moment in history, like every time of change, is a time of **crisis**. We are at a critical moment, similar to what the Christian West experienced during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. That period of the "Renaissance" was, at one and the same time, the end of the Middle Ages and the dawn of the modern age. We are indeed living at a critical time, one open to a new birth, but marked right now by a pervasive crisis of life, identity, ideologies and models to live by.

From the **religious** point of view, we are also experiencing a deep change and a crisis of transition. Simplifying the situation to an extreme, we can say that we are passing from a **pathological** conception of religion to a **therapeutic** one. As we know, for some key representatives of modernity, religion was either:

- a human disease, according to Nietzsche,
- an abnormal social phenomenon, according to Marx,
- an immature psychological condition, according to Freud.

It is worth recalling the Freudian concept of religion and its influence on his interpretation of spiritual, religious and mystical experience. It is an approach which has deeply marked the twentieth century. Religion would be the desire to return to the protection originally offered by

one's father in infancy. This desire is then projected onto an imagined God, since that is the only God that exists. Mystics are therefore undervaluing reality. They are deluded about the world they perceive, which they unconditionally submit to as a result of grief flowing from their pain. In other words, mystics suffer from psychic infantilism. All the more surprising then, that in the context of postmodern culture, religion turns out to be the best of therapies, which fact has thrown the Freudian approach into crisis. Something similar is happening in relation to Absolute Being, or God. Some spokespersons for modernity proclaimed in different ways the **disappearance** of God:

God is dead: the death of God.

God is silent: the silence of God.

God is an ideology, either socialist or capitalist: the impersonal God.

God is progress: God only exists for those who think everything is going wrong!

God does not exist: The result is that we are saints!

God is a game: Let's play God!

On the contrary, in postmodern thought we find that the divine has **reappeared**, although accompanied by a deinstitutionalization of religion. We can ask what the causes of this phenomenon are, and there are many different answers:

- The recuperation of our traditional mystical heritage.
- The encounter of Western culture with cultures of the East.
- Exasperation with the dictatorship of mere reason.
- The need for mystery to counteract science's pretense of explaining everything.
- The need for self-denial and self-giving to counteract the monopoly of efficiency, consumerism, waste and violence against nature, mother earth and the environment.
- Amazement at, and fear of human power, which can transform nature by genetic engineering and atomic science, but cannot control the ongoing consequences of this transformation.

Different **sacralizing** or "mystical" tendencies correspond to these causes of postmodernism. Thus there is an ecological current of spirituality, a sectarian current, an esoteric current, an eclectic current. Other forms of a sacred secularity should also be mentioned, such as the sacralization of a nation or race; the worship of, and fascination for musical experience as in rock concerts; the weekend football liturgy; or turning the sanctuary of the human body into a place of worshipful exposure. All of this is telling us that, alongside the process of desacralization of religion, there is a parallel process going on, which sacralizes nature and the secular world. These two processes have different faces according to their geographic location and local culture. It is hardly necessary to point out the ambiguity which dominates this whole field of attitudes and behavior.

In this new postmodern cultural environment, it is easy to understand and accept the fact that a clinical experience of depth psychology cannot be allowed to determine what beings should or should not exist. Modern reason knows very well that there is a serious error of method in jumping philosophically or theologically from sense knowledge to abstract metaphysics or from what is psychological to what is spiritual. A young psychiatrist once said, "What a shame that Freud never had the chance to psychoanalyze a true mystic, and it's also too bad that he is not living today to help all the little scientific mystics we have."

Everything seems to show that the western culture of the North Atlantic, marked as it is by the postmodern shift, is **thirsting for mystery**, wearied of ideologies, moralisms, dogmatics and ritualism. Such a cultural context lets us re-evaluate genuine religious experience. Faith needs the experience of conversion and prayer so that it can produce a theology which respects mystery. It knows that, when compared with the Mystery, all our knowing is approximative and all our talking is a stutter. It is because of this transcendence of the Mystery that we must avoid falling into a type of mystical fideism, or heresy of feeling that all are already one without conversion. That is also why we "*are in duty bound to offer a generous welcome and spiritual support to all those who, moved by a thirst for God and a desire to live the demands of faith, turn*" to us. (*Vita Consecrata*, 103)

## II. MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

I wish to speak now about mystical experience, not about mysticism. "Mysticism" refers to a perceptible cultural phenomenon characterized by an opening to religious values. The mystical experience, about which I now wish to speak, concerns the direct apprehension of one's interiority, the experience of deep presence and communion from within one's own depths. More concretely, I wish to speak about Christian mysticism, understood as an experience of faith through the interiorization of the Christian Mystery.

Let us say at once that the "Mystery of Faith" sums up and contains in itself the whole of Christian life and existence. *The Church professes this mystery in the Apostles' Creed and celebrates it in the sacramental liturgy, so that the life of the faithful may be conformed to Christ in the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father. This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer.* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2558)

### ***Mystery***

The human person, as an intelligent and free being, is oriented to mystery from within, by a need that will never disappear. This orientation, which springs from the person's deepest roots, is what constitutes him or her precisely as a person. Men and women of all places and times tell us that the mystery is reflected in all of *nature*. Thus they speak of "*that other*" reality. Artists and poets go further and intuit that this bewitching and seducing *I-know-not-what*, is something that goes beyond all beauty perceived by the senses or understood by human reasoning. Philosophers, for their part, know that in the depths of *all being* there is something that has always been known yet remains always *unknown*. Through the centuries, anthropology has taught that the human being should not wander far from *itself* in order to find the *mystery*. Yet, to designate it, different religious traditions speak of "*the totally other*".

What concerns us now is the Biblical and New Testament meaning of the mystery. St. Paul tells us that the mystery is that divine secret which can only be known through revelation. It is identified

with divine wisdom and the divine will (I Cor 2:7; Eph 1:9). What we as human beings could not have known by our own powers has been revealed through *sheer grace* by:

God himself (Eph 1:9; Col 1:26),

God's Spirit (I Cor 2:10) and

the prophetic Scriptures (Rom 16:26).

In particular, the mystery consists in the divine plan of salvation achieved by the paschal Death and Resurrection of Christ, together with all the good gifts promised to those who are saved. In this way the mystery of God (Col 2:2) is equivalent to the mystery of Christ (Col 4:3; Eph 3:4). It is:

- Christ himself (Col 1:27),

- Christ crucified (I Cor 1:23) and

- *Christ in you* (Col 1:27).

The best Pauline text on the mystery is the following one: "*He (God the Father) has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery of his will, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship*" (Eph 1:9-10; cf. the entire hymn of Eph 1 as well as Col 1:25-26).

Actually the whole life of Christ is mystery, not just his Incarnation and Passover. His humanity itself is the primary sign of what divinity is. What is visible in his earthly life leads to the hidden, invisible mystery of his divine Sonship and universal mission of salvation. Jesus himself during his public life told his followers: "*Knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you*" (Mt 13:11 and parallels). The granting of this revelation was a cause of great joy for him: "*I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him*" (Mt 11:25-27 and par.).

In the light of all this it is easy to understand what we read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "*Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called 'mystical' because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments - 'the holy mysteries' - and, in him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God calls us all to this intimate union with him, even if the special graces of extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting the gratuitous gift given to all.*" (CCC, 2014)

### ***Epígnosis***

The words of Jesus quoted above tell us that there is no *full-knowledge* (*epígnosis*) of God without the mediation of divine grace. It is a gift meant for all, but undelivered to the proud and given to the humble. Once again we find that St. Paul has an interesting instruction on *full-knowledge*, a doctrine which is one of the foundations of the Christian teaching on contemplation (cf. Phil 1:9-10; Eph 1:15-19; 3:14-19; Col 1:3-5, 9-12; 2:2-3; 3:9-14; Phlm 4-6). We can see here that Paul prays for the gift of *full-knowledge* in behalf of all his hearers and readers, not just for a select group from among

them. In his own life, *full-knowledge* and the apostolic ministry are mutually necessary: Paul preaches what he lives (Eph 3:1-3; Col 1:24-29).

This type of knowledge is closely related to the theological virtues. It is based on faith, but differs from it by a certain dynamic quality. It goes hand in hand with charity, which is both its source and its fruit, and it opens the way to the promised treasures of hope. *Full-knowledge* is an integral part of faith, hope and charity, being an experience of faith and charity which lets one touch what is hoped for.

The object of *full-knowledge* can be summed up as: the intimate life of God and his saving will given by Christ in the Spirit. Its immediate result is an authentically Christian life. At the same time *full-knowledge* of Christ requires the practice of virtue, counter to the teaching of some gnostics! Virtue bears fruit in *full-knowledge*: there is no *theoria* without *praxis*, no contemplation without ascetic self-denial (cf. II Pet 1:5-11).

The text of St. Luke about the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35) shows us something more about *full-knowledge*. Divinely revealed Scripture lights the fire of love and, in the Eucharistic banquet that follows, *full-knowledge* communes with God by knowing him through a communion of love.

In the final analysis, the charism of *full-knowledge* is similar to the gift of *wisdom* (I Cor 2:6-16) and to the *understanding* which John talks about in his first Epistle (I Jn 5:20; cf. 2:3-5; 4:7-8, 13, 16; Jn 14:21-23).

### ***Experience***

The richer the objective revealed reality, the deeper and more transforming will be its subjective experience. It is dangerous to forget that moral life needs dogma and that spirituality - the *existence of faith* - needs theology, which is the *understanding of faith*. In any case, is not mystical experience the flowering of revealed truth, just as revealed truth is the root of mystical experience?

Throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Cistercian century, there reigned a beautiful balance between the objective and subjective aspects of Christian mystical experience. Revelation was not thought of as a series of truths which were external to the human person, but rather as life that transforms and fulfills the person, since it satisfies the deepest longings of the human heart. Personal experience remained always subject to the objectivity of the revealed fact: *Follow the dictates of faith and not those of your own experience*, because it is only through faith that you can hold fast to what you cannot grasp with your mind (Bernard, *Quad* 5:5; *SC* 76:6). Mystical experience is thus a reality of grace that accompanies the entire life of the one who believes, transforming it from light to clarity and from glowing embers to blazing fire.

Experience is a basic building block in the teaching of the first Cistercians. The reason is simple: all their spirituality is based on love. So it is not strange that they invite us to spiritual experience and desire it ardently:

*Let your voice sound in my ears, good Jesus, so that my heart may learn how to love you, my mind how to love you, the inmost being of my soul how to love you. Let the inmost core of my heart embrace you, my one and only true good, my dear and delightful joy... I pray you, Lord, let but a drop of your surpassing sweetness fall upon my soul, that by it the bread of her bitterness may become sweet. In experiencing a drop of this may she have a foretaste of what to desire, what to long for, what to sigh for here in her pilgrimage. In her hunger let her have a foretaste, in her thirst*

*let her drink. For those who eat you will still hunger and those who drink you will still thirst.*  
(Aelred, *Mirror* I,1;2).

The most frequent use of the word in the works of Bernard and Aelred is in their teaching on the most common spiritual experience, namely that of spiritual searching and growth, the experience of love on the way to God as it passes through different stages or degrees. This experience of love is shown at its clearest and strongest in one's free consent to God's will: *You must seek the Word, in order to consent to it. He himself will achieve this in you.* (Bernardo, SC 85:1)

Obviously our Cistercian Fathers and Mothers are aware of specifically mystical experience even though they do not always distinguish its more or less extraordinary features. They use a wide vocabulary and many symbols to speak of it, like: *rest, Sabbath, ecstasy, visits, rapture, kisses, embrace, union, elevation, leisure, marriage, unity of spirit, deification.* For them, ascetical and mystical experiences are two realities which are joined together in a single supernatural thrust of the human person towards God.

Then, beginning with the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the subjective aspect begins to predominate in mystical writings. Mystical experience refers to the personal, affective, conscious experience of the Mystery through knowledge and love, thanks to a special divine gift. Its different elements are emphasized and analyzed: God's action increasing the capacity of the subject; the new light of knowledge and love; active passivity; the intuition of the divine Presence; mutual union and communication. These experiences can refer either to the mystery of the inner life of the Triune God or to the mystery of his saving will. It all comes through Christ in the Spirit.

It is not hard to distinguish different types of experiences within the almost infinite number of possibilities for dialogue between God and his human creatures. A simple reading of the spiritual classics lets us speak of mystical experiences which are:

- **Substantial:** such as infused contemplation, loving knowledge, warm light, bright flame, hidden presence. Emphasis is put either on knowledge, in the affirmative or *kataphatic* way, or on love, in the negative or *apophatic* way.
- **Ordinary:** with presences and absences, consolations and desolations, desire and love.
- **Accidental:** with a variety of phenomena, such as ecstasy, raptures, visions, locutions, revelations, touches and the like.
- **Apostolic:** characterized by acting with Christ who saves in history.
- **Cosmic:** finding God through nature, which can reveal him or make his presence known.

Substantial and ordinary mystical experiences are a normal part of the life of grace and of growth in the theological virtues. It is in this sense that every baptized person is a mystic. That is why a mystic is not a special person. He or she experiences the same things as any other Christian, but in a different way. Similarly, the grace of God acts in a mystic as in any other person, but the mystic knows that grace is at work.

In our monastic context, marked as it is by the Cistercian tradition, the most common experiences of the Mystery usually have to do with compunction of heart, God's liberating goodness, the *alternatio* of spiritual states, the desire of the infinite or absolute, the desert with its fascinating and transforming darkness, serving the community with the Beloved and resting in Him.

Obviously there are an infinite number of degrees of intensity in these experiences. It will depend on the torrent of God's generosity and on the receiver's capacity for them. They are usually more intense at moments of change or transition, such as a conversion or a decision which will affect the future. Times of intense desert aridity also cause a greater sensitivity to God's action. On the other hand, it must be said that such experiences can often happen without the help of any known or appropriate cause, even though they are helped by a climate of faith, hope and charity lived patiently in daily life. Often they become more habitual and result in an underlying state of chiaroscuro, somewhat like predawn or dusk, in which you can speak of neither light nor darkness. In any case, these experiences often accompany us throughout one's life in the Spirit. They play an important role in our process of ongoing conversion and their final purpose is to conform us to the image and likeness of Christ the Lord.

I will briefly elaborate here three of the experiences just mentioned. You will easily see that they are closely related to each other.

### *The Desert*

Few persons pass much time in a monastery without experiencing the fact that growth along the way leading into the Mystery implies a deep process of purifying simplification. This process is usually a disconcerting one and makes us enter into crisis. The truth is that our superficiality is blocking a deeper level and our complexity is fighting God's simplicity. We are floating corks that are hard to sink and wrinkled raisins whose skin resists being smoothed, so when the Lord does this, it hurts.

What is most disconcerting, however, is that penetrating into the divine Mystery is usually experienced as dryness or a desert. In practice this means that there is great difficulty in freely using our faculties - intellect, will, memory, emotions - during the times dedicated exclusively to prayer. This difficulty seems to have little to do with *epígnosis*, mystical experience or contemplation, at least with our ideas about such things.

Such relative inability to use our faculties can last for months or years. What is happening? It is simply a greater infusion of faith-hope-love. It is a purification of our reception of the faith and a simplification of our love so that we can become more capable of receiving God.

In this theological desert, which lets us enter into the Mystery, the inability to use our faculties is accompanied by other common experiences, such as the absence of sensible enjoyment from both the realities of God and the things of the world; an eager remembrance of God which is at the same time painful; a feeling of going backwards yet with practical fruits of progress; some type of deep, hidden peace in God and a desire to rest quietly in him. There is no sensible consolation in this desert, but there is fidelity: on the Lord's part to us and on ours to him.

It is important to distinguish between the desert experience and an experience of depression; and between feeling "depressed" and a real clinical depression. In the desert, despite possible feelings of being "depressed", we sense that we are going forward towards... something we don't know. Now and then we become aware of the fruits of our conversion and can use our faculties normally in daily life outside of prayer. It is different in a clinical depression, where one goes around in circles with a general loss of meaning in daily life and no positive fruit: one's attention is so centered on self that it blocks every other type of activity.

Whoever is mysteriously entering through the desert into the Mystery need not do much, since he or she is being remade. One's cooperation with the divine work of grace is reduced to:

Persevering with humility and submission to the Lord.

Abandoning oneself in peace and love into his hands.

Cooperating when possible with simple acts of faith, hope and love.

Perhaps the best that can be done is to pray in confidence with William of St. Thierry:

*Forgive me, Lord, forgive my heart's impatience for you. I seek your face; by your own gift I see your countenance, lest you should turn it from me at the last. I know indeed and I am sure that those who walk in the light of your countenance do not fall but walk in safety, and by your face their every judgment is directed. They are the living people, for their life is lived according to what they read and see in your face, as in an exemplar. Lord, I dare not look upon your face against your will, lest I be further confounded. Needy and beggared and blind, I stand in your presence, seen by you though I do not see you. And, standing thus, I offer you my heart full of desire for you, the whole of whatever I am, the whole of whatever I can do, the whole of whatever I know, and the very fact that I so yearn and faint for you. But the way to find you, that I do not find. (Meditations, 3:3)*

Unfortunately, not all monks and nuns are like William and many of us abandon the way that is leading us through the desert to the deep, restful valleys of the Mystery.

The dark, transforming experience of the desert is usually intensified during thanksgiving after Eucharistic Communion. This is very understandable, since the Eucharist is the mystery of faith that mystically transforms the person who enters into it. No moment of the monastic day is more mystical than the time immediately following the celebration of the Eucharist.

May the Lord grant that nothing take us away from the *secret of intimate contemplation* or from *friendship with solitude (amica solitudine)*. And may we know how to let go of everything that is useless, unnecessary or disturbing to our *friendship with quiet (amicam quietem)*, due to its incompatibility with our way of life. (Bernard, *Letters* 237:3; 143:1).

### ***Desire***

Bernard of Clairvaux, as a student in the school of St. Augustine, teaches us that desire is undifferentiated psychic energy which searches with increasingly insistent urgency for what we need. Desire expresses a feeling of absence and is a movement which drives our entire being toward the absent good: *Every rational being naturally desires always what satisfies more its mind and will. It is never satisfied with something which lacks the qualities it thinks it should have (Dil 7:18; cf. SC 58:2; 31:4; 32:2)*.

Desire for the infinite shows both the finiteness and the fullness of the human being. It is a precious footprint of the Creator in the human soul. In this sense, desire is a basic thrust of the spirit, a psychic sigh, in which the desire for God can take root. Desire is the underlying source and root of love. When it bursts into consciousness and becomes the willed search for God, it is converted into the love and desire for God. God is touched by *desiderii digito, the finger of desire*, as St. Bernard says (SC 28:10). When the *soul* has nothing of its own, nothing in its exclusive possession, but has everything in common with God, it is called a *spouse*. This spouse, who whispers, "*Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth,*" is a *soul athirst for God (SC 7:2)*. It boils down to saying that we are desire, because God is Desire in us. He arouses our desire in order to awaken and to satisfy our hope. That is why desire is grace.

Our desire for God refers both to God himself and to our own entrance into communion with him. What is paradoxical about this experience is that the desire for God implies that he is absent yet, at the same time, we cannot desire him unless he is present. This alternation between presence and absence awakens our desire and keeps it burning. St. Bernard says, *"Unless we use the utmost vigilance in attending to these gift-laden visits of the Holy Spirit, we shall neither desire him when he seems absent nor praise him when he is present"* (SC 17:1-2). The Abbot of Clairvaux speaks again from his own experience when he says, *"As long as I live, the word 'return', the word of recall, will be on my lips to recall the Word. As often as he slips away from me, so often shall I call him back. From the burning desire of my heart I will not cease to call him, begging him to return, as if calling after someone who is departing. I will implore him to give back to me the joy of his salvation and give himself back to me"* (SC 74:7) .

The Cistercian nuns of the 13<sup>th</sup> century exemplified in their lives the spiritual teaching of the Cistercian Fathers of the preceding century, especially the teachings of Bernard and William about the soul as spouse, thirsting in burning desires for love. In her work, *The Seven Manners of Loving* (which come down from the highest place and which return again to the summit from which they came), Beatrice of Nazareth presents seven experiences of love which are to be expected in the context of growing in Christian life. The experience of desire, in its active and passive forms, is the key to her whole work. In the fourth manner of loving, Beatrice offers us a description of the soul's first passive experience of the power of God's love. The experience is simply a restoration of God's likeness which had been lost:

*In the fourth manner of loving, Our Lord is also accustomed to give other manners of loving, at one time with great pleasure, but at another with great sorrow. I wish to speak of this now. Sometimes it happens that love is sweetly awakened in the soul, rising up with joy, and flows in the heart without any human collaboration. And then the heart is so touched with tender love, is drawn towards love with such desire, is so strongly held by love and so passionately embraced by love, that it is totally conquered by love. In this the heart feels a great closeness to God, a substantial clarity, a wonderful delight, a noble freedom and a strict necessity of obeying love. The soul then experiences fullness and superabundance. It feels all its senses sanctified in love, its will turned into love and so deeply immersed and absorbed in the abyss of love that it is made wholly into love.*

Closer to our day, Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón (1911-1938) exemplifies perfectly that *cor inquietum*, that restless heart burning with infinite desire for God. Everything in Rafael's life is explained by his desires for God, for the Absolute and for eternity:

*I long for eternal life... I long to fly to true life. My soul longs and groans to see God, tied as it is to the body... Life will be space and light where this little spark of love which I carry in me will expand, catch fire, see your Face and give out more light than the sun... I am giddy, sick from the love of God. I long for Christ! How can I help it?... The thirsty deer looks frantically for a hidden spring of water where it knows it can rest from its exhaustion and the water will calm its thirst... Lord, Lord, as the deer yearns for running streams... I yearn to love divinely. I suffer from living here... I long for eternal life! (Writings, Dec. 9, 1936)*

Moved by his great desire and after a period of deep suffering, Rafael passed his final days longing for Christ, *"whom I love and adore above everything else, whom I sigh for, suffer for and weep for, and for whose sake - you know it, good Jesus, - I would gladly lose my mind"* (Writings, March 20, 1938).

In other words, desire is the living impulse which, together with truth and action, constitutes the deepest orientation and drive of a human being toward something more complete, final and

absolute. Without desire for God there is no communion of love with God. Desire is, therefore, hunger and thirst for the infinite, a life process unable to be satisfied, an existential groan of hope.

I have spoken of "desire" in the singular to distinguish it from "desires" in the plural. The latter are explosive fragments of true desire which have become misdirected toward something finite, toward illusions or simply toward self-satisfaction. These so-called "desires" are what psychoanalysis is speaking of when it tells us that desire is a regressive phenomenon which prevents self-gift and self-fulfillment, and that, as separate beings, we are full of desires to recover our lost fusion.

### *Zeal*

The person who has entered into the mystery of divine fire burns for the salvation of the world. This salvation is the manifestation of the glory of God and itself gives God glory. If our life is hidden with Christ in God, we cannot help burning with zeal for good works, that is, for the salvation of all people, which is what gives God glory. When the Lord sends someone in a mission of service, he actually goes with that person. And for the person who loves, being with Christ and serving him are almost the same thing:

*When the Bridegroom perceives, as he always does, that the bride has taken her rest for some time on his bosom, he does not hesitate to entice her out again to what seems more serviceable. It is not that she is unwilling, or that he himself is doing what he had forbidden. But if the bride is enticed by the Bridegroom this is because she receives from him the desire by which she is enticed, the desire of good works, the desire to bring forth fruit for the Bridegroom, for to her the Bridegroom is life, and death is gain. And that desire is vehement. It urges her not only to arise but to arise quickly for we read: 'Arise, make haste, and come.' It is no small consolation to her that she hears 'come' and not 'go', knowing from this that she is being invited rather than sent, and that the Bridegroom will be coming with her... She is not therefore aroused against her will when what happens is already her will, for it is no other than an instilled eagerness for a holy profit. (Bernard, SC 58:1-2)*

Gratuitous, oblatinal love, that seeks not its own benefit, knows how to sacrifice its own good for the spiritual good of one's neighbor: "Love which seeks not its own benefit," as St. Bernard says to his monks, "has long since convinced me not to prefer my own cherished desires to your gain. To pray, to read, to write, to meditate, or any other gains that may result from the study of spiritual things: these I consider loss because of you" (SC 51:3; cf 52:7). However, the primacy of service is authentic only when it is based on the desire and deep joy of always being with the Lord.

*The spirit is affected in one way when it is made fruitful by the Word, in another way when it enjoys the Word. In the one it is considering the needs of its neighbor; in the other it is allured by the sweetness of the Word. As a mother, she is happy in her child, but as a bride she is even happier in her bridegroom's embrace. The children are dear, they are a pledge of his love, but his kisses give her greater pleasure. It is good to save many souls, but there is far more pleasure in going aside to be with the Word. (Bernard, SC 85:13)*

Charity, or "communion of wills" synthesizes being a spouse and being a mother, prayer and action, mystical experience and social commitment: which brings me back to placing mystical experience within the framework of our cenobitic - not to say simply Christian - life. For St. Bernard love, or charity, is a *common will*, shared with God and those with whom we live (cf. *Pasc* 3:3; *VNat* 3:6). When this will is not common to the persons we live with, it is very probably not shared by God either. Love of neighbor nourishes and purifies the love of God that already exists, while love of God crowns love of neighbor (*Div* 121; *I Sent* 21).

This love of neighbor, or *social love*, plays a decisive role in the growth of the spiritual life toward mystical love. The schemata and vocabulary can vary, but the doctrine remains the same:

There are three grades of *truth*: in oneself, by *judging oneself*; in one's neighbor, by *having compassion on him*; and in God, by *contemplating him* (Bernard, *Hum* 6; cf. 19-20).

There are four degrees of *love*: love of self for oneself but open to social love of neighbor; love of God for oneself; love of God for himself; and love of oneself for God (*Dil* 23-33, 39-40).

There are three *sabbaths*, or periods of rest: Love of self, love of neighbor, love of God (Aelred, *Spec car* III:1-6).

In the last analysis, "*No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us*" (I Jn 4:12). Let us rest, then, in the shade of the love of God and neighbor. "*Both loves are mine when I love you, Lord Jesus, my neighbor because you are a man and showed mercy to me, and nevertheless you are God over all, blessed for ever*" (Bernard, *SC* 60:10).

If we monks and nuns of the third millenium are not mystics, we will not be cenobites either. In such a case we will mean very little, or else we will be a counterwitness and - perhaps for some, God forbid, -- a cause of scandal. So at this hour of human history, at this moment of cultural transition, we monks and nuns must turn our lives with a new decisiveness towards the Mystery, so as to be mystically transformed by it. Our Christian mystical experience is, in the last analysis, an experience of being reformed and conformed to Christ. This is the only way we can offer guidance for the dawn of a new age and provide religious witness for the secular world of today. This alone is how we can give the help that is so vitally necessary in the dialogue with other religions and in our contemplative service to the Christian Churches.

Although it may seem paradoxical, what is needed today are prophets who announce that the God of Christians was more dead than what a certain modern atheism affirmed. It was death from the cerebral, masculine theological rationalism of some "believers". But God is much less dead than what some were saying, thanks to the feminine intuition springing from the heart of many unknown mystics. Among the latter is she who loved with all her heart, with all her soul, with all her strength and was full of grace. She thus became Mother of Love, whose Father is the God of Love.

With my fraternal affection in Mary of Saint Joseph,

Bernardo Olivera  
Abbot General