

Towards a Renewed Cistercian Mysticism (Dom Bernardo Olivera)

Perhaps you are wondering what the title of this conference means. I hope we will be finding the answer to this question little by little. Nevertheless, I can already tell you this much: if Cistercian mysticism is a Christian mysticism, the root of its renewal is in the Mystery of God, which is concentrated in Jesus Christ.

The mystical experience of Christian life has a **central place** in the Cistercian tradition. This statement is so obvious that it requires no proof. The early Cistercians tried to live in the presence of God and in communion with God. This declaration of purpose still retains its full value today. As we read in our Constitutions: our Order is *a monastic institute wholly ordered to contemplation* (Const. 2).

We might wonder, however: what are the **consequences** of the present day existence of lay men and women associated with monks and nuns with regard to the mystical dimension of our charism? Once again I anticipate an answer: the consequences will involve mutual enrichment in the ever deeper experience of the Christian Mystery.

I would like to situate my words in a very specific context: John Paul II's urgent **invitation** to *contemplate the face of Christ*, as offered in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo millennio Ineunte* (NMI). Such contemplation is the absolute foundation of all the Church's pastoral action in this new millennium. This program of evangelization is addressed to everyone: clerics, religious, lay. We would be poor and insignificant witnesses if we were not at the same time contemplators of his Face.

Two thousand years after these events [the Passion and Resurrection], the Church relives them as if they had happened today. Gazing on the face of Christ, the Bride contemplates her treasure and her joy. "Dulcis Iesus memoria, dans vera cordis gaudia": how sweet is the memory of Jesus, the source of the heart's true joy! Heartened by this experience, the Church today sets out once more on her journey, in order to proclaim Christ to the world at the dawn of the Third Millennium: he "is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8). (NMI 28).

This mystery of the Church, the Bride of Christ, becomes true and **incarnate** in those who experience prayer as affective fervor, as *the heart falling in love* (NMI 33). This *contemplative experience* is a heritage common to all Christians (NMI 34).

Here, then, is the **road map** we will follow in this meditation. First, we will draw back the curtain of the Apocalypse in order to meet Christ the Bridegroom. Second, following the Pope's invitation, I will say something about the great mystical tradition of the Church. This will lead us to say something about Cistercian mysticism. By way of conclusion I will propose a possible way of enriching our mystical charism in service to the Church.

1. The Bridegroom and his Bride in the Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation reveals to us Christ the Spouse, jealous of the love of his Spouse, the Church. From the very beginning, the Risen Lord is presented as *he who loves us*, or more literally, *he who is loving us* (Rev 1:5). This love accompanies our lives from its beginning to the very end. In the messages sent to the *seven Churches* (Rev 2-3), we can notice how this caring and passionate love closely follows the vicissitudes of each and every community. The language used, full of delicate affection and passion, is that of a fianc e in love and jealous of the love of his fianc e. In the messages to the first and last of the seven churches, we find words of great significance.

After praising the virtues of the Church of Ephesus, the words that follow require an answer, for love alone can repay love:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first (Rev 2:4-5).

The Spouse is saying: you no longer love me with the love you had before! The *first love* refers not just to a moment in time, but to a high quality of love. It means the immaculate love of the moment of conversion, similar to the love with which the Lord loves, that is, total love.

The situation of the Church of Laodicea is more dramatic. The Lord is fully aware of this and forces the Church to face its own mediocrity.

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth (Rev 3:15-16).

The Christians of Laodicea are playing with two loves, and therefore neither love nor cease to love. To answer the absolute love of the Risen Lord with this kind of love can only provoke vomiting. Nevertheless, conversion is still possible. The Risen Lord continues to love and therefore *reproves and chastens*. He advises them to buy *white garments* as befit a bride worthy of her Lord, and above all, repentance and *fervent love*. All is not lost: *Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me* (Rev 3:20; Cf S of S 5:1-2).

Throughout the history of humanity the chaff is being separated from the good grain. The day will come when opposition to God and his Christ, as represented by the *great Harlot*, will be reduced to nothing but ruins and ashes (Rev 17-18). Christ the Lamb has conquered also on account of the *good deeds of the saints*. These *works of justice* are the fulfilment of the two-fold yet single commandment of love. This love has made the followers of the Lamb a Bride clothed in *fine linen, bright and pure*. Thus the Bride is invited to *the wedding feast of the Lamb* (Rev 19:1-10).

We will all be at this banquet together, united among ourselves and with Him. The Church-Bride is also the Church-City, a two-fold metamorphosis symbolizing nuptial consecration to the Lord and transparent social coexistence (Rev 21:9-14).

Although we are happy because of the invitation, the wedding banquet has not yet taken place. While that glorious day is on its way, the Spirit inspires us with prophetic words suitable for calling upon the Lord. Christ the Bridegroom always hears the sighs of love arising from his Spirit-filled Bride: *Come, Lord Jesus!* And he is never slow to answer: *Surely I am coming soon!* (Rev 22: 17,20).

2. The Church's great mystical tradition

To speak of mysticism is necessarily to speak of mystery, and this for two reasons. The first is a simple matter of grammar: the word "mystical" is an adjective derived from the noun "mystery". The second reason is more important: mysticism is experience of mystery. Today, however, the term "mystical" can take on a variety of meanings. The same can be said about "mystery". We therefore need to provide some clarifications.

Christian mysticism is the fulfilment the Mystery of Christ in us. To repeat once again, Mystery and mysticism do not stand on their own as two things with a separate existence. Mystery-mysticism exists as a single reality, that is to say, Mystery at work in us. In this Mystery fulfilled in us, we find both the subjective and objective dimensions of all Christian mysticism. The experience is two-fold: Christ living in us and we living in Christ.

In his Apostolic Letter, John Paul II emphasizes our call to the fullest possible union with God. Let us look at three fundamental passages on this subject.

The Pope begins by speaking of contemplation as a gift of God's grace. Spiritual theology would call this infused contemplation, that is, a form of mystical experience in its clearest and most precise meaning. Commenting on Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, a confession arising from faith and attaining the depths of Christ's mystery, the Pope tells us:

We cannot come to the fullness of contemplation of the Lord's face by our own efforts alone, but by allowing grace to take us by the hand (NMI 20).

This mystical grace rests on a very clear anthropological basis. John Paul evokes the traditional patristic doctrine of the divinization of the human person through incorporation into Christ:

Jesus is "the new man" (cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:10) who calls redeemed humanity to share in his divine life. The mystery of the Incarnation lays the foundations for an anthropology which, reaching beyond its own limitations and contradictions, moves towards God himself, indeed towards the goal of "divinization". This occurs through the grafting of the redeemed on to Christ and their admission into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life. The Fathers have laid great stress on this soteriological dimension of the mystery of the Incarnation: it is only because the Son of God truly became man that man, in him and through him, can truly become a child of God (NMI 23).

Starting from our condition as redeemed creatures and ever counting on the help of God's grace, we reach the highest summits of God's Mystery. This is the place of transforming or conforming union with Christ. The Pope reminds us of the great tradition in the Church centered on the Lord's loving promise. He thus invites us to embrace God's mysterious action, uniting us as spouses with the Lord.

The great mystical tradition of the Church of both East and West has much to say in this regard. It shows how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart. This is the lived experience of Christ's promise: "He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (Jn 14:21). It is a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications (the "dark night"). But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as "nuptial union". How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teachings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila? (NMI 33).

It is easy to notice two different but complementary mystical currents in this passage: a current of trinitarian and filial mysticism, which implies being possessed by Christ, being moved by the Spirit, and being welcomed by the Father; and a current of christological, nuptial mysticism, in which Jesus' manifestation reaches its high point in spiritual marriage. In both cases, Christ's promise is fulfilled: I will love him and show myself to him.

3. Mystical tradition and Cistercian asceticism

John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila's doctrine is based on earlier witnesses and precedents. The golden era of Spanish mysticism, by way of the explosion of Flemish mysticism, drew on the depths of the medieval and Cistercian mystical current.

In medieval Christian mysticism it is possible to distinguish between two aspects of the experience:

- **essential** or unitive mysticism: union with God in God's Unity and deep integration of one's own soul.
- **love** mysticism or relational mysticism: union with the divine Thou in terms of nuptial, covenant love.

Both aspects are found in the doctrine of our Fathers, either accentuated as different or seen as united one to the other. William of Saint Thierry presents this two-fold reality within the unity of a single experience: *To love is to be and become one spirit with God (Contemp 11; cf. Ep fra 257-258, 263).*

In Cistercian commentaries on the Song of Songs, it is the bridal dimension of encounter and union with the Lord that prevails. Knowledge and love come together in this union: *we know to*

the degree that we love and we love to the degree that we know. Love shines forth when it attains its fruit: The love of one who has fruition is wholly in the light, because fruition itself is the light of the lover (William, Cant 76; 60; cf. 57).

Just as Cistercian mysticism is centered in love, so is asceticism. Ascetic effort and exercise consist in conforming our will to the will of God. When there is deep communion of wills, there is conformation, unity, marriage.

Such conformity weds the soul to the Word, for one who is like the Word by nature shows himself like him too in the exercise of his will, loving as she is loved. When she loves perfectly, the soul is wedded.... Truly this is a spiritual contract, a holy marriage. It is more than a contract, it is an embrace: an embrace where identity of will makes of two one spirit.... He and the soul are Bridegroom and Bride. What other bond or compulsion do you look for between those who are betrothed, except to love and be loved? (Bernard, SC 83,3)

To sum up, spiritual marriage is the high-point and destination of our Christian pilgrimage on the pathway of asceticism and prayer. It is not a matter of "mystical phenomena," but rather of the possibility of our nature, created in the image and likeness of God, enabled by God's grace. It all comes down to an unconditional and ongoing "Yes" to God and God's will. Translated into daily practice, this means not to seek one's own good, but rather to seek the glory of God and the good of one's neighbor.

And let us not think that this intimate union with Christ is only for a privileged few. The Holy Father invites all Christians to this union. Bernard of Clairvaux said the same centuries ago in a way that awakens and gives dynamism to our hopes and desires.

Every soul, even if burdened with sin, enmeshed in vice ensnared by the allurements of pleasure, a captive in exile, imprisoned in the body, caught in mud, fixed in mire, bound to its members, a slave to care, distracted by business, afflicted with sorrow, wandering and straying, filled with anxious forebodings and uneasy suspicions, a stranger in a hostile land...every soul, I say, standing thus under condemnation and without hope, has the power to turn and find it can not only breathe the fresh air of the hope of pardon and mercy, but also dare to aspire to the nuptials of the Word, not fearing to enter into alliance with God or to bear the sweet yoke of love with the King of angels. Why should it not venture with confidence into the presence of him by whose image it sees itself honored, and in whose likeness it knows itself made glorious? Why should it fear majesty when its very origin gives it ground for confidence? All it has to do is to take care to preserve its natural purity by innocence of life, or rather to study to beautify and adorn with the brightness of its actions and dispositions the glorious beauty which is its birthright (SC 83:1).

4. Enriching of our tradition

Cistercian mystical tradition, in its monastic form, may be enriched in different ways by century-old mysticism. I will dwell on only one of them, looking to Saint Bernard for inspiration.

I am referring to the last spiritual "itinerary" the Abbot of Clairvaux left us. Commenting on the verse of the Canticle, *Upon my bed I sought him whom my soul loves*, he presents seven reasons why the soul seeks the Word. The fifth has to do with acquiring *beauty*, that is to say: *simplicity of soul, which is concerned to keep the innocent reputation with a good conscience*. The soul that clothes itself with this *beauty of purity* and with this kind of white garment of heavenly innocence, reclaims for itself a glorious likeness to the Word (SC 85,11).

The soul which has attained this degree now ventures to think of marriage. Why should she not, when she sees that she is like him and therefore ready for marriage? His loftiness has no terrors for her, because her likeness to him associates her with him, and her profession of love is a betrothal. This is the form of that profession: "I have sworn and I purpose to keep your righteous judgements" (Ps 118:106). The apostles followed this when they said, "See, we have left everything to follow you" (Mt 19:27). There is a similar saying which pointing to the spiritual marriage between Christ and the Church, refers to physical marriage: "For this shall a man leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh" (Eph 5:31); and the prophet says of the Bride's glory: "It is good for me to cling to good, and to put my hope in the Lord" (Ps 72:28). (SC 85,12)

What Bernard is saying can pass by unnoticed, but it is of utmost importance. The Abbot of Clairvaux is saying that both religious profession and marriage can help understand the characteristics of the nuptial union of the soul and the Word; religious profession, as a sworn promise to leave all to follow Christ; marriage, as a sign of the union between Christ and the Church. Both vocations, each in its own way, realize the marriage bond with Christ the Spouse. How this takes place and through what mediation it is done may change, but the ultimate objective is the same.

When a monk, a nun, a married man or woman reach the point of being able to say: *For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*, we can be sure that this person is already a bride and has already conceived through the Word (SC 85,12).

We tend to think that the married person has a "divided heart" (Cf. 1Cor 7:34), and is consequently unable to make a total self-offering to the Lord. This is a serious mistake. Paul is not laying down a principle, but simply pointing something out. Any one of us can also point to the fact that there are celibates and virgins with divided hearts! The only thing that divides the heart—or even kills it—is sin, which is always a lack of love.

We are also accustomed to thinking that monks and nuns relate directly with God whereas married lay men and women relate with God by way of marriage and the family. We are forgetting, it seems, that monks and nuns have vows of obedience to a superior and stability in a community. The conclusion of Saint Benedict's Rule is not an idle wish: *May Christ bring us all together to eternal life!* (RB 72,12). Faith, hope, charity, and the Gift of the Spirit alone can bring us into direct union with God, and these gifts or virtues belong to all the baptized. Even solitude, whether in a monastic or lay context, can be filled with people, for better or for worse: for better when it allows us to be in true solidarity with all, for worse when emotional

immaturity turns us in on ourselves.

Cistercian monastic life, as a way or system of life, has to create the best possible climate to foster a certain type of Christian experience. The married life and family life of Cistercian lay men or women also has to create the most suitable climate for another kind of Christian experience. Each has a charism, a gift of the Spirit of God, and all of us partake of the common charism of the Cistercian grace. In what does this charismatic grace consist fundamentally? From the mystical point of view I have adopted here, I would say that the Cistercian charism consists in:

- Ordering our scale of values in such a way that religious values are the highest guiding principles. More explicitly, all of life has to be directed and oriented to seeking and finding God in the face of Christ.
- Clinging to Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church and of each Christian. Through the Incarnation, Easter and the Eucharist, he teaches us the intimate nature of what it means to be bride or bridegroom: gratuitous, total, ongoing and life-giving love that invites reciprocity.
- Giving concrete priority to prayer, understood as gratuitous giving and receiving, experienced as loving faith anticipating the visit of the longed-for Bridegroom. This likewise applies to all forms of prayer: liturgical and devotional, private, within marriage, family, or community....
- Striving to work at the discipline of love, understood as a common will shared with God and neighbor: love based on truth, truth that opens us to self-knowledge and mercy in the face of one's own misery and the misery of others.

I conclude by addressing a word to Lay Associates, or better said, to our Cistercian co-brothers and sisters, especially to those united in the sacrament of marriage. Christ is found in your conjugal experience itself. Your "divinization," as spouses, comes about when *conjugal love is taken up in divine love*, when there is a *fusion of the human and the divine* (*Gaudium et Spes* 48, 49; cf. John Paul II, *Catechesis* of July 4, 1984). In this context, the wish expressed by Bernard of Clairvaux in his letter to the Duke and Duchess of Lorraine is eloquent: *that they may so rejoice in a pure and mutual love that only the love of Christ is supreme in them* (Ep 119).

Conjugal experience is a way of living out the spiritual marriage we have been speaking about. Consecrated virginity and celibacy is another. The dialogue between them is called to enrich our mystical and Cistercian experience of the nuptial Mystery of God.

Dom Bernardo Olivera

Rome, 7 January, 2002

2nd International Meeting of Lay Cistercians, Conyers, 25 April, 2002