

What is meant by a "mysticism of encounter"?

# God among us

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*After briefly delving into use of the term 'mysticism', this article looks at a mysticism of encounter<sup>1</sup> present in the first Christian communities, in order to highlight its relevance in relation to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. A second part focuses on theological foundations of a mysticism of encounter: the universal presence of the Crucified One who is Risen, and who enables us to participate in the life of God as Trinity.*

'Mysticism', is a word used in many different religious and secular contexts today. We speak of it as a 'height' to be reached, or in describing a sports performance, or even regarding 'political mysticism'. It's used to describe a kind of intense, enthusiastic group spirit or when something unites groups of persons around a shared idea. Pope Francis, in speaking of the mystical dimension of our life as social beings, doesn't use the word in a metaphorical sense, but rather he speaks of "mysticism" in the precise and powerful sense of its meaning as an *experience of encounter with God*. He refers not to an individual experience, but to one lived in common with others.

The word, 'encounter', needs clarification as well. The Pope highlights needed mindsets for encountering and living with others: listening, welcoming, collaboration on shared initiatives, and journeying together towards common goals. Each encounter has a *purpose*: establish an authentic interpersonal relationship; a *method*: live a relationship of love between active participants; and a *model*: that of the three divine persons of the Trinity. Francis urges us to live our experiences of relationship in such a way as to lead us to a mystical experience, to an encounter with God.

## The underlying religious experience

In reality, Francis refers to the fundamental experience of early Christianity, of the birth and development of the Church as recounted in the Gospels: that of the Risen Lord present among the disciples when they were truly united. It was similar to the period before Jesus' death and resurrection, but also new: spiritual, yet real. It was that presence promised by Jesus: «Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst» (Mt 18, 20).

Then, after the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost, this experience continued. The Acts of the Apostles speak to this reality that allowed the communities to grow and develop, even in the midst of paganism, strong opposition from Jews, and persecution by the Romans.

It would characterize much of the Church's first centuries, with the Fathers of the Church testifying to this through their words: "God is not just in the midst of the seraphim, but also in our midst, if we want it.", wrote St. John Chrysostom, "Because, it is written, 'where two or more are gathered in my

name, there I am in the midst of them".<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in Cyril of Alexandria's writings: "Although [Jesus is] physically far from us because of his return to God, the Father, where he continues to rule the world with divine power and authority, he remains in the midst of those who love one another."<sup>3</sup> And there would be many other similar examples from this period.

## **A tumultuous journey**

The ongoing reality of this experience in the Church, however, has not been easy. It was born from concepts contained within the Jewish tradition (God's relationship with humanity as a covenant and a community experience of a people) that were not present in Greco-Roman culture, and in which Christianity would begin to insert itself after its separation from Judaism and Jewish culture. Thus, in the more pagan culture, such community frameworks did not have such a religious significance. Moreover, rejection by the Arians (denial of Christ's divinity and the Spirit) and subsequent condemnation (Council of Nicea, A.D.325) caused a certain disconnect between the divine persons and the created world. Then, in the following centuries, the emphasis of Christian reflection shifted in its emphasis towards that of the One God. Theologian Karl Rahner spoke of this marked shift as an "exile" of the Trinity. Thus, in this context, a Trinitarian model became almost unattainable in Christianity and in ecclesial life as a whole.

But the decisive step in this regard was one that was, above all, societal in nature. After Roman emperor Theodosius' declaration of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire in 380, the organizational model of the Church changed. The concept of the "community" fades into the background, with geographical and territorial criteria - borrowing from civilian structures (dioceses, parishes, etc.) - coming instead to the forefront. Bishops and priests also become state officials and mass conversions to Christianity began, with leaders often bring all their constituents to the new religion without adequate evangelization.

Thus, the cultural, theological and socio-ecclesial foundation upon which the Christian community was able to experience such an encounter with God became progressively weakened. Even those who continue to live a community life (the monks) were not sufficiently aware of its spiritual significance, generally seeing it more as a form of structural organization. The prevailing perspective in this period tended to be one of an individual encounter with God.

The evangelical ideal of communion, however, did not disappear completely. We can see it present in the birth of many charisms, particularly in the period prior to their institutionalization (establishment of a rule, constitution, vows), where one notes an existing reality between founder / foundress and first companions marked by a pact, by the establishment of a common ideal, a covenant, and/or a shared lifestyle. Unity and mutual love in their theological essence were seen as a divine gift and these founding experiences lived as an encounter with God.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, however, this initial vitality was not always fully reflected in later Church approval of institutional Rules and other structural expressions. Thus, those founding experiences, so crucial for an Institute's development, remained partially hidden or forgotten. Significant is the fact that many founders and foundresses, in their spiritual writings and legacies, wanted to ensure that mutual love and unity were given the highest priority, so as to be always faithful to God's plan.

For this, and other unfortunate circumstances, the proposal of a spirituality of communion appears as a kind of novelty in today's world. With the Second Vatican Council, however the needed conditions, rooted in new appreciation of the Word of God and Church's identity as sign and instrument of communion modeled on the Trinity (people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Spirit), and therefore on a mysticism of encounter, began to take shape.

## **The promise of a bold proposal**

But, Pope Francis' proposal goes further than this. He points to the Trinitarian life as a model of relationships between human beings. Yet doesn't it seem to be a utopia? Doesn't it place an undue burden on the shoulders of believers? Isn't it clear that we will never be up to the task? As mere mortals, our limits and sins can prevent us from loving with that measure of love God asks of us, from giving ourselves and fully accepting others, of living a reality of reciprocity in the measure proposed to us by Jesus.

It's useless to deny that we don't all experience these limitations. But we also experience that the Spirit, dwelling in us, is able to do what we are unable to do. It is the Spirit, dwelling among us as a fruit of our mutual love, who leads us to go beyond the limits. What meaning would the words of the new commandment, "as I have loved you", have if they were outside of our possibilities? Certainly, only in paradise will we reach this fullness, but something of this must be possible also in the here and now.

Jesus' prayer to the Father (*Jn 17*) calls us to participate in this Trinitarian communion, the life of heaven already here on earth. It is not our work. Rather it is God's work in us. If unity were ours, Jesus would have asked it from us. Instead he asked it of the Father. The unity, life of the Trinity, is God's work in us, in the measure of our being one in Christ Jesus by virtue of our love for one another.

## **The hidden object root**

Being the fruit of a free giving-receiving, mutual love always depends on us. At the same time, however, there is a firm and fixed foundation that goes beyond the choices and the wavering of our human freedom: it is Jesus himself, dwelling in the depths of my hearts and in that of my brother or sister (even if one or the other is not fully aware of this presence). "You did it to me" (cf. *Mt 25*). It is an objective fruit of our redemption: the new creation. The resurrection did not only involve the person of Christ, but rather all of humankind, and the entire universe.<sup>5</sup> It is the beginning whereby everything that has been created is summed up in the risen Christ (cf. all things were created by him, and for him: *Eph 1: 10*), becoming the new root of the cosmos. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (*Col 1, 16-17*).

## **New Horizons Before Us**

Thus, we start to comprehend the significance of the Pope's proposal. True encounters between Christians generate not only a beautiful "us" at a human level, but it allows for an encounter with the risen Lord. From the indwelling roots present in each one of us, the effort to love one another prepares the way for the presence of the Risen One alive among us, and able to be rendered visible to the world of today. Christ in me enters into communion with Christ in you, and the Risen Christ becomes a living presence among us, in whom we find ourselves again, both united and distinct.

In society today, where secularization has taken from religion its social value of the past, it's evident that the task of helping others live a personal encounter with Christ and in which it is necessary to evangelize above all by attraction and not so much with arguments, becomes a daunting undertaking. But we can't afford the luxury of neglecting such a path for encountering Christ. It is a presence that nourishes and gives life to the Christian community, rendering it capable of communicating Christ beyond the use of mere words themselves. Such a personal encounter with

the Lord facilitates, too, the handing down of faith's essence to the new generations as well.

## **The Trinity at the heart**

It is important to note that this presence of the Risen One is not generated merely by being together and in agreement with one other. It requires those given conditions revealed to us by the life of the Trinity in its essence. Aside from our own limitations and sins, the biggest obstacle can be a mistaken concept of self (being = self-elevation) and insufficient understanding of those dynamics needed for living this reciprocity.

The model of complete, fulfilling giving of self is seen in the full and reciprocal gift of the three divine Persons of the Trinity to one another. Each is 'fully themselves' as persons (because they are love). In this mutual gift to the other, nothing is lost. And we are able to comprehend this in the measure that we, too, respond to the call to live reciprocity with one another by modeling our relationships on the life of the Trinity. Only the Spirit alive in each one, and among us through mutual love, can overcome those human limitations that are often barriers to unity. In the Spirit, and through the Spirit, we are made one. Our true identity can be more clearly seen as consisting in self-giving to the other, in welcoming the other, out of love.

Thus, denying ourselves for the sake of others (which according to human reasoning can constitute a stumbling block) becomes the fulcrum of Christian life. The cross of Jesus becomes the key; the cross redeems us from sin and death, and makes us free to give of ourselves. Only through the gift of the Spirit are we able to reach this communion -- in unity and in distinction -- which is the fulfillment of God's plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the anthology of texts on pp. 2-3 of this issue of *Ekklesia*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Giovanni Crisostomo, *Om. in Is. 6, 2* (PG 66, 137).

<sup>3</sup> *In Ioh. Evang. IX* (PG 13, 1191).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. F. Ciardi, *Un patto fondativo per le comunità carismatiche (A foundational pact for the charismatic community)*, in AA.VV., *Il Patto del '49 nell'esperienza di Chiara Lubich (The Pact of '49 in the experience of Chiara Lubich)*, Città Nuova, Roma 2012, pp. 81-112.

<sup>5</sup> Benedetto XVI, To the participants in the 4th National Ecclesial Convention, Verona, Italy. October 19, 2006.