

THE
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Anselm Stolz, O.S.B.

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The Doctrine of Spiritual Perfection
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INTRODUCTION TO THE 2001 EDITION

A new edition of Anselm Stolz's lucid treatise on the mystical life is especially timely. As a German Benedictine who taught at the Anselmo in Rome, Stolz (1900-1942) brings to bear on the subject two movements in Catholic thought then in full flower. He combines the renewed interest in the thought St. Thomas Aquinas begun by Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* with the so-called 'new theology,' a return to the biblical and patristic sources of Christian thought. His approach to the spiritual life thus seeks to counterbalance the dominance of psychology and phenomenology which, even in Catholic circles, have led to distortion. These two disciplines assume that extraordinary phenomena—voices, visions, ecstasies, and stigmata—are essential to mysticism. By contrast, Stolz seeks to integrate the mystical life into the central dogmas of the Catholic faith and thus to recover it as the perfection of grace available to *all* Christians. Hence the suitability of the translator's choice of English title of a work originally published in German as *Theologie der Mystik*. Since mysticism is the flowering of the virtues and gifts of the Spirit implanted by the

sacraments and nurtured in prayer, a proper understanding of it provides a paradigm for understanding the nature and goal of every Christian's inner life. Stolz does not accept the strong distinction between mysticism and the usual modes of Christian prayer. Developing a balanced reciprocity between these, he locates their common essence in the human person's being created in the image and likeness of God.

So pervasive is the influence of psychology on the analysis of mysticism that Stolz's approach may strike the modern reader as eccentric or anachronistic. Much of this psychological influence actually has a recent provenance in Christianity, which Stolz traces to the Spanish mystics of the 16th century, especially the Carmelites Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross. Although respectful of the contributions of these Church doctors, he sees in their efforts to delineate precise stages in the experiential knowledge of God the seeds of a reductionism. One might well argue that these have germinated fully since being cultivated by William James and Evelyn Underhill at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite the remarkable achievements of these scholars who, together with Baron Friedrich von Hügel, were largely responsible for reviving contemporary interest in the field, they have also contributed to its dislocation from the systematic explication of the Christian faith.¹ In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James treats

¹ Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); originally published in 1908.

mystical experiences as isolated and extraordinary psychological phenomena. As defying adequate articulation, they temporarily render their recipient passive while conveying a knowledge that challenges the normal categories of understanding and perceiving reality. Mystics thus become bizarre cases for disinterested study: Their social utility must be justified, and their claims to know the divine, though perhaps authoritative for themselves, cannot be compelling to those who have not shared similar experiences.² In *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill corrects James's view of mystical experiences as discreet phenomena by situating them within an organic pattern of human development. But like James, her method is both phenomenological and psychological. She surveys an impressive range of mystical writings, Christian and other, and then seeks an explanation for the experiences they evince in a general theory of consciousness.³

Stolz contends that nothing could be more alien to the main lines of the Christian theology of mysticism. In an effort to ground the phenomenon's psychological aspects dogmatically, he returns to St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, the Greek fathers, and Thomas Aquinas. By synthesizing these biblical, patristic, and scholastic sources, Stolz discovers a basic definition. "Mysticism," he says, "is the experience of that process of being drawn into the stream of divine life, a process which is accomplished in the

² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: MacMillan, 1997) lectures 16-17; originally the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh 1901-02.

³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (England: Oneworld Publications, 1999) especially Part Two; originally published in 1911.

sacraments.” (234) By explaining the key terms of this definition, he proceeds to develop his theology of mysticism, which for him is really a theology of Christian spiritual life.

I

According to this theology, mysticism is first an experience of the divine life. St. Paul's account in II Corinthians 12:1-5 presents a model. Here Paul claims that, fourteen years prior, he “was caught up into paradise and heard secret words”: whether he was in the body or out of it, he does not know. Drawing on patristic commentary, Stolz contends that Paul's being taken up into paradise means that his ecstasy returns him, to some extent, to the nearness and intimacy with God enjoyed by Adam before the fall. This leads Stolz to recover Aquinas's understanding of Adam's prelapsarian mode of knowing. For Aquinas, Adam did not have a direct and unmediated knowledge of God. He enjoyed a mediated knowledge in two ways. Like us, he grasped God's existence as the ‘unmoved Mover,’ the uncreated Cause of the empirical world that we know through the experience of our senses. Adam grasped God in this way by realizing that everything a human being can know is dependent on a higher reality and so finally must be traceable to an ultimate explanation. But unlike with us, God gave Adam, through a special grace, an inner illumination of the mind not natural to humanity. This grace strengthened God's image and likeness imprinted in Adam's soul, thus allowing God to be manifested with clarity.

This special grace made Adam's knowledge of God like that of the angels. Angels do not affirm God's existence by

seeking an explanation for what they know in sensation. As pure spirits, they are not immersed in matter as we are, and so they have no senses. Consequently, they are able to know God more clearly and strongly than we can. They do this through their own spiritual nature which, like ours, is imprinted with the image of its Creator. The difference is that their intuition is not derived from anything exterior but from the divine image strictly interior to them. Nonetheless, there is a similarity. Just as human senses immediately grasp the objects of the external world, so angelic intellects immediately grasp God's existence. Aquinas calls this knowledge 'infused' because, bypassing sensation, it is wholly innate. Adam's knowledge of God was not identical to that of the angels because it was mediated by grace, a gift that fortified the human intellect so that it could know God in the soul's divine imprint. Still Adam did possess something of the angels' infused strength. But it was, alas, sacrificed in the fall.

This description of Adam's prelapsarian divine knowledge suggests that Paul's experience gives him a similarly angelic knowledge of God. But is this knowledge mediated like Adam's or immediate, as many Christian mystics claim? Drawing on Aquinas's doctrine of grace, Stolz argues that it is both at once. Stolz contends that God is immediately present in the soul through sanctifying grace. As a result, God dwells in the creature, and so the creature thus participates in the very divine life. This participation is effected through a habitual modification of the soul's natural powers which elevates them toward a supernatural end. It follows, therefore, that when the soul's graced powers reflect upon them-

selves, they are able to know the divine life, which is immanently present in them. Although this reflection gives an immediate divine knowledge, it does not confer a direct grasp of the divine essence, such as one receives in the beatific vision. Consequently, Paul's knowledge of God may be termed mediated, since its cause is a special gift, albeit a special gift which is the very divine life. Through this mediated immediacy, Paul's natural faculties, in reflecting on themselves, would have enjoyed something akin to the infused clarity of the angels. If Paul's experience is a model of Christian mysticism, then the knowledge any Christian mystic receives of God is essentially an experiential fulfillment of sanctifying grace.

But how does one achieve this fulfillment? Stolz's basic definition of mysticism answers this question. As an experience of the divine life, mysticism is a process accomplished in the sacraments. In speaking of baptism, the initiating sacrament of Christian life, the Greek fathers emphasize how the sacrament ontologically reforms the human person flawed by sin. Because baptism restores the prelapsarian likeness to the image of God in the soul, it makes possible the process of *theosis* or divinization by which the Christian grows into a lustrous mirror of the God-man. Building on this view, Aquinas affirms that the sacrament's graced waters infuse into the soul the theological and cardinal virtues. Since these virtues orient the person to the beatific vision as its final end, they are the causes of all authentic prayer. As such, they enable some persons to reach a properly mystical maturation in which cognitive knowledge of God becomes experiential. Although extraordinary phenomena like voices,

visions, ecstasies, and stigmata can occur during this maturation, they are not prerequisites to the growth of the virtues. A Christian can develop mysticism without experiencing them. If these phenomena do occur, they are mysticism's side effects, not its causes; its causes are the sacraments of initiation, which the other sacraments, especially the Eucharist, amplify.

In Christian mysticism, therefore, if the human person's psychological consciousness develops to an unusual degree, it is first and foremost because the virtues have developed to a high degree. And as Stolz reminds us, the virtues grow because they are amplified by the Holy Spirit's seven-fold gifts. According to Aquinas, because the virtues are habits of the natural faculties, they depend upon the faculties' operation. As a work of nature, this operation impedes the virtues from actualizing their full potential in grace. For this potential to be obtained, further divine help is needed. Given in the gifts, this help is proportioned specifically to each of the virtues in order to inspire the faculties with impulses, as it were, from the Spirit. As contemplation deepens, the gifts are developed, divine inspiration is strengthened, the virtues become perfected, and the faculties experience more fully their supernatural elevation.

Of chief importance for the mystical life is the gift of wisdom. Enabling us connaturally to view things from God's perspective, it is proportioned to the theological virtue of love. Because this virtue gives us an intimate share in the divine nature that is love, wisdom grows as love grows. Neither wisdom, nor any of the other gifts, entails extraordinary psychological experience. They enable us to do the

same works as the virtues which, begun sacramentally, flourish in the life of prayer. This inspiration is the same as the analogously angelic knowledge enjoyed by both Adam and Paul; it is the summit of the mystical life, the restored lustre of the soul's divine image.

II

Stolz's book raises several issues important in contemporary discussion. Of particular interest is his treatment of non-Christian mysticism. The rise of ecumenism spurred on by the Second Vatican Council, the emerging development of theologies of world religions, and the growth of cult movements have recently brought to the fore a dizzying plurality of spiritualities. For its part, Christian theology is being compelled to take stock, not only of them, but also of its own distinctive claims. Although all of these trends succeed Stolz's work by a generation, he does presage a salutary word of theological restraint that undoubtedly needs to be voiced amid the sometimes heady enthusiasm of inter-religious dialogue. If he cautions against a psychological reductionism that divorces mysticism from theology, he also cautions against a theological reductionism that relativizes the act of faith and homogenizes the notion of transcendence. As he says, when Christian mysticism becomes a partner for analysis in the comparative study of religion, the risk of misunderstanding it is high. The elements in Christianity that go into forming a common basis for comparison with other religions actually spring from the grace of Christ that is deeper and hidden. Because faith gives access to this grace, it and it alone is the adequate herm-

eneutic for understanding Christian mysticism. One danger in the comparative approach, therefore, is mistaking a part of the religions under study for their whole. This danger obtains even when religion is viewed, not merely as a socio-cultural phenomenon, but as a grasp of the transcendent. This last term, Stolz suggests, is analogous, if not outright equivocal. In light of the reaction among some contemporary scholars of religion against a common religious essence, the question that Stolz raises is especially probing: Can any religion adequately be understood apart from the act of fiducial assent that constitutes it?

Stolz's remarks on non-Christian mysticism are also timely because they point to an important debate between the two leading Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar: How inclusive should Catholicism be in finding the true and the good outside of Christianity? Stolz tends toward an exclusive position. Christianity possesses the only authentic mysticism, he asserts, because Christ is the unique mediator between God and humanity. Christian mysticism is not, therefore, merely an intensification of a natural desire for God implanted in us as a result of creation. Original sin has fixed a gap breachable only by the explicit grace of Christ. Whether there is good in non-Christian mysticism remains an open question for Stolz, who is concerned about the risk of delusion, especially from the Gnostic influences that Christianity has long countered. One thinks readily of how these have shaped the New Age movement. Its pantheism is at odds with the Incarnation; its syncretism and claims to esoteric knowledge undermine the ecclesial structure of

Revelation; and its emphasis on extraordinary psychological phenomena ignores mysticism's graced essence.⁴ Sharing Stolz's concern, Balthasar's groundbreaking work in theological aesthetics underscores the uniqueness of Christ as the formal representation of the hidden God. As a result, religions that overstress the spirit become suspect, because they do not account for the redemption of the flesh. Unlike Judaism, whose appreciation of the material cosmos provides the seedbed for the Incarnation, Hinduism dispenses with form, claims Balthasar, whereas Buddhism climbs toward the divine without awaiting God's own message from above.⁵

In contrast to Stolz and Balthasar's exclusivism, Rahner emphasizes God's salvific will which, though effective only in and through Christ, is universal. Indebted to Maurice Blondel and Henri de Lubac, Rahner posits that since the cosmos is created through the divine Logos, the grace of the Incarnation operates implicitly from the very dawn of time and space.⁶ Although drawing a distinction between the orders of nature and grace, he affirms the existence of only one concrete order, that of grace. Nature thus becomes a "remainder concept," useful for clarifying what humanity would be like were there no Incarnation.⁷ This position

⁴ See *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* 704.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Fessio et al., 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982-89) 1.217, 314, 336-37, 496; in Louis Dupré, "Balthasar's Theology of Aesthetic Form," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988) 299-318, at 315-16.

⁶ Maurice Blondel, *Action* (1893), trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984); Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 2000); and *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); both originally published in 1965.

leads Rahner to overcome Stolz's dichotomy between the unique authenticity of Christian mysticism and the mere intensification of the human person's natural desire for God. If this natural desire exists as an intrinsic moment within the order of grace, then it must be vestigially and seminally Christian.⁸ Consequently, the good and the true may be found in non-Christian mysticism, although Rahner is sagacious enough to know that specifically locating them requires careful discernment. Christian mysticism functions like a mirror in which humanity can see explicitly in history the fulfillment of its natural desire for God.⁹ The intensification of this desire, in some remote but authentic way, is due to the Spirit, whose virtues and gifts are anonymously infused, as it were, in every human being.¹⁰

Beyond these issues, Stolz also inquires into whether mysticism is rare. He suggests that this is hardly the case among devout Christians, for whom mysticism may even be considered normal. Once extraordinary psychological occurrences are dissociated from mysticism's essence, one can say that mysticism is found wherever sanctity is found. Rahner builds on this position when he embraces within the

⁷ Karl Rahner, "Concerning the Relation Between Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols. (various publishers and dates), vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst, 297-317, at 312-13.

⁸ Rahner, "Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth, 165-88, at 178-83.

⁹ Rahner, "The Order of Redemption Within the Order of Creation," in *The Christian Commitment*, trans. Cecily Hastings (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 38-74, at 49-50.

¹⁰ Rahner, "Anonymous Christian," in *Theological Investigations* 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger, 390-98, at 393-94. Balthasar is critical of Rahner's position in *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (Glen Rock: Newman, 1969) 60-68.

concept of the mysticism of everyday life such experiences as forgiving without reward, following one's conscience despite opposition, and unconditionally loving other human beings.¹¹ For Stolz, those who are not mystics in this life do not embody holiness. As a result, they will have to undergo in the next life the necessary purgation that is mysticism's condition. At this point in Stolz's argument, the reader may justly wonder whether his notion of mysticism, and Rahner's also, begins to lose specific meaning. After all, not every saintly ascetic is therefore a mystic. The combination of grace and human cooperation is sufficient to achieve heroic virtue even without the existential sense of God's nearness and intimacy proper to mysticism. Consequently, Stolz overstates his case in making mysticism normal among the devout.

Nonetheless, although Stolz is wary of extraordinary experiences, he is aware that mysticism does entail distinctive psychological content. Much of his originality lies in isolating, in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the nexus between theology and psychology. Amplifying the virtues, the gifts endow human consciousness with impulses that confer a connaturally divine knowledge. These can be empirically sensed. The gift of counsel, for instance, which is proportioned to the virtue of prudence, inspires a person to a specific decision when prudence alone is unable to discern the proper course. Prudence is not always sufficient to resolve the conflict among competing ways of proceeding. In fact, it can create a psychological deadlock precisely because it

¹¹ Rahner, "Everyday Things," in *Belief Today*, trans. M. H. Heelan (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 39.

enables a person to see clearly the advantages and disadvantages of all possible options. Similarly, fear of the Lord, proportioned to hope, arouses in us an existential caution, lest we overly rely on our own efforts and subtly withdraw from trusting in grace. Given in the usual means of grace, the gifts cause empirically distinctive states of consciousness that are not extraordinary, either psychologically or theologically. Although every Christian who cooperates with grace knows these distinctive states to some extent, the mystic, under the influence of asceticism, knows them with Adam's prelapsarian strength. Stolz's analysis shows, therefore, that every Christian is a potential mystic, because the raw material has been sacramentally infused. But this should not lead to the inference that every devout Christian is a mystic or will become one.

In sum, this noteworthy book counters some of the reductionist trends of our time, while it underscores the importance of integrating mystical psychology into the doctrine of grace. One avenue of approaching this integration, Stolz shows, begins in Thomas's treatment of the gifts. Another might begin in Bonaventure, whose doctrine of the spiritual senses treats the interplay among the person's sensitive, intellectual, and volitional faculties as they strive toward knowledge of God. This has been studied by both Balthasar and Rahner.¹² A potentially fruitful project of integration might be to examine William Meissner's seminal

¹² See Balthasar's essay on Bonaventure in *The Glory of the Lord* 2.260-362, esp. 309-26; see Rahner, "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses' in the Middle Ages, in *Theological Investigations* 16, trans. David Morland, 104-34; for a comparative study of their positions, see my "Balthasar and Rahner on the Spiritual Senses," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 224-41.

study *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* from the theological perspective.¹³ Such a project could proceed by accepting as a set of useful hypotheses the psychological analysis that Meissner offers. It could then show how these are derived from the virtues and gifts of the Spirit and how they are compatible with the spiritual senses. It could also use the visions and ecstasies of this mystic to address the pressing question that Stolz raises: What is the theological significance of mysticism's extraordinary phenomena? Such an interdisciplinary undertaking would perhaps best honor Stolz's work, which opens up new vistas for us precisely because it creatively recovers the past wisdom of others.

¹³ William W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

This work lays no claim to be an exhaustive treatise. It is an attempt to approach the problems of mysticism from the theological angle adopted by the fathers and the medieval Scholastics. In this connection the use made of St. Paul's account of his rapture is an essential feature of the work, furnishing it with a structure entirely in harmony with the theological method of the patristic age.

If the Spanish mystics, especially St. John of the Cross, seem to receive scanty treatment in the following pages, this is not because their importance is in any way underestimated. The psychological method, which they represent, is indispensable to an integral exposition of mysticism. But it should not dominate the whole field of inquiry: otherwise the positive result will be of superficial value. Neither does the theological method pursued in this work pretend to be exclusive. However much patristic and Scholastic theologians confine themselves to the dogmatic side of mysticism, room is always left for a psychological

approach to mystical phenomena. Both viewpoints, the psychological and the dogmatic, are mutually complementary. If in the present work the author insists rather on the dogmatic view, this is in keeping with his aim to reproduce the ideas of the fathers and of the Scholastics, and to provide something in the nature of a corrective to the excessive importance attached to the psychological in modern mysticism.

This book is a translation of *Theologie der Mystik* by Reverend Anselm Stolz, O.S.B., published by Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, Germany.

AIDAN WILLIAMS

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I

THE TASK

PERHAPS the theologian who undertakes to deal with the problems of mysticism will be asked first of all to show his credentials as a mystic. Such a demand presupposes that there can be a theologian who is not mystic as well. At this stage it is not proposed to question the justice of such a distinction: attention is merely called to the fact that the relation between mysticism and theology is itself a problem, that consequently the theologian who finds himself confronted with questions of mysticism must at the outset explain the standpoint from which he makes his approach to the subject.

Even if theology and mysticism were absolutely distinct, the theologian would still be called upon to discuss what is usually understood by the term mysticism. For the concern of mysticism is surely with occurrences in religious life, at times also with externally perceptible phenomena of that life. These must

be justified, their bearing on Christian life indicated, their foundations examined. This is a theological task. Moreover, it is the office of the theologian to point out where religious life begins to be heretical, where the frontiers of Christian mysticism are situated. And he must give to mysticism, so far as it manifests itself outwardly, some interpretation, that is, he must estimate its value in reference to what theology understands by man, by the Church, and possibly by other objects of faith also. The more closely mysticism and theology are connected, the more the theologian must concern himself with the former in the aspects mentioned.

Father Augustin Poulain, whose widely known work, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, has acquired notable importance for the scientific treatment of mystical questions, distinguishes a twofold method, the descriptive and the speculative. The descriptive method describes individual mystical experiences and arranges them in order. Father Poulain's book has become a classic in the use he made of this method. Its justification cannot be seriously questioned, especially where, as is the case with Father Poulain, the end visualized is primarily practical. He sets out to provide "photographs" of prayer-states, from which it may be possible to recognize whether a soul, detecting something similar in itself, is on the right road or not. From a theological standpoint this method is obviously not

complete. Poulain's work should not, without qualification, be called a treatise on mystical theology.

For a theologian, the source of knowledge is not merely what is experienced by the senses. The subject of theology is principally something transcending nature, something beyond the range of normal sense experience. Hence the theologian's interest in mysticism lies deeper than that of the psychologist, who simply records and analyzes. As the task of the speculative method, Poulain proposes the systematization of mystical happenings and the explanation of their relationship to natural dispositions and also to grace and the gifts of the Holy Ghost. The task of the theologian, the dogmatic theologian in particular, is thus at least partially indicated. Poulain does not take up this task: in his opinion it has already been accomplished in theological works not to be improved upon.

This may sound disheartening, especially as recently the theological side of mysticism has been dealt with exhaustively on the lines of traditional Scholastic theology. We need only recall in this connection the French Dominican theologians, Gardeil, Garrigou-Lagrange, Joret.¹ Nevertheless it is worth while facing the task again, not only to synthesize in its essential points what has been elaborated already, but also and chiefly to open a way for linking these questions

¹ A. Gardeil, O.P., *La structure de l'âme et l'expérience mystique*, 1927; R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, 1937; D. Joret, O.P., *La contemplation mystique*, 1923.

of mystical theology with the newly awakening patristic theology. In mystical theology this procedure is necessary. From the early ages of the Church down to our day the language of mysticism has remained substantially the same. In it are to be found theological expressions which originate to some extent from non-Christian mysticism and which have acquired their specifically Christian meaning in the theology of the early Church. The theologians whom Poulain has in mind, as likewise modern speculative studies in mysticism, treat of mystical questions on the basis of an almost exclusively Scholastic understanding of these concepts. Thus it is clear that one section only of the theological questions affecting mysticism is covered. To develop a theology of mysticism based on a patristic understanding of the traditional concepts is so vast an undertaking that here only a slight attempt can be made to fuse patristic and Scholastic theology into some such system. We need to find a suitable starting point for this attempt.

Today whoever takes his bearings in mysticism discovers that he has been led out on to a battlefield. The conflict seems to be about fundamental questions. A theology of mysticism cannot begin with an exposition of the pros and cons of this dispute. The danger of losing perspective is too great. Another consideration arises: perhaps the present-day conflict over fundamental questions in mysticism does not after all touch

the really fundamental issues. The dispute is entirely conditioned by circumstances of time, arising as it does from a concrete situation in the last century, from reaction against the excessive value attached to purely discursive and meditative prayer and from the effort to restore to mysticism its place in Christian life.² For a preliminary orientation we should in any case summarize briefly the theology of mysticism in its present-day position. Then a starting point must be looked for, outside the modern conflict. Not that this latter is to be in any sense disregarded; it is a question of adopting the right attitude toward it.

A summary of the position today as far as mysticism is concerned should reveal what is generally, or at least almost generally, admitted, and further what is the subject of dispute.

A certain unanimity is discernible in the various definitions of the essence of the mystical. Writers on this subject commonly acknowledge that there belongs essentially to mystical life an experimental realization of God's presence and of His activity within the soul.³ According to Poulain, the characteristic difference between the mystical state and the recollection of ordinary prayer lies in the fact that in mystical

² C. Butler, O.S.B., *Western Mysticism*, 1927, pp. xii f.

³ Later observations will show that a more exact conceptual definition of the mystical is possible, though the one given above is correct in its general wording: it will, therefore, be accepted provisionally in what follows.

prayer God not only helps man to think of Him and to recall His presence, but gives man an experimental knowledge of that presence. "In a word, He makes us feel that we really enter into communication with Him." ⁴ What this experience signifies and how it is to be understood, will be explained later.

There is further unanimity on the point that revelations, visions, stigmata, and the like do not belong to the essence of mystical life. Indeed these are often of doubtful value. "Extraordinary phenomena are no proof of intimacy with God and of holiness; they are just as little a regular means of attaining to moral perfection and close union with God. The mystics have called attention rather to the danger easily resulting when phenomena of this kind, in one's own case or in that of others, are overvalued." ⁵

Far-reaching agreement prevails also in defining the nature of mystical knowledge, of mystical contem-

⁴ A. Poulain, S.J., *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, 1912, p. 65. Similarly E. Krebs, *Grundfragen der kirchlichen Mystik*, 1921, p. 36: "Mysticism in the sense of the Church is the experience or awareness of a union effected by grace between the soul and God. . . . Summing it up in three words, we can describe this experience as *cognitio Dei experimentalis*, as a consciousness of God's nearness." According to A. Mager, O.S.B., by mysticism is understood an "extraordinary kind of religious activity centering round an immediate experience of God" (*Mystik als Lehre und Leben*, 1934, p. 25). A good summary of present-day terminology is furnished by J. de Guibert, S.J., "Mystique," in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 1926, pp. 3-16. Cf. also Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux* (1925), II, 585 ff.

⁵ J. Zahn, *Einführung in die christliche Mystik*, 1922, p. 637. Mager, *op. cit.*, p. 187: "Today . . . there can be few people who do not reckon visions as merely concomitant phenomena of mysticism."