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Catholic Theological Association 2015 Conference Papers

# Introduction

Dr. Gemma Simmonds CJ

In a sermon preached on the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, Karl Rahner states,

> A person who teaches something about mysticism is doing theology, is speaking in the light of revelation, saying something to the church as such for the edification of the faithful'.[1]

He goes on to discuss whether or not mysticism is anything more than a 'natural' factor of consciousness, transformed by psychological or parapsychological techniques, part of normal human capacities, presupposed by grace. From here he moves on to considering whether mysticism is a stage within the normal Christian life or a rare, God-given phenomenon of spiritual virtuosity outside the normal course of the life of the baptized. At the same time he acknowledges and seeks to identify the existence of mysticism outside Christianity. Rahner sees these as urgent questions for his day (and how much more so for our own, some thirty years after his death), since as the world appears to be declaring itself increasingly secularized and self-sufficient, the matter of both a theology of and an initiation into the human capacity for direct, personal experience of God becomes ever more pressing.

This year's conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain takes issue with similar questions with the title 'Formation in Holiness: Virtue, Growth and the Spiritual Life'. The presupposition is that *mystagogia* is an essential part of the growth in faith of each person baptized in Christ, and part of a God-given capacity, not simply a form of religious virtuosity given to the chosen few.

Papers were given from the perspective of a number of schools of Christian spirituality from East and West, from biblical times to the twentieth century. In his opening paper Philip Endean SJ addresses the question of 'what matters most', applying Ignatius of Loyola's conviction that God is to be found in the full range of human

[1] Karl Rahner, 'Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Church', in Albert Raffelt and Harvey D. Egan, eds., *The Great Church Year*, (New York, Crossroad, 1993), p.361.

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experience to the issue of what resources we bring to bear in our encounters with the Christ, the image of the unseen, sometimes unacknowledged but often deeply intuited God. Etienne Vetö CCN looks at Christian prayer from the perspective of pneumatology, engaging with Scripture and reflecting on the notion of breath (*ruah-pneuma*) as a way of exploring the definitive characteristics of the Spirit as divine person. Fáinche Ryan considers the connection between priesthood and holiness, first in focussing on the 'priesthood' of Jesus and then expanding this to an exploration of what it might be for all the baptized to exercise the priesthood of all believers while some are ordained to sacramental ministry. This raises questions about shared ministry which in practice do not always admit of comfortable conclusions.

Theology is not the only discipline within which virtue and growth in the spiritual life can be discussed. Peter Tyler brings to bear his expertise both in psychotherapy and in the study of mysticism to look at the recent retrieval of soul-language within the field of psychotherapy. This has heralded a return to consideration of the closeness of what are now two disciplines in the work of Freud and Jung. It has also brought about a certain closeness to discussions within the discipline of theology. Although Tyler welcomes this retrieval of soul-language, he also warns against an unhelpful creeping dualism within that language. Nicholas Austin addresses the topic of virtue, citing Aquinas's account of it as growth towards the image of God, but suggesting a gap in explanation of how such a growth takes place in practical terms. From the Dominican tradition he turns to the Ignatian, with the teaching on the discernment of spirits found in the *Spiritual Exercises* providing just such a practical approach, available to all who open themselves to the workings of divine grace. The final paper, given by Gemma Simmonds, engages less with specific topics than with those offered by conference participants, in light of contemporary discourse around spirituality within the Mind-Body-Spirit industry. While there is much for theologians to critique within the tendency in parts of this industry to narcissism and the commodification of spiritual experience, the persistent desire of large numbers of people to engage with it suggests a poverty of effective expression by believers of the riches of the Christian spiritual tradition and its practices. There is rich potential here for theologians to engage in open and receptive dialogues with the spiritual searchers of today.

There is no genuine dissonance or gap between the best traditions of theology and spirituality. Another sermon of Rahner's, this time on the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, insists, in contradiction to an approach to spirituality that leaves aside context and intellectual endeavour, that 'there can . . . be no really spiritual life without an intellectual life'. But in contradiction to any approach to theology that sees it in the main as a grappling with conceptual puzzles, he

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also insists that 'in theology we have to allow ourselves to be challenged as whole persons with all we are, with mind and heart, with the whole weight and seriousness of existence in our times, with all the experience of our lives'. However tedious and laborious and disillusioning theological endeavour may be, especially in the face of modern incomprehension as to the very point of it, he encourages us that 'we are headed each hour along a straight path on which we, holding the empty straw of our lives and of our scholarship in our hands, obtain as beggars the eternal realm, which is then really and truly God himself.'[2]

In this sense, all study of theology is potentially a formation in holiness, in which virtue can grow in spiritual lives lived amid the ordinary struggles and frustrations as well as the joys and triumphs connected with all that is most deeply human.

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[2] Ibid, pp. 312-313.

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