

Are All Men Mystics?

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ONCE upon a time there was no Earth. Instead, there was a sphere of blazing gases, tossed from the giant cauldron of the sun.

Through millions of years the gases lessened in temperature until there was a core of molten metal at the center of the sphere. The cooling process continued and a crust formed upon the metal ball, a crust rent by volcanic explosions and distorted into mountains and valleys. The outer envelope of gas, still cooling, precipitated water into the depressions to form seas and lakes. Finally, the sun burned through the outer mist and shone upon the planet.

Then, a new miracle occurred. Plant life began in sea and earth. Whole continents clothed themselves in green.

Another miracle; weird creatures swam in the water, soared through the air, wove among the trees. We call them "animals."

Last of all came Man.

You may call this gigantic process "Creation" or "Evolution" just as you like. Either term is correct, according as you view the development from above or below. In a moment we shall consider its relation to Mysticism.

Kingdoms

First, however, I want you to consider two facts about the various kingdoms: mineral, vegetable, animal and rational.

1. Each successive kingdom is constituted of elements from the kingdom or kingdoms below, but with a brand-new power added.
2. Different from one another though they are, the border-line between any two of the successive kingdoms is difficult, if not impossible, to define. Thus, anyone can tell the difference between a cow and a cabbage but there are certain organisms between, about which it would be hard to say whether they belong to the vegetable or the animal kingdom. You will see the point of these two propositions with reference to Mysticism as we continue.

Now comes a stupendous question. Is Evolution

finished? Or, to put it the other way, is Man, as we ordinarily know him in this world, the goal of the creative process?

The question answers itself. Man in his present state cannot be the goal of creation for, were that the case, we would be forced to the blasphemous conclusion that God has failed; because, though each individual human being is marvelously integrated within himself, both as regards his body and his mind, the human race as a whole is anything but integrated. On the contrary, we spend half our time tearing one another to pieces. What is needed is a new kingdom, a new order of being, as far above man, as we know him, as man is above the animals—a kingdom composed of elements assimilated from the kingdom below; composed, in other words, of individual men and women; but men and women indwelt by a brand-new power, the Power of Divine Love.

Is it not interesting to realize, in precisely this connection, that Jesus came preaching a "Kingdom?" Not the mere rational kingdom but the Kingdom of Heaven is that higher order of being which constitutes the goal of the creative process, the crown of evolution.

Heaven and the Mystics

Naturally, we cannot conceive the joy of Heaven. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." In Heaven we shall enjoy an entirely new mode of consciousness.

To some souls while still in this world, however, God gives foretastes of the heavenly experience. These are the Mystics. They do not, indeed, enter into the fulness of the Beatific Vision. But, short of this, no words can express the wonder and absolute newness of their contact with God.

FULL-GROWN mystics are rare.

On the other hand, it is probable that all souls which will eventually reach Heaven must participate in the mystical experience or its equivalent; if not on earth, then in the intermediate state. The reason why we may be fairly sure of this will be given later. Since, then, all souls are capable of eternal salvation if they use God's grace aright, it would follow that all men are *potentially* mystics.

The question now arises: Are all men capable, by a right use of the grace which God offers us in the Sacraments, of becoming mystics this side the grave? This problem is one which exercises some of the finest minds in the Church. It is, moreover, a practical problem which concerns us all individually.

There are many useful and holy subjects; some of them are concerned with God's creatures and some with our ideas about God Himself. Some, indeed, prescribe the ways in which we must be disciplined to attain to union with God.

But this subject is concerned with that union itself; and with the consciousness of that union. For mystical experience is the felt oneness of the soul with the Divine.

Union With God

We have drawn a distinction between union with God and consciousness of that union.

Every soul, small or great, good or evil, is united with God more intimately than the human mind can imagine. But the vast majority of souls are not directly aware of that union. "In Him we live

and move and have our being." Yes, but—even though we acknowledge this fact with our reason; even though we are loyal to this fact with our wills; even though the contemplation of this fact stirs our emotions—most of us do not have a direct "sensation" of this union. The mystics do.*

There are different modes of union with God. Since our very existence depends upon His, we can say that He is in every one of us by essence and operation. In this sense He is in the souls of the damned as truly as in the souls of the blessed. Otherwise they would not exist at all.

In the case of the blessed, however, there is a further mode of union. Their wills are in perfect harmony with the will of God. In other words His will and their wills are united. They are "at one."

Even in this world, the wills of the saints are at one with God's will; or at least they increasingly approach to perfect oneness.

And let us make it perfectly plain that this union of will is, in itself, better and more desirable than

* Please note that the word "sensation" is in quotation marks which means, of course, that it is not to be taken in its ordinary meaning. For its use at all in this connection see Appendix B at the end of the paper.

the consciousness of such union. In other words, a single act of perfect charity is worth more in the eyes of God than all the ecstasies of the mystics.

The fact remains that for us poor mortals the knowledge that there are such ecstasies and that it is conceivable that we ourselves may experience them is apt to be more "inspiring" than any other knowledge. For we shall have to become Saints ourselves, in the full sense of the word, before we can see things as God would have us see them; and recognize the fact that love is a greater thing than the enjoyment of love; that it is really and truly "more blessed to give than to receive."

What is Meant by Mystical Experience

IT is nothing less than the actually-felt sweetness, beauty, holiness, tenderness, power and protection of God.

Here is what some of the mystics themselves have said about it:

Blessed Angela of Foligno: "In this feeling by which the soul is made certain that God Almighty is within her . . . the soul feeleth that God, who

cannot be measured, is mingled with her and hath given her His company."

St. Alphonsus: "The soul now has but to feed on what she most desires amongst the many divine viands that are served up on the table of the divine perfections, viands that are of an excellent savour because their savour is the savour of God Himself. O heavenly banquet! God invites the soul, and in the banquet of love He giveth Himself! O supreme love! O heavenly love! O precious love! O deep and divine love in which the Master of the feast gives Himself as nourishment to the soul. . . . The soul forgets all earthly things and forgets her own self also, because she is solely occupied in loving God who is so intimately present to her as though face to face."

Tauler: "It is here that we drink at the source of the waters of the Divine sweetness that gush forth from the Divine Essence."

St. Catherine of Siena: "What joy such a soul receives who sees herself so sweetly arrived at this pass, for in truth she tastes the happiness of the angelic nature."

Alvarez de Paz: "The soul (in a certain degree of contemplation) affirms nothing, denies nothing, attributes nothing, avoids nothing, but in com-

plete repose she sees God." And, "the soul knows God in the depths of her being, and she sees Him, so to say, more clearly than she sees the material light with the eyes of her body."

The Curé d' Ars: "The inner life is a bath of love into which the soul plunges. She is, as it were, drowned in love. God holds the inner man as a mother holds her baby's head between her hands, to cover it with kisses and caresses."

Cassian: "It frequently happens, in the divine visits, that we are filled with perfumes, of a sweetness unknown to human skill; so that the soul overwhelmed with delight, is lifted into a rapture and forgets that she is living in the flesh."

St. Teresa: It is "as if some very sweet ointment were injected into the intimatest part of the soul."

But what use is it to multiply quotations? Those who have experienced these things try to burst the bonds of human speech in their ardent but ever-futile effort to suggest something of the joy, the peace, the tenderness, the sweetness which God has accorded them in the inmost recesses of their souls.

It is of the utmost importance to remember that the images which they use are nothing more than images. Since human language is built up of words which refer back ultimately to sense-impressions

it is impossible to express with it an experience of the soul which has, in its essence, nothing to do with the senses.

On the other hand, this does not mean that the joy, the peace, the tenderness, the sweetness are any less real than in the ordinary experiences of life. It is exactly the contrary.

What we must realize is that genuine mystical experience is utterly and entirely different from the experiences of ordinary life (and, among the latter, we include the joy and ardour and tranquillity of the ordinary ways of prayer). It is as different as would be the sudden bodily vision of a world of sunshine and colour from the past experience of a man born blind. It is apparent from reading the mystics that no-one who has not himself undergone the experience can form the faintest conception of what it is like. It is totally different in kind from anything he has ever known. Is this to say that there is no connection between ordinary prayer and mystical experience? By no means. For it is only after the soul has been developed by progress through the normal stages of the prayer-path that it is capable of receiving the gift of extraordinary prayer.

Relation Between Mystical Experience and Ordinary Prayer

MANY of the problems connected with mysticism and its relation to the lower forms of prayer can be solved in the light of the relations between certain other categories of life.

Take, for example, the relation of man to the lower animals in the evolutionary scale. Human beings belong to a higher order of being than "brute beasts." In order that men might come into existence it was necessary that God should breathe into them a rational soul. But He had prepared the receptacles, so to speak, of this fuller life through all the stages of development of the animal kingdom. The organs of the lower animals and their chemical constituents were carried over into the human race and, to a great extent, by the providence of God, determined our human structure. In other words—to put the essential truth picturesquely—the bodies of our primitive ancestors were built up in the animal kingdom. And it was not until this had been accomplished that there were creatures in existence capable of receiving the influx of the higher, rational life.

It is not fantastic but the soberest truth to see in

this a vivid picture of the relations between the states of so-called "ordinary" and "extraordinary" prayer. Generally speaking, it is only after the soul has passed through the stages of vocal, mental, and affective prayer and "the prayer of simplicity" that its faculties are developed to the point where God can pour into them the graces of mystical experience. Nor does progress end at the point where mystical experience begins. For the latter proceeds to unfold until it has successively captured not only the will, the emotions and the mind but even the body; after which the very greatest mystics have been carried on by God to the Transforming Union or Marriage of the Soul which is the highest stage that can be attained this side the grave and is a veiled form of the Beatific Vision in Heaven.

Let us consider another question, which is closely related to the last. There is much controversy among theologians as to what are the distinguishing features of "extraordinary" as contrasted with "ordinary" prayer; and at just what point in the prayer-life mystical experience begins. Indeed, so vexed are these points and so various are the meanings attached to the key-word of the controversy—namely, "contemplation"—that we are purposely avoiding this word throughout the paper. All agree that there

are "extraordinary" states of prayer which, in Father Poulain's words, "our own industry is powerless to produce, *even in a low degree, even momentarily.*" But some teachers vociferously disagree with him as to just where in the prayer life these states begin to occur and which stages around the border-line between the two "kingdoms" belong to the one or to the other. Just so, it is easy, broadly speaking, to distinguish between daylight and dark, but difficult, as night draws to a close, to say at precisely what moment light begins.

Mystical experience at its height is as different from the ordinary prayer states as daylight is from dark. When St. Teresa is suddenly overwhelmed with "an excessive gladness and delight which is so extreme that the soul appears to swoon away and seems on the point of leaving the body" the grace of supernatural prayer is manifest, but who can tell at just what point in the soul's progress the first faint glimmerings appear? It may well be that many people who have worked hard at their prayers and passed through the successive stages, earnestly, from their earliest formal devotions to the prayer of simple regard are visited by the dawn of mystical experience without realizing that something utterly new has entered into

their lives. They rise after their daily half-hour wonderfully rested and refreshed. Perhaps they say to themselves, "My time of recollection has been more sweet and tranquil today than ever before. God has seemed so near that I talked with Him easily and rested in Him and He in me."

Well, it does not matter if they cannot call this new experience by name; or even if they do not recognize it as new. If they will keep on faithfully (and above all, courageously) in heroic living for God as well as praying, He will sooner or later pour such torrents of love and joy into their hearts that they will beseech Him in mercy not to love them so—yet long more than for anything in the universe that He shall continue so to love them.

One wonders if there are not countless numbers of us who are at the very threshold of this heavenly fairy-land without dreaming that such is the case. Oh, how God must yearn that we should be just the least bit more resolute in our combat—just a little bit more hopeful and joyous for His sake in the midst of humiliation or pain—that we should yield ourselves to Him a bit more utterly—in order that He may draw us into that blessed trust for which in His love He longs still more than we do!

Mystical Experience the Necessary Road to Heaven

IT may be a new thought to some who have read several books about the mystics and who have been bewildered by the variety of their terminology and images that an extraordinary harmony prevails among them as to the main features of their progress. Yet such is certainly the case. For though, as St. John of the Cross says, "God raises every soul by different paths," it is also true that the divers trails to the summit of a mountain must all pass through the same general zones; from the fertile valley up to the pasture land and on through the forest belt to the windswept wastes above. And finally they merge together at the dazzling snow-capped peak. This simile is taken from Watkin's splendid book *The Philosophy of Mysticism*. Watkin also shows how the general development of mystical experience through its successive stages fits in with the essential psychological structure of mankind. Furthermore he deduces from this that everyone who will eventually be saved must sooner or later pass through all these main stages of the mystical path in this life or (in the case of the vast majority) the

spiritual and psychological equivalents in purgatory.

He goes on to say, "Since the mystic experience and way is thus a manifestation in this life of the principles which determine and constitute the condition of the saved after death, the study of mysticism should be of engrossing interest to every Christian soul. Since life is so short and death so certain, we cannot but long for some knowledge of the life to come, beyond the bare statement of the revealed truth . . . Nothing is more helpful . . . than the knowledge that purgatory and heaven, especially the former, are not without analogue in this life."

Relations Between Mystical Experience and Holiness

WE have considered the relations between mystical experience and the lower "ordinary," modes of prayer. What now, about its relation to holiness?

It may be said that no relation could be more direct. For mystical experience is, in effect, the awareness of holiness.

Only God is essentially holy. The greatest Saint would be, except for His in-dwelling, foul with sin. The holiness of the Saints is, then, wholly constituted by the union of their wills with God; this one-ness is their holiness. Since then, according to our definition at the outset, "mystical experience is the felt oneness of the soul with the Divine," there can be in the nature of things no real mystical experience where there is not will-union; and, furthermore, the degree and intensity of mystical experience is determined, in part at least, by the degree of union. We say "in part," because so far as the intensity of mystical experience is concerned (and its very emergence over the threshold of consciousness) it is determined also by such other factors as temperament, instruction in the prayer-life, etc. A simple analogy from inanimate objects may help to illustrate the principles involved.

Various different materials burst into flame at different degrees of temperature. It takes vastly more heat to "ignite" a metal bar, for example, than a stick of wood. The supernatural love of a soul (its will-union with God) is like the heat. The burst of flame is the mystical experience. And in certain souls which are predisposed by

circumstances the supernatural awareness of oneness with God in their souls (which is mystical experience) is more readily possible, or possible to a more intense degree, than in others.

Thus, therefore, though mystical experience is directly dependent on holiness it can never be taken as a gauge by which souls can be estimated and compared as regards their respective degrees of union with the will of God. Some gigantic spirit with heroic devotion to the cause of Christ may pass his entire life this side the grave without a vestige of mystical experience, while a very "small" soul may be genuinely a mystic from his youth.

But the relation between mystical experience and holiness works the other way around as well. It not only results from but helps to stimulate holiness. Above all, it stimulates heroic and fruitful work. Nothing could be more mistaken than the notion that Christian mystics are mere listless dreamers. History proves that the opposite is the case. No souls in Christendom have accomplished more creative work than St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Bernard, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Catherine of Genoa, or St. Teresa. "It is to this point, my daughter," said Teresa, "that orison tends; and, in the design of God this spir-

itual marriage is destined to no other purpose but the incessant production of *work, work!*"

Mistakes About Mysticism

UNFORTUNATELY there are other grievous misconceptions about mysticism. For example, it is confused by some people with certain strange phenomena which do indeed occasionally accompany it but which also accompany such pathological states as hysteria and which, in any case, do not constitute the essence of genuine mystical experience. I refer to such matters as visions, voices, telepathy and the like which are often associated with "psychic temperaments." These are often mistakenly spoken of as "mystical," but are something entirely apart from genuine mysticism in itself. Indeed, the real mystics have deprecated them. They certainly have never sought them.

Again, it is sometimes supposed that, once a person has tasted of mystical experience, the rest of his life thereafter follows a rosy path; that he is favored with a constant succession of blissful divine visitations.

The reading of a single good book on the subject

would quickly dispel such a notion. The road of the mystic is pre-eminently the way of the Cross. The rest of us can scarcely conceive and certainly could not sustain the series of trials of unique intensity which the mystic is called upon to endure in the awful progress of interior purification and detachment. The periods of aridity, persecutions, peculiarly violent temptation, scrupulosity, apparent impotence of will, awareness of sin and spiritual squalor, nervous disorder, moral isolation, depression, sense of abandonment by God and imprisonment in self, may often extend for many years at a time with little or no interruption by the positive, blissful element of mysticism. Indeed, in the mystic's own case, it is solely because he is sustained (though, at such times, he does not feel it or perhaps even realize it) by a quite special dispensation of divine grace that he is able to persevere for a day, let alone for—it may be—the greater part of a life time.

Let us well believe that the virtue the mystic needs, more than all other men, is courage. It is all very well and indeed quite legitimate to desire mystical experience and even to pray for it. (Cf. the chapter on "Desire for the Mystic Union" in Poulain's great book for ample justification of this statement,

replete with quotations from the mystics themselves.) But let us remember that, if we do so, we are praying for an especially intense share in the Passion. Let us also pray, therefore—and more especially—for a great increase in steadfast abandonment to the will of God and devotion to Jesus.

There is still another misconception which it will be useful to consider. This time it is a mistake which, strangely enough, is common among the mystics themselves. But we must first discuss for a moment some things which lead up to it. We have already noticed the dictum that we are powerless to produce the mystical experience by our own volition, "even in a low degree, even momentarily." Indeed, this powerlessness may be considered as the fundamental distinction between "ordinary" and "mystic or extraordinary" prayer. Any person can, if he will, pray; grace sufficient for the spiritual acts involved in the lower forms of prayer is always made available to us by God. But this is not so as regards mystical prayer. Strive we never so hard with all the faculties of our soul and for years on end we cannot elicit by our own efforts the slightest, most fleeting, mystical experience. We can, by God's help, prepare ourselves for it by earnest, ardent, joyous conformity to His will

in all things great and small. We can exercise ourselves in detachment from creatures. We can make more or less steady progress (by regular and persistent effort) in the course of the lower forms of prayer as far as the prayer of simplicity. Beyond that we cannot, by our own volition, go one step.

Indeed, far from our being able to attain mystical experience by strenuous effort, nothing is more essential for predisposing us for this great gift than to learn to be willing, if God should so rule, to be without it; to learn, in other words, to resign ourselves utterly to Him; to pray calmly and tranquilly.

It is only when our impetuosity has been relentlessly disciplined; when we are willing to sit or kneel content, for God's sake, with the utmost aridity—and this not for a day or a week, but for months on end—that there is even the possibility that the boon of mystical experience will be bequeathed to us.

Let us add that, of all the obstacles in the mystic's path, this quiet waiting upon God in apparent idleness is the subtlest and most difficult course to be persevered in. For not only is it, in itself, an almost unendurable cross to our natural restlessness of spirit, but—far harder still—we are assailed by scruples. The question confronts us, over and

over again, "Am I not wasting my time? Ought I not to return to the honest work of systematic meditation?" Sometimes, indeed, we should so return. (There is not space in this brief paper to indicate the signs for telling when we should or should not. We would refer you to Fr. Poulain for those. Let me just say that, if in your heart of hearts you would honestly prefer to go on quietly waiting, then by all means give yourself the benefit of the doubt. We can be sure that we shall never receive the gift of mystical experience—in this life—if we have not the courage for that.)

Here, then, are the facts. The mystical experience is given only after we have curbed our impatient spirits long and relentlessly. It cannot be attained by our own volition. And—when it does come—its most fundamental characteristic is a sense of ineffable peace—of peace so profound, so tranquil, so in-breathed by God, that we feel that our entire being is at rest.

The mistake which the mystics have made—and among them even so penetrating a psychologist as St. Teresa—is that they really imagine that they are completely passive; that God is doing all and the soul nothing.

God is indeed doing all. But He is doing it in and

through the soul's faculties which were never so vigorously active as now that they are energized in a special manner by Him.

If they were really in a state of "inaction" there would be no consciousness whatever. There would be coma. Whereas, on the contrary, consciousness is incomparably more vivid than in everyday life. The mind is riveted to God's presence. The will is saturated with the power of love and cleaves to God's embrace, putting forth His strength to such an extent that tasks which would normally be repulsive and, indeed, impossible, are performed with absolute ease.

It is this ease which is misleading. The soul thinks it is doing nothing because it is without all sense of effort. But it is more active than ever before. For far and away the best analysis of this *seeming* inactivity and its causes, the reader is referred to Von Hügel's masterpiece, the second volume of *The Mystical Element of Religion*.

The Ultimate Problem

WE are now ready to close our paper by reverting to the problem we set before ourselves at the start.

"Are all men capable, by a right use of the grace which God offers us in the Sacraments, of becoming mystics this side of the grave?"

Certainly not, if we mean by "capable of becoming" that they can do so by their own volition alone. For mystical experience is a free gift from God which we are "powerless to produce," etc. But if we mean by "capable of becoming" simply the power to predispose themselves for the mystical gift—with of course the help of that grace which is available to us all—the answer assuredly would be in the affirmative.

We are then confronted by the basic problem of all. Granted that a soul (by earnest, regular, persistent, fervent prayer; by ruthless mortification and detachment; and by joyous self-surrender to God's will) reaches a condition where it is receptive of this gift, will the gift itself inevitably be granted? Will God so surely pour it into the soul that its coming is (from the human point of view) automatic or, as it were, a matter of "natural law"? Will He?

APPENDIX A

SUGGESTED BOOKS

There are innumerable books on Mysticism, many of them fine. Of those written about the subject "from without" (in contrast to those by the great mystics themselves and based upon their own inner experiences) the following are in the highest rank. All but the first have already been mentioned in the text.

1. *Mysticism*, by Evelyn Underhill; Dutton & Co., New York, 1912. This is a rich and well-balanced general study, beautifully written. To anyone who wishes to get a coherent idea of the subject as a whole, we would recommend reading this book first.

2. *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, by A. Poulain, S.J.; English Translation from the Sixth Edition by L. L. Yorke Smith, B. Herder, St. Louis. It deals fully and with exquisite precision with the subtlest distinctions and difficulties; and is the most lucid practical manual for souls and their directors.

3. *The Mystical Element of Religion*, by Friederick von Hügel; Dutton & Co., New York, 1927 (two volumes). The first volume deals with the life of St. Catherine of Genoa and includes the most intricate exegesis of her literature. The second develops von Hügel's massive philosophy on the subject; difficult but exceedingly fruitful; much more useful than the first volume and can be read without it.

4. *The Philosophy of Mysticism*, by E. I. Watkin; Harcourt Brace, and Howe, New York, 1920. Not so outstanding as the other three; but both dependable and original.

Of works by the mystics themselves, those of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross are the classic examples.

By St. Teresa: her *Life*, written by herself, *The Interior Castle*, *The Way of Perfection*, the *Letters of St. Teresa*.

By St. John of the Cross: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, *The Living Flower of Love*, *The Spiritual Canticle*.

APPENDIX B

“SENSATION”

We used this word (cf. p. 6; and footnote) to suggest the intimacy of mystical experience, but were at pains to state that it was used in no ordinary sense.

The following is a passage from one of St. Bernard's sermons (Cant. lxxiv; quoted from a compressed translation in Butler's *Western Mysticism*, p. 146):

“I confess, then, though I say it in my foolishness, that the Word has visited me, and even very often. But although He has frequently entered into my soul, I have never at any time been sensible of the precise moment of His coming. I have felt that He was present; I remember that He has been with me; I have sometimes been able even to have a presentiment that He would come; but never to feel His coming or His departure. For whence He came to enter my soul, or whither He went on quitting it, by what means He has made entrance or departure, I confess that I know not even to this day. . . . It is not by the eyes that He enters, for He is without color, nor by the ears, for His coming is without sound; nor by the nostrils, for it is not with the air but with the mind that He is blended; nor again does He enter by the mouth, not being of a nature to be eaten or drunk; nor lastly is He capable of being traced by the touch, for He is intangible.”

St. Bernard, in other words, (and all the other genuine mystics with him) substantiates what was said elsewhere in this paper; namely, that the mystical experience does not consist in seeing visions or hearing voices, etc. Certain of the mystics—as, for example, Joan of Arc—saw and heard such things, but many of the mystics have never done so; while great numbers of the victims of hysteria have.

Nor does the mystical experience consist, essentially, of vivid “emotions” or “feelings” of God's Presence—in any ordinary sense of those words. One runs across devout folk, now and again, who believe that they have had mystical experience, but who almost cer-

tainly have not. Their error as to the fact may, perhaps, do them little harm. But, if the genuine mystical experience ever *should* be vouchsafed them in this life, they will instantly recognize the greatness of their error. For, if the experience does come to any marked degree, there will be no question about it. It is unmistakable.

But, if this is the case, it may be asked why we employ so misleading a term as “sensation.” Why not, instead, use more general words, such as “perception” or “awareness”?

The answer is that these other words are even further from the truth than “sensation.” For it is apparent that, to the mystics themselves, the latter serves better to suggest what they have known. In other words, the mystical experience, in its vivid intimacy, is *less unlike* bodily sensation than either mere cognition or emotion. We have, moreover, the soundest precedents for using the word “sensation.” See, for example, Albert Farges' definition of imposed contemplation as “the conscious and objective sensation of the action of God within us” (Jacques' translation of the 2nd Frank edition of *Mystical Phenomena*) and his references to the use of the word by St. Thomas Aquinas and other theologians.

We must always remember that language, since it has been built up from the ordinary experiences of life, has no vocabulary to express experiences which are essentially supernatural. Therefore, if the mystics are to talk at all, they must use words which are inadequate. But they are inadequate, not because the mystical experience is less concrete and vivid than ordinary sensations; quite the contrary. Their inadequacy is rather a difference of kind than of degree. For the mystical experience is totally different from anything in ordinary life and even from anything in ordinary prayer. It is, literally, as different as light from dark.