

Reflection #8: Paul the Mystic

A mystical experience is a direct, inner, ineffable experience of God, a total gift which is life-changing, leading to greater self-sacrificial love. St. Paul is regarded as the first great Christian mystic. His was a Christ-mysticism which he expressed thus: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal.2:20).



Paul’s mysticism was deeply rooted in suffering. He understood baptism as a death to his old life through the power of Christ’s death at work in him through the Spirit. The foundation of this belief was Christ’s own “self-emptying” on the cross (Phil.2:7) whereby he became the “testimony of God” (1Cor.2:1). In his apostolic vocation, Paul was keenly aware of the principle of power-in-weakness: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2Cor.4:7). He was able to bear his suffering because of the meaning it held for him. For him, God’s power was most active when he was experiencing the most acute feeling of human insufficiency and suffering the most dreadful trials. “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2Cor.12:10).

Paul also understood himself as a chosen witness whose sufferings Christ used to reveal himself to the world: “Always carrying in the body the death of Christ, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2Cor.4:10). Paul could write with enthusiasm: “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort, too” (2Cor.1:5). After listing multitudinous sufferings in 2Cor.11:23-29, he went on to disclose some of the mystical experiences - “visions and revelations” - that he has experienced (2Cor.12:1-10). Earlier he had written that God had revealed to him through the Spirit “what eye has not seen and ear has not heard and what has not entered the human heart, (namely) what God has prepared for those who love him” (1Cor.2:9).

Although having been so “utterly, unbearably crushed that (he) despaired of life itself” (2Cor.1:8), Paul saw in his suffering a source of plentiful blessing, not only for himself but for the entire church. His suffering led him to share in Christ’s “corporate personality” as he suffered in solidarity with his Christian community, the Body of Christ. “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church of which I became a minister” (Col.1:24). Paul’s sufferings were grounded in his eschatological hope that his sufferings and that of the community were not only contributing to the fullness of Christ, but were hastening the Day of Christ (Eph.3:13 and 2Tim.2:10) whose return was imminent (Rom.8:18).

1. When have I experienced Christ’s presence in a heightened way?
2. How has my faith enabled me to endure suffering with peace, with joy?
3. What “hidden gifts” has suffering held for me?

Hymn: “Eye Has Not Seen” #482;
“Christ You Are the Fullness” #431