



### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

Lord Jesus Christ, who returned from this world to the Father and loved those who were here in this world, make my mind turn from worldly preoccupations to the contemplation of heaven, to despise everything transitory and to yearn only for celestial things, and to burn with the glowing fire of your love. And you, Lord, who deemed yourself worthy to wash the feet of your holy apostles with your sacred hands, cleanse also my heart by pouring in the radiance of the Holy Spirit, so that I may be able to love you, our Lord Jesus Christ, in all things and above all else. Amen.

--Latin, 11th century (tr. Bernard Muir)

### **Week #13b: Mystical Theology and Spiritual Discernment in Jean Gerson**

There is no reason to believe that God has ceased to act and reveal himself today and indeed to deny the possibility or suitability of God's contemporary self-revealing action would be to try to limit and constrain the unlimited and unconstrained power of God. At the same time, although all power and freedom belong to God, he always acts in ways that display not only his power and freedom, but also his goodness and wisdom, so that his works always have "a devout purpose or meaning" that edifies the hearers and is useful or necessary to them, Compare the bizarre counter-example on p. 355!

When claims are made concerning experiences that are said to come from God, we are to test whether they are from God (1 Jn. 4:1), rather than from the Devil or one's own mind or psychophysical constitution, and to keep what is good (1 Thess. 5:21).

- Persons who claim to be constantly receiving revelations should actually merit more scrutiny rather than less, Henry argues (q'd in Caciola, p. 292):  
"A spiritual person is not to be quickly and easily believed, who continually labors at contemplating and fantasizing that every impulse, or any remotely unusual thing that happens, is the intervention of a supernatural spirit. Indeed, it seems that a person who has easy credulity in such things has a vain craving to be surrounded by supernatural revelation and miraculous motions. Moreover, there are some who can attain such gullibility and lack of judgment in this regard that every noise or tumult they hear around themselves or around others (something that often occurs from unseen dormice or cats or some such thing) they believe and immediately affirm to be the work of the devil."
- There is not a means to assess purported divine revelation by reason alone (so as to arrive at an evident or certain knowledge that comes from rational demonstration).

- Instead such evaluation can be done only with a discerning faith and evangelical humility by those to whom God gives the gift (i.e. the discernment of spirits or word of wisdom mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 12), which renders one's sense of these things clearer and more vivid and certain than when one labored under a mind clouded by one's own pride, arrogance and faith in oneself.

Gerson's treatise *On Distinguishing True Visions from False* was composed in 1401 in response to a request from Jean Morel, the spiritual director of a laywoman Hermine (or Ermine) of Reims, a widow who had died of the plague in 1396. She had claimed to have had visions which Morel had taken down in a book and later submitted to Gerson to ask his opinion of the orthodoxy of these visions. Although Gerson did not find the visions unorthodox, he was disturbed by her descriptions of constant assault by horrid demons that appeared in a variety of forms (snakes, serpents, kittens, even a priest with a demonic Host) and beat her, tempted her and tried to enter her body to possess her. Gerson questioned whether these visions were edifying and tried to outline the criteria that should be used in arriving at an appropriate judgment.

First some basic information must be gathered (Boland, p. 30, q'd in Voaden, p. 56):

- Who is to whom the revelation is made?
- What does the revelation itself mean, and to what does it refer?
- Why is it said to have taken place?
- To whom was it manifested for advice?
- What kind of life does the visionary lead?
- Whence does the revelation originate?

Certain evaluative criteria may then be introduced to assess the purported revelation:

### **Evaluating the Content of a Purported Inspiration/Visionary Experience**

The criteria for discerning the authenticity of that revelation which has become *enscripturated* and of that revelation which is claimed today are fundamentally the same, yet the former is recognized by the Church as providing the normative content of Christian faith and practice and can therefore be used by persons trained in the study of Scripture in evaluating the truthfulness of contemporary claims.

- Truth provides conformability
  - Holy Scripture (read in its entirety in its literal sense) is the archetype and model against which all purported subsequent revelations are to be judged.
  - As Scripture itself specifies (Dt. 18), the truthfulness of a prophet may be gauged by whether any future events predicted come to pass exactly as predicted, when the prophecy is understood in the mode specified in the revelation (literal vs. mystical; conditional vs. unconditional).
  - The revelation must not command or counsel anything contrary to sincere faith, right living or good morals (as previously specified in Scripture), e.g. lying or deception (cf. Dt. 13).

### **Where Does the Purported Inspiration/Visionary Experience Lead One?**

If one should accept the revelation as true, where would it take one? Where would one end up?

Discernment of a purported inspiration/visionary experience should include an investigation of the underlying motivation, tendency toward a goal or fruit produced by the action. As Henry of Langenstein (q'd in Caciola, p. 290) had earlier commented, "for inspirations whose origin is in doubt, let them be tested at their end point. Many times an outcome manifests what the origin hides. He who cannot judge his impulses at their origin, therefore, should investigate their end or fulfillment."

### **Does the Purported Inspiration/Visionary Experience Fuel One's Pride or One's Obsession with Attention/Public Honor?**

"Humility provides weight" (vs. the vanity of curiosity and pride)

If the supposed revelation draws attention to the person claiming to have had it, this may be a sign of pride and sinful self-absorption. The person in question

- "is eager to have unusual revelations" (arrogant curiosity)
- "thinks himself to be worthy of them" (presumption of sanctity)
- "delights in boastful telling of such matters" (bragging shows a vain desire for praise of others and personal glory)
- displays impatience (since every vice is impatient)
- counts upon the prudence of his own judgments, spurning the counsel and authority of others within the Church, showing himself to be unteachable.

Caciola, p. 292 comments,

"To lay claim to constant temptation from demons is to regard oneself as an object of unusual cosmic concern. Conversely, to pray for constant revelations is to make presumptions about the divine willingness to intervene in one's life on an ongoing basis. In an amusing passage, Henry asserts that God is more likely to cherish a person who simply listens to his commands and fulfills them rather than one who 'every hour pesters the ears of the Lord by interrogating Him about what he ought to do, and asking that He reveal this thing or that.' Obnoxious insistent supplications for revelations are a form of hubris that tempt God."

Here the weight of humility is lacking and the supposed revelations may instead be ascribed to a combination of pride and "an injury done to the imagination" (i.e. a strained and unhealthy mental state).

- "Be careful, whoever would act as a listener or an advisor to this kind of person, not to applaud or praise her on this account, nor admire her as a saint worthy of revelations and miracles. Instead be an obstacle! Challenge her sharply, reject her...so that it does not seem to her that she merits finding her salvation differently from the way other people do: through doctrine, the scriptures and saints, and according to the dictates of natural reason" (Gerson q'd in Caciola, p. 305)

On the other hand if one

- considers oneself...to be the most unworthy among all people to receive a revelation or ever be visited miraculously by God"
- recognizes his own ignorance and weakness
- upon receiving revelations, rejects "them with a holy, humble, and diffident modesty"
- mentions them to others only when "necessary to counsel or aid one's listeners" and from a charitable desire for the edification of the other(s), apart from any thought of any good for oneself.

then the weight of humility is present.

### **How Does the Recipient of the Inspiration/Vision Handle Suffering, Failure and the Possibility of Losing Honor in the Eyes of Others?**

#### **How Do Such Things Relate to Pride and the Desire to Be the Object of Attention?**

Patience provides durability in adversity, without any complaint or false imitation

Does the claim to have had religious experiences seem to be joined with a desire to attract the attention of others, seeking either

- the praise of others or
- to elicit the sympathy and compassion of others for one's suffering, lowly condition or persecution by others, even when these are exaggerated, feigned or self-inflicted and due to their own short-sightedness, defects and failures. (As a result, one does not recognize one's defects and failings for what they are, so that they are not humbled by their defects and so yearn to be free of them; instead they glory in their defects, treating them as a badge of honor and a sign of perfection.)

### **Is the Recipient of the Inspiration/Vision Truly Open to External Input (Discernment, Evaluation and Teaching)?**

Discretion provides flexibility and malleability (vs. superstitious stubbornness and lack of receptivity to advice)

If they are compelled by their own opinions to

- delight in following their own opinion ("they have persuaded themselves they are doing something magnificent, they think they know better than anyone else what is best to do")
- disregard
  - good advice (without convincing reasons to show why they do this)
  - all counsel and regulation by others (unless what the others say is "exactly what he is contemplating in his own heart")
  - obedience owed to others by virtue of one's station in life
- engage in devotional practices which exceed or contradict the rules of life instituted by recognized spiritual authorities within the Church, e.g.
  - overtaxing the body and the mind through excessive fasting, vigils, and/or weeping
  - excessive abstinence without a clearly formed purpose
  - rapid alternation between contrary states, inclinations and actions (e.g. periods of fasting followed by overeating)

they lack the discretion (i.e. prudent restraint and wise moderation) which belongs to the supernaturally-informed life of faith and (since people have different graces and austerity is not appropriate for all) are likely to damage and further disorder the body and mind, making one even more vulnerable to temptation and deception by the powers of evil. (See pp. 344-345 for a case study.)

- The Origin of False Perceptions: "It happens then through mania or rage or other melancholy passions that phantasms [i.e. images retained in memory] become so deeply rooted and buried in the brain that they are thought to be true objects that appear outside the mind. A person believes that he or she can see or touch that which the external senses in no way perceive. This passion becomes stronger until sometimes in this insanity a person will judge himself to be something else than he or she is...I have also seen many and also examined many who seemed in most matters to be of perfectly sound mind. In certain cases, however, they showed by their reactions that they were not sane, when damage to their powers of imagination manifested itself."

### **Does the Inspiration/Vision Lead One Upward to a Higher Love (Charity) or Does It Fuel the Fire of Baser and More Carnal and Worldly Loves?**

Charity provides color (i.e. the bright and sincere color of divine love without the contamination or filth of carnality)

- Without charity (a pure and holy love of divine origin), nothing else (even faith, hope or good works) are of value. True charity is comprehensive and transforming--it penetrates into the deepest reaches of the whole soul, illuminating the mind and effecting change in the whole person, quite apart from one's merit or abilities and even apart from discernible rational preparation by the person in question (see 360).
- At the same time, one cannot say with Augustine ("Have charity and do what you will."); it is not that simple. Out of ignorance or inattentiveness one may not recognize carnal or harmful loves (unholy natural inclinations) for what they are, but rather imagine them to be noble and forms of charity. This is particularly true in the case of loves which are excessive or involve violent passions, which are more difficult to control and can cause one to overstep the bounds of God's Law and carry one along into imprudent or sinful behavior (see p. 357).
- Base loves lead one to imagine that
  - one understands matters that in truth one does not rightly understand
  - one possesses a relationship and a love that one does not in fact possess.
- The presence of base loves may be suspected where physical attractiveness, youthful appearance and affluence contribute to the desirability of the other.
- The acceptance of base loves is often unreflective and demonstrates a lack of insight into the true nature of the situation, so that one imagines that one remains at peace with God and, moved by God's Spirit, continues in one's prior devotion and less suspect love.
- The presence of base loves may also be suspected where one resents questions concerning their affairs and is confident in their own ability to make judgments.

## **The Influence of Gerson's Work on Martin Luther**

The Protestant Reformers were fond of using Gerson (as well as Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux) in their defense of the new ideals of the Protestant Reformation. Luther was fond of Gerson's writings, mentioning him in his classroom lectures and in his *Table Talk*. Luther quotes Gerson's saying (taken over from Bernard of Clairvaux: *In via Dei non progredi regredi est* ("On the way of God [or: to God], not to go forward is to fall back").

### *Luther's Evaluation of Gerson's Views on Contemplation and Mystical Theology*

Luther liked the emphasis upon contemplation and meditation in Gerson's work and approved it to the extent that it was clearly tied back to the biblical account of how God has chosen to order the exercise of his power in becoming incarnate in Jesus and suffering for our sins on the Cross: "I once read books of that sort [i.e. books on contemplation and mystical theology by Gerson and others] with great zeal, and I urge you, too, to read them, but with discretion. You should direct your attention to the ordered power of God and the ministrations of God, for we do not want to deal with the uncovered God, whose ways are inscrutable and whose judgments are unsearchable [Rom. 11:22]."

Luther agreed with Gerson's view that contemplation should be closely tied to the preaching of the Word and the faith that consisting in hearing and believing this Word, which leads one "to want to know nothing 'except Christ and him crucified' [1 Cor. 2:2]. He alone, with His Word is the profitable and salutary object of contemplation." Gerson argued that when we suffer spiritual trials, if we are to find assurance of salvation and peace,

"[w]e must reflect on God's ordered power, that is, on the incarnate Son, in whom are hidden all the treasures of his Godhead [Col. 2:3]. Let us go to the child lying in the lap of His mother Mary and to the sacrificial victim suspended on the cross, there we shall really behold God, and there we shall look into His very heart. We shall see that He is compassionate and does not desire the death of the sinner, but that the sinner should 'turn from his way and live' (Ezek. 33:11). From such speculation or contemplation spring true peace and true joy of heart. Therefore Paul says [1 Cor. 2:2]: 'I determine to know nothing except Christ.' We have leisure to speculate on this with profit."

### *Luther's Evaluation of Gerson's Teaching on How to Deal Pastorally with People Who Have Tender Consciences (Scrupulosity)*

Regarding scrupulosity, Martin Luther comments in one of his tracts, "I have seen how much the doctors, especially Gerson, had to deal with...confused consciences."

Gerson had emphasized the need to reassure scrupulous persons who fear that they were not sufficiently contrite (i.e. sorry for sin) at the time of going to confession and therefore have not been forgiven:

"They always have a scruple that they have not yet properly confessed. They exhaust themselves and their confessors with repeated confessions, especially of light and unimportant sins...To all of these alike should be given the counsel to trust not in their own justice but in the pure mercy of God; and as they overestimate their own negligence, so let them also exaggerate the infinite mercy

of God." (quoted in Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977, p. 77)