

Prayer

Store

Into his heart

**Mystic Christianity for the
Intercessor**

Jim Smith

I have spent a lot of my time with Intercessors, and learning to intercede for myself. It has been a hard training course, with many mistakes. But as a result of all the Lord has taught me, I have been using the following material, with some limited success:-

Into the Flow
Pulling down the power
Praying from the depths

(This material is available from the PRAYERSTORE page of www.serving-africa.org)

But I have always felt there was a deeper level of prayer, and I began to study the area of prayer known as “mysticism.” This stream of prayer has been with us almost from the beginning of our Christian journey. It has caused a lot of controversy, and it is a confusing area to study at the beginning, but it gets clearer as we begin to understand the main principles.

I have studied this area of prayer, and tried to present material which will help Christians at least understand it, and, if they would like, to begin to experience it for themselves.

There is still much for me to learn, and while I have tried to be as clear as I can, some things still do not make sense to me.

I encourage Intercessors to use this material as fuel for their intercessory walk with the Lord. In these difficult days, we need all the help we can get, and I believe that those who have walked this path before us have some precious things to teach us.

There is an index of books at the end of this material. I have read them all, and I can recommend them to you. Some are free on the internet, or available at low price, either by Kindle or second hand.

Introduction – interpreting the stream

I was reading this story from the life of St Gemma recently:-

“Jesus held out one of his arms from the cross and beckoned Gemma to come to him. She levitated up to him. Jesus held her in his arms and she drank from the spring in his side.”

At first glance, this typical mystical Christian experience looks at best odd, and at worst almost heretical. But it needs interpreting into our culture and times. We might interpret this experience in this way:-

“Gemma drew very close to the sufferings of Jesus, and totally identified with that suffering - even drawing strength from that suffering. From this intense position she was able to offer intercession in a deep and profound way for those situations which the Lord revealed to her.”

Looked at in this way, this is a pointer for intercessors as to how to get more relevance and power into their intercession – they need to draw closer to the sufferings of Jesus. As I have studied the lives and experiences of the great army of mystical people, I have been learning how to interpret what they are saying for my life in the 21st century, and I have been moved on in my ability to intercede. The material that follows is my attempt to interpret more of their experiences, so that I, and others who want to, can get to the depths of intercession.

It is a confusing area – at least as we first approach it, so I encourage us not to get side tracked by the things we cannot understand, but push through to the end, believing that what we can understand is very precious.

Outline:-

- 1. What is the mystical experience?** The basic framework of the mystic prayer world.
- 2. The rhythm of the spiritual world.** How do we tune our hearts into the spiritual world, so that we can intercede more effectively?
- 3. The pure heart.** Facing our own nature, and how this helps us.
- 4. The anointing of stillness.** Understanding the power of stillness, and how we can enter into it.
- 5. Unfulfilled love.** A powerful emotion which takes us into the heavenly places.
- 6. The humiliation of love.** The price the Lord pays.
- 7. The way of the cross.** Learning to meditate on the cross and how we can draw on its power.

* **Bibliography:** All the books referred to in this material are listed for anyone who wants to go further.

(**Author's note:** I want to make it clear that every time we read "his" in this material, it can equally be "her." In fact, the great majority of mystic Christians are women.)

1. What is the mystic Christian experience?

“Hardly do I open myself to pray than all at once I feel as if my heart were possessed by a flame of living love – unlike any flame of this poor world. It consumes but gives no pain. It is so sweet and delicious that the spirit finds great pleasure in it and remains satiated in it in such a way that it does not lose its desire of God. This is a thing of supreme wonder to me. Perhaps I will never come to understand it until I reach the heavenly country.” (Padre Pio)

As I began to think and study in this area, I wanted a working summary of mysticism, so I would know where I was going. This is what I came up with - I have based it on the introduction to the material of the 17th century German Mystic, Jacob Boehme.

A mystic intercessor is a pilgrim. Like all pilgrims, he is on a journey of discovery, but for him it is a journey in the spiritual world. He does not use his intellect, which just gets in the way, but uses his emotions to “see” and experience spiritual things. For this pilgrim, spirit speaks to Spirit.

St John wrote “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” (John 1:9)

The mystic intercessor wants to experience this enlightenment in his spirit, so that he can experience the fullness of the divinity for himself. From this position he sees things in a different light - the light of the Spirit uncluttered by the things of the world. From here he returns, filled with joy, to encourage the church. But he finds it hard to put into words what he has experienced.

Sometimes the church has struggled with the language and experiences of mysticism. But overall, we have learnt to distil the good things from these sometimes strange experiences. Now let’s look at a few basic issues and questions.

*** No short cut**

Brother Roger of Taize said that, deep down in our hearts we all have the need to communicate with God. Mystical Christianity is one of those ways. But the mystical way is not a short cut to God. It is a growth towards God, as is all Christian experience. It is a little different, and has its own language and experiences, and these we have to learn to interpret. But apart from that, the mystic path is just like any other Christian experience - steady, and ultimately fulfilling.

*** Who can have this experience?**

I have always been against any elitism in the Christian faith. When the charismatic movement first swept over the church a few decades ago, I felt that any claim to special position because of tongues was wrong. God's blessings are open to all of us. As I began to move in the area of mystical prayer, initially I felt the same. Who were these special people? Why should they have a special blessing? But I soon discovered that this area of prayer is open to all, even if all do not choose to enter it. Marthe Robin, a French 20th century mystic was asked by her friend about this, and her words are a starting point for some kind of definition:-

“The mystic life is as much in you as it is in me. It consists of trying to be one with Jesus.” (Martha Robin)

When we come to think about the mystic tradition, unless we have a slight trace of the mystical in us, this material will make little sense. However, we are all part of this experience, to a greater or lesser degree, so let's be confident, not fearful of what we are studying.

One writer, who reflected on mysticism, put it like this:-

“Mystics have insights into the depth of truth untouched by their intellect. They have illuminations and revelations full of significance and importance, inarticulate though they may be. As a rule, they carry with them a curious state of authority for after time.” (William James.)

These insights express themselves in very intense experiences, which are beyond words. They powerfully touch the lives of the ones who receive them. This can lead to unusual behaviour! But underneath all the words, behaviour and experience, mystic Christians challenge us to deeper prayer, deeper experience, deeper love and deeper commitment - exactly the qualities all intercessors need.

*** How does it work?**

This is not an easy question to answer. It's like trying to explain how love works. William James was not a mystic, nor even a Christian, but he writes in a sensitive and perceptive way about faith. His description is useful, and what follows is based on his work. I have added practical examples to his summary.

Direct

The mystic experience is a direct experience. It cannot be imparted or transferred. Angela of Foligno, an Italian mystic would often fall down screaming, much to the consternation of those around her. When asked about this, she said that she was so overcome with the presence of the love of God that she could not do anything else. Others could watch, but they could not share her experience. If others wanted to fall down screaming, they would have to seek the love of God for themselves.

Emotions

The mystic experience touches our emotions. It is a state of feeling not intellect. St Makarios put it like this:- “My soul, having taken up thy abode in heaven, where thou hast God and the holy Angels to converse with, see that thou descend not hence, nor regard earthly things.”

Jacob Boehme, who we mentioned earlier, puts it another way:-

“Herein lies that simple childlike way to the highest wisdom which no sharp reason or worldly learning can reach. It is foolishness to reason and therefore few go that way.”

Transient

The mystical experience, generally, cannot be sustained for long, but can reoccur. Simone Weil, the Jewish French mystic wrote “Man only escapes from this world in lightning flashes.” Some of the major mystics, like Catherine of Sienna could manage days, but for most, the experience is brief but reoccurring. These reoccurrences can build on each other. Reading the diary of St Maria Faustina, a 20th century Polish mystic, we see that events reoccur, and often build on each other. As she matures, so her understanding increases. This is no different from the normal Christian life of course, but as I said earlier, why should it be?

Passive

Mystic Christians feel that their own will is in abeyance - that they are gripped and held by some higher power. These experiences modify the inner life of the mystic between experiences. Padre Pio, the very well-known Italian mystic would take hours to lead a communion service. Even when he was told to speed it up, he could not. He felt himself gripped by the whole experience.

The goal

Overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and God is the great mystic achievement. In mystic state we become one with God. It is a new manner of being. Marthe Robin again:-

“I am thy prey oh Jesus, in the cross and in joy, in cruel trials and in sharpest pain. Oh how sweet it is to suffer when it is a sacrifice to thee. And when one has, as one’s sun the great fire of thy heart, I know where love dwells. I have seen the shining of its flame. And for thy heaven oh Jesus I would gather flowers. Painful torments bloody my soul, but unceasingly I repeat “I thank thee my Saviour.”

Evelyn Underhill wrote on mysticism, and she prefers a somewhat simpler explanation, which some of us might find easier to take hold of:-

1. Mysticism is practical, not theoretical.
2. Mysticism is an entirely spiritual activity.
3. The business and method of mysticism is love.
4. Mysticism involves definite psychological experiences.

These summaries might look a little theoretical, and if there is one thing mysticism is not, it is theory. Catherine of Sienna wrote about the mystical experience in her book "Dialogue" but if we read her letters, we can see that her prayer life resulted in a very practical living, strongly involved in the events of everyday life. Mystic prayer must result in changed lives, changed environments and the willingness for practical things. While we spend hours in the heavenly places, very much out of touch with the world, we must avoid the flight into what Augustine calls the "fuga in solitudinem" the flight into solitude. If we do this, then what use is our intercession? It just becomes self-indulgence, and some contemplatives and mystics have stayed into this area.

The anonymous writer of The Cloud of Unknowing says "we have to press on God with love." He's right, but the result of the "pressing" must not be self-indulgence, but "Charity" which he sees should lead to action:-

"Anyone who wants to be a perfect disciple of our Lord needs to stretch up his spirit in the work for the salvation of all his brothers and sisters..not only for his friends..but for all humanity."

What benefits does mystic Christianity bring to us?

Mystic prayer is a confusing area, hard to define, and awkward to evaluate. So should we not just leave it alone, and concentrate on the more basic and obvious areas of prayer and intercession? We could, but this would lose us one of the vital sparks of prayer. So what are the advantages which make the effort to understand worthwhile?

*** More energy**

St John of the Cross was very clear about the energizing power of the mystical experience:-

“Mystic experiences enrich the soul marvelously. A single one of them may be sufficient to abolish at a stroke certain imperfections of the soul - and leave it adorned with virtue and loaded with supernatural gifts.”

“Often infirm, wrought upon with dreadful pains before ecstasy, the soul emerges from it full of health and ready for action. It is as though God willed that the body should share in the soul's happiness.”

Mystic prayer focuses on drawing closer to the Lord. As we do that, and allow our emotions to be used in the experience, we are often released from tiredness, and given a new energy in our lives, and especially in our intercessions.

*** Optimism**

Passing from the lesser to the greater, from the small to the vast, from unreconciled into a reconciling and unifying state - this negates the entire “no's” of life, and gives us a much more positive outlook on things - especially on being effective in prayer.

Dionysius the Aeropagite, a first century Christian and bishop of Athens lined up all the “no's”:-

“The cause of all things is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion or reason, or intelligence; nor is it spoken or thought. It is neither number nor order, nor magnitude, nor littleness, nor equality, nor inequality, nor similarity nor dissimilarity. It neither stands nor moves nor rests. It is neither essence, nor eternity, nor time. Even intellectual contact does not belong to it. It is neither science nor truth. It is not even royalty or wisdom; not one; not unity; not divinity or goodness; not even spirit as we know it.”

What Dionysius is saying to us is that it is impossible to be a negative mystic! In the presence of the “yes” of God, we have a very positive view of what can be done. This is a great contribution to the life of the church.

*** Fresh view on the Bible, faith and theology.**

In her “Dialogue” Catherin of Sienna has a section called “The Bridge.” Here’s a part of it - God is speaking:-

“When my goodness saw that you could be drawn in no other way, I sent him (Jesus) to be lifted on to the wood of the cross. I made of that cross an anvil where this child of humankind could be hammered into an instrument to release humankind from death and restore it to the life of grace.”

I have been studying the Cross for all my life, and as a theologian I have read much of what is available, but never have I read anything like this. Only a mystic Christian in prayer could present such an image - and what a powerful image of the cross and the death of Jesus it is. I am so appreciative of what she saw and it has touched my understanding of the crucifixion. Mystics have, and continue to bring many such unusual, challenging and uplifting images.

*** Challenge to us to move deeper**

Mystic Christians are pilgrims on an inner journey to the mountain top. They are a restless group, always believing that whatever experience they have is the prelude to another, until they reach fulfillment - whatever form that takes. They disturb, but at the same time prevent us from settling for what we have got - an ever present danger in religion. Let’s allow Saint Paul to have the last word:-

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3: 12-14)

2. The Rhythm of the spiritual world

“To him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever.” (Rev.4.13)

“I have to kneel before the Father, put my ear against his chest, and listen, without interruption, to the heartbeat of God.” (Henry Nouwen)

A business man was in a hotel in Ghana. He looked rather lost, so I asked him what was wrong. “Everything is fine” he said, “I am waiting for my driver.” “Have you phoned him?” I asked, “Oh yes” he replied. “He says he is coming. He will be here in a few minutes.” I smiled and said “When he says ‘he is coming’ it does not mean is he is coming now! It means he will come sometime. This is Africa, We move to a different rhythm here.”

My friend had to learn the rhythms of Africa. It was a strange country to him, and he had not yet quite picked up the pulse.

The same is true when we come into the spiritual world. It’s no good rushing around as if it was earth. Things move differently here, and if we want to grow in our intercessory ability, to enter a little into the mystic stream and be more effective, we have to learn to adjust to that rhythm. Here, we spend more time with our ear to Father’s chest, and less time bombarding him with requests and demands for action.

So what is the rhythm of his kingdom? Let’s see if we can find out. Exploring the spiritual world is meant to be fun. It's the place of pure joy:-

*In joy
he gathers up his love
into a bouquet
and throws it at me.*

*I catch it
and fragrance fills my life
beauty fills my heart
colours brush my soul
with the glory of heaven
I dance in his delight
will this never end?
"Never!"*

Rhythm - the sun and the clouds

"The wind blows wherever it pleases." (John 3:8)

I was standing on top of the Sussex South Downs recently, watching the beautiful white clouds floating lazily along. I noticed that their shadows could be seen on the ground. As they drifted over the valleys, the land seemed alive with these shadows. Now a meadow was in the light, now in the shade, and soon in the light again. Right across the valley this patchwork of light and shade was passing along, as it has done since the valleys and clouds came into being.

This is the rhythm of nature, and this is also the rhythm of the spiritual world. The Spirit moves around, and we feel his presence - now here, now there, leading us to one experience after another. He passes along, and the spiritual world is always changing in his light. This is the biblical description of such a spiritual walk:-

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear the sound of it but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

The rhythm of the spiritual world is movement. If we are going to be there, and pray there, we are going to have to be willing to be flexible and ready to be blown around. One moment we will be worshipping, the next the Lord will be speaking, the next we will be seeing or feeling, then praying. A rigid approach does not work. We cannot say "Let me finish this first!" That kind of approach does not work. St Brendan set out in a journey by sea with some of his Monks. He had a "sun and clouds" approach, and he puts it like this:-

"They set themselves to the oars until their strength failed. Then Brendan began quickly to comfort and advise them, saying: "Brothers do not fear. God is our helper, sailor and helmsman, and he guides us. Ship all the oars and rudder. Just leave the sail spread and God will do as he wishes with his servants and their ship." (St Brendan. The Navigation)

So we will have to adapt. Let's leave our frantic need for order and solutions behind, put up our sails and drift in the Spirit. Nothing else works!

Rhythm – Praising in the joy of heaven

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come." (Rev 4:8)

"Champion leader and Lord, vanquisher of hell, I your creature and servant offer you songs of praise for you have delivered me from eternal death. (Akathist to the Sweetest Lord. Orthodox Prayer Book)

Drifting in the Spirit, what do we meet next?

Once in the spirit, I became aware of a background humming sound. At first I thought some electrical equipment was malfunctioning in my room. Pushing that thought aside, I listened some more, and realised that I was hearing praise. The spiritual world is not a silent place. It is full of angels who adore the Lord, and the invisible church which has served the Lord here on earth, and still serves him in the spiritual world. I wonder what made me think they would be silent. The Bible is quite clear:-

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." (Rev 4:9-11)

Why is it that when we enter the spiritual world, we imagine it as so static? One time, I was in the spirit, and I became aware of the invisible church. I saw the mighty army and they looked like a vast field of wheat, swaying in the breeze. As I looked closer, I saw that they were moving with a rhythm of praise. They were dancing. The spiritual world is full of praise, and God's eternal people are constantly moving in a spirit of praise. Miriam can lead the way for us:-

"Then Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted." (Ex 15:20-21)

Sometimes, when we settle to intercede, a hymn or Christian song runs through our minds. It might be a lack of concentration - or we might be getting tuned in to heaven. Either way, praise will break in again and again. It should. It is "heavenly music, intolerably sweet!" (Richard Rolles)

Rhythm – Love is the breath of heaven

“If you love me, you will obey what I command.” (John 14:15)

“Lord you are my lover, my longing, my flowing stream, my sun, and I am your reflection.” (Mechtilde of Magdeburg)

I was in the spirit, and I saw a great river. It flowed into me and then out of me - backwards and forwards. “What is this?” I asked. “This is my love” the Lord replied. “It is the breath of heaven. It moves from me to you and from you to me, back and forwards all the time, and through everyone who comes here.” In the spiritual world, we have to breath - not oxygen, but love. Like so many things, this is easier to understand than write:-

*Softly you come to me
falling on me
like snowflakes,
drifting into my soul,
healing my wounds
with love.*

*Softly I reach out for you
longing
with all my heart
to know your touch.
Softly,
I fall asleep
into your arms*

Softly forever

I cannot explain this, any more than I can explain the air we breathe. But just as pure air lifts our bodies, so the pure love of the Lord flowing in and out of us purifies our spirits, and increases the flow of intercession.

Rhythm - Intensity of the presence

“Woe is me” I cried, “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (Isa.6:5)

“When you pray, gather up your whole self and with your beloved enter into the chamber of your heart. Remain close with him there.”
(St. Bonaventure)

I was in the spirit, and I met with the Lord. He was full of sorrow, and began to share that sorrow with me. It got more and more intense, until I felt I would break in two. “Stop Lord” I cried. “Remember my humanity!”

We can see the same kind of intensity in the dedication of the first Temple:-

When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground and they worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, “He is good; his love endures forever.”
(2 Chron. 7: 1-3)

The intensity of his presence is very challenging. We do feel our humanity pressing heavily on us, but there is no escape. The Psalmist had the same experience:-

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side

of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast .If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. (Ps.139: 7-12)

There are two things which have helped me here. Firstly, I have come to expect this intensity. It is a sign that the King is present, and that I am in the right place. Secondly, I have got stronger and can bear more of his presence as the years have gone by. This is one of the accumulated experiences that I spoke of earlier. This Celtic prayer has given me courage:-

O Holy Jesus,
Gentle friend
Morning star
Midday sun adored
Brilliant flame of righteousness
Everlasting and eternity
Fountain ever new, ever living, everlasting
Heart’s desire of patriarchs
Longing of prophets
Master of Apostles and disciples
Giver of the law
Prince of the New Testament
Judge of doom
Son of the merciful father
Son of the true Virgin Mary
True and living breath
Grant me your holy grace.

(Broom of Devotion)

Rhythm - emotion not intellect

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms round him, and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

“The universes which are amenable to the intellect can never satisfy the instincts of the heart” (Cloud of Unknowing.)

“I snuggle into the heart of God like a child to its mother’s breast.”
(Maria Faustina)

The heart of the rhythm of the spiritual world is the willingness to let our emotions speak. We may struggle with this, but there is no other way of going forward.

I was speaking in a very large church in South America. It was a very hard word to the church, but the Pastor wanted me to share it. As I began to speak, I saw a young woman fall on her knees and began crying. “Lord” I said “I cannot go on. I am damaging your people.” But as I looked to the Lord, I saw that he was crying. “If you do not carry on” he said, “You will hurt me.” I was caught between two emotions - his and the woman crying. It was my introduction to how things worked in the spiritual realm. So I carried on speaking, but after a few more minutes, a young man fell to his knees crying and sobbing. Again I said the Lord “I cannot go on. I am hurting your people.” But he continued to cry, and repeated “If you do not, you will hurt me.” I was hurting more and more, but carried on. Within a few minutes the whole church was on its knees, crying out to the Lord. My emotional stress was so great that afterwards I could not work for a week.

I once found myself in the spirit standing on a huge plain. There were no trees or bushes. It was empty for as far as my eye could see. The Lord said to me “If you travel as far as you can, north, south, east or west, to the very horizon, there is more of me.” I felt very alone very small and very exposed. “This is how it is” he said, “You must be totally open to me. If you build any walls, pull together any hedges or trees to protect yourself, you will break your intense relationship with me.”

We can catch glimpses of the emotional side of the spiritual environment in the Gospels:-

Nain: - “Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” (Luke 7: 11-13)

Gethsemane: - Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Peter and Jesus: - When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. (John 21: 15-17)

“Peter was hurt” - his emotions were impacted by what Jesus was saying, not his intellect. In our spiritual roaming, the brain has to be put to one side. I have always struggles to explain this side of mysticism. Thomas Merton, describing contemplation, wrote this and I think it helps:-

“(Mystic) contemplation is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concept. It can be suggested by words, by symbols but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said,

and denies what it has affirmed. For in contemplation we know by “unknowing.” Or better, we know beyond all knowing or “unknowing.” (Thomas Merton.)

Rhythm - the angels

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.” (Luke 2:13-14)

I was praying in the heavenly places, when I heard the Lord speak the word “release.” Suddenly, a flood of angels was all around me, rushing to obey his command. There was so much movement, so much love, so much activity and so much flow. They were almost bumping into me as they moved out to serve the Lord’s command. There was laughter, light, colour and such great joy. Down they rushed, sweeping me up with them, until they came to a very dark place. There they stopped, and as they waited, in complete stillness, hope, joy, and the fragrance of Jesus filled the place. I knew we were waiting for the Lord.

As I reflected on this experience, which I greatly enjoyed, I remembered this verse: - “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God (Luke 2:13)

I realised then that I had always looked at angels from the wrong perspective. I looked up to their activity, but in the rhythm of the spiritual world, I should look down on what God sends them to do. I need to see them flowing outwards at his command. What the shepherds saw was only the end product. In the spiritual world, we are allowed and privileged to see the start. It’s not always easy to grasp this at first. This hymn by John Riley is reaching for understanding:-

Ye watchers and ye holy ones,
Bright seraphs, cherubim and thrones,
Raise the glad strain, Alleluia!
Cry out, dominions, principedoms, powers,
Virtues, archangels, angels’ choirs:

Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia!

O higher than the cherubim,
More glorious than the seraphim,
Lead their praises, Alleluia!
Thou bearer of th'eternal Word,
Most gracious, magnify the Lord.

Respond, ye souls in endless rest,
Ye patriarchs and prophets blest,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Ye holy twelve, ye martyrs strong,
All saints triumphant, raise the song.

O friends, in gladness let us sing,
Supernal anthems echoing,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
To God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit, Three **in One**.

Surrendered
to his will
servants of the light
yield to his longing
and in the mystery
obey

Rhythm - the invisible church

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands on thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” (Hebs. 12:22-23)

“The community setting brought home to me the need for prayer to be set within the corporate. We may be on our own when praying but we need to realise that we are praying as part of the Christian community.” (The Jesus Prayer. Simon Barrington Ward.)

The invisible church fills the spiritual world. The entire church of the Firstborn - all who have gone before us - are there, and involved in prayer and praise. If an African church is praising God, and we arrive late, we are not conducted to our seats in an orderly way. We dance in! The praise is infectious, and it is impossible not to be moved by its rhythm. This is how I have found it with the invisible church. When I feel their praise, I begin to dance. When I hear their prayer and intercession, I begin to pray. I am a member of this church - why would I not want to pray, to praise, to dance?

“As far as I could see, there were palms waving - and light! So bright. We drew nearer, and I heard such a sound - sweet, deep, longing, calling. It reached into my soul. I so wanted this sound to be in me - to be me. But what was I seeing? I held back, but he, running ahead, called back “Come on!” I walked forward, and slowly the path, which had been so stony and hard, began to change. It was full of flowers, and their perfume filled my heart - so beautiful. He came back to me, holding a branch in his hand. “You are so slow” he said, “Don’t you want to join in?” and gave me a branch. When I saw it was a palm branch, I began to understand. “Lord” I said, “Is this..” But he was gone, running ahead of me, disappearing into the light and sound which was now almost like a wall in front of me. I went on, into the light, into the sound, into the glory. A word began to form in my heart, like a small bubble. It began to rise up, getting bigger and bigger. It filled my entire soul – one long ecstatic longing aching fulfilling word. All around me I saw people - glorious, looking at me – waiting. Bigger and bigger the

bubble grew. More and more it filled me. I ached to release it. Just when I thought my heart would burst it broke the surface of my spirit, and thundering out, it cried "Home!" The sound bounced around, echoing back to me from a billion voices. The glorious ones waved their branches, began to dance, echoing "Home! Home! Home!" Well what else could I do? I danced." (Jim Smith.)

(Rhythm - the sorrow)

There is great sorrow to be felt in the spiritual world. I will look at this sorrow at great length in the coming sections.

3. The pure heart - facing our own humanity

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart. (Ps 24: 3-4)

"Only those of the purest eyes can look upon his divinity, those who have risen up beyond lowly works and earthly thoughts and have gone off with him to the highest mountain of solitude." (John Cassion)

I was in the spirit, and I saw a column of glass, coming towards me. It was so pure that its purity frightened me. Closer and closer it came, until the purity of the column pierced my soul, and I felt so ashamed, so sinful, so unworthy. I cried out to the Lord "What is happening?" The Lord said "Only as you become purer, as your heart becomes purer can you come closer and closer."

I think Isaiah gives the same experience from a biblical perspective. Having been given a vision of the Lord, he says:-

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” (Isaiah 6: 5-6)

Isaiah became acutely aware of the chasm between the purity and holiness of God, and the impurity and unholiness of his own spirit. To bridge the gap, God has to act, but God does not act until Isaiah realises the issue.

I want to be a mirror. So that when the glory of the Lord shines on me, it will be reflected back to him. Then when he looks at me, he will see himself. But how can this be? I am so impure, so full of weakness, sin and failure. The mystic teachers would say that this feeling is the beginning of our purification, and that such a purifying is essential if we are to see the glory. Without it, we will never gain access to the deepest places of the spiritual world, and never intercede from within his heart.

But how can we be pure? It is a gift of God, not something we can do for ourselves, but there are a few steps we can take to contribute to the process.

*** Know ourselves**

Archbishop William Temple once wrote “The nearer to God I get the more of a sinner I feel.” The mystic stream would say that far from this being unfortunate, it is essential to our intercession. We are fallen creatures. We all tend to the wrong. Paul warns us - **“For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” (Rom.7:14)**

It is in having this realistic attitude to ourselves, that we can face our impurity as we stand in the presence of God. But how do we become purer? The writer of the Cloud of Unknowing puts it well. He is writing about Mary Magdalene, and he says this:-

“When our Lord said to Mary, as a representative of all sinners who are called to the contemplative life “Your sins are forgiven” it was not because of her great sorrow, nor because of her consciousness of her sin, nor again because of the humility which arose merely from the consideration of her sinfulness. Why then? Because she loved greatly.”

The Bible puts it this way: - **“Above all, love each other deeply, because love (Gk: “Agape”) covers a multitude of sins.”** (1 Peter 4:8)

Put quite simply, as we grieve for our impurity, and long to love the Lord more, we become more pure by the working of his grace. It's one of those strange kingdom principles. If we try to ignore, forget or overcome by our own strength, sin makes us impure. But if we are honest, and love more, slowly we are transformed from impure to pure.

*From a distance
I saw your works of power
and I wondered could you
would you heal me
the broken man that I've become.*

*Then you came to me
I felt your love - so strong
Heard your voice calling on
“Live again in me.”*

*** Seek humility**

Knowing our impurity and desiring to be made more pure by the Lord is only part of the truth. The other part is humility. By being humble, as Jesus was humble, we will continue to be aware of our impurity and of his grace. If we do not unite humility to longing for purity, we will eventually become

proud of our purity - and in this process make ourselves more impure, and worse, in danger of not seeing it. Chares de Fouchauld was a humble servant of the Lord, and he writes this:-

“Let me be humble in thought, knowing myself and facing my own misery, past and present, the faults that I have, the virtues I do not have, the infirmities I have and the natural gifts I do not have. Let me be humble in my desires, without any ambition, or any wish for man’s esteem. I must be afraid of myself, afraid of my own judgments and integrity and courage. I must attribute to God only whatever good there may be in me and to myself alone the evil that I do. Let me be humble in speech: I must speak little, saying no good of myself, never revealing unless under great necessity all the graces God has given me; never saying anything which could give a good opinion of myself to others except though necessity. Let us be humble in actions. I must believe no work beneath me. I should look on any occupation as a great privilege. I must welcome with love and readiness any occasion for humility, any humiliation that emulates the humility of Jesus.”

A litany of humility

It’s hard to maintain such a standard of humility. I came across this “Litany of Humility in an Orthodox Prayer Book, book, and it traces the path to humility very clearly:-

“O Jesus! Meek and humble of heart, hear me.
From the desire of being esteemed, deliver me O Jesus.
From the desire of being loved, deliver me O Jesus.
From the desire of being extolled deliver me O Jesus.
From the desire of being honoured deliver me O Jesus.
From the desire of being praise deliver me O Jesus.

From the desire of being preferred to others deliver me O Jesus.
From the desire of being consulted deliver me O Jesus.
From the desire of being approved deliver me O Jesus.
From the fear of being humiliated deliver me O Jesus.
From the fear of being despised deliver me O Jesus.

From the fear of suffering rebukes deliver me O Jesus.
From the fear of being forgotten deliver me O Jesus.
From the fear of being ridiculed deliver me O Jesus.
From the fear of being wronged deliver me O Jesus.
From the fear of being suspected deliver me O Jesus.

That others may be loved more than I
O Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may increase and I may decrease
O Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be chosen and I set aside
O Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.

That others may be praised and I unnoticed
O Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be preferred to me in everything
O Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may become holier than I
O Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.
That I may become as holy as I should
O Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.

4. The Anointing of stillness

“Be still and know that I am God.” (Ps 46:10)

“Faith puts us into a new atmosphere, in full sunshine, full daylight, in a serene and luminous place far above the region of clouds, winds and storms, beyond the realm of twilight and night.” (Charles de Foucauld.)

In the presence of Jesus, there is a deep stillness. It is the stillness of eternity - of God who was and is and is to come, and is before “was” and after “is to come”. Who is beyond “everlasting.”

I first understood this when I had a vision of the post resurrection breakfast by the lake. In the spirit I found myself sitting by Jesus on the shore. I could smell the fish cooking, hear the crackling of the fire, the rhythm of the waves, the sound of the wind. There was such a profound quiet, that I knew I wanted to ask nothing, or do anything. In the presence of the eternal “yes”, what questions or requests could be needed?

I sat and he sat. Slowly I began to absorb his stillness, and I appreciated the order and calmness of the universe, and of creation. I understood that by being there, held by that stillness, I began to absorb it. It calmed my soul, and I knew all I needed to do was to be in that atmosphere.

We sat together, and looked out over the sea. I did not need to intercede. Just being in that environment was my intercession. Being became my intercession. It was, as it were, that I became nothing so that I could absorb the I AM who was there with me. The Lord turned to me and said “Is there anything you want to say to me?” “No” I replied. Then I said to him “Is there anything you want to say to me?” “No” he replied. So we just sat, looking out over the sea, and I absorbed the stillness until I was stillness.

This stillness is an active stillness. In the storm on the lake, we see stillness in operation.

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. (Mark 4:35-39)

Jesus was asleep because nothing could affect his stillness. No storm could break in on him. The disciples did not try to absorb his stillness, but filled with fear, cried out. They did not cry out “Let us absorb your stillness” but “Don't you care...”

Then, from his stillness, he brought the created order into his stillness. He absorbed it into the I AM, and there was, and only ever could be, stillness.

Intercessors can bring situations into the flow of his stillness. We are led to situations, and we draw them into the stillness of the Lord. We don't pray as such, but absorb - absorb the situation into ourselves and through ourselves into his stillness. We lay the situation down beside him in the boat, and sleep with him, holding the situation in his stillness, totally confident that this and this alone will change the situation.

Litany of stillness

Father, Creator, still my heart.

Jesus, Saviour, still my heart.

Spirit, enabler, still my heart.

From the storms of thought, Good Lord deliver me.

From waves of doubt, Good Lord deliver me

From anxiety and fear, Good Lord deliver me.

From the needs of the day, Good Lord deliver me.

From the needs of the night, Good Lord deliver me.

From the demands of my body Good Lord deliver me.

From the troubles of my soul, Good Lord deliver me.

Here let me rest.

Here let me rest.

Here let me be.

Here let me be.

Here I am still.

Here I am still.

*Rising
on the thermals
of praise
I drift in the Spirit*

*Glory on glory
enfolds me
leading me
higher
until;
I fall at the feet
of the Mystery
and rejoicing
rest.*

5. Unfulfilled love

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19)

**“God who is infinite love demands from us only infinite desire.”
(Catherine of Sienna)**

Early one morning I was in the spirit. I became aware of a very great sadness in the spiritual places. I thought it was in me, but then I realised that it was also in the Lord. I could not understand. I was filled with love for the Lord, and I could see that he was filled with love for me.

I tried to love more. He tried to love me more. But however hard we tried, we just could not make that bonding which would fulfil love on both sides. The Lord spoke. "Son, what we both desire is not possible in this way. Only when you are here forever can this bonding take place. This is the price to us both of your humanity."

*I long, I yearn
but I cannot reach
the love I need so much
Humanity, unable to bear
the weight of so much passion
fails and leaves me sad
"I too feel the grief
of unfulfilment"*

*Together we stand
and hope*

I was so sad. I spent the day feeling the emptiness of a love I could not fulfil. I wrote these words:-

"This is the engine which drives the heart of the mystic intercessor. We press on God with love. We reach for that fulfilment, for the electricity to jump the gap, for the ecstasy to come. When it does, like all true lovers, we want more. It is never enough, and we know it can never be enough. We know the ultimate fulfilment can only come beyond death. We want only to die to experience fulfilment. We need not be afraid of this attitude. It is the way to ultimate intercession - to be within the heart of God, or as the mystics say "within the wounds Jesus". (St Gemma: St Francis) From this place, intercession becomes transformed from words to emotion. Our love and longing become the carrier waves on which the intercession penetrates to the very heart of God."

I struggled with this thinking, but was greatly helped by two mystics:-
John Ruysbroeck:

“These two spirits, that is our own spirit and the spirit of God sparkle and shine one into the other, and each one shows the other its face. This makes each of the spirits yearn for the other in love. Each demands of the other all that it is. This makes the loves melt into each other. God’s touch and his gifts, our loving craving and our giving back. These fulfil love. This flux and reflux causes the fountain of love to brim over. Thus the touch of God and our loving craving become one simple love.” (John Ruysbroeck.)

Methilde of Madgeberg:

“Here two natures meet - the hot fire of the Godhead and the flowing wax of the loving soul. If a pure wick of constant humility is there, a beautiful light shall burn by which one shall see far.”

We long, we ache, we cry for that unity - the jumping of the spark the flowing of the wax. Day by day and hour by hour we feel the lack of it, and know that in the earthly it can never be. This unfulfillment is made worse by knowing that we can taste it, see it and almost reach it in our mystic intercession, but never quite achieve it.

Unfulfilled love - the agony of prayer, and also, in that strange kingdom way, the engine of it. For longing to drink from that well drives me again and again into the arms of the Lord. Once there, intercession begins to flow.

*So near, yet so far
arms of Jesus reach
reach further
I want but I cannot touch
Eternal love, when will this agony end?
when we will ever be united?
“One day..”*

6. The humiliation of love

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and become obedient to death - even death on a cross. (Phil.2:8)

The nature of the true lover that he more he loves, the more he longs for love." (Cloud of Unknowing)

*Stepping from the Father's side
into a darkness he had never known*

one pain

*Feeling the poverty of my life
wasted by the loss of hope*

two pains

*Offering the servant love
yet spat and beaten*

crucified

three pains

Crying for me

longing for me

yielding for me

dying for me

One love

In the early hours of one Sunday morning as I was praying, I became aware of the Lord. He was not standing in front of me, but bending down. I was shocked by this, and even more shocked to see that he was washing my feet. For the first time, I understood what Peter said when this happened to him. (John 13:8) As this experience continued, I began to see things from

the Lord's perspective. How low he had come, from his glory, to wash the feet of one of his unworthy servants. Into my spirit he spoke the words: - *"The humiliation of love."* In the weeks that followed, I had many hours of prayer to reflect on what he meant. I have tried to explain the humiliation of love here. I have divided it up into separate experiences, but really it is one total experience. What follows describes the Lover, in the unfulfilled love relationship. I found it really hard to bear at the time, and I still find it very hard as I write. Words, as always, are poor vehicles to describe emotion.

Humiliation - Lost intimacy is a crucifixion

"I and the Father are one." (John 10:30)

Intimacy is the hallmark of our Godhead. Indivisible and unbroken fellowship is the foundation of their relationship. John tries to describe this unique indivisibility: - **"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God."** (John 1:1)

Jesus was always with God, and never knew anything else but that intimate presence with him. We see traces of this unique relationship throughout the New Testament. To Philip he says **"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."** (John 14:9) To Mary he says **"Go to my brothers and tell them 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (John 20:17)** To the Father he says: - **"Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."** (John 17:6-7)

Now he is going to exchange this intimacy for our damaged humanity. He turns away from heaven, and steps into our darkness. His heart is broken by the separation. Now he will be abused, insulted, humiliated - experiences he has never known. The Father will grieve. The Spirit will ache in his absence, and long for his return. The crucifixion begins here.

*Encircled
in the heartbeat
of the Father
eternal bond
knew no fracture.*

*But he saw
only a broken heart
could heal our wounds
and accepts
the crucifixion*

Mystic Christians have been absorbing this pain for centuries. Maria D'Agreda wrote about how she thought Mary would have felt:-

“My son and eternal God, light of my eyes and life of my soul...receive O Lord the sacrifice of my not being able to relieve thee of the burden of the Cross and carry it myself, who am a daughter of Adam for it is I who should die upon it in love of thee.”

Another Mystic, Henry Suso, whose book “The little book of eternal wisdom” was as popular as any book in the middle ages wrote:-

“Lord, touch my stony heart with one of thy scalding tears one of those which thou didst shed in bitter distress for thy tender child under the wretched cross.”

They are trying to tell us that we have to absorb this humiliation, so that we can intercede at very great depth, within the surrender of Jesus. Many of us start at the crucifixion, but we start too late. We have to go back to this original surrender, and to do that we have to feel the pain of the separation - like a bereavement. Then our spirits will begin to flow within the

parameters of the spiritual world - indeed very close indeed to the Father's heart. That's our ultimate destination. But the way is humiliation. Hard to understand isn't it?

Humiliation - Surrendered glory

“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:11-12)

I once had a vision of the glory. I saw a fountain of fire, clear as glass, bright as the sun, pure as diamonds, awesome in power, greater and more glorious than every sunset and every star filled sky that has ever been. It was totally powerful, totally pure, totally infinite and eternal. This glory stood in front of me, and like Isaiah I was afraid. If this glory fell on me, how could I survive? I was relieved to find after this vision had passed, that like the disciples at the Transfiguration, there before me was only Jesus. I came to realise who he truly was, yet his humanity shielded me, and mediated the glory to me - filtered it as it were, to protect my humanity.

Jesus was always in the glory - in the presence of the angels, of the invisible church, of all creation, of all heaven. With the Father and the Spirit he was not in the glory, but was the glory:-

“Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” (Rev.5:1-5)

Yet he went from this glory to this shame:-

**“O sacred head, sore wounded, defiled and put to scorn;
O kingly head surrounded with mocking crown of thorn:
What sorrow mars thy grandeur? Can death thy bloom deflower?
O countenance whose splendour the hosts of heaven adore!”**

(Robert Bridges)

When Jesus surrendered his intimacy, he also surrendered being in this glory. It remained in him, because he was glory, but he separated himself from the position of being in glory in heaven. The glory remained, as we see at the transfiguration, at the miracle of the water into wine, at the raising of Lazarus. But in the physical he “emptied himself” - he stood aside from the position of intimate glory which was his right. Surrendering it was essential. It could only be done by someone who had a depth of love beyond our ability to grasp it. A love that could humiliate itself to kneel in front of me and wash my feet.

To intercede, I must enter that love. To enter that love means to enter the humiliated glory of the Saviour.

*From the glory
He steps into the desert
Of unfulfilled humanity
To absorb our shame
Love's cup overflows
And humiliates the Giver
Yet in that demeaning
heals*

Humiliation - the pain of separation

“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” (Matt.26:38)

There are two people involved in the agony of separation. We have to understand the heart of both, and then we have to position ourselves between them.

First the Father:-

*Light of my light
Joy of my heart
Delight of my eyes
Breath of my hope
Parting is a love so deep it hurts*

Then the Son:-

*From above
the glory calling him
longing*

*From below
angry darkness
gloating*

*From above
tears
at his departing
From below
joy at his destruction*

*From above
love aching
From within
love breaking*

The separation is so intense, so lonely for the Trinity, so acutely painful for us who would enter into it. We find ourselves dragged to the worst desert we have ever met, and there we die the death of lonely isolation, and we do it daily, hourly. Why?

In mystic thinking, the “Why” question is irrelevant. The “Why” is because “I AM” went there. We follow. We feel. We die. After visiting this desert of separation a few times, I guarantee that we will not ask “Why” but “Oh God, when can this end?”

My toughest experience of this desert took place when the Lord invited me to meet him in the spirit. When I looked at him, I saw him beaten and broken, bleeding and alone. I was shaken to the root of my being. I was shocked beyond all shock. I can still feel it today, yet it happened nearly 20 years ago. I managed to ask “Who has done this to you Lord?” He replied “My love for my creation crucifies me again and again.”

Love breaking - a very heavy burden for the intercessor, and explains why few come here. The mystics come here regularly, and they call us to come too. We come to adore. We come to suffer. We come to intercede. If we have the courage to come, to stand and to stay, we will have an intercessory experience like we never knew before, and despite the pain, we will want to come again and again.

Humiliation - The depth of sacrifice

“For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

“What heart could not keep from breaking at the sight of your greatness descending to the lowliness of our humanity.” (Catherine of Siena)

In the spirit, I saw the cross. I saw the wooded cross beam, and a human figure tied on to it, being dragged up to be fixed to the upright. I saw darkness, smelt fear and human waste, heard people jeering. I saw the pain of the figure, twisting it around. I saw the blood, the tears, and the utter degradation of execution. I cried.

There are a number of ways of approaching this most painful issue. There is the biblical way.

Have the same mind as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8)

There is the physical way, described among many, by Charles de Foucauld:-

“Think that you are going to die a martyr, stripped of everything, stretched out on the ground, naked, hardly recognisable, covered with blood and wounds, violently and painfully killed.”

When the Lord left heaven, he knew the theology! But he also had to contemplate lowering himself to the vision of Charles de Foucauld. It's easy for us to read the theology, but not so easy to enter the pain. But if we can, emotionally, appreciate the pain, then that is a window into the love. Once we have that window, our intercession will move to a greater depth. The key to deep intercession is a deeper appreciation of the love of Jesus.

Gaining that appreciation, as we are seeing, is a pathway of suffering and pain. The mystic Christians would tell us that it has always been so.

*The spite of ages
Stored in sin
Attacks to kill
One whose only passion
Was to love*

*Crushed by the wheels of bile
He dies to his glory
That he might glorify me.*

*Father forgive us.
We did not know what we were doing.*

Humiliation – surrender to death

“With that he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (John 19:30)

“Only one who has possessed this realm can properly estimate how very painful it is to have to give it up voluntarily: How like a crucifixion it is to call a halt in the life of the spirit and to deprive that spirit of all that is life-giving.” (Edith Stein)

*From the glory
He steps into the desert
Of unfulfilled humanity
To absorb our shame*

*Love's cup overflows
And humiliates the Giver
Yet in that demeaning
heals*

So we reach the end. The humiliation finishes in annihilation - in surrender to death itself.

Why should I walk this way?

This is a hard section of teaching. We have had to watch the degradation of Jesus, and at the same time, try to grasp that this happened out of the intensity of his love for us.

Intercessors have to absorb this experience - this deeply challenging and disturbing humiliation. Then we pray from a totally different position. Appreciating our own weakness, we bathe in his stunning love. Through that love we see the creation as he sees it, and then we can feel his heart of prayer, and coming alongside it, pray with power.

It is not easy to understand. If it was, would it be worth it? In this struggle to go deeper, I have had to absorb the humiliation of love. I have not liked it. I love the Lord and do not like to see his humiliation. But somehow, I have managed to grasp the tiniest insight into his love, and my intercession has changed. More waiting, less saying. More understanding his heart, and less caring about my own.

7. The Way of the cross

“We are going up to Jerusalem.” (Mark 10:33)

“In the shadow of the cross everything else seems of little value. In the shadow, everything is revealed.” (Michael the Solitary)

*Broken humanity
breaks its Creator
seeking a freedom
it can never know*

*And enters a bondage
too deep for words*

*He allows it from a love
beyond our knowing*

*Broken eucharist breaks us both
and in its breaking
heals*

The cross is the centre of our faith, and we all know it and accept it. The theology is well worked out, and we rejoice in the freedom and hope which it brings. This is true for the mystic stream as for the rest of us. But mystic intercession brings the cost home to us in a vivid and emotional way. For these intercessors, getting to the cross, praying at the cross, surrendering to the cross, living and dying for the Cross is everything. We could look at almost any of the well-known mystics - here is just a sample:-

St Veronica: - “On the day she received her habit, she was given the name of the Saint who had the courage to wipe the Lord’s face on his way to the cross – Veronica. This was to be a sign of her life with the Lord, that of his passion. When did this begin? Was it at the age of seven when she saw the Lord covered with wounds? At that time he told her to be devoted to his passion, and then disappeared. He looked so wounded, and his wounds forged a stamp in her heart, carving themselves deeply into its cavities, that she was unable to think of anything or anyone else.”

Henry Suso: - “Lord never was there a magnet so powerful in attracting hard iron to itself as thy love-fraught passion, thus presented to my soul, is powerful to unite to itself all hearts. Alas! Thou loving Lord draw me now by means of love and sorrow away from the world to thee on thy cross, fulfill in me the closest resemblance to thy cross so that my soul may enjoy thee to thy highest glory.”

Marthe Robin: - “He desires to relive in me his passion up until his last breath and his descent into hell and even his resurrection, although I remain on the cross so as to continue this life of crucifixion which is his will for me.”)

St Benedicta: - “One can only learn a science of the cross if one feels the cross in one’s own person. I was convinced of this from the very first and have said with all my heart “Hail cross, our only hope.”

Julian of Norwich: - “When I looked at the cross I was safe. For apart from the cross there is no safety, but only the horror of devils.

In the spirit, I saw a man greeting guests. Each one was welcomed with great warmth. But then the door opened and another man came in. It was the greeter’s father. They fell into each other’s arms, sobbing and yearning. There was a passionate deep and very intimate outpouring of love.

The scene changed. I saw a man - the greeter being hoisted up onto a cross. He was broken, bleeding and the smell of filth and death was on and in him. Blood ran down, bones were broken, the smell was awful.

Slowly he was hoisted up - the pain breaking his hands and feet.

In the dust and the chaos, I saw this man, hanging in agony. Far away, I heard the sobbing. I began to pray with compassion, and as I did, people and situations came into my mind. I let each one flow through the experience I was having. I let them flow to the cross - the cross which was marking itself in my emotions.

This is the key experience for mystic prayer. It is a very deep challenge to us - it impinges powerfully on our senses, yet is easily rejected by our intellect.

Our crucifixion

In the spirit, I saw the Lord, broken and bleeding. "Who has done this to you Lord" I asked. "My creation crucifies me daily. How many more times?"

*Darkness closes in
to consume the sacrifice
Heaven bows in sorrow
the Breaker takes his fee
and does his work.
Hell gloats
All is over.
"Finished?"*

*Death - a victory
hidden and now revealed.*

We have to go further if we are going to absorb the crucifixion. As a prelude to receiving the stigmata, Francis saw an angel - we might call this angel the "angel of the stigmata. Here is Brother Leo's description:-

“And being thus inflamed in that contemplation, on that same morning he beheld a Seraph descending from heaven with six fiery and resplendent wings; and this seraph with rapid flight drew nigh unto St Francis, so that he could plainly discern him, and perceive that he bore the image of one crucified; and the wings were so disposed, that two were spread over the head, two were outstretched in flight, and the other two covered the whole body.

And when St Francis beheld it, he was much afraid, and filled at once with joy and grief and wonder. He felt great joy at the gracious presence of Christ, who appeared to him thus familiarly, and looked upon him thus lovingly, but, on the other hand, beholding him thus crucified, he felt exceeding grief and compassion. He marvelled much at so stupendous and unwonted a vision, knowing well that the infirmity of the Passion accorded ill with the immortality of the seraphic spirit. And in that perplexity of mind it was revealed to him by him who thus appeared, that by divine providence this vision had been thus shown to him that he might understand that, not by martyrdom of the body, but by a consuming fire of the soul, he was to be transformed into the express image of Christ crucified in that wonderful apparition.

Then, after long and secret conference together, that marvellous vision disappeared, leaving in the heart of St Francis an excessive fire and ardour of divine love, and on his flesh a wonderful trace and image of the Passion of Christ. For upon his hands and feet began immediately to appear the figures of the nails, as he had seen them on the Body of Christ crucified, who had appeared to him in the likeness of a Seraph.

And thus the hands and feet appeared pierced through the midst by the nails, the heads whereof were seen outside the flesh in the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, and the points of the nails stood out at the back of the hands, and the feet in such wise that they appeared to be

twisted and bent back upon themselves, and the portion thereof that was bent back upon themselves, and the portion thereof that was bent back or twisted stood out free from the flesh, so that one could put a finger through the same as through a ring; and the heads of the nails were round and black. In like manner, on the right side appeared the image of an unhealed wound, as if made by a lance, and still red and bleeding, from which drops of blood often flowed from the holy breast of St Francis, staining his tunic and his drawers.”

The cross was thrust into him - into his physical self. For the rest of his life, he bled from these wounds, and they probably contributed to his weakness, final sickness and death. I think Sister Benedicta would teach us the same lesson. She did not receive the stigmata, but held a profound grasp of the place of the cross. She dies a sacrificial victim to the Jewish people in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, in the middle of the pain, agony, fear and excrement of that filthy crime. The cross so absorbed her life, that she died by it - by the knowledge she had absorbed.

Intercession means, at its extreme, not meditating on the cross, sitting at the foot of the cross, but absorbing it to such an extent that we become victims of the cross, following the footsteps of Jesus. This is, for me, the ultimate place of intercession - involving not words but emotions and my total body existence - all laid down in the agony of crucifixion.

**When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died;
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.**

**Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ, my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.**

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,

sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

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For Catherine of Sienna, see her letters, (free on internet) or “Catherine of Siena” by Margaret Roberts in the Pergamum collection
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