

## EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

What theme can there be for a meditation at Pentecost other than the Holy Spirit, given to the early Church in the midst of phenomena of enthusiasm, with the promise that he would remain with it always to the very end, with his power, his consolation, and his freedom? In a meditation of this kind we must certainly speak about the Holy Spirit as the gift in which God imparts himself to man.

But what is to be said and how exactly is it to be expressed? Certainly we could look up the Scriptures and read there about the Spirit of the Father, who is given through the Son to all who believe in him; about the Spirit who flows as living water out of the pierced side of the Crucified, as a fount of life, welling up into eternal life and quenching our thirst for eternity; about the Spirit who makes us sons and enables us to say 'Abba', 'Father'; about the Spirit who signifies the coming of the triune God, who gives us a share in God's love, truth, and freedom, in whom we are united with one another and have hope, by whom we are anointed and sealed, who prays in us and with us in ways too deep for speech and in access to the Father gives us assurance of eternal life. These and many other [6] and sublime things could be found in Scripture, collected for a Pentecost meditation, and offered to the person within us to aid courageous faith and joyful reflection.

To the Christian believer who approaches these words of Scripture with an open mind it is obvious that he can meditate on Pentecost in this way even at the present time. And, even though here and now we are trying to follow a somewhat different way of meditation and want to raise questions about our own experience of the Spirit, [190] it is also obvious, but should be stated expressly, that we always tacitly make use of this teaching of Scripture and that we ourselves could not so clearly grasp our own experience (which is offered to all human beings in the depth of their existence) if it had not been made explicit in the words of Scripture, even before our own efforts.

But, precisely because this Scripture does not speak to us merely doctrinally about this Spirit who is given to us, but at the same time itself appeals to the experience of the Spirit as we know it ourselves (for instance, in the Letter to the Galatians and elsewhere in Paul's letters, in John's writings, and in Scripture as a whole), we may rightly ask when and how such an experience occurs in us.

At the same time we are of course aware from the very outset that this is an experience incommensurable with what we ordinarily describe as 'experience' (especially in a scientific or empirically psychological sense), for the experience of the Spirit begins at the very heart of our existence, at what might be called its subjective pole, and does not signify an encounter with any sort of particular object that happens to come upon us from outside with its effects on us. Apart from experiences explicitly interpreted in a theological way in our consciousness and our reflection, there is an experience in us which is different from and not comparable with the experiences which first come to mind when we hear the word 'experience'.

In the first place the word suggests to us the fact, the impact, of individual realities of our milieu and environment or individual psychological objects in our consciousness: pain, for instance, that can be localized, an individual thought with a particular content, etc. All these individual realities are present to us as individual *within* the total framework of our consciousness; there they fit into some kind of arrangement, they are distinguished from one another and connected with one another.

But, in addition to these individual experiences of certain individual realities, there is a

quite different experience, not by any means given thematic expression in the ordinary routine of our experiences: the experience of the one subject as such, that has all these experiences as its own and has to answer for them, that is itself present in its original unity and totality, even though it cannot itself be thematically objectified in detail but takes the form only of an apparent void when it passes into the multiplicity of its everyday experiences and seems to forget itself in the process.

[191] There will be no attempt here in an epistemological or existential-ontological reflection to analyze this singular, original, primordial experience by the subject of itself, always and everywhere present behind all representational experiences. (We shall return later to this 'transcendental' character of man as subject.) All that is intended by this reference is to recall the fact here and now that there is in any case a kind of experience which is not commensurable with the ordinary experiences of individual realities, but which nevertheless is always present, even though it is generally overlooked. The experience of the Spirit which we are considering here is therefore not to be rejected *a priori* as nonexistent, merely because, just like the factuality of the subject as present for its own sake in all individual experiences, it can always be overlooked.

Of course, if we think we cannot really discover in ourselves the experience of the Spirit as understood here, we can accept the testimony of its existence as coming, so to speak, authoritatively from outside, from Scripture and the teaching of the Church. But, however much it must be interpreted in faith and given expression in words with the aid of Scripture, if we did not here and now ask also about the actual experience of the Spirit, there would be a danger of regarding sceptically as ideology or mythology all that Scripture tells us of this Spirit in ourselves and we might wonder with some irritation whether or where everything that Scripture says of the glory of the possession of the Spirit is present in us; we might wonder whether it should not all be set in a dimension (particularly when there is an assent in faith to the teaching of Scripture) which lies outside our consciousness and outside our freely realized piety.

Is there such an experience of the Spirit which on the one hand makes understandable and authenticates the testimony of Scripture to the indwelling of the Spirit in us and on the other hand is confirmed and put into words of truth by Scripture? We say that there is such an experience.

This statement is not refuted by the fact that we can and must *ask* with some hesitation and doubt about such an experience, that consequently this is not an absolutely indisputable experience, of the kind we have, for example, of the external world, without feeling (unless we are philosophers in an ivory tower) any need or necessity to ask whether a person really has such an experience of his milieu and environment. There are in any case also other genuine experiences [192] which *exist in fact* and about which questions nevertheless simply must be asked. If, for example, a German idealist philosopher or even a modern Christian philosopher asks about the transcendental subject of knowledge and freedom and about its structures, if the modern depth psychologist tries to track down deeply repressed attitudes, they are all rightly convinced that there can be real experiences in man which are felt only unthematically, which are not verbalized, which are perhaps suppressed and not brought to man's free attention. Experience as such and objectified, representational and verbalized experiences are not simply the same thing, although it might seem so to consciousness lost in the objective reality of ordinary life and worried only about what goes on there. There can therefore be an experience that amounts simultaneously to a genuine question.

The *question* then about the *experience* of the Spirit cannot be dismissed *a priori* as contradictory. But how can it be answered?

Today, as often also in the Church's past, it is perhaps appropriate to recall the fact that there have always been mysticism and enthusiastic occurrences, experiences and movements

in the Church which, even though in the most diverse forms and interpretations, have been understood as experiences of the Holy Spirit.

There has been and there is mysticism. Here, those who have been so privileged said and continue to say that either in a sudden awakening or in a long and gradual ascent they experience grace, God's immediate proximity, union with him in the Spirit, in a holy night or in blessed light, in a void silently filled by God, and, at least at the moment of the mystical event itself, cannot doubt their experience of the immediate proximity of the self-communicating God as effect and reality of God's sanctifying grace in the depth of their existence: in other words, as 'experience of the Holy Spirit'.

How this experience has been described in the course of the history of mysticism in Christianity factually or in theological terms; how this objectifying and verbalizing interpretation has taken the most diverse forms, dependent on the background of the history of ideas, the history of civilization, of philosophy and theology; how the question is to be answered about the relationship of this Christian mysticism or mysticism interpreted in Christian terms to similar mystical phenomena outside Christianity, particularly in the East and especially in Islam and Buddhism; how such an experience can [193] co-exist with ecclesial-social and sacramental-ritual piety: all these are questions which need not occupy us here and now.

The mystics tell us of an experience of the Spirit and in principle there is nothing to prevent us from regarding their testimony on the whole as credible, particularly if on the one hand we justifiably allow for the fact that the original experience is the one thing and the philosophical and theological interpretation of it another and that consequently diversity and inconsistency in the interpretations need not discredit the original experience, and if on the other hand we remember that among these mystics there have been persons of the utmost sobriety and with acute powers of observation up to the present time, including Carl Albrecht, the mystic who was also an outstanding doctor, psychologist, philosopher, and natural scientist. The fact remains that there are people who have the courage to provide us with credible testimony to the experience of the Spirit.

Admittedly in the theology of Christian mysticism there has been considerable insistence on the extraordinary and elitist character of such mystical phenomena; on the one hand because people (rightly) wanted to stress the grace-inspired character of these phenomena and at the same time were guided by the tacit opinion that what is effected by grace and unmerited must by its very nature be rare and on the other hand because such clearly mystical phenomena are generally accompanied by circumstances of an ecstatic, almost parapsychological nature, which really are rare. Hence it is understandable up to a point that the normal Christian is inclined to leave aside such mysticism as a matter which has nothing to do with him.

But if we were to distinguish (which is not possible here) the really *central* mystical experience more clearly from these rare marginal phenomena such as ecstasy, absorption, etc., then it would be easier to understand that such mystical experiences are certainly not occurrences lying completely outside the experience of an ordinary Christian; that what the mystics talk about is an experience which any Christian (and indeed any human being) can have and can seek, but which is easily overlooked or suppressed. But in any case it is true that mysticism exists and it is not as remote from us as we are at first tempted to assume.

In addition there are enthusiastic phenomena and movements in non-Catholic and Catholic Christianity. Whether these things also involve a mystical closeness to God and union with him in the sense [194] of classical, more or less individual and individualistic mysticism, or whether and how mysticism and (former or present-day) enthusiasm of a more social character must be distinguished phenomenologically and theologically, this is a question into which we cannot directly enter here. It is not really necessary to do so, particularly since the

classical theology of mysticism recognizes very diverse forms and degrees of mystical experience and consequently allows for the possibility of arranging enthusiastical experiences in a series of steps on the mystical ascent, without making them coincide with the peak of mysticism, the final unification by grace with God in the mystical union.

Enthusiastic movements exist anyway in Christendom at the present time. People are looking for the experience of the Spirit and his power. Lengthy charismatic religious services take place in a community, where people think they perceive the presence of the Spirit and particularly in ecstatic speaking in tongues and marvelous cures of the sick. At these times of prayer there are not a few who think that they are experiencing what they describe as ‘baptism of the Spirit’, being filled once and for all with the Spirit of God.

Even a solidly rational theology does not need to reject such enthusiastic experiences out of hand and in all cases or to regard them completely sceptically. This is true even though the fire of God often produces a lot of human smoke, even though many of the phenomena of American enthusiasm may not appeal to us, even though many features of these phenomena can be explained (if not theologically interpreted) with the aid of very secular psychology and take exactly the same form outside a religious context.

Even though in such enthusiastic movements the person who is still on pilgrimage in time and history may never assume that he is perfect, that he has received and experienced an absolutely certain and even final promise of the Spirit (something that traditional theology would describe as ‘confirmation in grace’ and would count among the most sublime mystical experiences), it need not be disputed that there can be particularly impressive liberating experiences of grace here transforming the person and providing quite new horizons of life, which mark for a long time the innermost attitude of the Christian and can certainly be described (if desired) as ‘baptism of the Spirit’ and also (particularly within such community prayer [195] meetings) experienced as effect of the Spirit given to the congregation.

## II

But – and here we really come to our proper theme – where do we stand, who do not venture to describe ourselves as mystics and who, perhaps for the most diverse reasons, can find no personal approach to such enthusiastic movements and practices? Have we no experience of the Spirit? Can we merely bow respectfully before these experiences of others regarded by ourselves as elitist? Do these people merely give us an account of a country that we ourselves have never entered, whose existence we admit as we admit that of Australia which (perhaps) we have never seen.

We say that as Christians, supported by the testimony of Scripture, we *confess* that we can have such an experience of the Spirit and even *necessarily* have it as an offer to our freedom. It is an experience that exists, even though in the routine of ordinary life we mostly overlook it, perhaps suppress it, and do not want to admit it.

If in what follows we try to draw attention to such an experience, it seems impossible to avoid prefacing these concrete references to our own experiences with some more or less theoretical considerations on the intrinsic nature of human knowledge and freedom, even though they can only be brief and to some may seem very abstract. It is only in this way that the actual structure and peculiar nature of our experiences of the Spirit can be made clear and understood, why in our explicit and verbalized representational consciousness we can easily overlook them and thus be led to think that they do not exist at all. We must therefore ask particularly for attention and patience for these theoretical preliminary considerations.

We may consider together man’s knowledge and freedom, since, despite their radical difference from each other, in the last resort they have a common structure. In knowledge and

freedom man is inescapably the being of transcendence. This term may sound pompous, irritating, and redolent of ideology. But it is difficult to avoid, referring as it does to an ultimate, inescapable, essential structure of man, whether the ordinary person or even the empirical scientist is [196] inclined to take note of it or not. In knowledge and freedom man is always both involved with the individual object (nameable and distinguishable from others) of his ordinary experience or of his particular fields of study *and* at the same time carried beyond it, even though he leaves this always implicit trend unconsidered and unnamed. The movement of the mind to the individual object, with which it is occupied, always goes toward the particular object *precisely* by going beyond it. What is objectively known and named as individual is always grasped in a wider unnamed, implicitly present horizon of possible knowledge and freedom as a whole, even though it is always with difficulty and only subsequently that reflection succeeds in making this implicitly present awareness into something like an individual object of consciousness and giving it objective expression in words.

The movement of the mind and freedom, the horizon of this movement, is boundless. Every object of our consciousness which confronts us, making itself felt in our milieu and environment, is only a stage, a continually new starting point of this movement, which passes into the infinite and unnamed. What is present in our ordinary and academic consciousness is no more than a tiny island (even though it is large enough in itself and continually and increasingly enlarged by our objectifying knowledge and action) in a boundless ocean of the nameless mystery which grows and becomes clearer the more precisely we know and will in detail. And if we want to set a limit to this apparently empty horizon of consciousness, we would by that very fact have again transgressed this limit.

In the midst of our everyday consciousness we are saved or damned (as we will) for nameless unencompassable infinity. The concepts and terms that we use subsequently of this infinity to which we are continually referred do not represent the original form of our experience of the nameless mystery that surrounds the island of our ordinary consciousness, but the small signs and images that we set up and must set up to remind us continually of the original, unthematic experience – silently present and silencing its presence – of the strangeness of the mystery in which we live, despite the clarity of ordinary consciousness, as in a night and in a pathless desert, reminding us of the abyss in which we are unfathomably rooted.

Anyone who wants to do so can of course angrily claim that too much is required of him and leave all this aside and continually press [197] on to what is new; he can attempt to disregard the night which alone makes visible our little lights and gives them their brightness. But a person who takes up this attitude is really acting contrary to his fundamental nature, since this experience of being referred to the boundless mystery, seen more closely, is not a superfluous mental luxury, but the condition of the possibility of ordinary knowing and willing, even though in the routine of ordinary life and in academic activity this is generally disregarded and not considered.

If we wanted to describe as ‘mysticism’ this experience of transcendence in which man in the midst of ordinary life is always beyond himself and beyond the particular object with which he is concerned, we might say that mysticism always occurs, concealed and namelessly, in the midst of ordinary life and is the condition of the possibility for the most down-to-earth and most secular experience of ordinary life.

He whom we call God dwells in this nameless and pathless expanse of our consciousness. The mystery purely and simply that we call God is not a particular, especially peculiar, objective piece of reality which we add to the realities named and systematized in our experience and fit in with the latter; he is the encompassing, never encompassed ground and precondition of our experience and its objects. He is known in this strange experience of

transcendence, even though it is not possible here to define metaphysically more precisely the unity and difference between the experience of transcendence on the part of the intellectual subject in knowledge and freedom on the one hand and the experience of God himself on the other hand that is present in the experience of transcendence. Such a definition would be a difficult philosophical undertaking at this stage and it is not necessary here.

The fact remains that the boundless expanse of our mind in knowledge and freedom, which is inescapably always present unthematically in all ordinary knowledge, permits us to learn what is meant by God as the ground opening up and filling that expanse of the mind and its limitless movement. However and wherever it is brought about by a concrete, categorial object, transcendental experience is always also experience of God in the midst of ordinary life.

At this point an observation must be made, of which the philosophical and theological senses are linked in a peculiar relationship of mutual dependence. The unlimited transcendental movement of [198] the mind toward God has actually a radicalness that makes it tend toward God, not merely as an asymptotic goal, itself remaining always at an infinite distance, but as that which itself forms in immediacy the attainable goal of this movement.

*Philosophically* we can think of and hope for this radicalness by which God himself becomes in himself the goal of this movement, at least as a possibility that cannot be excluded; *theologically* we grasp this possibility as in fact given by God and describe as grace this actually available radicalness of the transcendental movement toward God's immediacy in himself up to the point one day of the immediate vision of God, for it is in this that the actual and ultimate nature consists of what we call grace, self-communication of God in the Spirit, and of what finds its ultimate fulfillment in the immediate loving intuition of God; *existentially* we freely grasp this radicalness of our movement toward God in immediacy, sustained by God's Spirit, when we surrender ourselves unreservedly and unconditionally to this movement of the Spirit as it actually ranges of itself, when in our freedom we set no limits to it, but let it in a sense swing out in its own boundlessness up to the immediacy of God himself.

If grace is so understood, as it must be grasped philosophically as possibility, seen theologically as reality, and existentially realized (thematically or unthematically) in hope, then, in the actual order of reality, experience of transcendence (which is experience of God) is always also experience of grace, since the radicalness of the experience of transcendence and its dynamism are sustained in the innermost core of our existence by God's self-communication making all this possible, by the self-communication of God as goal and as strength of the movement toward him that we describe as grace, as the Holy Spirit (at least as offer to man's freedom). The experience of transcendence permitting God to be present (because of God's salvific will in regard to all human beings, by which man is oriented to God's immediacy) is in fact always experience of the Holy Spirit, whether a person can or cannot interpret explicitly in this way his inescapable experience of the unknown God, whether or not he has at his disposal theological expressions such as those we have just been using.

There is something more to be added to what has just been said. It is true that all this applies to the average person in the ordinary activity of knowledge and freedom, at least where (but always [199] where) we find really intellectual knowledge and freedom, in which a human being as real subject is aware of himself and definitively disposes of himself. But this transcendental experience of God in the Holy Spirit is present in the ordinary course of human life only unthematically, covered and concealed by preoccupation with the concrete realities with which we are involved in our milieu and environment. In everyday life this transcendental experience of God in the Holy Spirit remains anonymous, implicit, unthematic, like the widely and diffusely spread light of a sun which we do not directly see,

while we turn only to the individual objects visible in this light in our sense-experience.

But even if we disregard the question whether this transcendental experience of God in the Holy Spirit can occur quite independently (for instance, in phenomena of a formless absorption, in an attitude of consciousness emptied of objects of an individual character, in mystical experience), there are in any case concrete experiences in our existential history in which this transcendental experience of the Spirit always present as such is thrust more clearly to the fore in our consciousness: experiences in which (conversely) the individual objects of knowledge and freedom that concern us in ordinary life, by their singularity, bring to our notice more clearly and more urgently the accompanying transcendental experience of the Spirit; in which these objects of themselves silently refer more clearly than otherwise happens in our ordinary and banal daily life to that incomprehensible mystery of our existence which always surrounds us and also sustains our ordinary consciousness. Everyday reality then becomes itself a pointer to this transcendental experience of the Spirit, which is always present silently and apparently facelessly.

This reference – which our everyday reality grasped in knowledge and freedom as such always carries with it and announces more forcefully in certain situations – can also be implied by the positiveness of this categorial reality in which the greatness and glory, goodness, beauty, and transparency of the individual reality of our experience point with promise to eternal light and eternal life. But it is also understandable without more ado that a pointer of this kind is perceived most clearly where the definable limits of our everyday realities break down and are dissolved, where the decline of these realities is perceived, when lights shining over the tiny island of our ordinary life are extinguished and the question becomes inescapable, [200] whether the night that surrounds us is the void of absurdity and death that engulfs us or the blessed holy night already shining within us is the promise of eternal day. If then in what follows attention is drawn particularly to such experiences which bring to the fore in this second way the transcendental experience of God in the Holy Spirit, this does not mean that the human being and the Christian are forbidden to allow this experience of God to occur also in the first way indicated and to accept it. In the last resort the *via eminentiae* and the *via negationis* are not two ways or two successive stages of the one way, but two aspects of one and the same experience, even though (as we said) it is right for the sake of clarity to stress particularly the *via negationis*.

We may now at last begin to point to concrete experiences of life which, whether we are explicitly aware of it or not, are experiences of the Spirit, assuming only that we cope with them in the right way. In regard to these references to the concrete experience of the Spirit in the midst of the ordinary routine of life there can be no question of analyzing them in detail to their ultimate depth, which is in fact the Spirit. In this connection what was said in a formal preliminary outline of the real nature of all these experiences in general must suffice. Nor can the attempt be made here to offer a systematic chart of such experiences. All that is possible is to give a few arbitrarily and unsystematically selected examples.

Here is someone who cannot get his life's accounts to come out right, who cannot balance the entries in these accounts, consisting of good will, mistakes, sin and disasters, even if he tries (impossible as it may seem) to add repentance to these entries. The accounts simply do not add up and he does not know how he can insert God as an individual entry in order to strike a balance between debit and credit. And this person, unable to balance his life's accounts, surrenders himself to God or, to put it both more and less precisely, to the hope of an incalculable final reconciliation of his existence, marked by the presence of him whom we call God; trusting and hoping, he gets away from his unfathomed and uncalculated existence and does not himself know how this miracle occurs, bringing no advantage to himself and not to be regarded as his own possession.

Here is someone who can manage to forgive, although he gains no reward for it and the

silent pardon is taken for granted by the other party.

[201] Here is someone who is trying to love God, although there appears to be no response of love from God's silent incomprehensibility, although he is not sustained by any feeling of enthusiasm, although he cannot confuse himself and his desire for life with God, although he thinks he will die of this love which seems to him like death and absolute rejection, which apparently calls him into the void and the wholly unknown: a love that looks like a terrifying leap into unfathomable depths, since everything seems to become intangible and utterly futile.

Here is someone who does his duty even when it seems that he can do it only with a burning sense of really denying and annihilating himself, when he can do it only by doing something terribly stupid for which no one will thank him.

Here is a person who is really good to someone from whom there is no sign of appreciation or gratitude, while the good person does not even have the feeling of satisfaction that he has been 'selfless', decent, and so on.

Here is someone who is silent, although he could defend himself, although he is unjustly treated; who is silent without being able to profit by his silence as evidence of his supreme irreproachability.

Here is someone who has to make a decision purely in the light of an innermost dictate of his conscience, a decision that cannot be made clear to anyone, in which he is quite alone and knows that it is a decision of which he cannot be relieved, for which he has to answer always and eternally.

Here is someone who obeys, not because he must or because he must otherwise put up with some inconvenience, but merely because of that mysterious, silent, impalpable reality that we call God and his will.

Here is a person who renounces something without thanks, recognition, or even any feeling of inward satisfaction.

Here is someone who is utterly lonely, for whom life is drained of all its colour, for whom everything tangible on which he could rely fades into an infinite distance, but who does not run away from this loneliness which is felt as the last moment before drowning, but endures it with resignation in an ultimate hope.

Here is someone who sees that his clearest ideas and the most intellectual operations of his thought are disintegrating, that in the breakdown of all systems the unity of consciousness and what is known consists only in the pain of not being able to cope with the [202] immense variety of questions and yet of not being allowed and not being able to cling to what is clearly known from individual experiences and from learning.

Here is someone who suddenly notices how the small rivulet of his life winds through the desert of banal existence, apparently aimlessly and with the terrifying possibility of completely drying up. And yet he hopes, without knowing how, that this rivulet will find its way to the infinite expanse of the ocean, even though this is concealed from him by the dark sand dunes apparently stretched out endlessly before him.

It would be possible to continue in this way for a long time and even then not to have visualized in particular that experience which for a certain individual is the experience in his life of the Spirit, of freedom, and of grace. For every human being approaches it in the particular historical and individual situation of his own unique life. Every human being? But he must admit it, dig it out, so to speak, from under the refuse of the ordinary business of life, and, when it becomes faintly visible, not irritably turn away from it, as if it only created uncertainty and disturbed the obvious course of his daily routine and his scientific clarities.

Permit me to say it once more, although I am merely repeating the same thing with almost the same words:

When, over and above all individual hopes, there is the one and entire hope that gently

embraces all upsurges and also all downfalls in silent promise,

when responsibility is undertaken and sustained, even though no evidence of success or advantage can be produced,

when someone experiences and accepts his ultimate freedom, of which no earthly constraints can deprive him,

when the fall into the darkness of death is accepted with resignation as the dawn of incomprehensible promise,

when the sum total of all life's accounts, which we cannot work out ourselves, is seen as good by an incomprehensible 'other', although this cannot be 'proved',

when the fragmentary experience of love, beauty, and joy is felt and accepted as promise of love, beauty, and joy purely and simply, and not regarded with deep cynicism and scepticism as facile consolation in face of ultimate bleakness,

when the bitter, disappointing, and fleeting monotony of ordinary [203] life is borne with serene resignation up to its accepted end out of a strength whose ultimate source cannot be grasped and so cannot be brought under our control,

when we venture to pray into a silent darkness and know that in any case we are heard, although there seems to be no response from there about which it would be possible to reason and argue,

when we get away from ourselves unconditionally and experience this capitulation as the true victory,

when falling becomes standing firm,

when despair is accepted and mysteriously experienced as assurance without any easy consolation,

when man entrusts all his knowledge and all his questions to the silent and all-sheltering mystery which is loved more than all our individual perceptions that turn us into petty lords,

when we practise our death in the course of ordinary life and then attempt to live in the way that we wish to approach death, calmly and with resignation,

when . . . (as we said, it would be possible to go on for a long time),

*then* God is present with his liberating grace. Then we experience what we Christians describe as the Holy Spirit of God; then an experience occurs that is inescapable in life (even if it is suppressed) and is offered to our freedom with the question of whether we want to accept it or to barricade ourselves against it in a hell of freedom to which we condemn ourselves. The mysticism of everyday life is there, God is found in all things; here is that sober intoxication of the Spirit of which the Church Fathers and the early liturgy spoke, which we may not reject or despise simply because it is sober.

Let us look ourselves for such an experience of our life, let us look for our own experiences in which something of this kind happens precisely to us. If we find them, we have had what we mean by experience of the Spirit. The experience of eternity, the experience that the Spirit is more than a part of this temporal world, the experience that the meaning of man is not absorbed in the meaning and happiness of this world, the experience of risk and of overwhelming trust which really has no demonstrable justification based on success in this world.

From this standpoint we can understand what is the secret passion alive in those people who really belong to the Spirit and in the saints. [204] They want this experience, in a secret fear of being stuck in the world, they want to be continually assured that they are beginning to live in the Spirit. They have acquired the taste for the Spirit. While ordinary people regard experiences of this kind as unwelcome if not entirely avoidable interruptions of normal life with the Spirit merely providing the flavour and the trimmings of another and not wholly real life, the people of the Spirit and the saints have acquired the taste *for* the Spirit purely and simply. Spirit is in a sense drunk pure by them and not merely as a flavouring of earthly

existence. Hence their odd life, their poverty, their desire for humility, their longing for death, their readiness to suffer, their secret yearning for martyrdom. This does not mean that they are not also weak. It does not mean that they do not also need constantly to return to the ordinary routine. It does not mean that they are unaware of the fact that grace can bless also ordinary life and rational behaviour and can turn all this into an approach to God. Nor does it mean that they do not know that here and now we are not and are not expected to be angels. But they know that man as spirit in his actual existence and not merely as a matter of speculation is meant to live really on the frontier between God and the world, time and eternity, and they are constantly trying to reassure themselves that this in fact is what they are doing, that spirit in them is more than a way of giving a human character to life.

When we have this experience of spirit, then (at least if we are Christians living by faith) it becomes *ipso facto* the experience of the *supernatural*. Perhaps very anonymously and inexplicitly. Probably even in such a way that we may not and cannot at the same time turn to catch sight of the supernatural itself. We know however, when we lose ourselves in this experience of spirit, when the tangible, the demonstrable and available, is lost to sight, when all that is heard is a deathly silence, when everything acquires the flavour of death and corruption, or when everything vanishes as in an ineffable, strangely white, colourless and incomprehensible bliss, we know then that what is active within us is not only spirit but truly the Holy Spirit. This is the moment of his grace. Then the seemingly unfamiliar unfathomability of our existence as we feel it is the unfathomability of God, imparting himself to us, the advent of his infinity that is pathless and appears to us as nothingness, precisely because it is infinity. When we have freed ourselves and no longer belong to [205] ourselves, when we have denied ourselves and no longer dispose of ourselves, when everything (including ourselves) has moved away from us into an infinite distance, then we begin to live in the world of God himself, the God of grace and eternal life.

At first all this may seem bizarre and terrifying and we shall constantly be tempted to take refuge in our more familiar and intimate world, in fact we must and may often do this. Nevertheless, we should gradually get used to the taste of the pure wine of the Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit, at least to the extent that we do not thrust back the chalice when it is offered to us by his guidance and providence.

At this point the question might be raised as to whether we have not hitherto extolled a mysticism of ordinary life which is by no means properly Christian and not related to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, but which can exist even apart from any explicit religious or theological interpretation. It is admittedly a question that cannot be answered adequately here, but for which some few hints of an answer will be given.

First of all, if and insofar as the experience of the Spirit mentioned above is present in a mysticism of ordinary life, even outside a verbalized and institutionalized Christianity, and is discovered there by the Christian in the life he shares with his non-Christian brothers and sisters or in his study of the history of religion, this observation need not upset the Christian. It merely makes clear to him the fact that his God, the God of Jesus Christ, wills the salvation of *all* human beings, offers to *all* his grace as liberation for the incomprehensible mystery, that the grace of Christ is effective in a mysterious way beyond the limits of verbalized and institutionalized Christianity and gives a share in the paschal mystery of Jesus even when someone who is faithful to his conscience has not yet been confronted by a convincing presentation of the explicit message of Christianity and has not yet been marked by the Christian sacraments.

An observation of this kind is not only not forbidden to the Christian when and where he can make it; he must also expect it, since his faith requires him to believe in the universal salvific will of God, which reaches its limit only at the personal mortal sin of an individual and even offers the grace of Christ again and again to every human being in his whole life.

The grace of God (which the history [206] of the Crucified and Risen One made effective and irreversible in the history of humanity) is consequently the grace of Jesus Christ even when it is not yet explicitly and reflectively grasped and interpreted as such. This is not merely an opinion which a Christian may hold; it is part of his faith, which acknowledges the universal and supernatural salvific will of God for all human beings and forbids him to hold the opinion that this salvific will of God in Jesus Christ effects a person's salvation only when the latter has explicitly become a Christian.

If we also recall what we said about man's experience (radicalized by God's grace) of transcendence into the ineffable mystery of God, it becomes clear that this experience has something to do with the death of Jesus, whether this is explicitly considered or not.

The real experience of transcendence in the Holy Spirit accepted in freedom is primarily and ultimately not a matter of theoretical reason, but something that involves the *whole* person in the *concrete* history of his life and his freedom. In the last resort then it occurs at the point where it is impossible to stop at any individual reality of life as if it were final and absolute, where a final, autonomous self-defence is abandoned in free and liberated hope unsecured by anything else: in a word, at the point where dying is a passing into the incomprehensibility of God.

For the Christian who cannot and will not shut his historical existence out of his relationship with the absolute God, the moment of his mystical union with God and the climax of his experience of the Spirit is present, in the last resort, not in a sublime experience of mystical absorption as such, but in his death, even though the latter event must not necessarily take place at the very moment of his medical exitus and even though (conversely) truly existential dying as the final self-forsaking which is actual death may possibly (but necessarily) occur also in a mystical experience of absorption (assuming only that this experience is not regarded as secure and final before death in the ordinary sense of the term occurs).

It can be seen therefore that there is an identity between experience of the Spirit and participation in the victorious death of Jesus, in which alone the real success of our death is experienced and experienced within a believing community. In this life the chalice of the Holy Spirit is identical with the chalice of Christ. But it is drunk only by someone who has slowly learned up to a point to taste [207] fullness in the void, dawn in doom, discovery in renunciation. A person who learns this experiences the Spirit, the pure Spirit, and this is the experience of the Holy Spirit of grace. For this liberation of the Spirit comes about as a whole and permanently only in faith by the grace of Christ. But when he liberates this Spirit, he liberates him by supernatural grace into the life of God himself.

### III

Before closing these reflections, two observations may be put forward, both of which lead us back expressly to the point from which our reflections started and from which, it is to be hoped, they never became entirely remote. What we mean is the connection between experience of the Spirit and the ordinary routine of life.

As always understood here, experience of the Spirit in the first place has nothing to do with an elitist sense on the part of the chosen, claiming to be the only ones so dedicated and setting themselves apart from the great mass of Christians and ordinary people. If what has been said hitherto is really rightly understood, experience of the Spirit in the sense meant here as such occurs always and everywhere in the life of someone who has awakened to personal self-possession and to the act of freedom in which he disposes of himself as a whole. But in most cases in human life this does not come about expressly in meditation, in experiences of

absorption, etc., but on the material of normal life: that is, when responsibility, fidelity, love, etc., are realized absolutely, while even in the very last resort it remains a secondary question whether this activity is accompanied by an explicitly religious interpretation, although (conversely) it is not denied that a religious interpretation of this kind is right and also important as such. Meditation and similar spiritual 'exercises' are not thereby depreciated. They may be rehearsals, so to speak, for admitting and accepting in radical freedom fundamental experiences of the Spirit whenever they occur in life; these exercises can *also* (but not solely) be the point at which such experiences of the Spirit become clearer and more explicit and are grasped by man's ultimate basic freedom in such a way that they amount to a decision embracing the whole of existence and leading to salvation.

Christianity however is not elitist. The New Testament is aware [208] also of sublime experiences of the Spirit in the most varied forms, which can be summed up under the heading of 'mysticism'; but it also assures to all who love their neighbour unselfishly and thus experience God that final salvation in God's judgment which is not surpassed even by the highest ascent or the deepest absorption of the mystic. The New Testament then (even without expressly considering the matter) is certain that this unsurpassable salvation in the self-communicating Holy Spirit of God can take place even when apparently all that happens is the observance of the harsh duty of ordinary life and the resigned acceptance of death. The fact that such a fundamental experience of the Spirit (contrary to all elitist pride on the part of 'pneumatic' enthusiasts) can happen in the midst of ordinary life and how this can be regarded as possible: these things are just what our reflections as a whole were meant to show.

Admittedly, when there is a genuine concern for salvation, when God is loved, when a person learns increasingly clearly that he may never finally come to a stop on the way of freedom to himself (and thus to God), when he faces the terrifying and blessed excessive demands of the Sermon on the Mount, then neither will he ever refuse to follow at least those explicit ways of meditation and spirituality which are in fact opened up to him in the ultimately uncontrollable history of his life.

In the course of reading the letters of the apostle Paul, we come across his teaching on the charisms. These are not simply identical with a possession of the Spirit and an experience of the Spirit on the part of the person justified by faith; but they are intrinsically connected with this possession of the Spirit and the experience of it. They are regarded by Paul as diverse powers and commissions for building up the Christian community, continually assigned in different ways to individuals, never in their entirety to a single individual. They may (for instance, powers of healing and speaking in tongues) have an extraordinary, almost spectacular character; but they can also certainly be present in the form of more or less secular, everyday abilities, including, for example, ability to manage the funds of a community. Here for the time being the significance of these charisms for the building up of the *community* can be ignored. We can safely say that all powers and possibilities of Christian action, as authorized, sustained, and animated in the last resort by the Holy Spirit of God, are charisms, gifts of the Spirit.

[209] If at the same time we do not forget that the manifold and diversely assigned charisms are distinct from the possession of the Spirit which is one and the same in all those who are justified, it may perhaps be possible to elucidate up to a point the connection and distinction between possession of the Spirit and the charisms. Charisms, seen quite prosaically, are primarily individual commissions, individual abilities and individual offers, which the ordinary routine of a person and of his varied life puts before him. These possibilities are always more than an individual with his limited powers and time can actually realize. He must choose, distinguish. If he makes this selection rightly (that is, in the Spirit and in virtue of it) he can regard what is chosen really as 'charism', as 'God's will'.

How is a choice of this kind made correctly? The masters of the spiritual life reflected and experimented considerably on the rules of such a discernment of spirits, of finding the will of God in the concreteness of life, particularly since they were sure that finding what is here and now concretely right is not *merely* a matter of rational consideration and theoretical moral theology. We cannot repeat here this teaching of the masters of the spiritual life. But, in the light of all that has been said up to now, we can perhaps very briefly add something of fundamental importance which combines once more the ultimate experience of the Spirit and these ultimately ‘charismatic’ individual decisions continually demanded by life. When such a choice of an individual object by freedom in the course of ordinary life is not only (this is an obvious assumption) justified rationally and according to the principles of a Christian morality, but also (which is not obvious) does not obstruct and does not obscure an ultimate openness to the real experience of the Spirit in unlimited freedom; when a Christian is aware of the presence of an ultimate synthesis (not to be produced at will, not open to rational analysis, but simply there as a fact) between the basic experience of the Spirit and the will for a particular individual object of his everyday freedom: then he is acting, not only reasonably and morally, but also charismatically. Of course a great deal of practice and spiritual experience is needed to see more clearly when a will for an individual object offered by ordinary life does not obstruct this fundamental experience of the Spirit passing into the apparently empty freedom of God and beyond all individual realities, but precisely as material and starting point of this experience of the Spirit offers it to an [210] effective synthesis between experience of the Spirit and everyday duty. But the experience of such a synthesis, in which a person abandons everything to admit the boundless mystery of God *and* makes the courageous decision for a concrete reality of life and the ‘world’, is possible and alone constitutes the totality of Christian life. In that life man forsakes everything with the dying Jesus in order to reach the inescapable and formless freedom of God *and* accepts lovingly the individual reality of this world intended for him in ordinary life in order to take it up into this Spirit of God.

Let us look in the very consideration of our life for the experience of the Spirit and of grace. Not to say: ‘There it is; I have it’. We cannot find it in order to claim it triumphantly as our property and possession. We can seek it only by forgetting ourselves; we can find it only by seeking God and surrendering ourselves to him in self-forgetting love, without returning to ourselves. But we ought to ask from time to time whether anything like this deadening and reviving experience is alive in us, in order to judge how far the way still is, and how far away from the experience of the Holy Spirit we are still living in what we describe as our spiritual life.

*Grandis nobis restat via. Venite et gustate, quam suavis sit Dominus!* (‘A long road still lies ahead of us. Come and taste, the Lord is sweet!’)