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## FR. ALBERIONE: A MYSTIC AT THE PASSING OF TIME... OF THE MYSTERY OF SALVATION.

From "organization" to "greater perfection" (cf. AD 23-24)

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### Part 1: MYSTICISM

#### 1. Introduction

Whoever wants to speak of mysticism will face the *ambiguity* of the word and the *confusion* of defining it. The ambiguity of the concept is evident not only in the ordinary speech but also in the scholarly works. Noticing the differences in the definitions and opinions regarding mysticism, critics do not hesitate to affirm that mysticism "is the most ill-defined and fluid concept in all theology".<sup>1</sup>

It is not very difficult to find reasons for the current ambiguous and confused state of the study of mysticism. One of the reasons is the negative value labelled on mystics and mysticism, especially by scientists and by scholars of certain sections of psychology. They tend to associate mysticism with abnormal phenomena, pathological states and religious sentimentality. The second reason is the abstract nature of the subject; mysticism is often associated with irrationalism, speculation, otherworldliness, etc. which has nothing to do with practical daily living. A third reason for the ambiguity of mysticism is that this phenomenon is often reduced to an exceptional level beyond the reach of ordinary people. Fourthly, the charges that mystic experiences are merely for personal satisfaction, and the inability to communicate the special experiences with others in a sensible way make mysticism unpopular and uninteresting. And finally, mysticism concerns the nature of our access to God, reality, truth, etc., and hence it is subjective and prone to controversy and interpretations<sup>2</sup>. These confusions regarding the nature of mysticism have led to prejudice and the consequent lack of interest in investigation and scientific study. However, a new awakening has been taking place in the last two centuries with regard to the study of mysticism.

#### 2. Brief history of mysticism

*Mysticism in the Hellenistic religions:* Historically the word is associated with Hellenistic mystery religions and cults of the pre-Christian era. The word *mysticism* comes down to us from the Greeks and it comes from the root meaning *to close*. The mystics were the ones who were initiated into the knowledge of the sacred rites of the mystery religions, and were required to keep secret of the rituals into which they were initiated. The word *mystical*, therefore, originally referred to the

<sup>1</sup> A. WIKENHAUSER, *Pauline mysticism: Christ in the mystical teaching of St. Paul*, Freiburg 1960, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. HOWELLS, "Mysticism and the mystical. The current debate", in *Way Supplement*, Vol. 10, 2001, 15-27, 15.

cultic secrets revealed only to the initiated—the mystics. The mystical secret was usually only a secret about the purely material aspects of the rites and rituals of the Greek mystery religions.

*Mysticism in the Bible:* Though the word *mysticism* is not found in the Bible, yet the concept is very much present therein. The sacred writers of the Scriptures grasped the mystical dimension of history: Adam and Eve experienced the intimate presence of God; Abraham, Jacob, Moses were often ecstatically drawn to God as their greatest good. Both Moses and Jacob claimed to have encountered God face to face (Gn 32: 30; Ex 33:11,23); The Old Testaments prophets were essentially mystics in action. On the basis of their mystical experience of God, they could comprehend the situation well and address the situation effectively.

In the New Testament, Jesus realises the fullness of contemplation and transforms himself into the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15; 2:9). Jesus is the foundation of Christian mysticism. He claimed that no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mt 11:27). Jesus spoke of his intimate, total, personal knowledge of his Father (cf. Jn 7:29; 8:55). He knew that he came from the Father (cf. Jn 5:23). Jesus heard his Father (Jn 8:26), he knew his will (cf. Jn 5:30), and had seen him (cf. Jn 5:19). So intimate was his union with the Father that he revealed everything to the Son (cf. Jn 5:20).

*Christian mysticism:* The term *mysticism* came into Christian vocabulary more predominantly and systematically through the famous late fifth/sixth-century Syrian monk, Pseudo-Dionysius<sup>3</sup>, who wrote the mystical classic *Mystica Theologia*. For him, mysticism involved the secrecy of the mind or that trans-conceptual state of consciousness which experiences God as a ray of divine Darkness.<sup>4</sup>

In the Church, the word *mysticism* was not used so frequently until the late Middle ages. The 12th and the 13th centuries witnessed some great mystics: Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Bonaventure (1221-1274), etc. The Christian contemplation reached to a higher level in the two great mystics: Teresa of Avila (+1582) and John of the Cross (+1591). Their works constitute a rich teaching of high mystical experiences. The way of intimacy with God is indicated and exposed with great clarity and surety in their works.

### 3. Definitions

*Authentic union with God:* Evelyn Underhill, one of the best writers of recent years on mysticism, says, “Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute.”<sup>5</sup> There are also many other writers who define mysticism in a similar fashion.

*Experience of God:* Mysticism is also defined as a way of life and as an experience of God. It is a way of life, “in which the purifying, illuminating and transforming power of God is experienced, effecting a transmutation of consciousness.”<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Essential Elements of Christian Mysticism

#### 4.1: God as the Source of Everything

One of the essential elements of Christian mysticism is the conviction that in one way or another, everything is interconnected and that all things have a common origin — God<sup>7</sup>. A mystic is

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of Dionysius is in the fact that he was the first, and for a while, the only Christian author who attempted to describe with penetration and accuracy the development of the mystical conscience. He carried out this work so well that the mystics of the later period, reading the writings of Dionysius, could find at least partial explanations to their marvellous experiences. Cf. E. ANCILLI, “La mistica. Alla ricerca di una definizione” in E. ANCILLI, M. PAPAROZZI, ed., *La mistica. Fenomenologia e riflessione teologica*, Città Nuova 1984, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H.D. EGAN, *What are they saying about mysticism?* New York 1982, 2.

<sup>5</sup> E. UNDERHILL, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, London 1923, 86.

<sup>6</sup> C. KOURIE, “Mysticism: A way of Unknowing...”, 218.

<sup>7</sup> BORCHERT, *Mysticism: Its History and Challenge*, Maine, 1994, 3.

also convinced that God is the source of human happiness and all that he/she wants and needs is God alone.

#### **4.2: Experience of the Presence of God**

The mystical experience is a human experience in which the individual perceives the direct intervention of God in his/her spiritual life. This experience is not an ordinary or commonplace experience, rather “a heightened awareness of God’s immediate and transforming presence.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **4.3: Union with God**

The element that is emphasized most in mysticism is one’s union with God. Mystical experience is the loving and mysterious union of a person with God. In fact, the experience of God who is Holy demands that the one who experiences be like what is experienced, i.e., having experienced God who is Holy, the person wants to become Holy.

#### **4.4: Association with Grace**

The mystical life means the progressive extension of the Spirit in the life of an individual. The experience of God and the union of a person with God are provoked in the individual by a special motion of the Holy Spirit.

#### **4.5: Transformation of Self and of the World**

Mysticism consists of both an experience of God and the consequent transformation of the mystic. This transformation comes about through one’s experience of God and through one’s union with God.

#### **4.6: Love as the Genuine Mark of Mysticism**

The transformation of self and the world can be summarized in the word *love*. The mystical experience is an expression of God’s love. The experience of the love of God transforms the mystic, and the essential sign of genuine transformation is love for God and for others. Hence, one can speak of mysticism only in the context of love.

#### **4.7: Certain Mystical Signs—Ecstasies and Visions**

Genuine mystical experiences manifest certain psychosomatic effects. It can result in partial or total ecstasy. One can receive extraordinary phenomena in his / her body like stigmata. Others may hear voices. Still others can receive divine manifestations and visions. However, these signs are not essential part of mystical experience.

#### **4.8: Effects or Fruits of Mysticism**

One of the fruits or effects of mysticism is greater knowledge. The mystic has a greater and profound knowledge about the divine mysteries than the simple faithful. Another dimension of knowledge is intuition. Mysticism claims that the soul can see and perceive, perhaps through intuition, the revelation and knowledge of God; it can perceive things hidden from reason. Mystical experience is not alien to experience of joy and sorrow. Mysticism which is the union of the individual with God brings about a temporal disappearance of the individuality, with all its modes of acting, thinking and feeling.

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<sup>8</sup> MCGINN, “Mysticism” in SHELDRAKE, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM Press 2005,19.

## Part 2: MYSTICISM IN THE THOUGHT OF FR. ALBERIONE

### 1. Definition and Meaning

Mysticism, according to Fr. Alberione, is that part of Sacred Theology which deals with one's union with God (cf. LSS n. 87). Mysticism is the spiritual science which, beginning with infused contemplation, guides the person towards spiritual matrimony (cf. UPS II, n. 54). Mystic experience is the most intimate union with God; the one who brings the person to this stage of union is the Holy Spirit (cf. APD 1963, n. 186).

Often, Fr. Alberione speaks of mysticism in the context of the grades of prayer. He follows the traditional understanding of the grades of prayer: (1) Vocal prayer; (2) Mental prayer or prayer of meditation; (3) Affective prayer; (4) Prayer of simplicity (cf. AAP 1961, n. 631); (5) Infused contemplation; (6) Prayer of solitude (cf. AAP 1965, n. 479); (7) Simple union; (8) Ecstatic union; (9) Transforming union or spiritual matrimony (cf. UPS II, n. 109; APD 1965, n. 628). The first four grades of prayer belong to asceticism; human effort is more stressed in asceticism (cf. APD 1965, n. 628). The other five grades, which come under mysticism, are mainly the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. APD 1965, n. 628, 462; AAP 1965, n. 463).

Mysticism which is a union with God, at times, brings about extraordinary phenomena such as visions, apparitions, revelations, miracles, etc., in the life of a mystic, but the extraordinary phenomena are not essential part of mysticism (cf. UPS II, n. 109; AAP 1961, n. 628; APD 1960, n. 240).

It is a sublime and difficult science which only few understand and practise (cf. LSS n. 87). One cannot understand it only with human reason (cf. LSS n. 90). For its divine origin and substance, Fr. Alberione considers mysticism superior to other human sciences (cf. LSS n. 90).

The foundation and principles of mysticism are sure and clear because it has its base in the Scripture and in the tradition (cf. LSS n. 87-89). Mysticism is not something abstract or uncertain, but a true and certain science, and its certainty comes from the Holy Bible written under divine inspiration (cf. LSS n. 89).

The scope of mysticism is to instruct and guide the person to greater perfection till the last grade of mystical experience which is spiritual matrimony of the soul with Jesus the lover (cf. LSS n. 87-89).

### 2. Scripture and Mysticism

According to Fr. Alberione, certain books of the Bible, especially the books of the Prophets and the Song of Songs which describe the spiritual union and the intimate dialogue of the soul with the Lord are mystical in their nature. The Song of Songs is called the *Song of Mystics* (cf. LSS n. 89).

St Paul, the great doctor of mystical theology has not only left the writings on Mystical Theology, but has given us examples from his life (cf. LSS 89; FSP 1929-1933\*\*, p. 46). All the grades of mysticism in their highest form are found in the doctrine of St Paul (cf. FSP 1934-39, p. 624). Fr. Alberione would say that the other books on mysticism are in line with the doctrine of St Paul (cf. APD 1966, n. 330).

### 3. Mystics in the Mind of the Founder

Mary, according to Fr. Alberione, is the greatest mystic; she had intimate communications with God and had more mystic gifts than all the saints put together (cf. BM. n. 150).

The prayer of Paul was the most elevated prayer which a person can attain (cf. FSP 1934-39, p. 624). The mystical life of Paul is expressed more eloquently in his words: "It is no longer I who

live, but Christ who lives in me” [Gal 2:20] and in “for me to live is Christ” [Phil 1:21] (cf. FSP 1934-39, p. 625).

Fr. Alberione indicates that St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross have reached the highest form of mysticism and piety (cf. BP 1948, 129). In St John of the Cross are united *mortification* and *knowledge of the divine sciences* (cf. FSP 1950-1953, 527).

Fr. Alberione puts among the mystics Bl. Timothy Giaccardo, Ven. Canon Chiesa, and Ven. Tecla Merlo.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Books Recommended**

The Gospels are the first books of asceticism and mysticism (cf. APD 1963, n. 501). After the Gospels, the letters of St Paul are the greatest books on these themes (cf. APD 1965, n. 628). Fr. Alberione would say that other books which speak about mysticism took their material from St Paul (cf. APD 1966, n. 330). The *Constitutions*, of course always second to the Scriptures, is another book of asceticism and mysticism (cf. APD 1963, n. 501). Added to this list, the two important books recommended by Fr. Alberione are: *A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* of Adolf Tanquerey and *Theology of Christian Perfection* of Royo Marin Antonio (cf. APD 1960, n. 273).

### **Part 3: FR. ALBERIONE AS A MYSTIC**

We have already seen that mystical experiences are beyond human understanding for its divine origin and operation. On account of this nature of mysticism, we cannot categorically affirm and scientifically prove Fr. Alberione as a mystic. But considering the characteristics of Christian mysticism and associating them with the life and activities of Fr. Alberione, we can make an attempt to show the mystical elements in his life and activities.

#### **1. God as the Source of Everything**

One of the essential elements of Christian mysticism, as we have indicated earlier, is the belief in the common source of everything and in the connectedness of everything in the world. The common source which connects everything is God. The belief in God as the source of everything and a life of absolute dependence on God make Fr. Alberione a mystic of our times.

*God as source of everything:* One of the firm beliefs that characterized the life of Fr. Alberione is the conviction that God is the source of everything. Fr. Alberione believed and taught that God is the only necessary Being (cf. DF n. 17), that He is the Creator of everything (cf. FSP 1929-1933\* p. 485), that He is the Supreme Father (UPS II, n. 13) and that the plan of God is “glory of God and peace of human beings” (UPS II, n. 152).

*Dependence on God:* One of the aspects which greatly qualified the life and the activities of Fr. Alberione is his absolute dependence on God. Hence he would say: “With God everything, without God nothing” (AAP 1961, n. 345).

#### **2. Experience of the presence of God**

Mysticism is defined as an experience of God which brings about transformation of one's consciousness. In the experience of God, the individual perceives the direct intervention of God in his/her life. If God-experience and the consequent transformation of oneself is one of the criteria of mysticism, Fr. Alberione can be called a mystic.

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<sup>9</sup> G. ALBERIONE, *Esercizi spirituali. Prediche tenute alle Maestre* [s.l.], 1966, p. 34-35.

Fr. Alberione's life was marked by intense experience of God. The most important experience of God in the life of Alberione took place in the night that divided the 19th century from the 20th. That famous night was a Damascus experience for Fr. Alberione. He has idealised those four hours of night adoration and the consequent intervention of God in his life. There are many other instances when Fr. Alberione experienced the powerful intervention of God in his life: When he needed a serene maturation of an idea, the Lord gifted him brief periods of rest on bed (cf. AD 47); when he suffered from Tuberculosis and feared the danger of abandoning his activities halfway, he heard the voice of the Lord: "The Lord thinks and makes provision better than you; go ahead with faith" (AD n. 112); many times, especially at the times of need and difficulties, Fr. Alberione heard the voice: "I am with you till the end of the world" (AD nn. 16, 156); while praying, he heard the voice of the Lord, "You can err, but I do not. Vocations come not from you but only from me: this is the external sign that I am with the Pauline Family" (AD n. 113).

### **3. Union with God**

Mysticism is the science of union with God. A true mystic seeks to be united with God. The desire for God prompts the mystic to reorganize or even destroy other lesser desires. If union with God is one of the criteria to be called mystic, Fr. Alberione is a mystic.

Fr. Alberione was convinced that human beings are created for God and only in God they can find happiness. Aware of this truth, Fr. Alberione says that our scope cannot be pleasure, appreciation, virtues, power, knowledge. They are finite. Our hearts search for what is infinite (BM n. 8). He believed and affirmed that human being is created for eternity (cf. UPS I, n. 15).

We cannot easily measure the degree of union of a person with the Lord. The only way to measure it is from the fruits as Jesus said: "You will recognise them by their fruits" (Mt 7,16). For the fruits of the Spirit that Fr. Alberione demonstrated in his life and for the fruits of good works that he carried out, cannot but be attributed to the intense union that he had with the Lord in prayer.

### **4. Transformation of Self and the World**

Mysticism consists of both God-experience and the consequent transformation of the mystic. If transformation of self and the attempts to transform the world can be one of the marks of a true mystic, Fr. Alberione is truly a mystic.

*Transformation of self:* As we have already pointed out, the Damascus experience of Alberione took place in the famous night that divided the two centuries. The most visible transformation of Alberione was that from that moment onwards he tried to understand society better; his readings were more focused, disciplined and directed towards a precise purpose (to serve the Church); he dedicated all of his free time for reading and study (AD n. 13-22). The immediate interior transformation was the desire or rather the obligation to do something for the people of the new century with whom he would live (cf. AD n. 15).

*Transformation of the world:* God-experience cannot be devoid of an ethical dimension. The mystical experiences and a life of service always go together. So it happened in the life of Fr. Alberione who became a powerful instrument in transforming the world.

The most visible sign in favour of evangelizing the whole world is the foundation of the Pauline Family with its diversified activities. One cannot but admire Fr. Alberione for the number of initiatives he took for the work of evangelization: Distribution of Bibles; distribution of good literature through books, magazines, leaflets; the apostolate of radio, television and cinema; the liturgical and priestly apostolate; the pastoral work; the associations and unions he began in favour of the Church.

## 5. Love as the Genuine Mark of Mysticism

*Love is action:* Mystical experience is an expression of God's love. The experience of God's love makes the mystic an agent of God's love. Hence, as we have already mentioned, love is the sign of genuine mysticism. Love as the only motive of action qualifies Fr. Alberione to be a mystic.

## 6. Presence of the Spirit

The mystical life means the progressive extension of the Spirit in the life of an individual by the presence of the gifts of the Spirit. If progressive extension of the Spirit in the life of a person is the hallmark of a mystic, then Fr. Alberione can be termed a mystic.

The fruits of the Spirit, according to Paul, are: charity, joy, peace, patience, understanding of others, kindness and fidelity, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). Fr. Alberione's life was characterised by these fruits of the Spirit, and those who had the privilege to live with him would testify to it. The initiatives and the activities of Fr. Alberione reveal the *fruit of charity* in the life of Fr. Alberione. He rejoiced over his priestly vocation, over Pauline charism, over the Pauline method of Jesus Master, Way - Truth - Life. Fr. Alberione was very *understanding* of the difficulties and situations of others. As a Founder, he had many things to do. But he never assumed the attitude of not having time or of being very busy. Fr. Alberione produced the fruit of *fidelity*. He was obedient to the Roman Pontiff and was faithful to the doctrines of the Church. Fr. Alberione was *patient*, and as a person of patience he could change programmes without agitation. He could remain serene in every situation.

## 7. Certain Mystical Signs in the Life of Fr. Alberione

*Knowledge:* The mystical experience of God leads to special knowledge of Him. God mystically illumined Fr. Alberione and gave him a special knowledge of his mystery and of the mission that he had to carry out.

*Fasting, prayer, strength:* The most important thing about the long fasting of Alberione which would last even up to seven days, did not leave him weak and tired. After the fasting, when he started his normal rhythm of life, all found him as they used to see him<sup>10</sup>.

*Visions:* As a child, Alberione had to show the *light* for his father and brothers who went to work before the dawn of the day. As a young man and as Founder he saw the *light* of the Lord at different occasions. In the famous night, Alberione witnessed a special *light* from the Holy Host (AD n. 15). It is in clear *light* that he took the definitive decision that the printers, technicians and propagandists all be consecrated persons (AD n. 24). And then in a special *light*, Fr. Alberione heard the voice of the Lord: "Do not fear, I am with you. From here I want to enlighten. Be sorry for sins" (AD n. 152).

*Humble, contrite heart:* Like most mystics, Fr. Alberione too felt the need for severe penance which goes from "interior dispositions" to "external mortifications". Fr. Alberione had the sense of sin. He did not want to offend God by not doing the will of God.

*Creativity:* Mystics become creative in their thoughts and actions. So was Fr. Alberione. Alberione noticed that the Bible was not read. The idea prevalent was that it was dangerous to give the Gospel to the people. Noticing that the Bible was not read habitually in the families, he organized Day of the Gospel in the parishes. Fr. Alberione's initial idea was to organize people for the good press. But creativity and inspiration led him to decide that this group should be a group of religious who would ensure unity, continuity, purity of doctrine and special efficacy. The innumerable activities of Fr. Alberione are signs of his creative mind.

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<sup>10</sup> L. ROLFO, *Don Alberione. Appunti...*, 184. (English)

## **Conclusion**

The mystic personality, in the thought of Fr. Alberione, is an integral personality. The mystical way of life makes demands on the whole person, and not merely certain human emotions and faculties. Mysticism aims at the growth and development of the wholeness of a person. The itinerary of this conformation of a person to Christ is narrated in the text, *Donec formetur Christus in vobis* (DF). It is a gradual process which leads a person to become docile to live and remain in Jesus; they become truly Christified. The Christified man and woman become true apostles. The Christified persons will continue to carry out their apostolate faithfully; they will be persons of the Church; they will be persons of faith, hope and charity.

Fr. Alberione is a mystic of everyday life. His mystic tendencies reveal themselves in the midst of apostolic activities. For him apostolic initiatives and dedicated work are occasions of true mysticism.

According to Fr. Alberione, the call to mysticism is universal. All the religious are called to mysticism and have the grace to arrive at spiritual matrimony which is expressed in "Christ lives in me" [Gal 2,20] (cf. UPS II, 54). Everyone has the vocation and grace to reach up to the last stage of spiritual matrimony (cf. UPS II, n. 109). One is to progress in knowing and living always better the two parts of Theology: asceticism and mysticism (cf. UPS II, n. 54). One has to move from asceticism to mysticism (cf. AAP 1965, n. 241). Hence, let every opportunity that our daily life offers us be an occasion to become *mystics* to which God calls each human being.

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