

THE NIGHT OF THE APOSTLE

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Introduction

It is *light* that floods all living persons with life, leading them to become what they truly are – beings who understand themselves and others as aware, free, and capable of interpersonal relationships. *Light* is another name for knowledge, familiarity, trustworthiness, harmony, unity, confidence, and simplicity, while *darkness* is the equivalent of mystery, fear, unreliability, separation, isolation, and ignorance.

The Greek *Hades*, the Roman *Netherworld*, the Nordic *Valhalla*, the Hebrew *Sheol* and the Christian *Hell* are all places of thick, impenetrable darkness, veiled in perpetual, hostile gloom. Here, glacial loneliness separates one person from another, freezing them into immobility forever, in utter poverty, with no kind look ever finding another. Here we are unchangingly alone, eternally incapable of relationship, communion or solidarity.

The Bible, too, speaks of these things: “*Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom*”, says Psalm 107, 10. Especially deep and painful is the experience of Job, the first pre-Christian mystic of the dark night of the believer: “... *I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and deep shadow, to the land of deepest night, of deep shadow and disorder, where even the light is like darkness*” (Job 10, 21-22). Some of the greatest prayers of the people of Israel attest to these same things: “*You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend*” (Ps 87, 19).

Light and darkness as metaphors

“*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night"* (Gen 1, 3-5). In the *Hexameron*¹, night is completely unknown and foreign: deep darkness and night were neither created nor intended by God, because they symbolise evil, the apparent frustration of God’s inventive and creative work. They are in no way his creatures, nor do they partake of the fullness of his impassioned Being for humankind.

“*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters*” (Gen 1, 1-2). Here “*darkness*” and “*the deep*” are perceived as two negative realities, attracting and repelling one other at one and the same time. As Genesis sees things, darkness seems almost to pre-exist the *Pantocrator*’s creative and ordering activity. Darkness stands for the *primordial chaos* that ruled all creation, a subversive reality opposed to the harmonious order disposing all things in the place assigned them by the Creator. Night and darkness symbolize what does not exist, nothingness “separated” from everything, incapable of communicating the natural warmth of that Life² which pulsates in fullness only in its wellspring, who is God.

¹ The *Hexameron* is a commentary on the six days of creation (Gn 1, 1-26) in the form of a “*homily*” collected in six volumes, which draws on the *Hexameron* of St Basil the Great (c. 329-379).

² “*I am the way and the truth and the life*” (Jn 14, 6).

Darkness conveys the idea of a plot hatched in secret against all that is innocent and defenceless, a symbol more of *omertá* than of relationship. Morning and evening mark out the events of creation: “*And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day*” (Gen 1, 5); they point to God’s harmonious, wonderful creative activity. When night ends and slips lazily away into the treacherous torpor of sleep, morning rises, confident and full of life, setting off on another day of feverish activity. In the time of creation, night is no match for the morning light.

The cynical and mocking Johannine night (cf. Jn 1, 4-9) only made its appearance at the fall, but from then on its pursuit of humankind has been relentless. Yahweh is the Lord of the morning, the unopposed dominion of pure light, clear and transparent: “*The true light that gives light to every man*” (Jn 1, 9), while Satan is the prince of darkness and of all that is purposely hidden or planned in secret. By his very nature, Satan is incapable of communion. “*What fellowship can light have with darkness?*” asks Paul (2 Cor 6, 14).

Yet night is by no means the merely passive absence of light. Psychiatry is well aware that every form of “*passivity*”, even if only apparent, conceals a silent but active resistance to communication. Here darkness is the despairing flight into the endless labyrinth of self, seeking but not succeeding to avoid the light, hiding in guilty shadows. There is something demonic here, an awareness of the repeated refusal to be open and reveal the jealously kept secret.

At the *Last Supper*, the upper room (cf. Mk 14, 15; Lk 22, 12) where Jesus instituted the Eucharist was bathed in light. It was precisely in this place that Satan entered into Judas (cf. Lk 22, 3), and from then on Judas could no longer remain immersed in the splendor of light: “*As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night*” (Jn 13, 30). The thick darkness of the deepest night of evil greedily swallowed Judas, never to give him back, and so was an accomplice in the terrible and untellable secret of the betrayal of the Son of Man (cf. Lk 22, 6.48).

Peter’s denial, too, takes place in the heart of the night (cf. Jn 18, 17.25-27), as if the darkness provided protection for such a sinister and perverse reality: “*But this is your hour—when darkness reigns*” (Lk 22, 35). And Jesus puts us on our guard against an historically incontrovertible fact, of which each of us is daily the amazed and powerless witness³: “*The people of this world are more shrewd... than are the people of the light*” (Lk 16, 8). “*The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood*” (Jn 1, 5). “*I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness*” (Jn 12, 46). If on the one hand all this is a reason for affliction for us, because of our awareness of somehow being implicated, on the other Paul gives us back our lost hope, reassuring us that we too have been enlightened through Christ, so as to be totally transformed from darkness into light: “*You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness*” (1 Ts 5, 5), and this because God “*lives in unapproachable light*” (1 Tim 6, 16).

The meaning of the night of the spirit

To the superficial observer, talk of the mystical life might conjure up images of some kind of enviable “paradise island”, where believers, showered by God with his graces, have nothing else to do than receive them with a humble and grateful spirit, and so let themselves be led towards transformative union with God. Such a way of imaging the “mystical life”, however, would be misleading, and would not correspond to the truth. To be convinced of this, one has only to listen to the authoritative teaching of the great mystics of the Church.

³ “*In my dismay I said, "All men are liars"* (Ps 115, 11); “*Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed*” (Ps 119, 136 XVII Pe).

Certainly, the joy God pours on the mystics here and now is only a pale shadow of those other joys which will be granted in the final, consoling reality; but before attaining these the mystics have to face and overcome the most painful and difficult transformations⁴. It is sheer presumption to aspire to the mystical life without first being prepared to make a severe and rigorous ascetical journey. Yet at the same time as life becomes more austere, and the mortifications of our disordered appetites become more intense, God's graces will become ever greater. His favours are unmistakable: they pierce the heart like the severest of warnings, never to be forgotten. God refuses to pour out his purest and highest joys on those who have grown attached to more superficial pleasures; but if believers are faithful, He will configure them intimately to Himself.

In the Gospel, Jesus put his disciples forever on their guard against facile but deceptive illusions: "*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*" (Jn 3,3; see also 4-8). And a first and indispensable condition for being born again is to die to oneself: "*Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life*" (Jn 12, 24-25).

To be ready to die to oneself so as to be born again in God is essential for every Christian: there are no discounts, no shortcuts. Nor are the mystics exempt, precisely because the mystical life is a very special form of union with God, and can only be attained through a deep and continuous interior purification⁵. Indeed the mystics, even more than other believers, are subjected to the hard demands of the Gospel: "In order to attain union with God, the soul must necessarily pass through this *dark night*, that is, through the mortification of its appetites and the renunciation of all human pleasures, and for the following reason: all affections nourished for creatures are like deep darkness in the sight of God. For as long as the soul is shrouded in this darkness, it cannot be enlightened or possessed by the pure and simple light of God. It must, therefore, free itself from this attachment to creatures, because light cannot live with darkness"⁶.

The believer will make every effort to seek spiritual poverty and poverty of the senses, which consists in the sincere desire to go to God freed of every support and comfort, whether exterior or interior⁷. The more a person is freed of self, the more they grow in fascination for the ineffable mystery of God, which leads to a pure, spiritual, joyful and complete knowledge of that love which truly satisfies the soul⁸. Relentlessly pursued by love, the heart's bounds are widened; the Lord leans over his beloved disciples, and reveals himself to them in an intimacy hitherto unknown: "*My night does not know darkness, everything is resplendent with light*"⁹. This intimate communion with the Lord gives the disciples the strength and tenacity of spirit to bear the hardest trials and to face them with the greatest courage. To experience in oneself the irresistible fascination of God's presence is the sign that the mystical life has already begun. It should be remembered, however, that without our cooperation even the grace of God will lead us nowhere. In fact, to God's unparalleled graces we must respond with unrivalled generosity.

⁴ Cf. ST TERESA OF JESUS, Interior Castle, V, 2, 4-6, in *Opere Complete*, Paoline, Milano 1998, 932-933.

⁵ The Christian is divided between love for self and love for God (cf. 1 Cor 7, 32-34). "The day I freed myself from self, I began to enjoy prayer" (ST ALFONSO RODRIGUEZ, *Traité de l'union et de la transformation de l'âme en Jésus Christ*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 189, p. 57).

⁶ ST JOHN OF THE CROSS, 1 Salita del Monte Carmelo, 4, 1, in *Opere Complete*, S. Paolo, Milano, 2001, p. 161.

⁷ ID., 3 Salita del Monte Carmelo, 13, 1, in *Opere Complete*, o.c., p. 329.

⁸ "... You made us for yourself, and our hearts cannot rest until they rest in you" (ST AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, I, 1).

⁹ August 10, Vespers of St Lawrence, Antiphon at the Magnificat.

Taught by the mystics, we will seek to understand what *the mystical life* consists in, and to identify the demands made of those seeking to walk the road strewn with obstacles which leads to transformative union with God.

For St John of the Cross, the mystical life has two facets, which can be distinguished thus:

1. *an ethical and moral aspect*, calling believers to become ever more worthy of God (cf. Lev 11, 44). Here they are led to an acute experience of their own sinfulness, realizing that this greatly displeases God: this constitutes for them a slow inner agony¹⁰. They love God so much that they would willingly give their lives for just one glance of his, even though they know they would not be able to bear it (cf. Ex 33, 20).

2. *an ascetical and spiritual aspect*, underlining that love of God is irreconcilable with love of self¹¹. This underscores the link between purification and mystical contemplation, between the purgative and unitive ways. We are not only to consider what God asks of us sinners, but also this fundamental requisite for initiation into the kind of life he reserves for his friends (cf. Jn 15, 15). God will not be able truly to draw them to himself without rendering them every more worthy of him, really “*capax Dei*”¹².

It is a serious error to seek somehow to evade this logic, or to dream of some easier path replacing this slow, costly conversion. In fact, in the end, only the “*pure of heart*” (Mt 5, 8) will contemplate the shining, friendly face of God: “*My heart burns within me; I long to see my Lord*”¹³ (cf. Ps 11, 7; 17, 15). The discipline required by this teaching is very demanding, but the intimate joy it offers is an anticipation of that untellable joy of communion with God which will be ours on the day of his final coming. When the Lord appears “*there will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever*” (Rev 22, 5). He will offer us the fullness of his gifts, and we will look upon him as he truly is: “*In your light we see light*” (Ps 36, 9).

In the course of this passive purification, believers will from time to time experience moments of the acute anguish of death, offering them a foretaste of the particularly painful and purifying character of the spiritual night. For believers not called to such an elevated degree of intimacy with God, the experience of the night of purification will be short but frequent¹⁴; instead, for those God calls to very advanced degrees of union with him, and who have the grace of responding promptly and generously, the night of the spirit will be long and terrifying, beyond all telling: “*My soul yearns for you in the night*” (Is 26, 9). At the beginnings of the mystical life, God asks believers for the unconditional gift of self. Heroic docility is called for: the Lord is not to be refused even the smallest sacrifice. In all this we find ourselves in the presence of that mystery of suffering and joy which characterises the life of believers in Christ.

¹⁰ “When we sin we must experience displeasure in ourselves, because our sins displease God in the greatest degree. And because we realize that we are not without sin, at least in this we seek to be like God: to find displeasure in what displeases God. In a certain way you are united to the will of God, because all that your Creator detests also displeases you” (ST AUGUSTINE, *Discorsi*, 19, 3; in CCL 41, 254).

¹¹ ST JOHN OF THE CROSS, 1 Salita del Monte Carmelo, in *Opere complete*, o.c., 12, 2-3.5, pp. 185-186.

¹² ST AUGUSTINE, *De Trinitate*, XIV, 8.

¹³ July 22, St Mary Magdalen, *Morning Prayer*, II antiphon. Another text declares: “May the meek and joyful face of Christ appear to you, and may you look upon him for all eternity” (Commendation of the dying, in *Sacramento dell’unzione e cura pastorale degli infermi*, CEI, LEV 1979, chap. VII, p. 112).

¹⁴ ST JOHN OF THE CROSS, 2 Notte oscura, II, 1, 1, in *Opere complete*, o.c., pp. 445-446.

The purpose of the night of the spirit

The journey of passive purification is made up of the night of the senses and the night of the spirit. The night of the senses is only the first stage in the long journey of faith that believers are called to travel if they are to attain transformative union with God. The purification of their natural appetites is already a great grace, but for as long as believers have not been purified by this divine fire which consumes but is not consumed (cf. Ex 3, 2), they are unworthy and incapable of approaching God.

This painful phase of passive purification has as its aim the believer's slow but gradual transformation. Paradoxically, the instrument God uses to purify believers is that very contemplation to which they passionately aspire with all their hearts. The goal they desire becomes the painful instrument of their deepest sufferings: "I do not desire to speak of this *spiration, filled for the soul with good and glory and delicate love of God*, for I am aware of being incapable of doing so; and were I to try, it might seem less than it is. It is a spiration that God produces in the soul, in which, by that *awakening* of lofty knowledge of the Godhead, he breathes the Holy Spirit in it in the same proportion as its knowledge and understanding of him, absorbing it most profoundly in the Holy Spirit, *rousing its love* with a divine exquisite quality and delicacy according to what it beholds in him. Since the *breathing is filled with good and glory*, the Holy Spirit, through this breathing, filled the soul with good and glory in which *he enkindled it in love of himself*, indescribably and incomprehensibly, in the depths of God"¹⁵.

The ceaseless longing, the inner passionate desire, to seek union with God are so demanding for the fragility of believers, that at the beginning all this is cause for great suffering. "God divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings. For this privation is one of the conditions required that the spiritual form, which is the union of love, may be introduced into the spirit and united with it. The Lord works all of this in the soul by means of a pure and dark contemplation"¹⁶.

The pain believers experience is so intense that they are left with the impression that God has somehow ranged himself against them, and that they themselves, in their turn, have rebelled against God. They even feel that God has abandoned them: "*Your footprints were not seen*" (Psalm 76, 20), a thought so desolating and painful as to make them cry out with barely contained anger: "*Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?*" (Job 7, 20). "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die", wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹⁷ as a world war raged around him. This suffering has the purpose of strengthening believers interiorly, leading them to experience their innate fragility to such an extent that they are unable to resist, and are broken by the intensity of the trial. The senses and faculties of the soul are nullified, overwhelmed, so as to provoke such intense anguish that, if believers had a choice, they would without doubt prefer death to this slow, unceasing pain: "*I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine*" (Job 7, 15). Nobody would be able to bear such a trial, if they were not borne up by a singular grace, and this grace comes from union with God.

The good deeds done by believers up to this time now suddenly appear in all their crude reality, and the good they thought they had done all of a sudden seems to evaporate into nothingness. The perception of

¹⁵ ID., Fiamma d'amor viva B, strophe 4, 17, in *Opere complete*, o.c., p.851.

¹⁶ ID., 2 Notte oscura, III, 3, in *Opere complete*, o.c., p. 449.

¹⁷ German evangelical pastor and theologian, one of the leaders of the resistance against Nazism. Born in Breslau (today Wrocław, in Poland) on February 4, 1906; executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp, Bavaria, April 9, 1945.

their achievements, which until now had been supported by all that resided happily in their memory, imagination, sensory perception, capacity for relationships, etc... suddenly disappears; a bottomless void opens up, a tremendous existential emptiness, an abyss of personal poverty and misery. Their mind only perceives a sense of interior uncertainty and lostness, precisely because God is purifying them with aridity. The human faculties, stripped of their capacity to feel and to act, grope in the most absolute darkness. It is an unspeakable torment, full of doubts, anxieties and fears. Thus it is that God purifies believers, pruning, perfecting, nullifying, and burning all those values which made up the reality of their senses and affections.

This purification has a double purpose:

1. a liberation, to free the understanding from all purely human considerations so as to make it at home with the values, methods, judgments and criteria of God;
2. a purification, healing the wounds inflicted by pride and ambition, and rendering the heart pure and available to work with sincere purpose.

The journey is long and difficult, but we are called to respond to God's work of purification within us with humble and constant generosity, without rebellion and refusing God nothing: we have to accept his rough action in us. Only very few persevere till the end¹⁸. But where human beings fail, God steps in to help them. All God asks of believers is to surrender themselves blindly to him, and place their trust in him, repeating with Job: "*Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him*" (Job 13, 15), or as the people of Israel's ever up-to-date prayer-book encourages us: "*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord*" (Psalm 27, 14).

This slow and painful purification is God's work, so it should not be understood as culpable negligence or tepidity on the believers' part, somehow due to a decrease in fervour or something similar. At the beginning of this transformation, the believers themselves do not understand it, and do not feel its benefits in any way. Used as they are to felt consolations, they start seeking them again, and no longer finding them, they are left with a sense of lostness, emptiness and distaste; yet if they persevere with courage, they will soon begin to savour joys never before experienced¹⁹.

The only effective support in this situation of desolation is the reassuring and comforting company of faith: "God is darkness to our intellect. Only by faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest himself to the soul. The greater one's faith the closer is one's union with God... 'The one who would be united with God must believe' (Heb 11, 6), this means that people must walk by faith in their journey to God. The intellect must be blind and dark and abide in faith alone, because it is joined with God under this cloud"²⁰.

Instead of being an obstacle, the darkness of mystical aridity favours and intensifies God's action in believers. The fervour and the desire of serving God as he truly deserves are so powerful that believers are indignant with themselves, feeling unable and inadequate to realise their own aspirations, even though sincere. They no longer feel any sort of benevolence towards themselves, and no longer look for appreciation from others, concerned as they used to be with the judgment and acceptance of other

¹⁸ Cf. ST JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Fiamma d'amor viva B*, strophe 2, 27, in *Opere Complete*, o.c., p. 799.

¹⁹ Cf. ID., *1 Notte oscura*, 9, 4, in *Opere complete*, o.c., p. 428. Here St John speaks of the signs that allow us to distinguish between the aridity deriving from passive purification and that which is instead the result of tepidity.

²⁰ ID., *2 Salita del Monte Carmelo*, 9, 1, in *Opere complete*, o.c., pp. 216-217.

people. Instead, they surrender themselves to Jesus Christ, and consent to have no other will than his own; nor to nourish any other ambition than that of being intimately united to him in life and death.

Sometimes they have the painful sense that God is doing everything he can to humiliate, contradict and crucify them. The torment this creates far surpasses all they have suffered so far. Moved to the depths of their being, they begin to understand the truth of the words of Holy Scripture, according to which no one can resist God's anger: "*How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire?*" (Ps 78, 5); "*If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?*" (Ps 130, 3; cf. 2 Ch 20, 6; Rm 9, 19ff; Rev 6, 17).

Day after day believers experience with increasing pain the unattainable desire of serving and loving God as he deserves. To this cruel trial they respond by surrendering themselves lovingly to him. Plunged into the long night of darkness, they experience the devouring fire of passive purification which slowly consumes them in an inexorable agony. But at the end, in a totally unexpected way, while still immersed in darkness and trial, they will find themselves suddenly filled, possessed, inhabited by God's light, at a time when their will is still hard, desolate and unknowing of their union with him: "*I will turn the darkness into light before them*" (Is 42, 16)²¹. With a love avid for a daily closer intimacy, they will finally be able to understand God: "There is no fire in me desiring to be fed; but there is within me a water that lives and speaks, saying to me inwardly, Come to the Father"²². This painful agony, this mystical death²³, are the finest crown of any believer's life.

Teresa of the poor: a light in the darkness

It was in the course of the year 1948 that Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu (Skopje, August 26, 1910 – Calcutta, September 5, 1997) became *Teresa of the poor*, out of love for the last of the least, sharing their spiritual as well as their material poverty so as to experience a sense of being abandoned in deep darkness amidst the torments of an agonizing interior loneliness. In a moment of intimate conversation with Jesus Christ, Mother Teresa heard these words addressed to her: "You are a most inept, weak and sinful person, but it is precisely because of this I want to use you for my glory. Will you perhaps refuse me this?"²⁴. She so identified herself with the poorest of the poor that she shared their painful sense of not being loved or cared for by anyone. She gave flesh to the ideal of that strong faith which offers total love in humble service to the poor, to whom more must be given because they are the sacrament of the suffering Christ, and so represent him better than anyone else: "...". Mother Teresa lived out in a radical way her love for Christ and for his poor, without the consolation of a felt faith in God: "..."²⁵

How could she have held together in her life and person the darkness of faith²⁶ and such a tireless commitment for others? The answer springs spontaneously from her very existence: it was all done so as to give birth to a new and greater work in the Church, because nothing new is born unless a high price is first paid. Writing to the sisters she had founded with suggestions to help them serve at the frontiers of charity, *Mother Teresa of the poor* interpreted suffering in terms of theological faith and of

²¹ "*Your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday*" (Is 58, 10); "*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, 12).

²² ST IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Ad Romanos*, 7, 2.

²³ Cf. ST PAUL OF THE CROSS, *Mystical death*, in *Lettere*, Rome 1977, vol. 5; on the same theme cf. C. BROVETTO, *Introduzione alla spiritualità di S. Paolo della Croce. Morte mistica e divina natività*, Teramo 1955.

²⁴ *Letter to Mgr Ferdinand Périer, archbishop of Calcutta, January 1947*. Jesus addressed similar words to Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) and St Gemma Galgani (1878-1903), only to mention these two.

²⁵ IDEM, 1956.

²⁶ S. GAETA, *La fede si scontra con la "notte oscura"*, in *Il segreto di Madre Teresa*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato (AL), 2002.

cooperation with God's plan of universal salvation for humanity: "(...) without suffering, our work would only be a social enterprise, all very good and useful, but not the work of Jesus Christ; it would not be part of the redemption. God wanted to help us, to lead us to share his life, his loneliness, his agony and even his very death".

Pope Benedict XVI recalled all this when he spoke to the young people gathered near Loreto in September 2007: "All of us, even if we are believers, are acquainted with God's silence. Recently a book²⁷ has been published with the spiritual experiences of Mother Teresa, and what we already knew about her has now become even clearer: despite all her charity, and the strength of her faith, Mother Teresa suffered the silence of God"²⁸. The Pope's mention of Mother Teresa's experience of the prolonged silence of God leads us right to the heart of the matters considered here, and to the God who falls silent and withdraws from us, the "God who hides himself"²⁹. "..."³⁰ This is at one and the same time a painful *presence and absence* of God, who is certainly alive in the soul even though we do not experience him. It amounts to a real inner martyrdom for the person who does not feel God's presence but experiences instead a terrible, unbearable sense of emptiness: "..."³¹.

In preparation for the third Christian millennium, John Paul II had already touched upon this theme of the dark night and of the trial of faith: "(...) we are greatly helped not only by theological investigation but also by that great heritage which is *the "lived theology" of the saints*. The saints offer us precious insights which enable us to understand more easily the intuition of faith, thanks to the special enlightenment which some of them have received from the Holy Spirit, or even through their personal experience of those terrible states of trial which the mystical tradition describes as the "dark night". Not infrequently the saints have undergone *something akin to Jesus' experience on the Cross* in the paradoxical blending of bliss and pain. In the *Dialogue of Divine Providence*, God the Father shows *Catherine of Siena* how joy and suffering can be present together in holy souls: 'Thus the soul is blissful and afflicted: afflicted on account of the sins of its neighbour, blissful on account of the union and the affection of charity which it has inwardly received. These souls imitate the spotless Lamb, my Only-begotten Son, who on the Cross was both blissful and afflicted'. In the same way, *Thérèse of Lisieux* lived her agony in communion with the agony of Jesus, 'experiencing' in herself the very paradox of Jesus's own bliss and anguish: 'In the Garden of Olives our Lord was blessed with all the joys of the Trinity, yet his dying was no less harsh. It is a mystery, but I assure you that, on the basis of what I myself am feeling, I can understand something of it'³².

It has not been rare for the saints to experience the anguish of Christ on the Cross: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Ps 22). Mother Teresa was united to Jesus precisely because of a faith and a love so deep as to lead her to share the experience of Jesus in Gethsemane and on the Cross. This is the deep darkness of the times of spiritual aridity, of interior desolation, of lack of enthusiasm for prayer, of the experience of the distance and even of the absence of God: "..."³³. Out of love for the

²⁷ Cf. "*Mother Teresa. Come be my light. The private writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'*", edited and with commentary by B. KOLODIEJCHUK, Doubleday Books, New York 2007; in this book are published sixty letters addressed by Mother Teresa to her spiritual directors and confessors (e.g., Fr Michael Van Peet, Fr Joseph Neuner, etc...).

²⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Replies to the young people participating in the prayer vigil, Saturday September 1, 2007; second reply of the Pope to Sara (cf. www.zenit.org/article-11758?l=italian – 18k).

²⁹ For BLAISE PASCAL God often remains hidden from human beings (*Deus absconditus*): this is either because human beings are so much in sin that they cannot see him, or to humble the human understanding which, if it discovered God, would grow proud.

³⁰ *Letter to her spiritual director Fr Michael Van der Peet*, September 1979.

³¹ *Request addressed to Jesus on the advice of one of her confessors*; no date.

³² JOHN PAUL II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, January 6, 2001, 27.

³³ *Request addressed to Jesus on the advice of one of her confessors*; no date.

poor, Teresa had sacrificed the awareness and the consolation of her union with God, caught between the atrocious pain of that loss and her uncontainable longing, her inextinguishable thirst, for God: "...”
“...”³⁴ And her solidarity with the poorest of the poor, especially with the One who, though he was rich, made himself poor out of love for us (cf. 2 Cor 8,9), was lived out till its ultimate consequences..

The night of the apostle

For St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Jesus, “*la Doctora y Maestra Mistica de la vida espiritual*”³⁵, the mystical life is essentially a life of prayer. Without taking anything away from the teaching of Doctors of such authority, however, we need to widen our horizons if we want to avoid reducing to this single typology - important though it is - the wide gamut of mystical experiences. In this way, too, in the spiritual direction of the faithful we will avoid the risk of imposing rigid models which could result in a restrictive understanding of the ways God acts as he freely offers the gifts of the Spirit to his beloved children.

In the Church, there does not exist only the mystical life of contemplation and prayer, but also an apostolic mysticism, such as that of Paul of Tarsus, of Bartolomé de las Casas, Turibio of Mongrovejo, Vincent de Paul, Maria of the Incarnation, Paul of the Cross³⁶, Giustino de Jacobis, Daniel Comboni, Charles de Foucauld...and many others, who were great mystics in spite of the fact that their spiritual journey cannot be reduced to the classical one already codified by the great Doctors and Mystics of Carmel³⁷.

Writing in the first half of the XVII century, Michael Wadding³⁸ first described the passive purification undergone by the contemplatives, and then went on to write of the difference between this and the severe trials faced by missionaries at the frontiers: “With all those whom God treats differently, he sometimes makes them suffer through an abandonment full of desolations; but *the most common instruments of their purification are persecutions, abominations, ignominies, the continuous fatigue of journeys, dangers on land and at sea*³⁹, *calumnies against them, jealousies, contradictions*. And this was the path walked by

³⁴ Teresa of Calcutta should be proclaimed “*protectress of the unbelievers*”, of those, that is, who without believing are searching for God (cf. Dt 28, 29; Is 59, 10; Zeph 1,1 17; Acts 17, 27). The word “*atheist*” has an active and passive meaning, that is to refuse God, but also to be rejected by him. The first is a conscious atheism, while the second is an atheism of expiation.

³⁵ As described by M. WADDING, in: *Práctica de la teología mística*, Puebla (Mexico) 1681, 1st ed.

³⁶ Cf. J. LEBRETON, *Tu solus Sanctus. Jésus Christ vivant dans les Saints. Études de théologie mystique*, Beauchesne et ses fils, Paris 1949, pp. 171-205; 215-235.

³⁷ To the holy Doctors Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross is to be added Teresa of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, proclaimed Doctor of the Church on October 19, 1997 [cf. La piccola via, in *30 Giorni*, n. 7/8 (July-August 2007), 43-58].

³⁸ Born in Waterford (Ireland) in 1586 of Thomas and Mary Walsh. Left an orphan, he was sent to study first at the Irish College in Lisbon (1605-1607), and then to the “*Real Colegio de San Patricio de Nobles Irlandeses*” in Salamanca (1607-1609). In 1609 he entered the Jesuit novitiate in Villagarcía, where he made the acquaintance of the famous theologian Francisco Suarez (1548-1617). In 1609 he left for Mexico, where he took the name of Miguel Godínez by which he is still known today. In 1611 he made his first simple profession. In 1616 he volunteered for the missions of Japan. From 1618 to 1626 he worked among the ethnic groups of the Sinaola, the Tepehuan (a Mayan tribe, living in north-west Mexico). He also dedicated himself to the tribes of the Conicaris, Bsiroas and Tahatas. Then it was the turn of the Híos (a tribe of the Chínipas), followed by the Huvaguros and the Tehuisos. In 1626 he made his solemn profession. He spent the remaining eighteen years of his life as a teacher in the colleges of Mexico City, Puebla and Guatemala. He died at the end of 1644. He distinguished himself by his deep knowledge of supernatural states and by the wisdom of his spiritual direction. His work “*Práctica de la teología mística*” was published forty years after his death (1681) and went into thirteen editions in three languages: Spanish, Italian and Latin. Outside of Spain the book was spread by Fr Manuel-Ignacio La Reguera (2 vols in fol., Rome 1740-1745). (Cf. L.M. MENDIZABAL, *Godínez Michel*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Beauchesne, Paris 1966, fsc. XLI, coll. 565-570).

³⁹ Cf. Pauline echoes in 2 Cor 11, 23-27; Acts 14, 19.

Paul, Athanasius, Thomas, Bonaventure, Ignatius, Francis Xavier, etc...⁴⁰ The point made here by the Jesuit missionary, Irish by birth but Mexican by adoption, is of fundamental importance, because, in his view, missionaries are put to the test by God in different, but no less real ways, than the ways he uses with those who dedicate themselves exclusively to contemplation and prayer.

The most original and valuable aspect of Michael Wadding's approach⁴¹ is precisely his interpretation of the sufferings of mission as the equivalent of passive purification in leading the missionary into infused contemplation⁴². He writes: "I knew several of these missionaries upon whom God bestowed the loftiest degree of infused contemplation, pouring out upon them in their wretched hovels the abundant harvest they had sown with such generosity throughout their scattered mission stations..."⁴³. According to Wadding⁴⁴, important mystical graces are given in the lives of missionaries: these are an important support to them in their work and also that work's very reward. In the apostolic ministry, God's love stands out with such a pure and intense splendour as to be comparable to the contemplation of the greatest mystics of the Church.

The adversities which missionaries have to face in the preaching of the Gospel are intended to purify them in depth, as well as to give them a lively awareness of their limitations and provide them with schooling in every virtue. Such purification, though, is still not enough; persecuted and oppressed by continuous trials, the apostles reached the point of considering themselves really to be the "*scum of the earth, the refuse of the world*" (1 Cor 4, 13). In his own life, the Apostle of the Gentiles was subjected to every sort of trial, and his body was made even more fragile by illness: "*there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me*" (2 Cor 12, 7). After imploring Jesus Christ to free him from these continuous afflictions - "*Who will rescue me from this body of death?*" (Rm 7, 24) - Paul was given this not entirely gentle response: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor 12, 9).

God the Father desires that every messenger of the Gospel be configured to his only-begotten Son, who for the salvation of the world "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil 2,7). In fact, as Christ redeemed the world through the painful experience of surrendering himself to the Father on the cross, so all those who dedicate themselves to the missionary life must relive his own mystery of suffering and death: "*death is at work in us, but life is at work in you*" (2 Cor 4, 12). This truth offers light and encouragement to missionaries who, engaged in the preaching of the Gospel, continue their efforts even in the dark night of the spirit, without enjoying even the slightest comfort from the Master whom they instead preach with such zeal. The missionary to whom the Lord gives a share in his passion can make his own the words of Paul: "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live,*

⁴⁰ *Praxis theologiae mysticae*, trans. HENRI WATRIGANT, 1921, p. 81. "I affirm that there will be rarely found a contemplative full of delights who has not first passed through a period of desolation; if contemplation comes without these experiences, it will be an exception to the rule or at least a contemplation that does not last long" (ibid., p. 91).

⁴¹ In 1681, Mgr Alfonso de Cuevas y Dávalos, archbishop of Mexico, in granting the imprimatur to the first edition of Wadding's book, offered the information that the Jesuit's life was in all things consistent with his writings.

⁴² Cf. E.J.BURRUS, *Michael Wadding. Mystic and missionary (1586-1644)*, in *The Month*, new series, t. 11, n.1, 1954, pp. 339-353.

⁴³ M. WADDING, *Practice of Mystical Theology*, vol. 3, chap. VII. Here is found the most complete description of his missionary work, where he describes the many kinds of deprivations suffered by the Jesuit missionaries in Mexico in the XVII century.

⁴⁴ "A man of penetrating intellect and sound judgment, reliant upon God's help, a doer of unselfish deeds, a man of union with God and of solid learning, one who strives through every form of apostolate to bring men to see and do god, prudent, seeking the common good to the point of sacrificing self, courteous and courageous, patient and self-controlled, inspiring others by his example rather than trying to persuade them by words or threats". (*Practice of Mystical Theology*, vol. 3, chap. IX-X). This is the description provided by Wadding of his superiors, but it could well be of himself.

but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2, 20). If we Christians really knew the price paid for the holiness of the Church, we would have a greater appreciation for the “*mirabilia gesta*” of the courageous witnesses of the faith and their confession of unconditional belonging to Christ and to his holy Church.

The mystical life moulds the action of the missionaries into that of Christ himself: Christ not only associates them with his plan of universal salvation, but unites them to his person, and acts in and through them. It is in view of this specific end that God continues to mould them into the image of Christ, the Apostle of the Father by definition (cf. Heb 3, 1), and transform them into suitable instruments for the salvation of all peoples. They have to be stripped of every form of narcissism, and of every individualistic outlook.

This purification is worked in them by the Holy Spirit, both through intimate contemplation as well as apostolic activity, through the violent opposition of men (cf. Jn 15, 20), as well as through misunderstandings and illness, but always producing ever more abundant fruits of salvation, for which only God can claim the merit. Christ Jesus, working through the missionaries for the salvation of humankind, shows himself to be the Good Shepherd to imitate, and the sure Way to be followed unhesitatingly to the end.

The countless privations the missionaries may be called to face are not primarily in view of a more intense and perfect contemplation, as in the canons of classical ascetical and mystical theology; they are intended rather to render the missionaries ever more docile, suitable and available to the missionary action of Jesus Christ, acting in and through them for the good of all.

The night of the apostle: St Daniel Comboni

Daniel Comboni underwent this kind of purification from the very beginning of his life as a missionary (1857). The only surviving child of seven, and anticipating the painful sacrifice of leaving his elderly parents, he wrote thus to the parish priest of his native village: “Two serious difficulties frighten me, which I cannot leave unresolved while departing for the Mission, and they are both formidable. The first is the thought of abandoning my two poor parents who have nothing else on this earth to comfort them but their only son”⁴⁵. Yet taking a firm hold on his faith he found the courage and the prophetic spirit of the disciple who responds to the Master’s call: “I am a martyr for love of the most neglected souls in the world, and you have become martyrs for love of God, sacrificing an only son for their good. But be brave, my dearest parents”⁴⁶.

Leaving his parents caused Comboni much pain, but he never complained about it; on the contrary, he thanked the Lord: “Blessed is the Lord for he has guided me on the way of the Cross”⁴⁷. When he received the sad news of his mother’s death, he wrote thus to his father Luigi, now alone in the empty house at Limone sul Garda: “Ah! Is my mother then no longer alive?...Has inexorable death then cut the thread of my good mother’s days?... Are you then quite alone now, you who once saw all around you the happy company of seven children, cherished and loved by the one whom God chose to be your inseparable companion for life?... Yes, by the mercy of God it is so indeed. Blessed forever be the God who wished it so. Blessed be the provident hand which has deigned to visit us in this world of exile and of tears”⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ D. COMBONI, Letter to Fr Pietro Grana, Verona, July 4, 1857 in *Writings*, Sunningdale (UK), 2005, nn. 3-4.

⁴⁶ ID., Letter to his father, from the Kich tribe (Sudan), March 5, 1858, in o.c., n.222.

⁴⁷ ID., Letter to his father, Korosko (Sudan), December 9, 1857, in o.c., n. 187.

⁴⁸ ID., Letter to his father, from the Kich tribe (Sudan), November 20, 1858, in o.c., n. 416.

Thus it was that God prepared Comboni for his mission in Africa. Purifying him through the difficult choices he had to make, and through the sacrifice of his most sacred and legitimate affections, God was tempering him so that his missionary work could become the very action of Christ for the peoples of Africa. Faced with the demands of his missionary vocation *ad Gentes*, Comboni had understood⁴⁹ very early on that he had to make a new start in everything: *he had to be born again* (cf. Jn 3,3), *he had to become a child* (cf. Mt 18, 3), and finally *he had to give up everything*, parents included (cf. Mt 10, 37; 16, 24; Lk 14, 26; Jn 12, 24-26). This was to be a mission of self-emptying, of humble service for the coming of the Kingdom among the women and men to whom he would be sent. With the passage of time, all this transformed Comboni, making him a “*new man*” built on the solid foundation of faith.

Yet there was in him no kind of self-exaltation, none of the easy enthusiasm often typical of the new convert. Comboni knew from experience that to bring Christ to people in general, and in his case to the peoples of Africa in particular, there was above all need for the grace of God. Even if Christ had died pouring out his blood for the salvation of all humankind, not all were aware of this extraordinary reality. The heartfelt lament common to prophets and apostles has perennial relevance: “*Who has believed our message?*” (Is 53, 1). Missionaries experience the pain of the lack of response and the refusal of the Gospel by a good part of humanity: “*But not all the Israelites accepted the good news*” (Rm 10, 16). To this they respond, though, with an even more intense commitment to proclaim everywhere and to all the Good News of Christ.

Comboni sums some of this up in the Rules of the Institute (1871), which he left as an important part of his inheritance for his followers: “They will develop in themselves this most essential disposition by keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly and seeking always to understand more fully the meaning of a God who died on the cross for the salvation of souls”⁵⁰. These words recall some others, much older and perhaps even more authoritative, but nevertheless in surprising harmony with Comboni’s: “Those who wish truly to honor the Lord’s passion must look with the eyes of the heart at Jesus Crucified, so as to recognize their flesh in his (...). Nobody is denied the victory of the Cross (...). The sacred blood of Christ has extinguished the fire of that sword which barred the way to the kingdom of life”⁵¹. This conviction pierced Comboni’s heart, soul and mind with a deep, inner suffering: “If you want to heal a wound, Christ is the doctor. When you burn with fever, he is the fountain. If evil oppresses you, he is justice. When you need help, he is strength. If you fear death, he is life. If you desire heaven, he is the way. If you flee the darkness, he is light. When you are hungry, he is food”⁵².

Comboni’s deep personal commitment to the plan of salvation which the grace of Christ had reserved for the Africans led him to consecrate his life to making common cause with those who were the considered the poorest of the poor, because deprived of the only treasure able to make them children of God: the faith. In the course of his life of a little more than fifty years (1831-1881), a few rays of light would sunder the deep darkness of his soul, but these were only fleeting, brief moments; after them the night returned unopposed to try Comboni’s faith: “I have seriously considered whether, given my weakness and indeed nothingness, *I can still be really of use to the African apostolate*, doubtless the most trying and difficult in the world, or *whether I am more likely to do it harm*; the more so because now I have really become more sensitive to the blows of adversity and far less able to carry crosses, because of so many difficulties, privations, illnesses, fevers; because of so much heartbreak, struggle

⁴⁹ On January 6, 1848, Comboni knelt at the feet of his rector, Fr Nicola Mazza, and swore fidelity to the African mission.

⁵⁰ D. COMBONI, *Rules for the Institute of the Missions of Africa*, 1871, o.c., n. 2721.

⁵¹ ST LEO THE GREAT, *Discourses*, in PL, 54, 366.

⁵² ST AMBROSE, *De virginitate*, XVI, 99-106, in PL, 16, 291-293.

and opposition, all borne for many years, but particularly during the recent and terrible period of the famine and plague. However since we must always trust in God and his grace alone and whoever trusts in himself trusts in (sorry!) the world's greatest ass, and since the works of God are always born at the foot of the Cross and must always be marked by his Cross's adorable seal, so I have decided to abandon myself in the arms of divine Providence, the source of charity for the poor and the protector of justice and innocence. Consequently, I put myself in the hands of my Superiors, God's true representatives, and in the hands of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, of your Most Reverend Eminence and those of the Most Eminent Cardinal di Canossa, appointed by Your Eminence and your late, venerable Predecessors to help me in my holy undertaking"⁵³.

Such considerations are no exception in Comboni's vast correspondence; his thought grows and develops, but always in the same direction. *The night of this missionary* eventually seems to reach its nadir. Comboni becomes convinced that *he himself is the greatest obstacle to the evangelization of those African peoples* whom Pius IX had entrusted to his pastoral care. So just as, paradoxically, contemplation in the end becomes the instrument for the contemplative's purification, in the same way the missionary ideal becomes the instrument of the purification of the missionary: "In the course of my hard and wearisome enterprise it has seemed to me more than a hundred times that I have been abandoned by God, the Pope, the Superiors and by all men (...). Finding myself so abandoned and distressed, a hundred times I had the strongest temptation (...) to give up everything, hand over the work to Propaganda and offer myself as a humble servant, at the disposal of the Holy See, or of the Cardinal Prefect, or of some Bishop. Well, what helped me not to fail in my vocation (...) what sustained my courage to hold firm at my post until death or some decision from the Holy See was the conviction of the certainty of my vocation. It was *always toties quoties* because Fr Marani told me on 9th August 1857, after a serious examination, '*your vocation to the African mission is one of the clearest I have ever seen*'"⁵⁴.

If it is true that a person's words reveal what is in their heart⁵⁵, this letter of Comboni's leads us into the deep loneliness of a man who has had the fearful experience of being abandoned by God, by others, by all. Yet this was the very place where Comboni discovered what it means for love to suffer and to suffer with love. Here again it was Paul who helped Comboni identify the reasons of faith to go on living through this apparently insoluble situation: "*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (...) And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified*" (Rm 8, 18.28-30).

We might be tempted to imagine that at this point in Comboni's missionary life the degree of abandonment, of loneliness and of desolation had reached its peak, and that there could be no more room for other trials and sadnesses, that his cup was full. Yet a lover's heart harbors unsuspected strength, and somehow is always able to love yet more: "But I am altogether too unhappy. Jesus will certainly help me, the Immaculate Virgin and St. Joseph will help me. I thank Jesus for the crosses, but my life is an ocean of anxieties brought on me by good people who love me. My God! 'Dear Heaven!' (...) *But my very heart is petrified*. However, Africa will be converted, (...) But we are ready for crosses (...) please pray for me, who *am the most afflicted of men and disheartened with the world*, and

⁵³ D. COMBONI, *Letter to Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni*, Verona, August 27, 1880, in o.c. n. 6084-6085.

⁵⁴ Id., *Letter to Fr Giuseppe Sembianti*, El Obeid (Sudan), July 16, 1881, in o.c., nn. 6885-6886.

⁵⁵ "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12, 34).

also pray for my father. Long live Jesus”.⁵⁶ Our mission does not attain its accomplishment when we are strong and sure of ourselves, but only when we are fragile, lost, and unable to move forward: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12, 10).

It was precisely through the death Comboni had to die every day that he became the apostle and missionary God wanted him to be (cf. 1 Cor 15, 31; 2 Cor 12, 10). Accepting to descend into the abyss of self-emptying, he was very much aware that the more painful was the night of his mission, the nearer was his dawn of Resurrection. Yet Cross and Resurrection do not have the same weight. Resurrection has the last word and vanquishes the Cross forever. Resurrection, indeed, is the Father’s last word on the humiliation of his only-begotten Son.

The central theme of the missionary message is that Christ is risen; this consequently means that the Church is called to live the Resurrection life here and now, and that she is called to be a sign of contradiction in today’s world over against the forces of hatred, of selfishness as a way of life, and the indifference flooding contemporary society.

Conclusion

Many Christian mystics have not received the privilege of martyrdom, but they have imitated the passion of the Lord most intimately. Christ Jesus is the *only model* of both contemplation and mission. This explains the fundamental importance and peculiar character of Christian mysticism, distinguishing it from the mysticisms of the other great world religions, and rendering it unique, singular and unrepeatable.

In reality, the various Christian mystical journeys bring out the multiplicity, complementarity, and great variety of charisms, those wonderful gifts of the Holy Spirit to individual believers for the up-building of God’s holy people. These gifts, so rich and various, serve as a support for even greater and higher graces. The ideal of the mystical life is to attain transformative union with God through a life of contemplation, of *agape* and of humble *diakonia* to the poor, who are a real *epifania* of Christ on earth, that Christ who “though he was rich, yet for your sakes (..) became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8,9).

Only the mystics have been made able by the Holy Spirit to lead us into that “*secretum*” or “*absconditum*”, that “*intus*”⁵⁷ into which we dare to tiptoe full of childlike confidence in the Heavenly Father, who sees in secret (cf. Mt 6,6). Already here on earth we are able to have a foretaste of supernatural joys, but only the mystics see the invisible, which is different from all other realities because it can fully satisfy our unquiet and tormented hearts. They alone hear God’s gentle voice, unheeding of the noise and chatter of our empty talk: “*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal*” (2 Cor 4, 18).

⁵⁶ D. COMBONI, Letter to Fr Giuseppe Sembianti, June 24, 1881, in o.c., nn. 6795-6796.

⁵⁷ “*Ambulare cum Deus intus*”. (De laetitia bonae conscientiae, in *De imitatione Christi*, book II, chap. 6, n. 4).

Prayer

Lord, the light does not spare itself, but gives itself to warm and heal those who are sick with the night of lovelessness and the weight of darkness. You, too, do not spare yourself, but give yourself and share yourself. Wherever your light shines out, there is healing, liberation and many other signs that witness to you. Lord, let your Church live an unending epiphany, so that the preaching of the Gospel may be accompanied by signs, and she may be given in fullness the power to heal the children she carries in her arms.

Amen