

The Cry of the Mystic

by William Johnston

Mystics are men and women in love, in love without restriction. Theirs is a profound love which consumes the whole person.

I HAVE USED many words to describe mystical experience, which in the end is ineffable. I have used all kinds of symbols. I have called it a small flame of love, a determination to follow the ox, an infinite trust in Amida. But perhaps in the last analysis it is best described as a *being in love*.

For "being in love" is different from plain loving. I may love many people; but if I am in love with a woman, the thought of my loved one is always in my mind and heart like the small fire or the murmuring stream. She dwells in me and I in her.

Mysticism is like that; and the mystics are men and women in love, in love without restriction. That is why contemplatives from Origen to Bernard of Clairvaux and on to St. John of the Cross have sung passionately about the man who loves the woman and the woman who loves the man. Their

erotic language has embarrassed the pious; their interpretations of the Song of Songs have dismayed the exegete; their sexual symbols have intrigued the psychologist. But when all is said and done, is this not a good way to express it? It is a profound love which consumes the whole person.

I have spoken of the secrecy and hidden quality of this mystical love. I will not deny this now; but let me say that it is not always secret and hidden. It may become all-consuming and surge to a ravishing climax as St. John of the Cross declares in *The Dark Night of the Soul*:

Because the enkindling of love in the spirit sometimes increases exceedingly, the longing for God becomes so intense that it will seem to a person that his bones are drying up in his thirst, his nature withering away, and his ardor and strength diminishing

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through the liveliness of the thirst of love. A person will feel that this is a living thirst.

Such a thirst also consumes the psalmist, who longs for God as the hart longs for flowing streams. And again he thirsts for the infinite as one in a parched land thirsts for water:

*O God, Thou art my God, I seek Thee,
My soul thirsts for Thee; my flesh faints for Thee,
As in a dry and weary land where no water is.*

Psalm 63:1

Such is the cry of the mystic. □

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