

The Concept of Divine Grace in Spanish Mystics

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(It is puerile to imagine that Divine Grace is 'Roses, roses all the way'. Excruciating suffering, physical as well as mental, is a tormenting desert through which the aspirant has to pass after tasting the initial sweetness of the Lord's Compassion, and before reaching the ineffable bliss of Union with Him. Swami Paratparananda of the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bella Vista, Buenos Aires, a former Editor of the Vedanta Kesari who has made a special study of Spanish Mysticism, deals in this article with the spiritual experiences of two outstanding mystics, St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross. The mother suckles the infant and surrounds it with every comfort. But then comes the weaning and the toddler stumbles as he is made to stand up and walk by himself. The trials the Sadhaka meets with are a sign that he is spiritually growing up under the close guidance of the Divine Mother who knows what is best for him.)

St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross are the two most prominent among the Spanish mystics. Being of a devotional type they place great stress on divine grace. We may almost say that divine grace forms the corner stone of their spiritual edifice. It is, so to say, the warp and woof of their spiritual texture. They consider themselves as insignificant creatures, full of weaknesses and prone to err, and that it is only the grace of God that points out to them their errors, shows them the way out, nay, guides them out gently, time again lifts them up when fallen to make them perfect and draws them unto Himself. We shall try to show—quoting from the life of St. Teresa, written by herself², and from the writings of St. John of the Cross—what we have stated above.

Perhaps for the proper appreciation of the way in which divine grace acted in the life of St. Teresa, it would be helpful if a brief sketch of her early days is given. Born and brought up in a God-fearing family, she was endowed with pious inclinations, so much so that one of the cherished dreams of her childhood days was to court death for the sake of God. Another pastime of hers was to play at building monasteries, considering herself and her girl friends as nuns. But on the death of her mother, which occurred when Teresa was twelve, there seemed to occur a change in the girl. She took to reading books on knight errantry, which at that

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² The saint had written her life at the bidding of her confessors.

time she thought was an innocent pastime. But gradually this took the form of a vice, as it were; for if she could not get a new book of that type, she began to feel unhappy.³ Then followed the trifling amusements such as adorning herself, wearing pretty dresses and using perfumes. Keeping company with her cousins, almost of her age and talking with them on trifling matters became another of her hobbies.⁴ But the danger cropped up when she began to associate herself with a woman relative of hers and pass her time in light-hearted conversation. As St. Teresa herself says: "This was when God intervened and rid me of these frivolities, as if, it seemed, He was bent, even against my will, to see that I was not totally lost. My father who had warned me several times against this association, took me to a convent to be brought up there, on the pretext that it was not good for me to be alone in this house where there were no other female members."⁵ She proceeds: "In the convent the first eight days I suffered much, more because of the suspicion that I had, of having been discovered in my vanities, than to be in that place. I was already tired of these pastimes and was not above the fear of God when I offended Him again in that way. I had also gone to the convent dissatisfied with myself. So in eight days or even less I was much more happy there than in my father's house. All the inmates of the convent were kind to me, for the Lord, in His infinite mercy, had bestowed on me the boon to please people wherever I happened to be. However, at that time I was quite opposed to the idea of becoming a nun, though I was delighted to see such good, honest, religious and modest ones there. In spite of all their love and kindness towards me, at first, I sought to contact the world outside by trying to send messages, but as I found it impossible, my attempts soon came to an end and my soul started to accustom itself to the good inclinations of my childhood days. I then saw the immense good that God does to one whom He places in the company of the holy. It seems to me that the Lord was surveying over and over again to find out how He could draw me to Himself."⁶

Here the saint seems to opine that once the divine grace descends on a person, there is no force on earth that could resist it, that in spite of oneself one is led along the right path until one reaches the goal, and that even if that person wilfully tries to go astray, God will not allow it. Somehow He prevents that person from behaving otherwise; puts before him that right ideal in the form of exemplary characters and weans him away from bad habits or evil company.

In the convent a nun used to sleep with the girls entrusted to their care to be brought up. She was an exceptionally pious soul. St. Teresa

³ Obras de Santa Teresa de Jesus (The Works of St. Teresa de Jesus) 6th Edition, 1948. Published by Apostolado de La Prensa, S.A., Velásquez 28, Madrid. Life of Saint Teresa, page 12.

⁴ Ibid., Page 12.

⁵ Ibid., Page 15.

⁶ Ibid., Ch. 2. p.16.

comments on the benefit this holy association did to her: "It seems to me that the Lord wished to show me light through this pious nun. I began to like her good and holy conversation, and her talks on God were so marvellous that I enjoyed hearing her. Slowly this good association began to eradicate my bad habits and implant in their place thoughts about things eternal. Also it helped to diminish my opposition to become a nun."⁷ She was much better spiritually after a stay for a year and half in the convent; she began to pray often and request the nuns to plead for her with God so that she might be in a state fit to serve Him. At times she would think of becoming a nun, but afterwards such thoughts would vanish. When she was in the grip of this indecision, "the Lord, keenly desirous to make me fit for the state best suited for me, gave me a serious illness, which obliged me to return to my father's, from where after recovery I was taken to my sister's. On the way I stopped at the house of an uncle of mine, a widower, a person clear-sighted and of great virtues. His main occupation was reading good books and talking about God. He made me read to him from these books and though I did not like them, to please my uncle I would do it. Goodness gracious! By what methods did He not prepare me to the state in which He wished that I should be, to serve Him, so much so that I was forced to make efforts in that direction against my will."⁸

The mystic here sees the hand of God working through inscrutable ways to save her from being entangled in the world and mould her life in such a manner as to fit her for His works. The reading of good books to and holy talk by this sagacious man, her uncle, were to clear her mind of the erroneous views and sow seeds of yearning for a spiritual life. After a severe struggle between this yearning and the temptations of the world, she resolved to become a nun and communicated her decision to her father, who, however, would not give his permission. On the other hand, he asked her to postpone her desire till after his death. But Teresa, lest her resolve should falter or fail her with the passing of time, left her father's house immediately without his knowledge. She remembers how painful a thing it was: "When I left my father's house I felt such a pain that I do not believe that the suffering at the moment of my death would be worse. It seemed that every bone was falling away from me, and this because as yet I had no love of God which could counteract or outweigh the love of father and relatives. All this was so much weighing down upon me that had not the Lord in His infinite grace helped me, my own forces would not have been sufficient to go ahead. God here gave me encouragement to go against myself, and this I fully utilized."⁹ Here St. Teresa is very clear in her declaration that but for the divine grace it would have been impossible for her to cut asunder the bonds of love and attachment she had for her relatives, especially her affectionate father,

⁷ Ibid., Ch. 3, p.17.

⁸ Ibid., Ch. 3, p.17-19.

⁹ Ibid., Ch. 4, p.20-21.

and dedicate her life to God. She goes on to emphasize how by the mercy of the Lord she could see the good that comes to one who totally surrenders oneself to Him. "After being initiated as a novitiate the Lord gave me to understand how He favours those who strive to serve Him. I experienced such an immense pleasure, on having elected the religious state, which never has abandoned me till today. At that time God changed the dryness from which my soul was suffering into greatest tenderness. All things religious gave me delight. The hours during which, in former days, I used to engage myself in adorning and dressing myself, now I spent, sometimes, in sweeping the convent grounds. And realizing that I was free from that futile pastime, I used to feel a new kind of happiness."¹⁰

Then commenced her severe illnesses, the cure for which could not be brought about by the methods known to medicine of that time. Her father then takes her to a quack well known for her cures of different kinds of maladies. On the way she stops for a few hours again at her uncle's, who, seeing her in such a wasted condition, arranges for her to rest in his library. There Teresa tells her uncle about her inner life, and he gives her at her parting a book on prayer and recommends her to use it as a guide. Taking his advice she follows the teachings given there and reaps immense benefit. She says: "God began to show such mercy on me that sometimes I would be immersed in silent prayer and at times united with God, though at that time I did not understand what meant the one or the other. But their effect was so elevating that the world, after which people ran, seemed to me a paltry thing."¹¹

Teresa's illness aggravates; the quack medicines, instead of healing her, worsen her condition. She is reduced to skin and bone. The pains become continuous and intolerable. Her father, disillusioned, takes her to his home and again places her under the treatment of the local doctors, but her condition shows no improvement. Teresa desires to see a confessor, but her father, thinking it would be too much of an exertion to her in her present state does not permit her. That same night she suffers, from paroxysm which leaves her unconscious for nearly four days. She is given the extreme unction and all think that any moment she may breathe her last. Her grave is dug in the convent grounds where she had joined. However on the fourth day she revives. But in what a state is she! She cannot drink even a little water, cannot move any of her limbs. She feels as if she is cut to pieces; her nerves are all dried up, and a heavy sense of reeling of the brain persists. But the pains that were constant before would sometimes subside and she began to think that she is improving. After some days, though she cannot get up nor even move her limbs, she insists that she be taken to the convent. There in that extremely wasted condition and bed-ridden, she passes three years,

¹⁰ Ibid., Ch.4, p.21.

¹¹ Ibid., Ch.4, p.23-24.

though in the latter part of this period she is slowly recovering.¹²

"Seeing how the Lord had resuscitated me, I tremble in my interior... I pray to Your Majesty (the Lord) that I may starve to death than fail to love You."¹³ The divine grace did not limit itself to saving her physically, but as on other occasions continued to protect her even in small matters; to keep her mind pure and unsullied. Let us give an instance: After her recovery which was almost like a miracle, many visitors came to see her and talk with her, and there were persons of every type. "On one occasion", she says, "when I was conversing with a particular person I saw Christ's stern figure before me, and His aspect seemed to give me to understand that this friendship was heavily weighing upon Him. And I had this vision before my soul's eye more clear than I would have been able to see with my physical eyes. This left such an indelible impression in my mind, that even now, after twenty-six years, I have a sensation of His presence. I was very much perturbed and frightened and did not want to see that person any more."¹⁴

We shall now briefly deal with what St. John of the Cross says about divine grace. There is a poem by him, entitled, "Songs of the Soul", which begins with the words: "On a dark night inflamed by the anxieties of love I sallied forth, oh, what a blissful venture!, without being observed, the house having been already quieted." Explaining the significance of this verse St. John says: "Into this night enter the souls, when God lifts them up from the state of beginners. . . When the soul determines to dedicate itself to the service of God, generally He rears it up in spirit and presents it with gifts, as a loving mother does with her young baby, suckling it with her nourishing milk, carrying it in her arms most of the time and presenting it with toys. But when the baby grows up, she no more suckles it, does not demonstrate so much her love, and ceases to carry it in her arms, nay makes it walk, so that it may, losing its childish qualities, grow up and engage itself in great and substantial things. The loving mother of God's grace too does the same with the aspirants that just begin their spiritual march, infuses in them new fervour and enthusiasm to dive in the search for God."¹⁵

It is common knowledge that the beginners in the spiritual path have many shortcomings, such as pride of their erudition, of their spiritual evolution, of their spiritual exercises, an inordinate enthusiasm which manifests in the form of study of a great number of books, practising of all types of disciplines and a host of other things. God in His infinite mercy allows them to work on until they get a taste for spiritual life, and then makes them pass through this dark night.¹⁶

Now let us see what this dark night means. Says St. John of the

¹² Ibid., Ch.5 & 6.

¹³ Ibid., Ch.5, p.33.

¹⁴ Ibid., Ch. 7 p.44.

¹⁵ Obras Completas de San Juan de La Cruz (Complete Works of St. John of the Cross). Pub: Editorial Calomino, La Palata, 1945 edition. P.288.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 289.

Cross: "This night is contemplation, which produces two kinds of obscurity, according to which two parts of man they mean to purify, the sensuous or spiritual. That is the night sensuous when the soul is purged of its attachment to the senses, and the other is the night of the spirit, when the soul is purged and purified to prepare it for the union of love with God. Now, the style with which the beginners tread the path of God is inferior and resembles much the taste and love of each individual, which is generally wanting in purity. Here the divine grace descends on the sincere seekers and lifts them from this lower mode of love and takes them forward to the higher level of love of God and liberates them from their inordinate attachment to reason and discussions, so that they may communicate more frequently with God, freeing themselves of their imperfections. But once they begin to enjoy the light of divine grace, God darkens this light for them. Then they cannot exercise either their imagination or reason. The spiritual things lose taste for them and a dryness sets in, for seeing them a little grown up (spiritually speaking) He lets them down from His arms, teaches them to walk, so that they may grow stronger and healthier."¹⁷ Thus we see how the Spanish mystics consider divine grace as a factor indispensable in the spiritual growth of man.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 306.