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## A PATH TO GOD TODAY MEDIATED THROUGH VISIONARY EXPERIENCE

**SUMMARY** — Reports of visions continue to be a problematic form of spiritual life today even in the context of spiritual direction. Yet Karl Rahner and William Johnston, both Jesuits, sought to understand such phenomenon and support its importance in the contemporary church. The history of this issue is traced from biblical times and discussed in relationship to the flowering of visionary mysticism in the Middle Ages. Finally, a sample of visionary material from qualitative research interviews demonstrates that such experience is not at all uncommon today and deserves to be received with respect and nuanced understanding.

### INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of this essay is on a mystical path to God through vision and symbol. These are experiences and discourses with which we are not always comfortable, given our historical bias in favor of less eventful contemplative experience, commonly known as apophatic. Yet in his last major book on mysticism *'Arise, My love...'* *Mysticism for a New Era*, William Johnston wrote:

In mystical experience Christians can dialogue with mystics of Asia, paying special attention to the *advaita* or nondualism of Hinduism and the emptiness of Buddhism. Here we find common ground. Yet each religion has its distinctive features. Most Christian mystics love the Song of Songs. For them, in the terminology of Bernard Lonergan, mysticism is an experience of falling in love with God so that one's being becomes being-in-love. The Christian does not lose his or her unique personality but finds it in a new and profound way. (...)

And as we move into the future, Christians must pay more and more attention to the kataphatic dimension of their own tradition and share this dimension with others; they must pay more and more attention to the biblical mysticism of prophecy. Only in this way can we save our mysticism from sterile irrelevance; only in this way will we speak meaningfully to the men and women of the third millennium. The answer to our problems is not flight but further involvement.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Johnston, *'Arise, my love...': Mysticism for a new era*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009, 119.

Johnston had spent his scholarly and apostolic life exploring the apophatic tradition of Christian mysticism especially his study of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the works of John of the Cross, as well as their convergence with Zen Buddhism and Hinduism. At the end of his life, Johnston came to the conclusion, that a Christian apophatic mysticism alone could not enable us to solve today's problems because this tradition itself was influenced by 'a neoplatonic "flight from the world"'. Johnston associated 'the mysticism of the prophets' with kataphatic mysticism<sup>2</sup> that 'sees God as the source of all existence' and through whose visionary manifestation to the prophet, 'sends the prophet on a mission, (...) sends the prophet into the world where he or she is rooted and embedded'.<sup>3</sup> His exemplars were Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola in their times, and Teilhard de Chardin and Mother Teresa of Calcutta in our own.

#### HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

What is our attitude toward visionary phenomena in our own personal religious experience and in that of others? How do we receive experiences of God that are mediated through art, nature, or interior images? Few spiritual directors or students of mysticism approach visionary phenomena without a pre-conceived set of assumptions that usually include a measure of skepticism and doubt. The history of Christian mysticism and the role of visionary experience within it reveal neither a constant definition of the 'mystical' nor a consistent set of features related to visionary phenomena. Yet those experienced with the Ignatian mystical horizon through the *Spiritual Exercises* tend to enjoy a variety of symbolic and visionary phenomena, especially through Ignatian contemplation.

In late Antiquity, visionary experience was taken for granted. As Johnston noted, it was a common feature of prophetic experience in Judaism. Early Christians believed both visions and dreams guided them. We find important precedents narrated in the Christian Scriptures related to the pre-Easter and Risen Christ, Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus, and a number of other visions described in the Acts of the Apostles. Although Christians continued to value visions and recorded them in hagiographical accounts, visionary experience was gradually marginalized in the tradition with the development of Neo-Platonic philosophical theories of mysticism and the development of early Biblical exegesis that included the four-fold typology of the literal, moral, ecclesial, and mystical meanings of Scripture. Participation in these developments required literacy and education, prerequisites that frequently

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 117.

excluded women and other less educated persons. As the Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* gained popularity among elites, this way of forms began to be denigrated. A bias toward apophatic mysticism (either an intellectual mysticism or mystical experience unaccompanied by images or other palpable phenomena) developed among the educated. This preference prevails to the present.

Despite this bias, in the high Middle Ages, many women and some men developed in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries what Bernard McGinn and others identify as a 'new mysticism' that was largely visionary. These mystical visions began to form a vernacular theology and enabled Beguine women, Francis of Assisi and his followers, as well as apostolic visionaries such as Catherine of Siena to claim the authority to teach, preach, heal, or create new forms of religious life on the basis of their visionary experience. Ignatius of Loyola inherited this rich and complex tradition in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and exploited its potential for apostolic formation.

As this religious creativity and extra-hierarchical authority and claim to mediate the divine in their world threatened the male, clerical monopoly on sacral power, the church moved to discredit these women and to control their social influence through the role of the confessor-spiritual director. His task included correcting any heterodox content of his penitents' visions and binding them to submissive obedience to himself in terms of activity in the community or church. Thus, women made some gains toward developing their own spirituality and finding their own voice as teachers partnered by God. These gains, however, have always been an ambiguous and fragile achievement. Without ecclesial validation from male clerics and theologians, visionary women or lay men risked persecution first as heretics and later as witches. Thus, the historical evolution of what counts as mysticism and who counts as a mystic is neither innocent of power or gender issues.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have demonstrated that the typical content of visions varied with the times.<sup>5</sup> Visions are always influenced by the personality of the visionary and the religious and secular cultures that provide images, symbols and theories out of which a visionary creatively produces a unique vision influenced both by God's interaction deep within and by their own psyches, conscious and unconscious.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Grace Jantzen, *Power, gender and Christian mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The growth of mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12<sup>th</sup> century*, New York: Crossroad, 1994, 325-326, and *The flowering of mysticism: Men and women in the new mysticism, 1200-1550*, New York: Crossroad, 1998, 24-30.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, *Visions and prophecies*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1979, 63-65: 75. See also Bernard McGinn, 'Visions and visualizations in the here and hereafter', in: *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005) no.3, 235-236, for his account of the shaping influences fostered by processes of visualization that merged with visions in many cases as well as Barbara Newman's account of similar processes in medieval religious culture and the theologies that influenced

Bernard McGinn carefully differentiates between mystical<sup>7</sup> and non-mystical medieval visions and asserts that this upsurge of ecstatic, mystical, visionary accounts from the 12-14<sup>th</sup> centuries 'signaled a new form of mystical consciousness, or mystical knowing – more direct, more excessive, more bodily in nature than older forms'.<sup>8</sup>

Although twentieth century studies of mysticism have been preoccupied with the epistemological claims of mystical knowing, there is a long historical record of the factual inaccuracy of knowledge claimed through visions, and numerous instances in which prophecies simply failed to turn out as predicted. Theologians continue to wrestle with the truth claims of visionaries and how to evaluate them in terms of the teaching itself and its intended audience. A consensus formed in favor of limiting all such experiences to the realm of 'private revelation'. By so doing, the claims for action or involvement by others is greatly reduced. No one has an obligation to believe or act on such messages or images interpreted by a mystic or visionary other than the mystics themselves. All of us are affected by suspicions about the authenticity and potential guidance visionary experience might offer either for the Christian community itself or for the persons themselves who have such experiences.

As psychology developed as a discipline, visionary experiences were usually interpreted almost exclusively as pathological. They were treated as hallucinations and as signs of a psychotic episode. At the present time, however, both researchers in mysticism and psychologists recognize some visionary experience as a healthy manifestation of religious experience and have developed much more positive approaches to this phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

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such reports, 'What did it mean to say "I saw"? The clash between theory and practice in medieval visionary culture', in: *Speculum* 80 (2005), 1-43.

<sup>7</sup> McGinn's definitions are important not only in reference to the medieval period but also for our own times. 'The mystical element within Christianity (...) centers on a form of immediate encounter with God whose essential purpose is to convey a loving knowledge (even a negative one) that transforms the mystic's mind and whole way of life. (...) Thus mysticism is characterized primarily by a sense of an immediate relation to God and the transformation this effects in the consciousness of the recipient – not by visions or auditions. (...) Hence it is not so much the *fact* that someone makes claims to visionary experience as it is the *kind of vision* presented, the *purpose* for which it is given, and the *effect* it has on the recipient that will determine whether or not any particular vision may be described as mystical'. *Flowering of mysticism*, 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> *Flowering of mysticism*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Tomas Agosin, 'Psychosis, dreams, and mysticism in the clinical domain', in: Fredrica Halligan & John Shea (Eds.), *Fires of desire: Libidinal energies and the spiritual quest*, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 41-65. See especially criteria for distinguishing between mystical experience without pathological signs and mystical experience occurring along with psychopathology. Stanislov Grof & Hal Zina Bennett, *The holotropic mind*, New York: Harper Collins, 1993; and Robert E. Masters & Jean Houston, *The varieties of psychedelic experience*, New York:

At the same time, the mystical tradition accumulated a received wisdom about visionary experience and its authentic role in the spiritual life. Among the Counter-Reformation mystics who particularly supported an authentic mystical development that included visions was the Carmelite, Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola whose *Spiritual Exercises* encouraged imaginative contemplation as a privileged mode of discerning God's will for apostolic activity in the world.

#### CONTEMPORARY VISIONARY EXPERIENCE BASED ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In my qualitative research, I have examined some patterns of growth and the role of various forms of mediation for committed men and women of prayer whose mystical path is characterized by imaginative visions along with other mediations of religious experience. Although I am focusing here on the visionary experience of the men and women in my sample, it is important to note that all of them experienced God in and through nature, music, and both sacred and secular symbols as universally as they did through interior vision.<sup>10</sup> All had been shaped in some way by the Ignatian tradition and a surprising number (half the group) experienced some kind of locutions that I have described elsewhere. I conducted these interviews in 1993 and secured permission to use these accounts in future writing and teaching. Directees were recommended by their spiritual directors according to specific criteria and chosen using a random table. I conducted all the interviews in person and settled on a sample of twenty-four people in all, twelve from California and twelve from the

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Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1966. See John Shea, 'Spirituality, psychology, and psychotherapy', in: Philip Sheldrake (Ed.), *The new Westminster dictionary of Christian spirituality*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005, 55-62, for a succinct summary of the current situation. See John J. Shea, 'The super-ego God', in: *Pastoral Psychology* 43 (1995) no.5, 333-351; and 'The God beyond', in: *Pastoral Psychology* 43 (1995) no.6, 411-431 for very helpful psychological criteria for evaluating the relationship between the God-image and the person's psychological maturity as well as John J. Shea, *Finding God again: Spirituality for adults*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. See also Sue Gagg, 'The reality of voices: Auditory hallucinations', in: *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 23 (2002) no.3, 159-165, for new treatment approaches to diagnosed schizophrenia and ways of understanding and interpreting hearing voices as related to dissociative disorders, particularly post-traumatic stress. Gagg also reports positive experiences of voice hearing as described by John Watkins in *Hearing voices: A common human experience*, Melbourne: Hill of Content, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> See Janet K. Ruffing, "'The world transfigured": Kataphatic religious experience', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995), 232-259, for the executive summary of this research and description of the protocol. Also, of interest are findings on nature and music, "'To have been one with the earth...": Nature in contemporary Christian mystical experience', in: *Presence* 3 (1995), 40-53; and 'Music as an opening to religious experience', in: *Vinayasadhana: Journal of Psycho-Spiritual Formation* 1 (2010), 70-85.

North East of the U.S. from Connecticut to Washington, D.C. The group included men and women proportional to the entire pool available, clergy, seminarians, married and single laity as well as men and women religious. The findings continue to be confirmed in my experience with directees, supervisees, and students.

*Definitions and Positive Criteria*

For a working definition of Christian mystical visions for this research, I follow Jesuit Karl Rahner:

We call mystical those visions the object and content of which solely concern the personal religious life and perfection of the visionary. Prophetic visions are those which in addition induce or commission the visionary to address his environment and ultimately the church with a message, instructing, warning, requiring something, or foretelling the future.<sup>11</sup>

Rahner's theory maintains that imaginary visions are the ordinary form of mystical visions. This means that the visionary does not confuse the vision with a hallucination, something thought to be external to the visionary, but that an imaginary vision emerges from within the visionary and is perceived internally. Imaginative visions may register as images drawing on any of the senses, thus they need not necessarily be visual but may be tactile, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, or kinesthetic, etc. Some visions include multiple sensory impressions and others only one or two. Ignatius' exercise of 'the Application of the Senses' invites the retreatant to employ all five senses in the repetition each day on retreat as a way of savoring or tasting the experience of God more deeply.

Further Rahner dispels much of the skepticism surrounding the interpretation of such experiences in terms of causation. He argues that ordinarily they are 'caused by God' but not through a suspension of natural laws. Thus God works through the consciousness of the visionary. When he claims divine causality, Rahner asserts that the vision is an echo of mystical graces or of the visionary's love of God that over flows into the consciousness of the visionary through imagination.<sup>12</sup> One does not evaluate the vision on the basis of cause but rather in relationship to its content and effects. If the effects are wholesome, not injurious to the spiritual or psychological health of the visionary, contribute toward progress in holiness, and the content is congruent with faith, Rahner evaluates them as positive. For spiritual directors or other pastoral persons, these are useful criteria.

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, *Visions and prophecies*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Today, it seems to me women particularly manifest a certain mystical creativity in terms of the content of their visionary experience. Their imaginative visions are truly congruent with faith yet also express a greater diversity in images of God and ways God might act in their lives than a narrow or rigid interpretation of Catholic tradition might seem to permit. Although most women interpret their experience primarily in a personal way, namely God's guidance for the visionary herself, collectively these visions may potentially be prophetic for the whole people of God. They often tend to undermine the tradition's limitation of women's public role in the church as well as its resistance to feminine images of God, inclusive language in prayer, and women-affirming piety.

*General Features of Visions within the Research Sample*

All of the interviewees had spiritual directors who were either trained in the Ignatian tradition or who were thoroughly familiar with visionary phenomena and comfortable with it. They experienced their visions either as the unfolding of intentional visualization<sup>13</sup> as taught or discovered in imaginative contemplation or through perceptual attention to an external object that spontaneously elaborated into a full vision. An example of the latter was a vision experienced in the context of Eucharistic worship in which the movement pattern of the gathered community became something more than what everyone present might have perceived. Visions occurred frequently during corporate worship or private prayer but also occurred spontaneously within life situations.

In every instance, the visionaries felt themselves to be addressed by something not themselves, an 'Other', whom they interpreted to be God, Jesus, Mary or another spiritual being. They usually expressed some surprise. These visionaries were quite convinced that something more than they could personally create even psychically was transpiring. Frequently, there was also an 'original' or creative component to the vision. Although the starting point of the vision might be almost stereotypical, its story line or symbolic content was often uniquely stamped by the visionary's personality. Although the vision was

<sup>13</sup> Bernard McGinn writes in relationship to medieval visions, 'I suggest that it is helpful to think of them primarily as "visualizations", in the sense of powerful imaginative creations based on intense meditation on the imagery of the Bible and liturgy, as well as artistic representations of Christ, the angels and saints, heaven and hell, and so on. [Medieval Women] produced such powerful and original new visions, or visualizations, of the inner meaning of salvation history and of the mystical relation between God and humans. It is understandable that they would have conceived of their imaginative constructions and the dialogues that accompanied them as divinely given, insofar as these produced new theological and spiritual insights useful for themselves and their readers'. *Flowering of mysticism*, 30.

congruent with the faith tradition in theme, it was again original and creative rather than a slavish repetition of the story-line of the Scripture or a narrow interpretation of the tradition.

### *Sense of Presence*

The most important and universal feature of these visions was an awe-inspiring and consoling sense of God's presence at the core of the experience that was more important than any of the particular incidents occurring in them. Historical research affirms the hallmark of mystical experience is this sense of God's presence quite apart from the particular images or metaphors used to describe the goal of the mystical journey. Bernard McGinn identifies this 'direct consciousness of the presence of God' as the most constant feature in Christian mysticism.<sup>14</sup> Mystics may experience this sense of God's presence without any accompanying visionary phenomena, but they often occur together. Among the subjects in the study, all of them actively sought an experience of the presence of God, consented to it, and at times fled from it or resisted it. The experience of God of many people in this study was pervasive, deep, and on-going. For others it was intermittent, subtle, or alternated successively between presence and absence. All had committed themselves to being influenced by this consciousness of God and many showed evidence of life transformation.

### *Bodily Sense*

This sense of the presence of God was often experienced bodily as well as spiritually. Numerous references were made to exactly where in their bodies they felt or heard words. They offered rich descriptions of a warming of the heart or an opening or relaxation in the chest, stomach, or gut. Some described a sense of an 'impending' encounter. Some described intense, ecstatic trance states; others very delicate and subtle interior experience that left them relaxed, joyful, peaceful, etc. A few described intense erotic responses; while others noted changed feeling states that they registered in their bodies. Many used physical metaphors such as, being held, embraced, or touched to describe the effect or quality of the way God was present to them.<sup>15</sup> For example:

I feel called to them in the sense that I get real restless, and all the things in my life that have been important to me or crucial (...) suddenly I could care less

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Mc Ginn, *The foundations of mysticism: Origins to the fifth century*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, xvi.

<sup>15</sup> An account of such bodily responses among the women can be found in Janet K. Ruffing, 'Knitting together mind, body and spirit: the experience of contemporary Christian women', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 7 (1997), 242-262.



about. I'm just not THERE. Then I start looking around, and basically, what I feel to myself is that I want to be with Jesus. (...) but it's not clear HOW I'm going to be with Jesus. (...) NOW I'm better at knowing what this is, and can more easily help myself. Before when they were first coming regularly (...) it was an accident, (...) I didn't feel called to it or anything; I was just sitting there quietly. And it came into my mind, this image of Christ in the rose garden. (...) I was desiring a rose garden of my own. So [the image was of] Christ, the historical figure, that you might get in paintings (...) in the rose garden (...) The visions are like a dream, only that you are awake. But they had the quality of a dream, in that you are participating in it TOTALLY. There's no room for (...) observation. So you are part of this thing, only you are not in charge. Like in a day dream, where you can move it to suit. This is like a night [dream] which you can't control. So I'm sitting in the garden, and Jesus comes up to me, a little girl in (...) a fur dress, and he stands there next to me, next to this seat, and he says 'Come sit here'. But he didn't SAY anything; (...) I knew He wanted me to sit down next to him. So, I sat and wriggled and squirmed. And that's all we did (...) finally I just STOPPED. I sat still. And (...) then it was over. So, I'd say it was kind of a preparation, to know that (...) in the future (...) to sit still was going to be one of the requirements. And I had to learn to do that. It was interesting that the texture and the smell of the robe (...) was like those of the nuns who brought me up (...) [with my spiritual director] we talked about it over the phone, and it was all symbolic and those were the symbols, and somehow that seemed all right. And I thought, O.K. But after that I was real concerned lest they increase, lest they tell me to do things...

### *Integrating, Positive Effects of Visions*

To use an Ignatian vocabulary, profound consolation was the usual effect reported. There was frequently a consoling, guiding quality to the vision. Physical and psychological healing was embedded in the imagery. Subjects were strengthened, comforted, challenged, taught, called, invited into deeper intimacy, or confirmed in callings or new missions.<sup>16</sup> Two received prophetic words for their respective communities.<sup>17</sup> Others reported the social effects of their visions included their

<sup>16</sup> 'I am going to Africa in September. The end of August, I was making the Mission Discernment Program here on the West Coast, discerning my mission. God was calling me there. I felt called up on the mountains, and I just sat there under a tree, and I really called out to God, "Here I am". Am I to go to mission at this age? Am I really called there? And I felt the same type of power of God just coming to me there and really, I cried. I really cried and screamed, "Here I am Lord" and I could feel Him say, "Be not afraid. Be not afraid".'

<sup>17</sup> See Janet. K. Ruffing, 'Hearing voices: An interpretation of contemporary locutionary phenomena', in: Hein Blommestijn et al. (Eds.), *Seeing the seeker: Explorations in the discipline of spirituality*. A Festschrift for Kees Waaijman, Leuven: Peeters, 2008, 495-510, for a full treatment of the visions in this sample that involved voices and discernment criteria for evaluating them. Karl Rahner also identified five types of prophecy and several criteria for identifying

being more loving persons in their ordinary environments. Many were supported through profound changes in their image of God, clearly developing beyond the Super-Ego God (Shea) to a God who entered into an increasingly mutual relationship with them. Often images or words in the visions indicated the healing of deep psychic wounds that were blocking this transformation. Karl Rahner describes the potential positive effects from authentic visionary experience as contributing to religious deepening, decisive transformation, and having lasting effects. These interviewees described such effects from their most important visionary experiences. In addition, there were no obvious signs of pathology such as cognitive disturbances, impaired functioning after the mystical experience, or signs of ego disintegration. Once they adjusted to their visions, the visions seemed to enhance their everyday functioning in significant ways.

### *Typical Patterns of Progression*

There were some typical patterns of progression among a number of the participants along with a few notable exceptions. Generally, interviewees described beginning with a complex and fully elaborated process of actively imagining themselves in a Gospel scene or in some favorite sacred landscape. They would create the scene with exact detail, and they engaged in lengthy conversations with one or another figure. These imagined contemplations might include multiple scenes, actions, and considerable emotional interchange. At this stage, the person knew they were creating most of the imagery. Even then, however, most reported some surprise in the imagery when they became more passive and they felt themselves in touch with Jesus or God's presence through this imaged scene.

At the beginning of contemplative prayer, spontaneity and surprise were more prominent and they sensed God to be both present and more involved in the unfolding imagery. At this stage of prayer development, some participants reported spontaneous visions without any preparatory visualization on their part. An important exception to this progression was a man who did very little active imagination before he began to have spontaneous visionary experience, seeing Jesus in the clearing outside his window. A couple of the women bypassed the first stage of imaginative prayer altogether. A typical example of this initial stage of imaginative prayer is this description from a married woman with two children:

I remember being on a hill and kind of swooped up by Jesus, and we walked along a path, into a field, and there were all different roads into this field. And so

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true prophecy in *Visions and prophecies*: (1) superstition, (2) parapsychological, (3) Anticipation of the future in the light of philosophy and history, (4) fabricated prophecies, and (5) genuine supernatural revelations caused by God (91-99). His description of true prophecy is too lengthy to cite but occurs in the same volume (105-106).

I started to go towards one and I remember thinking am I going on the right path? But then I saw Jesus was with me. And so I figured this path was okay. But I was always (...) aware that there were all these other paths kind of, you know, off of the field. As we walked along we came upon a baby. And I picked up the baby and together we were kind of goo-gooing and holding the baby and nurturing the baby. I paused for a while. And then I had the image of continuing down the path and the baby became attached to me. And that was the end of the image. And, you know, I stayed with that for a long time because I realized, in facilitation, you know, with my supervisor and my spiritual director (...) But a lot came out of it for me because I saw the baby as life. (...) finding life on this path. What I was getting hung up on was that it had to be this path. And then I realized that I could kind of hop to all of these paths that came over the fields, that there was no one path. That was the key part. There was something else about the baby, how this life attached itself. (...) I didn't have to hold it. This baby just kind of (...) hooked on. Almost like it had velcro. So anyway that was an image that stayed with me for a long time and continues (...) I'm in a point right now where (...) I don't know which path I'm supposed to be on. So I go back to that realizing that with God I can find life no matter what path I choose. God can use any situation. I don't have to be hung up on picking the right path. (...) I almost call it my spot. It's a spot under a tree, kind of on a hill, that I know Jesus waits for me there. So that's where this prayer began, at my spot. [It] often starts there. So it began at that spot, under the tree, where it kind of swooped me up and we went down into this field.<sup>18</sup>

As prayer developed into longer periods of contemplative prayer characterized by great simplicity and a pervasive sense of God's presence, fewer texts were read, fewer words exchanged, and an image pattern consisting often of a single scene was held without much development for several prayer sessions. Sometimes a very simple single image that either emerged from a deep quiet prayer or that the visionary remembered became a steady vehicle for focusing attention on the interior action of God. This pattern was delicate and subtle for some. For others, the experience was intense.. For both groups there was stability in their presence to the consolation they were receiving and their sense of the divine presence through their image. Within this group, a number also experienced full-blown visionary states, especially during periods of secluded retreat but increasingly at unexpected times in ordinary life. At the time of the interview,

<sup>18</sup> [Q:] 'When you began another prayer period, where did you start?' 'We would be maybe in the field. The usual spot, going right down to this path, I think when I took the time and went back we spent maybe more time in the field. And I think maybe words, maybe more than words. I can remember talking to the Lord in the fields and saying, (...) "I know there's life in me, just come with me". And also this probably happened after the prayer was facilitated (...) I realized that I didn't have to go back in the field, that I could go from path to path in a very free sense'.

several experienced this depth and solidity of prayer on a regular basis without being on retreat.

I don't (...) do a lot of scripture anymore. There are words that speak like a phrase or a line and there's a lot more meaning for me now, and I (...) stay with them. And a lot happened within me just thinking of it. Just being with it. Yesterday, a phrase came up; we had some sharing. I hadn't thought of the line, but it said, 'You are my people and I am your God'. (...) I just sat with that phrase, it just came to me all of a sudden, working in a group and I was part of this group of people and I didn't just feel that I was just this individual there. This prayer took in everybody sitting around me. And when I came to the Chapel, it came back to me. I just sat there with it and then I found myself just singing a little song that I learned [which] came back like love songs. [It] welled up inside. And when I started sharing these feelings with other people, I was trying to remember the words. You see, the words were in there but it was just now as you said, just welling around in there. Just swimming. Coming up in the gush. And like being rocked in the arms of the Lord. You know, that we're all in this together. (...) The whole [group], all of us as we were. Whatever we became in our brokenness and our joys are just part of a whole (...) entering into each one of them and that whatever they were and whatever I was myself at that moment, you know, together.

Her second experience was evoked by a picture in a magazine.

I was going through a magazine and (...) this picture of the Shepherd came. It was round. It was done on a plate, the art was well done; I don't know the artist. (...) The words underneath said 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. I just closed my eyes and the picture (...) on the plate transformed into another picture for me. Just the Shepherd who is there for me and I could feel just being carried, just being in his arms, just being loved by him. Just as I am. (...) the experiences come at any time. (...) It was a seeing and feeling it. I guess I couldn't say I could see the Shepherd in person.

A notable exception to the characteristic simplicity of prayer at this stage was that of three women. Two of them engaged in long and involved written dialogues as a part of their prayer. In these dialogues, they were being taught in significant ways. The journaling was a vehicle of increasing intimacy with God for both of them. Both of them had frequent experience of contemplative prayer in more subtle forms and without the complexity and detail of either their written dialogues or the detail of visual, participative contemplations that were profoundly healing and transformative. At the time of the interviews, the journal and intense visionary experience had stopped for one. She was adjusting to a simpler and more subtle form of communication. The others continued to experience a variety of images, words, and communication in their prayer experience. It appears that a complexity of images or language can and does appear in full blown visionary states when the visionary needs some kind of specific guidance. Some people do not permanently develop, as a matter of course,

beyond the appearance of visionary events. Visionary events can and do occur at any time in the mystical journey. One of the men who had had intense and complex imaginative visions, attempted to abandon them altogether when he felt he was directed to stop creating all these emotional expressions and vivid scenes and turn to centering prayer. Despite his satisfaction with the simplicity of centering prayer as taught by Contemplative Outreach, he, nevertheless, experienced visionary phenomenon that he ignored in centering prayer.

### *Spontaneous Initiatory Visions*

The received mystical tradition usually associates authentic visionary experience as characteristically manifesting itself during the latter stages of the transformation process originating in infused contemplation and as indicative of the spiritual betrothal, marriage, and union. This assumption is often misleading. There is ample witness in the historical record that visions of an initiatory nature occur either during spiritual awakening prior to religious conversion or at moments in which God is inviting a person to a new phase of spiritual development. Gertrude the Great, Angela Merici, Joan of Arc and numerous others attest to this pattern. A number of the interviewees who had such initiatory experiences became frightened by these overtures and resisted further visionary experiences before they eventually responded with a commitment to living a spiritual life. Some described one or two such instances. Others described a subsequent history of visionary approaches of God in times of development, growth, or crisis after long periods of less remarkable religious experience. Many of these interviewees were deeply reassured by the experience of their interview with me. They felt free to talk about their visions because they often doubted them or were afraid to discuss them with their directors for fear of negative reactions. I offer this example from a woman religious in the early stages of recovery for alcoholism:

A couple of times I have had this kind of [experience] that makes me laugh and also makes me know I'm okay. One time, I guess about six months ago, there was a departure liturgy and it was the Holy, Holy, Holy and we were singing 'Blessed is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord'. This happened so fast; Jesus came riding in the name of the Lord, and in the crowd he just bent over, and he said Cathy, get up here I want you with me. And he just scooped me right up on the horse or donkey (...) And it was very real but I can't tell you how fast it was (...) I guess part of it felt good because there was a mob of people there, but he saw me in the mob and he wanted me on that animal with him. Even the memory of that experience helps me now.

### *Mystical Interludes of Intense and Prolonged Communication*

In addition to the initiatory character of visions for some, others experienced an increase of visionary events when God seemed to be initiating a new mystical

phase of intense and prolonged communication, teaching, transforming, or healing the interviewee. These tended to be full-blown ecstatic trance states. They were characterized by deep absorption, trance-like states, inability to resist or control the experience, an assurance and an unmistakable quality to the experience that left no doubt in them about God's involvement. Frequently they experienced a felt sense of something about to happen. Multiple senses were often involved, including brief or lengthy locutions, and the effects on them were life-changing and enduring. Interviewees who were accustomed to imaginative contemplation easily distinguished between ordinary prayer experiences that begin to deepen into contemplative prayer but were less intense and seemed to be a combination of God and the person and these more intense and deeper mystical experiences. Although there was often a signature preparation for the event, the interviewee never tried to initiate them. Frequently, they occurred without any particular activity on the part of the subject other than walking into a chapel for Eucharist or feeling a sudden impulse to turn to prayer. Sometimes they occurred as an answer to a question the person was wrestling with such as a new commitment of some kind, such as to priesthood or missionary life. In response to the interior focus of the subject on the choice in question, the 'answer' from God's side frequently came in a full-blown vision that left no doubt in the subject that their choice was in harmony with God's desires. These were often accompanied by a 'word' which gave quite clear direction in this particular context. Finally, some appeared in the midst of a serious crisis. At times, these experiences occurred as a series during important times of transition or decision-making and then came to an abrupt end. Some of the subjects had experienced such an ending; others were still in the midst of the series. Of the eleven respondents whose prayer had simplified and deepened into a characteristically mystical prayer of infused contemplation with or without an on-going visionary quality to it, only three did not describe a full-blown visionary incident or interlude at some time in their lives.

This experience-based research suggests that for those God chooses to communicate with through visions or locutions, many will continue to experience such kataphatic phenomena throughout their entire mystical development and they ought not try to suppress it nor should a spiritual director. Because the mystical teaching that these experiences are not constitutive of mystical prayer nor necessary to it is so over-emphasized, many of those interviewed actually denied the experiences they were continuing to have. Even those who had tried to adopt image-less centering prayer, discovered that images, nonetheless, arose within them or they might be visited with a full-blown vision or brief locution without warning outside of time dedicated to prayer.

I was raised (...) very strongly Methodist. At the other seminary [I] spent maybe two to three hours before the Blessed Sacrament a day. During the first year [here], my prayer experience was continuing to deepen. And I had some mystical

experiences. (...) I would (...) drift off into the centering prayer mode during Mass. I knew what was going on (...) but people would be standing and I would realize I had sat through this whole segment. (...) That would embarrass me. One time I was looking at the altar. (...) Behind the celebrant, the whole sanctuary was loaded with priests concelebrating. They were like ghostly figures (...) I looked away, looked back, looked away, looked back, I mean I (...)

[Q:] There was actually only one person saying Mass?

I saw many people in the sanctuary celebrating Mass. (...) I saw that they were vested. They had on long robes, but not really colored. (...) it was like a ghostly presence, but I could see them all clearly there without seeing facial features. That very much frightened me because I knew I'm not a person that (...) Takes to (...) and believes in ghosts and yes, (...) that very much frightened me. It was also after a deep (...) experience of centering prayer. Where there was just such a sense of peace and love that I felt.

### *Psychic Qualities*

Although I do not personally equate psychic phenomena with infused contemplation in agreement with the received mystical tradition, some of those interviewed described psychic events that occurred together with the deeper, God influenced mystical experience. At least five of the people in the study described psychic experiences such as clairvoyant dreams, out of body experiences, visionary travel, aura reading, and clairvoyant knowledge about massage clients. Two who reported psychic experiences were somewhat anxious about them and non-receptive to them because of the reactions of other people and their own fear. The others seemed to take them for granted, and they did not seem as important to them as the more properly mystical interludes that nourished them deeply.

### *Attitudes Toward these Experiences*

The tradition has prescribed desirable attitudinal responses that authentic mystics are expected to demonstrate in response to these experiences. They involve gratitude, humility, and indifference to them. Above all, they are expected to obediently submit to ecclesial authority. I personally find these guidelines only partially helpful. Many of those interviewed were conditioned by others to be so skeptical toward their visionary experience that they actually avoided prayer and opening themselves to God's influence as a result. Others had insufficient psychological knowledge that might have allowed them to distinguish between pathological, disintegrative or dissociative states that might lead to psychosis. As a result, they were simply frightened about losing control themselves or of negative external judgment by others. If they read mystical literature, they often assumed they personally did not qualify as being holy enough or advanced



enough for their experiences to be authentic. Many had difficulty receiving these particular consolations even when their spiritual directors encouraged them. And some might never have yielded to their experiences and the subsequent growth and development without helpful, supportive spiritual direction. I believe the appropriate attitudes might be expanded to include some of the following: openness to explore a range of symbolic meanings and interpretation for a given experience; lack of ego-inflation or grandiosity; a sense of wonderment, awe, mystery accompanied by gratitude; an increase in faith, hope, and love; a willingness to be of service to or engaged with the needs of others; increase in self-knowledge both in relationship to gifts and abilities as well as to sinfulness or weaknesses; and the courage to allow themselves to be influenced or affected by God and embrace the call, mission, or guidance offered.

### *Gender Differences*

For the men, visionary experience appeared to be less important. Four of the five men in the study reported some visionary phenomenon. Only one person welcomed it, having had some childhood experiences and then developed into centering prayer as an older man. Nonetheless, he experienced intense imaging at other times of prayer. Another one resisted and avoided visionary states although they occurred from time to time. A third male began to experience some visionary phenomena in contemplative prayer once he learned to meditate. In the interview, he still seemed somewhat mystified by it although it was primarily a spontaneous Ignatian 'application of the senses'. The fourth reported nothing visionary. The last male interviewee reported one full-blown visionary state as part of an altar call in a Protestant church as a young person and nothing else after that.

By contrast, fifteen of the nineteen women reported visionary experience. Four women appeared to be more physically expressive, sensate, or symbolic in their mediations of religious experience and so tended to be less visionary. One woman had an occasional locution or tactile vision; another had occasional intense visualizations. Two other women had the capacity to visualize but this was not particularly significant for them and typically involved simply creating the scene (composition of place) for Ignatian contemplation.

### CONCLUSION

I believe it is not accidental that the majority of those identified as having these mediated experiences of grace are women. The biases against these experiences in the tradition are often rooted in a bias against the emerging power and spiritual



authority of women. The free action of the Holy Spirit is one of the ways God acts in the world and in the churches toward change, liberation, and empowerment among those who are denied such action through prejudice, fear, and blatant structural injustice. While an attitude of on-going and faithful discernment is a necessity, both the gifts of the Spirit and the 'tail of the Serpent' are not always easily discerned by those with a structural monopoly on power. It is usually from the position of the oppressed or less powerful that God raises the lowly and does a new thing. Hence, it is critically important for spiritual directors to overcome their own inherited biases and prejudices in such matters in order to more properly accompany and co-discern with such directees. I believe these kinds of experience are exceedingly common and a normal development for many in a life-long commitment to prayer and religious living.