



The Mystical Narrative as a Way of Revealing the Truth of Faith¹

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Abstract

The biblical understanding of faith shows that it is a phenomenon inherently connected with the perception and experience of God's presence and action in human history. Revelation is considered the foundation of faith, as recorded by both testaments: from the words or personal stories of the patriarchs and the prophets to the stories of the Gospel and the witness of Christ's followers. The act of faith expects that the individual or the nation will fully embrace Revelation, doing so in devotion and trust. Reflecting on the relationship between religion and faith, this study will primarily draw from the paradigm of Christian knowledge and, especially, - utilizing the method of literary interpretation with interdisciplinary overlaps - from the mystical experiences of selected medieval authors (such as Margherita de Cortona, Angela da Foligno, and Chiara da Montefalco). This is because the mystical experience mirrors a multitude of attributes that accompany the act of faith. And even though the mystical experience is due to its mysterious character fundamentally inexpressible, it remains an original source of revealing the processes of the human being's spiritual maturation.

Keywords: mystical experience, truth, faith, poetic of the ineffable, mystery of the Trinity, Margaret of Cortona, Clare of Montefalco, Angela of Foligno

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Homo viator as an ancient literary topos and as a concept in the philosophy of hope, developed in the 20th century by Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), together constitute the two outer points of an arch of historical accounts that disclose humanity's being in the world. They illustrate the shifting and dynamic nature of human existence (from birth to death), as well as that every person finds themselves, at a certain point in their life, directly confronted with the question of their life's meaning, whether the answers are sought in the context of mystical and religious thought or in philosophical reflection. Belief in the mysterious and pervasive influence the sacred has upon the human being, along with the desire for contact with it throughout life and certainly after life, are inherent within all our history. It is what guides both the individual and the community on their paths to places of worship, just as it inspires our inner journeys. Even the semantic opposite of faith (faithlessness), as an approach towards life, always emerges from the search for truth, authenticity, and meaning.

The history of civilizations points towards the fact that in the labour of interpreting and understanding life, especially its precarity and finality, while it is influenced by one's knowledge of self and the world and therefore by culture, the human spirit with its impulses remains as both the primary subject and agent of this process. Without the literary arts, many of the most intimate expressions of human interior would remain unknown and scattered, or their original form would be lost to time. The expressions of literary language have the potential to illuminate an experience of an ineffable character, to glimpse beyond the invisible, beyond the horizon that we can only intuit, and even so, not within the ranges of common experiences. Independent proofs of this can be found in personal spiritual experiences captured in biographies, journals, or memoirs. These texts did not primarily originate as works of art, though they can carry an aesthetic value. This evidence is found throughout centuries of literary history of religiosity within the accounts of Christian mystics, capturing the pinnacle of transcendent experience. The phenomenality of these encounters reaches beyond the human capability of knowing, which is possibly why the mystical has retained an attractiveness for its recipients, whether in a scientific discourse or in other, more accessible genres. It reveals and casts a light on that which is hidden in the common human experience or that which resonates throughout it in the form of a subtle, spiritual intuition.

The purpose of this study is a literary-semantic interpretation of mystical narratives and their essential connection to 'truths of faith.' The Catholic teaching associates them with the knowledge attained through a revelation from God; truths of faith therefore have to be, explicitly or implicitly, positioned within the Word of God or the Tradition, which is considered to be the source of revelation. The objects of my study are the accounts of Christian mystics, particularly those

by three female mystics of medieval Italy: St. Margaret of Cortona (1247–1297), St. Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) and St. Clare of Montefalco (1268–1308). The spiritual experiences of these women present an important addition to European cultural history and to the study of the universal character of mystical language. By a mystical experience, I understand here the unmediated encounter with the transcendent, a spiritual perception of the nature of being in an altered state of consciousness. The domain which the mystical works concern themselves with and to which their inner imagery synecdochally refers is the transcendent presence of God (within creation) and not the physical reality (of creation).

The mystical narrative presents a model of the inner world of (not only) the medieval man. It's the source of authentic spiritual knowledge, though at times marked by unusual or even bizarre verbal and nonverbal formulations. This is the startling dimension of the mystical, its signifying of a contact with a world other than a natural, earthly one, represented in these cases by the towns and regions of Italy within which the stories of these three female mystics are set, with their specific spiritual and cultural backgrounds. Yet the narratives of a mystical experience both turn back to and intensely live in their historical context and its physical reality. The individual and characteristically exceptional spiritual experiences of Margaret of Cortona, Angela of Foligno, and Clare of Montefalco resonate with the tradition of spirituality based upon the ideal of *sequela Christi*, practiced and deepened in Italy throughout the 12th and 13th centuries, especially by the mendicant orders. These accounted for a new mentality, which accentuated individual engagement and a new type of Christian holiness; it was conceived to be a personal journey springing from an inner need, and it became identified, primarily in the Mediterranean, with a lifestyle based upon poverty and abstention.² Accounts of the holiness of these women already began throughout their lives and were undoubtedly influenced by their practice of strict asceticism, their charismatic gifts (the word of knowledge, the gifts of healing, prophecy, etc.), and works of charity, but more importantly, they were born out of the reality that their spiritual journeys intensified within the people an entrenched need to have a personal relationship with God, to experience something consolatory or miraculous, possibly within the *fuga mundi* or as a vision of blessed, eternal life.

The mystical account - a gesture of truthfulness and an act of community

For a text to be considered a part of mystical literature, it means that it captures a personal experience with God. According to Gianni Baget Bozzo, such text has the following attributes: it talks about the experience directly or indirectly, either autobiographically or in reference to the experiences of others, outlining the criteria

² See André VAUCHEZ, "Il Santo.", in *L'uomo medievale*, ed. by Jacques Le Goff, Bari: Laterza, 1988, p. 367, p. 369.

and the form of mystical experiences in a general sense.³ The reason for which the experience is written down is the aim of having a certain “resonance among its recipients”⁴. It’s usually due to an external influence that mystics disclose the experience they have lived through, not having any authorial ambitions. If they do share their experience with others, it is because they realize its importance (of the content and nature of the attained understanding) for the community which they are part of and, therefore, more broadly, for the Church. The essential meaning of such a narrative is faithfulness to what was revealed – as this is what the mystics discuss – what they mystically saw, heard, or felt, which is why it matters to them that their account is captured with authenticity. A mystical experience is the Catholic Creed materialized, as it presupposes faith while originating in it and reaching beyond it, without the mystic attaining “the light of glory.” As affirmed within the thought of Edith Stein, the mystical is an in-between state of sorts, lying between the light of grace and the light of glory.⁵ The attained knowledge is for the mystic a devotion, a truth of faith, which is to be protected and manifested in their doing. If they are to speak of their experience, it matters to them whether it could inspire their recipients to an inner transformation or a spiritual renewal, which would then affect their doing as well.

The validity and authenticity of the experiences of Margaret of Cortona, Clare of Montefalco, and Angela of Foligno are confirmed *in primis* by the people who were in some way close to them. The witnesses were people from spiritual and monastic communities, confessors, and representants of the Church, tasked with investigating the experience, as in the case of Clare of Montefalco. When she died in August of 1308 with a reputation for holiness, the bishop’s vicar of Spoleto was the French priest Béranger de Saint-Affrique. It was his task to verify the truth of the mystic’s life and the miracles in it. In his investigation, he collected all available information and witness testimonies, from which was written the Latin *Vita sanctae Clarae de cruce ordinis eremitarum S. Augustini* (1315–1317), Clare’s first biography, which today serves as an important source of “the civil and religious history of 13th century Umbria”.⁶ On the basis of his investigation’s conclusions, Béranger became a passionate advocate for the cause of her canonization. We learn about Margaret’s dialogues with Christ from the Latin biography *Legenda de vita et miraculis beatae Margaritae de Cortona* (1311; *The Life and Revelations of*

³ See Gianni Baget BOZZO, “La mistica.”, in *Le parole della mistica. Problemi teorici e situazione storiografica per la composizione de un repertorio di testi*, ed. by Francesco Vermigli, Firenze: Sismel, Edizioni del Galluzzo and Fondazione Ezio Franceschini ONLUS, 2007, p. 3.

⁴ Magda KUČERKOVÁ - Miroslava REŽNÁ, “Vnútorné obrazy u kresťanských mystikov. Literárno-sémantická charakteristika.” *World Literature Studies* 6 (23), 1 (2014): 7.

⁵ See Baget BOZZO, “La mistica.”, p. 3.

⁶ Clara GENNARO, “Berengario, di Sant’Africano (1967).”, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 9, available at https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/berengario-di-sant-africano_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

Saint Margaret of Cortona, 1883). It was written by her confessor, Minorite Giunta Bevegnati, at the request of his fellow brother, an inquisitor, and Margaret's first confessor, Giovanni da Castiglione. Brother Giunta knew the Cordoban penitential movement, which developed under the guidance of his order and into which Margaret entered shortly after her arrival into the city very well; he was trying to settle the disputes between the conflicted family factions there, an effort in which Margaret became engaged as well. We learn about Angela of Foligno's mystical experience from her spiritual autobiography, *Memorial*, written in 1292–1296. She herself dictated what she experienced in the mystical state to her confessor and spiritual guide. She spoke in volgare, and brother Arnolfo, known also as the brother scribe, would on the spot transcribe her words into simple Latin. As he himself says in the pages of the *Memorial*, he based his process of writing upon trying not to write down any idea or expression differently from what Angela has said – if he failed to understand her comprehension of the experience, she would explain herself again – he stresses in the introduction to the book that everything is written down truthfully, although he also admits a certain incompleteness and limitation.⁷

The texts capturing the mystical experiences of these three women were already subject to many close readings in their time by theologians and Church authorities, as they were already considered for canonization. This was because of the reputation they enjoyed among the people, as well their wide societal influence, especially through their part in the penitential movement, their charismatic gifts of prophecy and healing, and, not in the least, their works of charity. Their canonizations, in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries respectively (in the order of Margaret, Clare, and Angela), also affirm the authenticity of their spiritual experiences, their exceptionally virtuous lives, their evangelizing impact, as well as the truth and honesty of what they disclosed. While the private nature of their revelations and of their accompanying phenomena (mystical ecstasies, for example) did and still do meet with misunderstanding, their subjective aspect offers a variety of interpretative possibilities for philological research, as this aspect is the source of the narrative's truthfulness and validity as well as the place of mystical self-expression. The recorded accounts are often of fragmentary nature, elliptical, emotional, and situational – these attributes reflect both the conversational quality originating from the “dialogue” with a divine being and the nature of personal perception and comprehension of the divine. The effort of honest disclosure is in a mystical account marked by a notable poetic, characterized by a language of analogies and specific imagery, resulting from an inner perception of the phenomenon of theophany.

⁷ *Angela of Foligno's Memorial* (hence *Memorial*), ed. by Cristina Mazzoni, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999, p. 22.

The expressive qualities of mystical narration can, within the context of the experience, be understood as a gesture of truthfulness. As it was already mentioned, the main aim of the transcription – within the auto/biography – is to disclose the attained truth authentically, allowing it to influence others in the form of a *metanoia* (μετάνοια): so that it would become an object of faith and the final meaning of life for them and that they would accept the salvational importance of the disclosed experience.⁸ In this context, it's important to ask whether the source of a mystical experience and its transcription, with often the only source of information being medieval biographies and legends, is to be considered relevant. According to Pozzi and Leonardi, it is apparent that some hagiographical genres were made to showcase the heroic holiness of the mystics, as well as aiming to create out of them an example worthy of following: some are focused on canonization, and though they contain a great deal of information, they are not impartial as they necessarily investigate the exceptional circumstances under a given perspective demanded by the strict legal process.⁹ The medieval authors of biographies are formed in the context of a certain theological culture, ecclesiastical politics, identifying themselves with a certain (for example monastic) charism and having their own idiolect, which is in many ways a reflection of the period's rhetoric. Enrico Menestò, discussing the biography of Margaret, points out that the intermediary role of brother Giunta could have changed and constricted the actual imagery – the recipients receive not a direct witness of the event but only a certain memory of it.¹⁰ Hagiographical genres were a part of ecclesiastical lexis, and it's natural that besides didactic and educational purposes, they would also serve ideological and political ones. It must at the same time be noted that these works were not of historical character and did not carry documentary value. Hagiographies, alongside legends, according to André Jolles, divide the historical chain of events into individual moments, which they then allow to be imbued with the quality of imitability (“valore dell'imitabilità”).¹¹ Even the contemporary receptional potential of these genres, specifically the legends of Margaret, considered by Roberto Fusco¹², lies in the actualization and renewal of the worthy example – facts and the disclosed narrative enter new contexts and through this, preserve their meaning and value for exploring spiritual experiences, even from the perspective of spiritual theology. In Fusco's discussion, it is shown many times that, despite their individual character, mystical experiences are an

⁸ See Riccardo TONELLI – Luis A. GALLO – Mario POLLO, *Narrare per aiutare a vivere*, Torino: Editrice Elle Di Ci – Leumann, 1992, p. 178.

⁹ See Giovanni POZZI – Claudio LEONARDI, eds., *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, Genova – Milano: Casa Editrice Marietti, [1988] 2004, p. 12.

¹⁰ See Roberto FUSCO, *Angela. Giuliana. Margherita. Tre mistiche medievali*, Milano: Ancora, 2008, p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

act of community (“atto comunitario” in the term of Gianni Baget Bozzo). The community not only provides the mystic with the (religious) language in which they express their experience; it is also the recipient of this experience: “whoever speaks of or describes an experience with God does so as to inform a certain community about it, so that they can identify with that narrative, even though they were not part of it”.¹³

The infused nature of the medieval Christian female mystics’ spiritual experiences, especially their eschatological dimensions and the universal qualities of the language they use in their accounts, is the platform on which their message is renewed and on which it enters new communities throughout history (even into those unsympathetic towards religiosity). This happens alongside both the historical evolution of spirituality and a deeply human, individual desire for higher knowledge that would give meaning to the (not always necessarily spiritual) events in their lives. The impact of mystical narratives is attested by the large following that has gathered around all three female mystics and is still being developed to this day.

The Word of God as an object of mystical contemplation

We can consider biblical narratives to be an inherent part of mystical ones, as mystical experiences are firmly positioned in the histories of salvation. In the prologue to Angela of Foligno’s *Memorial*, brother Arnold diverts the reader’s attention onto „the experience of the faithful ones” (*vere fidelis experientia*) as in it is to be found the “treasure hidden in the field of the gospel.”¹⁴ As this is Angela’s autobiography and its narration follows her life, it is she herself who represents an authentic journey of faith through her unusual spiritual experience. Like the man and the merchant, protagonists of the New Testament parable of the treasure and the pearl, she believed that she had found the kingdom of heaven and (radically) gave up everything for it. As brother scribe continues to say in the prologue, experiences of the truly faithful reveal the incarnate Word of God, it perceives and touches it, as it itself says in the gospel: “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. [Jn 14, 23] And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him. [Jn 14, 21]”.¹⁵ Angela’s mystical narrative mirrors her inestimable inner understanding, which draws upon an intimate, unifying communion with God. This understanding has been inspiring for the spiritual life of the Church, which honored Angela with multiple attributes – “magister theologorum” (1624, the Dutch jesuit Maximilian

¹³ Baget BOZZO, “La mistica.”, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Memorial*, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 22.

Sandaeus)¹⁶, “a truthful teacher of spiritual living” (1993, pope John Paul II.)¹⁷ or “...she, who through the means of various events of her life and daily practice of the Christian virtues, reached the pinnacle of evangelical perfection and became a prophet as well as a teacher of truthful knowledge of Christ, as shown in the mystery of the Cross” (2013, pope Francis I.).¹⁸

A view profoundly focused upon the crucifixion of the Son of God is the central perspective of the spiritual and practical lives of Angela, as well as Margaret and Clare. The gospel, which reveals Christ as both Godman and saviour, presents the innermost core of their mystical narratives. With their experiences and faith, they attest that God exists and that he is perceptible by us here.¹⁹ The divine and human dimensions of Christ’s person and the key events of his life, such as the mystery of his incarnation, his death by torture, and his resurrection, are the objects of mystical contemplation. In a prayer, her eyes fixed upon the cross, Angela experiences within a higher realm of knowing the reality that the Son of God died for our sins. Admittance of her own sinfulness then becomes much more painful to her: “I felt that I myself had crucified him. But I still did not know which was the greater good: that He had rescued me from my sins and from hell and converted me to penance, or that He had been crucified for me”.²⁰ Her pain is that more authentic the more Angela is aware of her past lived in spiritual indifference, ostentation, and pretentiousness. Her process of conversion began when she attended a general confession as a thirty-seven year old, troubled by anxiety and pangs of conscience. The knowledge of the meaning of the cross sets her heart ablaze with love: face-to-face with a cross she takes off her clothes and takes a vow of purity, accepting the resolution that she will never offend Christ with her body. Nudity is the image of her self-abstention (as forgiveness to others, abandonment of relationships and of all possessions) and of her journey of absolute poverty and penance, which is in a strange way allowed through the deaths of her husband and children. Her desire, inspired by the gospel and by the example of St. Francis then takes a more radical form, through works of charity and her entrance into the Third Order of St. Francis. Her visions are often those of Christ nailed to the cross and of hearing him inviting her to gaze upon his wounds, which he suffered for her, while revealing his suffering: “...from His

¹⁶ See Michael S. HAHN, “St Angela of Foligno on her Feast Day”, January 4, 2022, available at <https://www.franciscanpublishing.com/st-angela-of-foligno-on-her-feast-day/>

¹⁷ “Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II.” Foligno, 20 giugno 1993, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19930620_foligno.html

¹⁸ “Lettera Decretale di Papa Francesco sulla Canonizzazione equipollente della Beata Angela da Foligno”, 9 ottobre 2013, available at <https://www.causedeisanti.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/LetteradecretalediPapaFRANCESCO.pdf>

¹⁹ Luigi BORRIELLO – Edmondo CARUANA – Maria Rosaria DEL GENIO – Nicolò SUFFI, *Slovník křesťanských mystiků*, Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2012, p. 81.

²⁰ *Memorial*, p. 26.

feet to His Head. He even showed me the hairs of His beard, eyebrows, and head, which had been plucked out; and He counted every blow of the whip, pointing to each one, and then He said, 'All this I endured for you'. (...) What can you do for me in return which would be sufficient?"²¹ Angela's deeply inner experience of theophany radically changes her: as she's cutting her ties to the world and giving away all her wealth, a new love burns even brighter within her. It's set on fire both by her yet stronger resolutions of penance, drawing from a yet deeper understanding of Christ's suffering, and by the fulfilling spiritual visions through which she feels divine sweetness and pleasures of God's benevolence. The ineffable joy felt by her is intermixed with images of the contemplated suffering, which – as she herself says – becomes that more real as she now has a living faith (her faith was before almost dead by comparison) and sheds genuine tears (which she shed as if forcefully before).²² The mystical encounter with divine presence in 1291 at the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi began what was the start of her "foolishness," which led her to attain a higher, mystical understanding, highest among the Italian female mystics; paradoxically, by her example of an active life of service, she attests that acts of love towards God and others matter more than any mystical visions.²³

The spirituality of Clare of Montefalco became identified with a penitent attitude natural to her. Since she was six years old, she chose to live in absolute poverty and strict asceticism among anchorites and continued to do so when her community accepted the rule of St. Augustine and cenobitic monasticism. Clare's spirituality and *modus vivendi* were also imprinted by the charisma of St. Francis of Assisi, which heavily influenced the medieval Italian religiosity. A saint by his example was to be an *alter Christi*, striving to emulate Christ's poverty, humility, and obedience – Clare's body bore marks of her love for Christ, the human being, as was found out after her death.²⁴ Just like St. Francis, she did not detach herself from the world, even after becoming an abbess. She performed everyday work and necessary tasks for the monastery, including activities such as the sale of property, admission of the poor, and was often visited for her "claritas doctrine" and "propheticus spiritus" by high-ranking Church officials, theologians, and even heretics.²⁵ Clare's profound relationship to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Word of God was attested to by her fellow sisters in the first phase of her canonization (1318–1319), mostly by their observations of Clare. It was

²¹ Ibid., p. 26.

²² Ibid., p. 30.

²³ See POZZI – LEONARDI, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, p. 136.

²⁴ See Giulia BARONE, "Società e religiosità femminile (750–1450).", in *Donne e fede. Santità e vita religiosa in Italia*, ed. by Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarrì, Roma and Bari: Laterza, (1994) 2009, p. 91.

²⁵ See POZZI – LEONARDI, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, pp. 204–205.

known that she experienced states of spiritual ecstasy, often lasting multiple days; her being in this extraordinary state would show on her face, whether in an expression of joy or a change in colour, and either in erratic movement or none whatsoever, as well as the loss of bodily senses.²⁶ Her fellow sisters were concerned for her, fearing her death, as these states would exhaust her horribly. She herself could barely talk about her visions and revelations, doing so rarely and with difficulty; the meanings of words and sentences were incomplete and shrouded in darkness.²⁷ Despite the rare outer appearance of her experiences and their fragmented formulation, it becomes apparent that their content was of a doctrinal rather than an emotive-affective character.²⁸ Clare would mystically behold the crucifixion of Jesus as if she stood right beneath the cross (“quasi ad pedem crucis”). Her compassion for the crucified Christ would manifest itself in an inexplicable pain of the limbs as well as in an overwhelming bitter taste, as if she herself were offered a vinegar-soaked sponge.²⁹ In one of her visions, discussed by Béranger, she saw Jesus as a beautiful young man in clothing of pure white, with a cross on his shoulders the size similar to the one he was crucified upon, and said to her: “I am looking for a strong foundation upon which I can raise the cross, and for the foundation of this cross I find a suitable place here.” She accepts Christ’s proposal to her to experience the same suffering: “If you want to be my daughter, die on the cross”. When she later fell ill, she repeated five times that the cross of Jesus is in her heart. She did not undergo Christ’s suffering only at the level of imaginative mystical contemplation but also physically, which was testified by the discovery of stigmata after her death, confirmed by immediate witnesses. Béranger describes in detail the image of her physical heart, pierced from within by an arm of the cross (that cross which Christ was to raise upon her heart), with the wound being visible on her body.³⁰

Today, Margaret of Corona tends to be termed a modern woman because of certain analogies made to the problematics of her life: after the tragic death of her partner from a noble family in Montepulciano, her wealthy relatives drove her out of their home, along with her young son; she is refused help and shelter at her father’s house, due to the hostility of her stepmother. Traumatized by the death of her son’s father, destitute and alone, she finds shelter and spiritual refuge in Cortona, where she joins in on the religious and penitential enthusiasm that was at its peak in 13th century Italy. Like Angela, Margaret enters the Third Order

²⁶ See Berengario DI SAINT-AFFRIQUE, “Vita di santa Chiara della Croce”, in POZZI - LEONARDI, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, p. 207.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁸ BARONE, “Società e religiosità femminile (750-1450)”, p. 93.

²⁹ Berengario DI SAINT-AFFRIQUE, “Vita di santa Chiara della Croce”, in POZZI - LEONARDI, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, p. 206.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

of St. Francis to serve the ill and the poor. Her life reflects her gradual spiritual rebirth, which at a certain point, profoundly intensified through an encounter with a vision of Christ. The same passion that drove her to flee from her parents' house for love (despite him being a nobleman and herself a peasant, flaunting societal convention) is imprinted on her relationship with God, whom she towards the end of her life follows into solitude at a remote hermitage. Jesus reveals himself to Margaret in mystical ecstasy as incarnate into the womb of Virgin Mary, suffering injustice and pain and dying for humanity's salvation.³¹ At three in the afternoon, she experiences in ecstasy Christ's torture and crucifixion as described by the gospel: Judas' bargain, Peter's denial, the abandonment by the apostles, the whipping, ridicule, spitting, beating, and ironic worship: she is present at the way to Calvary and at its summit. The image of Christ's suffering, perceived by her internally and felt both in body and soul, is complete, as brother Giunta says.³² When she hears within her the shouts of the Jews and Pilate's verdict, condemning Christ to death, she screams and faints; she feels the pain of Mary's heart pierced by a sword – immediate witnesses of Margaret's experience describe the physical effects of torture on her: grinding of teeth, spasms, loss of colour, inability to speak, slow pulse, and low body temperature. In the words of her biographer, she loses all sense and sight other than the inner. At the ninth hour, she lays her head down and stops moving. All the witnesses mourn her death until the nearest vespers, when "as if risen from the dead" she lifts her head up, a joyful expression on her face. Shortly after, her strength is restored. While describing Margaret's contemplation of Christ's suffering, brother Giunta uses plastic, at times even expressive comparisons, evocative attributes, and imagery, building a narrative dynamic simultaneously upon the events of Christ's torture and death and of Margaret gradually experiencing this suffering. This scene, along with those from Angela's *Memorial* fits well into late medieval spirituality, which accentuates the key role of Christ's suffering humanity that is thematized in paintings, theological tractates, and folk devotion.³³ Their spiritual view on the crucifixion of Jesus resonates with that of St. Francis, who united himself fully with the suffering Christ by accepting the stigmata.³⁴

What leads mystics to identify with such pain and even to desire it? As will be explored further in this study, their innermost motivation is the knowledge of God founded upon "a complex experience of love" (definition by the medieval philosopher and theologian Jean Gerson)³⁵. They accept this love mystically, in

³¹ *Life and Revelations of Saint Margaret of Cortona* (hence *Life and Revelations*), London: Burns and Oates, 1883, ch. II 10, 12.

³² *Life and Revelations*, ch. V, 3-4.

³³ See FUSCO, *Angela. Giuliana. Margherita. Tre mistiche medievali*, p. 38.

³⁴ See BORRIELLO et al., *Slovník křesťanských mystiků*, pp. 316-319.

³⁵ Jean GERSON, *Teologia mistica*, Cinisello Balsamo (MI): Edizioni Paoline, 1992, p. 150.

a state of contemplation, and its influence strengthens their faith in the joyful message of salvation. When St. Francis experiences theophany while looking at the icon of the crucified Christ in the church of San Damiano, he realizes the horrors of his death, but he also comes to understand their meaning: through his resurrection, by God's promise, humanity has hope for eternal life. This profound and joyful knowledge manifests as a life-long penance of spreading this message through the testimony of his life, which became of permanent spiritual value. Angela's itinerary "journey into God" is according to Pozzi and Leonardi marked by three key moments: the moments of love, of nothingness, and of resurrection, the moment of love being identified with the moment of the cross – of her love for Jesus, tortured and dying.³⁶ As the "social poverty of St. Francis corresponded to the poverty of the incarnate God, who he imitated to the point of accepting the stigmata" so Angela understands that this poverty of God, his incarnation and death, do not humiliate him or diminish his divinity, and on the contrary, "are the true face of God; he is present in them with all his divinity and power".³⁷

Actus essendi of all three mystics is a revelation of the kingdom of heaven as infused by the contemplated Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ and his doing, most visibly in the miracles of healing and resurrection (for example, Mt 9,22; Mt 15,28; Mk 10,52; Lk 8, 41-56; Jn 11,1 – 12,50). In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar – "The object of contemplation is God. (...) We contemplate the life of Jesus only because it is the life of the Son of God. (...) and so he is the answer to the question which I am. Only by looking at him can I have any ultimate hope of salvation."³⁸ Mystical narrative, not always understood and often considered a sign of insanity, is an absolute confession of faith in Jesus as Lord and Creator: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (Jn 11, 25-26). It is the faith in the truth revealed by the Word of God, which the accounts of the mystics evidence and the knowledge of which radically changes their lives: they fully give themselves to the one they believe in.

Poetic of the ineffable and the mystery of the Trinity

Mystical narrative inspires interpretation. From a general perspective it can be considered a metaphor for the hidden presence and influence of God in the world. In its particularities, specifically in the narrative of individual mystics, it takes on a synecdochic character – an example of this is an "inner imagery".³⁹ It is created within the mystic's consciousness from an infused understanding (as

³⁶ See POZZI – LEONARDI, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, p. 137.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁸ HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Prayer*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986, pp. 155–156.

³⁹ KUČERKOVÁ –REŽNÁ, "Vnútorné obrazy u kresťanských mystikov. Literárno-sémantická charakteristika.", p. 3.

opposed to attained through contemplation) and are part of their imaginative perception. They should not be taken literally. Growing out of a symbolic-connotative paradigm of Christianity, they have a specific archetypal foundation while at the same are part of an individual poetic, which specifically expresses the event of an encounter with God. The semantic significance of the mystical lies in the attribute of inexpressibility. This is attested by Paul the Apostle in *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (12, 2-4), where he shortly talks of this: “I know someone in Christ who, fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows), was caught up to the third heaven. And I know that this person (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows) was caught up into Paradise and heard ineffable things, which no one may utter.” This term’s semantic motivation is intertwined with the theophanic character of the event. The encounter with the divine happens only within a sacred space and is therefore shrouded by a veil of mystery. Participation in this event evokes awe and wonder in the recipient-mystic, being an experience both fascinating and terrifying (*fascinans* and *tremens*; terms of Rudolf Otto). The means of thematization of an encounter with the revealed Word however also point towards the distance between the sacred and the profane: the human being, by its nature, lacks the ability to express the attained knowledge, even more so to express it fully or absolutely. This is also the reason for the creation of as if an almost a new language by the mystic, with specific categories of expressions, founded upon the gradation of meaning, as well as on analogies to the natural order of the world. The qualities of God’s being that reach beyond this world, their designation and imagination, expresses this negation. An example *pars pro toto* is the Margaret of Cortona’s mystical encounter with Jesus. At the beginning of her conversion, she craves to know whether she truly is an adopted daughter of God the Father and as such is indivisible from him. When told by Christ that she is still rather a daughter of sin, in her desire to become the purest and worthiest vessel for him, as attested by her confessor-biographer, for eight days she repents from the sinfulness of her life. When she then finally accepts Christ in the Eucharist, she hears him beckon inside her: “Daughter!” (*Filia!*). The sweetness in his voice is so immense, that she feels she could die out of pure joy. She experiences other ecstatic states like this that day. That the experience of such encounter through God’s loving word is of a different quality than anything else she has felt before is evidenced by her body – in the moment of ecstasy she loses all sense and mobility. Each effort to express what she experienced is later found to be difficult: “Returned to consciousness Margaret in astonishment asked her soul how it could have remained attached to her body during her sweet dialogue with Jesus”.⁴⁰ Her inside mirroring the experience of ecstasy seeps into her abilities of

⁴⁰ *Life and Revelations*, ch. II, 6.

expression, she's unable to speak fluently, her words being only explosive, deeply emotional proclamations: "Oh infinite and sovereign sweetness of God! Oh, day promised to me by Jesus! Oh, converse full of sweetness, in which I received the title of daughter!"⁴¹ The sweetness with which the encounter with Jesus fills Margaret's heart, is so vast that she finds the word "great" to be lacking: "And My Sweetness, which has penetrated you, is it not great? – O Lord, (...) say not great; it is ineffable, incomprehensible, infinite."⁴² Angela of Foligno also uses the word sweetness in relation to her experience of God's presence within the depths of her soul. Once, meditating upon a specific word within the gospel that she connected with immense goodness and eternal love, she feels a thirst for that word. Then, in a vision, she is told that the knowledge of the gospel is so delightful, that were it to be had by anybody, they would leave behind all things worldly and even their selves. "(...) allowed me to experience this. And immediately I was understanding divine goodness with such delight that I completely forgot all worldly matters, and I completely forgot my self. I was such in such divine delight that I asked the one who was leading me never to take me away from there. And I was told that what I was asking was not yet possible; and immediately I was led back. And I opened my eyes and felt the greatest joy from what I had seen, but I was very pained that I had lost it. The memory of the vision still delights me very much. From then on I had such certainty and light and such burning love for God that I affirmed without a doubt that what is preached about the delight of God is nothing; those who preach are not able to preach that, nor do they understand what they preach. (...) Still, there was so much fire from the love of God in my heart that I did not grow tired from genuflecting or from any penance. Later the fire became so great that if I heard any talk of God, I would start screeching. (...) And whenever I saw the Passion of Christ depicted in art, I could not bear it; a fever would overtake me and I would become sick."⁴³ Angela's account shows as well that an experience of such character cannot be expressed otherwise than through comparison: what she comes to understand is as important as to make her forget everything else; she feels a joy so immense as to never want to lose it; she is so sure of what she saw and feels so much of God's love within herself that she understands this knowledge has been infused into her and isn't of this world. The difference of this experience is in this case expressed by periphrasis, which as well confirms the nonexistence of any notional vocabulary for transcendent experiences. The quoted passage also shows that the category of the ineffable is closely bound to the category of the mystery, that, which must yet remain hidden. Despite this, the ineffable is the object of mystical contemplation and of great desire, as St. John of the Cross expresses it in his poem the "Dark Night of the

⁴¹ Ibid., ch. II, 6.

⁴² Ibid., ch. VI, 2.

⁴³ *Memorial*, pp. 31–32.

Soul" (*Noche oscura del alma* [1908]): In a dark night, With anxious love inflamed, O, happy lot! Forth unobserved I went, My house being now at rest."⁴⁴ Night, a common mystical symbol, hints at, besides other things, the hidden, mysterious nature of an encounter with God at the core of a loving soul, which is semantically inherent in the term *mystic*, which has this etymological line from Greek: *myein* "to close (the eyes, mouth)" or "cover (the ears)" ; *mýstēs* "initiated", *mystérion* "mystery", *mystikós* "pertaining to mystery, closed, hidden."⁴⁵

It is not an artificially created mystery, even though it is undeniable that a mystical experience is very often an object of religious effort. But even the most arduous asceticism doesn't necessarily lead to this experience, which is evidenced by the history of spirituality and in it the many names of men and women endeavouring for a holy life. The concreteness of the life stories of these mystics from Cortona, Foligno and Montefalco also clearly show, that time and manner of an encounter with God is not within human power to affect. Their experiences, as we have so far interpreted them, attest that the mystery, which they delved into through their experience with God, is fully rooted in the influence of his transcendent being. If all these mystics through infusion contemplate the revealed Word of God Jesus Christ, they at the same time contemplate God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, by the teachings of the Catholic church. If God's existence is by its nature mysterious, the teachings of the Holy Trinity only make more profound this mysterious and hidden dimension of divine being, or it could even be said, that it deepens the mystery within the mystery. This is hinted at by the formula of St. Basil the Great, *mia ousia treis hypostaseis*, who in one substance (*ousia*) defined the shared godhood of the three hypostases: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Hypostasis was by him considered to be the unique and concrete existence of substance, better comprehended by certain attributes (hypostasis of the Father specifies fatherhood, hypostasis of the Son sonhood and hypostasis of the Holy Spirit the power of sanctification. According to St. Basil the substance of the three divine persons is life-giving and unified – their coexistence is infinite, indivisible and their unity of being is such, that there exists no time or space which could separate them.⁴⁶ If we wanted to place this definition away from theological thought into a more tangible conception, a good example would be the image which Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi saw through her inner sight on 22nd of January 1585: three divine figures ineffably and infinitely flowing into one another, then

⁴⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul by St. John of the Cross*, London: Thomas Baker, 1908.

⁴⁵ See *Dizionario etimologico online*, available at <https://www.etimo.it/?term=mistico>; <https://www.etimo.it/?term=mistero&find=Cerca>; <https://www.garzantilinguistica.it/ricerca/?q=-mistero>

⁴⁶ See Pavol KOCHAN, "Krátky vstup do chápania podstaty a hypostázy v triadológii svätého Vasiľa Veľkého.", *Acta Patristica* 11, 23 (2020): 263.

overflowing onto the saints in heaven, who then through praise and thanks ascend back into the Trinity, which itself flows and spills into all of creation.⁴⁷ If we go back in time to the medieval female mystics, Angela of Foligno's mystical experience played a key role in the conception of the triune divinity: "Finish what you have set out to do, because immediately after you are done, the whole Trinity will come into you."⁴⁸ Angela was giving away the rest of her wealth to the poor at this time. In a following vision, she receives a blessing of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit and ever since smells inexplicable odours.⁴⁹ Based on her mystical understanding, she describes the Trinity as a unified whole that is simple, similarly to the sun. She also notes that even though the Trinity is within her, it remains in heaven. And when it was said to her "I am the Holy Spirit" and „I am the one who was crucified for you“ in that moment Father, Son and the Holy Spirit were within her.⁵⁰ There is a curious similarity between the image of the Trinity from the vision of Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi and the testimony of Angela's companion, who three times heard a voice that told her that the Holy Spirit is in Angela. Later, when Angela was in ecstasy, through her physical eyes she saw on her chest an image of a beautiful star of countless shapes, radiant with a variety of delightful colours. Rays of remarkable beauty shone forth from the spherical star, which then joined and ascended into heaven. The vision of the rays returning from Angela's chest onto heaven attests to the life-giving, creative power of the triune divinity onto itself and in its relation to all creation.

Reception of this mysterious triune being and its influence in mystical contemplation happens through a "loving infusion of God" (term of St. John of the Cross, in the tractate *Dark Night of the Soul*). "For it is love alone that unites the soul with God."⁵¹ Love infused by contemplation of the mystery of the Holy Trinity is therefore also the only mover of a mystical experience. Accounts capturing it reveal its incalculable strength and indubitable potential. Life after an encounter with a revelation of Christ (and through him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, by their unity) cannot remain unchanged. The impact left upon the soul by the Word of God incarnate can be compared to the noblest of metamorphoses. The select people who mystically contemplate the Godman feel the tension between their desire for the divine, its eternal goodness, which they understood or saw within and now cannot express them, and for everyday life, with its, in contrast, mundane situations and problems. This tension is however dissipated by the

⁴⁷ Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, *Le parole dell'estasi*, ed. by Giovanni Pozzi, Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 1984, pp. 55–56.

⁴⁸ *Memorial*, p. 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵¹ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, ed. by E. Allison Peers, New York: Doubleday, 1990 – II, 18, 5.

invitation to participate in Christ's work of salvation. As Jesus said to Margaret of Cortona: "Oh, Margaret, My daughter, truly become a pearl in My eyes! [...] Do you not shelter all the poor in your heart for the sake of my love?"⁵² They accept this invitation in its most radical form – by giving themselves in service to others, especially those abandoned and dying, not fearing suffering or illness – they can bear all adversity, as through the knowledge of the infused love of God, any "yoke is easy, and burden light." (Mt. 11, 30).

Conclusion

The mystical narrative, as an example of and a complement to the doctrinal teachings, illuminates a remarkable unity and uniqueness of God in the three divine persons ("Because it does not divide the divine unity, the real distinction of the persons from one another resides solely in the relationships which relate them to one another", *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 255). Contemplation of the mystery of the triune being of God as a revealed truth is at the heart of mystical narrative, as it is present at the foundation of the Church since its beginnings, in the form of baptism (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 249). Our contemplation, according to Hans Urs von Balthasar "consists of a cautious approach to the mystery of the hypostatic union: the two natures having become one in the Person of the divine Son. Not only with the intention of creating a fellowship in which Being is Being-together, but explicitly so that eternal Being may manifest itself, express, interpret and represent itself for the benefit of temporal beings".⁵³ A perfect example of this cautious approach towards Christ is the story of St. Augustine, one of the most authentic and arduous searches for truth: „Tomorrow I shall discover the truth. I shall see it quite plainly, and it will be mine to keep.“⁵⁴ His experience shows us, that what changes the hearts of those who search is divine intuition, as he himself feels it through the kind and sweet touch of God. "For when I look for you, who are my God, I am looking for a life of blessed happiness. [...] True happiness is to rejoice in the truth, for to rejoice in the truth is to rejoice in you, O God, who are the Truth, you, my God, my true Light, to whom I look for salvation."⁵⁵ Experience of a mystical character – as the wellspring of exceptional spiritual knowledge – attests to this innermost human desire along with its potential for *metanoia*. This is because the mystical experience is always also an eschatological experience; though it's ineffability denies us to behold the invisible, incomprehensible, incredible, and invaluable, it allows us to intuit that it exists as well as that we can come to know it through faith.

⁵² *Life and Revelations*, ch. II, 12.

⁵³ BALTHASAR, *Prayer*, pp. 157–158.

⁵⁴ SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961, 6:11.

⁵⁵ SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 10: 20, 23.

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