

## Chapter 2

### FAITH AND THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

We have talked about the origin of the Creed and what it means to believe: faith is above all a personal adhesion of man to God; it's our free acceptance of the whole truth as revealed by God. This revelation is made through "deeds and words"<sup>1</sup>, and frequently through the language of symbols. Let us now concern ourselves with the symbol of the Cross of the Apostolate as an expression of a "private revelation".

#### *The value of the spiritual experience*

The mention that Benedict XVI makes about the spiritual experience of the saints gives us a clue so we can place in its right place an experience which is, moreover, the result of a private revelation.

The Church has always acknowledged the contribution that the experiences lived by the saints make to theology; the saints are the great interpreters of true Eucharistic piety.<sup>2</sup> The Second Vatican Council teaches that the experience of spiritual moments is one of the keys of the revealed data.

Benedict XVI, in his book "To look on Christ Exercises in Faith, Hope and Love" underlines the essential characteristic of the saints' wisdom and their knowledge of theology. He backs himself up in the teachings of St Thomas Aquinas, who considers theology a subordinate science, because it can't show or demonstrate its essential foundations. Theology is dependent on the knowledge of the saints, their visions:

These visions are the reference point of the theological thought, a point that guarantees its justice. The work of theologians is, in this regards, always secondary, relative to the real experience of the saints. Without this reference point, this intimate anchor to similar experiences, it would lose its character of reality. This is the humility that is asked of theologians... Theology becomes thus a pure intellectual game and loses even its character of science if it does not have the realism of the saints, without their contact with reality.<sup>3</sup>

That is to say that the spiritual experience is an essential foundation for theological knowledge. Knowledge through instruction is not enough, this represents a "second hand" knowledge, since it does not imply direct contact with reality; on the other hand, the knowledge of spiritual wisdom, through one's own experience, comes in direct contact with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Dei Verbum 2

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 62

<sup>3</sup> Cf Ratzinger, *To look on Christ (Mirar a Cristo)*, 37-38

It is obvious that experience and knowledge cannot be kept apart: the former refers to the latter. But it is important to emphasize that an authentic knowledge of the love of God is only possible in the context of an attitude of humble prayer and generous availability.<sup>4</sup>

In this line, the spiritual experience of Venerable Servant of God Concepcion Cabrera de Armida shows from her contemplation what theologians explain from the light of theology itself. She does not give a systematic theological reflection; her words express the penetration in the mystery of faith, witnessed from her own experience. Such a mystical experience is only a link in the chain of those who, in the Church, have *a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities*, which increases the penetration of the information in the theologian, and which has been transmitted to us through Scripture and Tradition.<sup>5</sup>

With these comments we don't intend to go ahead of the judgment of the Church in regards to Concepcion's holiness, but we can certainly place her among those privileged people Benedict XVI mentions: "The "Saints" are not only the people who have already been canonized. There always are hidden saints, who, in communion with Jesus receive a ray of His brilliance, a real and concrete experience of God."<sup>6</sup> They are a luminous ray and they show us the way to be happy.

Concepcion was one of these people gifted by God to have a close religious experience. She belongs to this group of people capable of a direct contact with God, to the group of true reformers who so many times have brought the Church out of the dark abyss where She threatens to fall. The saints are part of a big procession of men and women, known or unknown, who have constantly searched for God during their life and thorough whom the Lord continues to open and pluck the pages of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

We must understand that these people are an exception, very few people get such evident manifestations of the divine; many don't have the immediate experience of the holy, yet they are not so deaf to it as to be unable to appreciate an encounter with it through the medium of the man granted such an experience.<sup>8</sup>

### *Faith and the Cross of the Apostolate*

As we mentioned before, a private revelation is not exactly an object of faith<sup>9</sup>, yet, Pope John XXIII used to say: "the Roman Popes have an obligation to bring to the attention of the faithful – whenever they consider it necessary for the common good after careful consideration – the supernatural lights

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Message to the SJ about Sacred Heart Devotion on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "Hauretis aquas"*(5/23/06)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Dei Verbum* 8

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *To look on Christ (Mirar a Cristo, 36)*

<sup>7</sup> Cf Ratzinger, *God's Revolution*, 14

<sup>8</sup> Cf Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 94

<sup>9</sup> According to K. Rahner, "it is not clear why we shouldn't all recognize the divine origin of these private revelations, and why couldn't this knowledge presuppose the right/duty of everyone's adhesion to the divine faith" (*Les révélations privées*; RAM 25, 508)

that God wants to deliver freely to certain privileged souls, not with the purpose of proposing new doctrines, but to guide our conduct.”<sup>10</sup>

These words by Pope John XXII take us back to the means through which God ordinarily manifests Himself in the history of salvation: He acts upon the fantasy of the prophets and creates in them visual and audio images, which are completely dependent on the circumstances of their environment. This is the case of the prophet Isaiah, he is praying in the Temple; he sees the throne and the garment of Yahweh and he feels on his lips the contact of a lit ember, then he understands that God is calling him to give him a mission (Is 6:1-13). The Prophet Amos sees a basket full of ripe fruit and understands that the fall of the northern country is close at hand. (Am 8:1-2). Jeremiah sees a branch of the watching-tree and understands that God is vigilant (Jer 1,11)

And so something similar happens with private revelations. In the old times we used to think that they were a miracle performed by a supernatural power completely outside of the mystic, and that there was no explanation in their personal psychology. Nowadays another explanation is more common. Private revelations are brought forward by the intense affective imagination of the mystic, awoken in him/her by the grace of the Spirit; its content is shaped according to the social, cultural and ecclesial context of the times: they have a symbolic meaning taken from the spoken language of the times. Inside the mystic, the cultural and ecclesial experience is reworked in his/her internal charity; and it becomes a prophetic symbolism by virtue of the light that the Spirit pours upon him/her; it finds its expression in a love of visual union with the Lord.

And so, which is that social, cultural and ecclesial context of the time and the language through which the vision of the Cross of the Apostolate is expressed?<sup>11</sup>

Here we will only mention the Cross, as it deserves special attention; the Cross of the Apostolate is fruit of the spiritual experience of Venerable Servant of God Concepcion Cabrera de Armida, a woman called by God to live a surprising human “fullness”. She lived her mystical experience amidst her family environment, where she was able to integrate the different dimensions of her feminine being: taking care of her husband and children, being attentive to her extended family’s needs, and towards her spiritual family as well.

Her spirituality touches the fundamental truths of the Christian Faith and God’s experience in her soul. She lived her baptismal priesthood as an offering of her own self with the maternal overtone so proper of her life. The topics she talks about are immersed in the mystery of the Trinity, the Church, the mystery of the cross of Jesus, the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit, Mary’s motherhood, God’s incarnation in the soul, the holiness of the priestly people – made up of laymen and ordained ministers.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf Benedict XVI, *Radio message to the faithful at Lourdes in the centennial of the Apparitions (Feb 18, 1959)*

<sup>11</sup> This topic has been extensively dealt upon in *Proceso humano y experiencia de Dios en Concepcion Cabrera de Armida (CCA’s Human process and experience of God)*, 123-153

Her message, we were saying, is summarized in the *Cross of the Apostolate*, a glorious cross which floats in the air, enveloped by radiant clouds, bathed with the light of the Holy Spirit which is poured down upon it, and carrying in the very center the living and beating heart of Jesus Christ; a Trinitarian cross that reminds us that God is family. This cross represents a central truth of our faith: God is not a prisoner of His own eternity, He acts here and now, He is around us everywhere, lives inside us and calls us to be part of the eternal communion of the divine Family.

Indeed, the image of the Trinity, who takes on human flesh in the person of the Son, becomes explicit in the symbol of the Cross of the Apostolate. In this Cross, the Father becomes present through the light, as the fount, origin and destination of everything; a living God, full of love and mercy who gives Himself to us through his Son's heart and in the love of the Holy Spirit, permeating all of mankind and making it "divine-like", making of it a filial world. There we can see a Trinitarian God, a God of communion, who becomes familiar with man, and man is represented by the wooden cross.

Concepcion describes the Cross and interprets her Trinitarian meaning by making reference to the theological virtues:

"The Cross of the Apostolate floats within three kinds of lights: the light of fire which is a symbol of faith, it illuminates and enkindles; the light of the rays that flow from the Cross is a symbol of hope, hope widens the soul; and the light that, clean and very clear, pours down the Holy Spirit [...] this means the poorest virtue of charity, divine light which transforms the soul lifting it up to the union.

These three lights or virtues symbolize the Holy Trinity. The Father is represented by the Faith, which is light and fire; the Son is represented by the hope, since he is our redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is represented by charity, because he is the bond of light and love which joins the Father and Son together..." (*Autobiography* 2, 314).

This vision of Mrs Armida is the expression of her faith, a faith that she understands as the foundation for the "building" which is the Cross; but, since faith is light, it does not concentrate on a fixed point, but envelops the Cross of the Apostolate completely.

Faith is the light of wisdom, a light above all lights, which sheds light radiantly over the hidden and dark paths of the human spirit... This pure look of faith pierces the creatures and makes the acts of the soul supernatural.

And so, both Benedict XVI's reflection on faith and Concepcion Cabrera de Armida's experience of faith, as manifested in the Cross of the Apostolate, help us to deepen the meaning of those first two words in the Creed, realizing that "what can't be seen" is not unreal, but what's authentically real, is what sustains and enables all of reality.

One of the conclusions we can draw from this analysis is that faith is not the result of knowledge brought upon by theological reflection; one can draw on the knowledge that comes from personal experience, due to the direct relationship with things themselves. To this regard, Benedict XVI says: “Being overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than a mere rational deduction”.<sup>12</sup>

Concepcion Cabrera de Armida’s experience of faith let her see, beyond the image of the Cross of the Apostolate, the mystery of God, the mystery of the Trinity symbolized by that same Cross. In this Cross a central truth of our faith is represented: God acts here and now, he surrounds us everywhere, He lives inside of us and calls us to become part of the eternal communion of the divine Family.

We cannot underestimate the importance of theological reflection, of exact and precise theological thought, which continues to be absolutely necessary. But, Benedict XVI says, to despise, on that account, the impact produced by the heart’s encounter with beauty, or to reject it as a true form of knowledge would impoverish and dry up both faith and theology. We must rediscover this form of knowledge – it is an urgent demand of the present hour<sup>13</sup>”. True knowledge comes from being touched by a ray of the beauty that kills man, that is to say, this happens when man is affected by reality itself, by the personal presence of Christ himself.<sup>14</sup>

Concepcion Cabrera de Armida manifests her understanding of the mystery of faith from the light of her own experience. Faith is a movement of her whole human life which takes her to a love encounter with God. From that encounter the Cross of the Apostolate came forth, which allowed her to conquer through her own existence the chasm between the everlasting and the temporal, between the invisible and the visible. The God who is eternal shows himself through Christ, through the symbols within the Cross, as a man, as one of us, not simply as “Absolutely Other” who is outside of the world and time, but he speaks to them about God through the history of the God Incarnate.

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<sup>12</sup> J. Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 36

<sup>13</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Ibid*