

# MYSTICAL WAY OF MOTHER TERESA

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## ABSTRAK:

*Banyak orang mengagumi karya-karya cinta kasih Ibu Teresa dan mengikuti jejaknya untuk mengembangkan karya-karya kemanusiaan. Akan tetapi mungkin tidak banyak orang yang menyadari bahwa karya-karya agung Ibu Teresa digerakkan oleh kecintaannya kepada Tuhan. Relasinya yang erat dengan Tuhan merupakan penggerak utama dari karya-karya itu. Itulah pengalaman mistik Ibu Teresa. Pengalaman mistik tidak datang secara tiba-tiba. Di satu sisi, pengalaman mistik merupakan karunia dari Allah. Di sisi lain, pengalaman mistik merupakan buah dari perjuangan manusia secara tekun dan setia. Dengan kata lain, pengalaman mistik merupakan buah kerjasama rahmat dan usaha manusia. Tulisan ini meneliti pergulatan Ibu Teresa dalam mengembangkan pengalaman mistik, yang dibangun melalui kecintaannya pada Kristus, Ekaristi, kontemplasi dan Gereja.*

## Keywords:

*mysticism, love, Eucharist, contemplation, charity*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

The announcement of the winner of Noble Prize for Peace in 1979 perhaps startled many people, because not a great politician, economist, or social activist won the prize, but a very simple woman who worked for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. She was Mother Teresa from Calcutta, a nun from the Missionaries of Charity Congregation. She worked for those who are hungry for food, life, and love. In more detail about the poorest of the poor, they are unwanted babies who come from midwives, or are picked out of dustbins, or other babies who suffer from acute malnutrition. They are abandoned or unwanted children who suffer because of lack of food, of attention, and of love. They are the out case boys and girls picked up from the railway stations and bus stands where they managed to live by their wits. They are the young women who had been raped and violated, who need help in order to save them from committing abortion. They are the young mothers who are about to die, and their children. They are the lonely elders without resources, without love, with no one to aid them. They are lepers, disfigured and totally unwanted. They are refugees who have left or have been forced to leave everything for the sake

of peace and joy in the new environment. They are those who live in the slums of city or town, amidst all the dirt and disease and misery.<sup>1</sup>

What was also surprised is Mother Teresa's speech during the awarding of the Noble Prize. Teresa said that the Noble Prize award reminded her that the human beings were created to experience the peace, for which Jesus was born. She said that she did her works for the poorest of the poor as the realization of Jesus' calling her.<sup>2</sup> She said the similar things in all her interviews, even with unbelievers, even with non Christians. She insisted that "what she and Sisters do is for God, for Lord Jesus Christ. All they do is for Christ; and they find in their love for Jesus, in prayer and in adoration of the Blessed Eucharist the strength to serve the poor."<sup>3</sup>

Teresa's expression indicates her experience to be union with God in Christ which can be categorized as mystical experience. Even, her close relation with God in Christ was manifested in her wholehearted service for the poor, in accordance with the mission of Jesus Christ to whom she was attached. Nevertheless, many people admire Teresa's works of charity. But only few who realize that her glorious works were strongly motivated by her deep love to God. Even, her close relationship to God was the only energy which moved her heart to care the poorest of the poor.

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### 1.2. Focus

Mystical experience is inner power or spiritual energy that supported Mother Teresa's mission in loving the poor. The mystical experience is the experience of God's true love that animate daily life. The focus of this article is to uncover Mother Teresa's mysticism. It covers her ideas on prayer, service, suffering, Eucharist, and Church as the medium for experiencing the union with God in Christ.

### 1.3. Aims

*The first* aim of this research is to uncover Mother Teresa's mysticism as a basis or inner energy that motivated her perpetual mission in loving the poor. *The second* aim is to articulate Mother Teresa's mysticism as the warning that all the social activists or works without strong bases of the true love of God will be trapped on activism and self arrogance. *Thirdly*, based on her mysticism it can be mentioned that charity deals with the process of moral, cultural and social transformation. From her spiritual perspective, charity will be perpetual and beneficial for social transformation if it is both Devine and human work.

### 1.4. Methodology

The methodology used is an analytical reflection on Mother Teresa's mystical experience. It surveys articles and books which mention Teresa's sayings on her close relation with God in Christ. In that line, it will clarify first the understanding on mysticism, before describing the mystical way of Mother Teresa. Although the exposition seeks to present the mystical experience of Mother Teresa faithfully, this does not mean ignoring analytical attitudes.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING MYSTICISM

Mysticism was a current debate throughout the history of religions, because of its claim on the immediate experience of God. For the proponents, mysticism is the most advance

expression of spiritual and religious maturity that someone experiences the union with God. When there was crisis of religious institutions, then, mystical life became the escaping place. In mysticism, one finds the warmest relation with God, the Ultimate and the Absolute One, which can not be experienced in much institutionalized religions.<sup>4</sup> But for the opponents, mysticism is considered as the deviation of religion. In some extent, it is heresy, for it objectifies God to be the one directly contacted.

Apart from the debate, the facts show that in all religions developed mystical life which then encouraged the development of religions. In this regard the writer follows the experts who wrote about mysticism. Underhill mentions the central fact of the mystic's experience as "an overwhelming consciousness of God and of his own soul: a consciousness which absorbs or eclipses all other centers of interest."<sup>5</sup> Bernard McGinn, as cited by Edward Howells, states that "the centre of mysticism is the consciousness of the immediate presence of God, which is the kind of mediated return to immediacy in human consciousness." For Ginn, "the mystical is centrally about experience, as part of full epistemology. Mysticism is not just a particular experience, or vision, or moment of union, but immediate consciousness in relation to God which brings the whole range of human experience."<sup>6</sup> In this sense, mysticism, literarily meaning "close", refers to an exclusive feeling of experiencing God, the Ultimate and the Absolute One. Mystics are those who have that exclusive experience of the union with God, the Ultimate and the Absolute. The experience comes because of personally close relation between an individual to God.

Margaret Smith in her article entitled "The Nature and Meaning of Mysticism" indicates four bases of assumptions.<sup>7</sup> *First*, there is spiritual sense that enables human beings to receive revelation and knowledge about God. It is called intuition, which is higher than physical sense and intellect. *Second*, human beings take part in the Divine nature. Human beings are conveyed with capacity to understand God and to be in union with God. Even, they can naturally shine the divine spark through their lives. *Third*, the union with God is exclusive gift to those who have purified themselves. They are called mystics. *Fourth*, love is the special way to be one with God.

Besides, there are three stages of mystical way that are purgative life, illuminative life, and

unitive life. On the first stage, Purgative Life, the mystics must clean themselves by cleansing their senses and all external life that are opposed to Eternal Order. Asceticism is ordinarily done on this stage. On the second stage, Illuminative Life, the inner aspect of life, such as feeling, intellect and will, must be cleansed and brought into harmony with the Eternal Will. On this stage, the Light of God enlightens and guides the mystics' life, that is why this stage is called Illuminative. On the last stage, the mystics are united with the Ultimate. It is called as the stage of Unitive Life.

In the context of religious life, mystical experience is the highest experience of God, when God truly lives in the daily life of his/her people. God shines his/her light through the life of religious people who experience the presence of God. In this situation, religious practices, such as prayer and liturgy, are fully experienced. Actually can be said that mystical experience is the center of religious life. Without experiencing the presence of God in oneself, one's religious life is vain. Practicing religious practices of religion without achieving the highest stage of union with God is just doing formal rules of religion. That is why mysticism usually emerges when religious life becomes dry and poor.

In Christianity, mysticism is essential. To be one with God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit is the foundation of Christian life. Living as Christian means experiencing God in daily life. This experience happens in various forms. It can be in the daily prayer, when one communicates with God by praising Him with words of prayer or recitation of psalms, and even with silence for contemplating God in which one feels union with God. In very special way, it happens in the celebration of sacraments. When the Christians celebrate sacraments, God presents there, and the Church becomes the sign and the instrument of God's presence. In the Catholic Church there are seven sacraments: baptism, reconciliation, chrism, Eucharist, marriage, ordination, and anointing of the sick, where the union with God is specially celebrated. Eucharist is the sacrament *par excellence* because by the sacrament God presents in the body of Christ in every individual who eats holy bread or Holy Communion. In the Eucharist the experience of the union with God truly happens. In short, the Church teaching about the Church as the mystical body of Christ expresses the close relation between the Christian community and the Church with God in Christ.

To be acknowledged, the Christian mysticism had elitist character in the past. Mystical experience is the privilege for those who live in radical way as virgin in Order and Congregation, or as religious. No mystical event for the everyday life, as was the debate between Rahner who proposed "the everyday life's mysticism" and the opponents.<sup>8</sup> There is distinction between active and contemplative life, where the latter monopolizes mystical experience of the Christians. Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) are representatives of the active and the contemplative persons which put the latter as higher status than the former. Staying closely to Christ in the contemplative way as Mary did is the best way to be united with God, because with that way one can intensely hear the word of God. Then, Meister Echart (1260-1320) changed the paradigm with his different interpretation that Martha was the perfect one who lived as "virgin and wife" and experienced the union with God through her contemplative and active life as "virgin and wife" together.<sup>9</sup> The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) totally changed the paradigm of mysticism by changing the understanding of the Church. The Church is the people of God, who have lived in different ways. There are hierarchy, lay, and virgin who have their own roles in the Church, but they have the same dignity as the people of God.

Mystical experience can happen in various forms as mentioned above. This point is important to discuss about the mystical way of Mother Teresa, because Mother Teresa truly transformed her mystical experience in her daily service for the poor. In Mother Teresa, mysticism really happened in everyday life.

### 3. MYSTICAL WAY OF MOTHER TERESA

Mother Teresa was born as Agnes Gonxha Bejaxhiu from Albanian parents on 27 August 1910 at Skopje, Yugoslavia.<sup>10</sup> She has a brother and a sister. When she studied in the Government school (Gymnasia), she joined the community of Sodality of the Blessed Virgin. In this community she usually read letters of the Yugoslav missionaries who worked in Calcutta Archdiocese, especially a missionary from Kurseong about the Bengal Mission. She was attracted by the Bengal Mission so she volunteered to work there. She was sent to Loreto nuns in Ireland who were



working in Calcutta. In 1928 she left from Ireland to India to begin her novitiate in Darjeeling. From 1929-1948 she was a teacher of geography at St. Mary High School in Calcutta, where she was also the Principal of the school for some years. She was also in charge of the Daughters of St Ann, a native religious Congregation attached to the Sisters of Loreto. In 1948 she got permission from Rome to leave the Loreto Sisters to devote herself to the mission among the poor. She spent times for taking intensive nursing course with the American Medical Missionary Sisters in Patna. In March 1949 there were three girls who joined her work. In October 7, 1950 her new Congregation of the Missionaries of Charity was approved and instituted in Calcutta, which then got pontifical status from Pope Paul VI in February 1, 1965.

Mother Teresa received many honors. The chief among them are the honoris causa doctorate in Theology of Cambridge University in 1977, Noble Prize for Peace in 1979; Pope John XXIII Peace Prize from Pope Paul VI; the Pandit Nehru Prize for International Understanding from the Indian Government. In April 1980 she received the Bharat Ratna (Jewel of India), India's highest civilian award for her "exceptional service of charity" to the poor of India's cities. She died on September 5, 1997 after some sicknesses hurt her. Pope John Paul II opened the process for her beatification on July 29, 1999. With the proof of miracles performed from intercession of Mother Teresa, on 19 October 2003, she was beatified as the "blessed," and the next miracles are waited for preceding her canonization as a saint.

Not honours and success Teresa got, but the spirit behind all of that which is interesting to be discussed. In the next passages will be explored her spiritual life which is proper to be categorized as mystical experience, that by Brian Kolodiejchuk, the editor of *Come Be My Light*, she was compared to the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, St John of the Cross.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.1. Everything for Christ

Analyzing her deeds and achievements, Pope John Paul II said that Mother Teresa found the strength and perseverance to place herself completely at the service of others in prayer and in the silent contemplation of Jesus Christ, his Holy Face, and his Sacred Heart.<sup>12</sup> She said many times that she did everything for Christ she found in the poorest of the poor. She was inspired by Jesus' word in Matthew 25:31: "What you do to

the least of my brethren, you do it to me ... I was hungry, I was naked, and I was homeless ..."

She told that she was called by Jesus on the September 10, 1946 in the train that took her to Darjeeling. In quiet, intimate prayer with the Lord, she heard distinctly what later called "a call within a call". The message was: "I was to leave the convent and help the poor whilst living among them. It was an order. I knew where I belonged, but I did not know how to get there."<sup>13</sup> She felt that Jesus invited her to serve him, and follow him in actual poverty, material poverty, to practice a style of life that would make her similar with the needy in which Jesus was present, suffered and loved. On the Annunciation Mary Immaculate (8 December) she answered: "Yes, be it done to me according to your word, according to God's will."

Teresa's work of charity is not just social work which is good and helpfull by itself. But it is redemptive work, because it is integrated to the suffering and passion of Christ. Teresa was conscious that Christ dwelt in her and her work, so that she was aware about the suffering and passion of Christ she bore in her work. In this sense, Teresa was a mystic. She consciously experienced the presence of God, the union of God in what she did. She said: "We need a deep love and a deep union with Christ in order to be able to give Christ to others. Our union with Christ must be something real, alive, deeply felt, and be the fruit of our conviction. We see God's face in Christ; we discover Christ's in the poor."<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2. Prayer and Contemplation

In his first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI mentioned Mother Teresa as the example of one who devoted to God in prayer and used prayer as the source of her service. "In the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta we have a clear illustration of the fact that time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from effective and loving service to our neighbor but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service." Mother Teresa specified that "It is only by mental prayer and spiritual reading that we can cultivate the gift of prayer."<sup>15</sup>

Mother Teresa considered prayer and contemplation as the best way to be closed to Christ. She said that "the mission of love derives its force and power from the life of prayer. The

beginning of prayer is silence in which God speaks to us and we listen; we speak to God and he listens. The beginning of prayer is Scripture. We listen to God speaking and we speak to Him again from the fullness of our heart and He listens. Allowing Jesus to live His life in us is prayer."<sup>16</sup>

Besides, Mother Teresa was contemplative woman. She started her prayer by seeing Christ in the consecrated bread; and throughout the day she continues to see Christ in torn bodies of the poor. It means that in silence she finds Christ, who speaks to her. Then, she manifests what Jesus spoke in her work for the poor. In this sense, Mother Teresa mixed the both contemplative and active mysticism.

### 3.3. The Power of the Eucharist

A.C. Savarimuthu wrote that the Eucharist is the centre and culmination of the Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa.<sup>17</sup> Mother Teresa and Missionaries of Charity respected Eucharist as their spiritual food. They give themselves to be broken and to be given first to the members of community and then to the poorest of the poor, as Christ in the Eucharist is broken and given to the people. Eucharist is the mystery of their union with Jesus. It is the bond of union with Jesus. It is the only gift of Christ that keeps us united with Him. Mother Teresa calls the Eucharist a symbol of the bond between Jesus and the souls. By receiving Holy Communion her followers would be strengthened to bear the fruit of their union which is the fulfillment of the fourth vow that is to serve the poorest of the poor. For the Missionaries of Charity, Eucharist is strength, inspiration, and consolation.

### 3.4. Church: the Mystical Body of Christ

Mother Teresa respected and obeyed the Church very much. She puts herself as the member of Catholic Church. Her loyalty to the Church was undoubtable. She respected Pope, and hierarchy. She always prayed for them. Even, she did not care on the scandal and negative issues in the Church. She was optimistic that the Church's problems would be over. She was aware that the Church brought her to love the people, especially the poorest of the poor.<sup>18</sup> The Church is the sign of love, where she found Christ. In this respect, she was conscious that the Church is

the mystical body of Christ. In this way, Mother Teresa indicates that mystical experience happens in the context of religious institution. It does not happen without mediator and help of others.

Mother Teresa manifested her loyalty to the Church by obeying the teaching of the Church. In her work, she struggled for the teaching of the Church, especially which became international issues such as contraception and abortion. She refused strongly abortion and stated that abortion is the first cause of the destruction of world peace. Abortion is direct killing done by the mother of the fetus. It is cruel killing done to the innocents. Also, she refused contraception as the way to control the birth, because it rejects the grace of life given by God through marriage. That is why in her charity work, Mother Teresa took care women who were raped and violated, and the unwanted babies born by them. In this way, Mother Teresa showed her dedication to the Church, the mystical body of Christ.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Mysticism is the personal experience of the union with God. It manifests deep and close relation of individual with God. The paper shows that Mother Teresa has that experience, so that she was compared to John the Cross, a mystic of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. She experiences the union with God in Christ, that motivated her to express it in charity work for the poorest of the poor. She maintains her close relation to Christ with prayer, part taking the Eucharist, and uniting herself in the body of the Church. Mystical experience happens in the social context. It is mediated by the Church as the mystical body of Christ. It implies, then, that the true charity should be based the source of love, that is God himself or herself.

What is the special mystical experience of Mother Teresa? The core of her mystical experience is the relationship with Jesus Christ. Especially she Experienced Christ as a lovely Person who dedicated throughout His life for humanity, particularly the poorest. Jesus Christ and His mission inspired Mother Teresa in loving the poor throughout her life. How is to maintain the intimate relation with Jesus Christ? Mother Teresa received and lived her spiritual relation with Jesus Christ in prayer, contemplation and Eucharistic in Catholic Church while she were realizing the mission of witnessing the love of

Christ for the poor. She is a perpetual witness that charity is the fruit of mystical experience.

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### END NOTES

- 1 The description about the poorest of the poor is taken from Mariasusai Dhavamony, "Mother Teresa's Mission of Love for the Poorest of the Poor", in *Human Rights. Christianity and other Religions*, 137.
- 2 "Sambutan Ibu Teresa ketika Menerima Hadiah Nobel Perdamaian", :339-347.
- 3 E. Le Joly, *We Do It for Jesus. Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity*, 14.
- 4 Carlo Carozzo, "Mysticism and the Crisis of Religious Institutions", :017-026.
- 5 Evelyn Underhill, "The Essentials of Mysticism" in Richard Woods (ed), *Understanding Mysticism*, 27.
- 6 Evelyn Underhill, "The Essentials of Mysticism" 27.
- 7 Margaret Smith, "The Nature and Meaning of Mysticism, 20-21.
- 8 J. Matthew Ashley, "The Mysticism of Everyday Life," 61.
- 9 Compare to Syafa'atun Almirzanah, Ph.D', D.Min. *When Mystic Masters Meet. Paradigma Baru dalam Relasi Umat Kristiani-Islam*, 187-196.
- 10 The short biography of Mother Teresa is taken from Mariasusai Dhavamony, "Mother Teresa's Mission of Love for the Poorest of the Poor" , 135-136.
- 11 www.wikipedia, diakses oktober 2012.
- 12 John Paul II (October 20, 2003). "Address Of John Paul II To The Pilgrims Who Had Come To Rome For The Beatification Of Mother Teresa" as cited by www.wikipedia.
- 13 E. Le Joly, *We Do It for Jesus*, 17.
- 14 Dhavamony, "Mother Teresa's Mission", 140.
- 15 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* as mentioned in the www.wikipedia..
- 16 Dhavamony, "Mother Teresa's Mission", 141.
- 17 A.C. Savarimuthu, "Mother Teresa's Contextual Reflections on Eucharist" , 161.
- 18 T. Krispurwana Cahyadi, S.J., *Jalan Kesucian Ibu Teresa*, 168-187.

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