

Thomas More, the Mystic?

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This paper intends to challenge G.K. Chesterton's assertion regarding Thomas More: "He was a mystic and a martyr." It will draw material from studies on mysticism, with the aim of finding accurate definitions of the concept, and from the writings of well-known mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. Our study focuses on More's Tower Works, (produced during the fifteen months of his imprisonment). It will analyze the mystical aspects in his writings and try to determine whether Thomas More can reasonably rank among the Catholic mystics.

Keywords: Thomas More, spirituality, mysticism, Teresa of Avila, Tower Works

Cette étude souhaite remettre en question cette affirmation de G.K. Chesterton : « Thomas More était un mystique et un martyr ». En s'appuyant à la fois sur des traités sur le mysticisme dans le but d'y trouver des définitions précises du concept, et sur les écrits de mystiques célèbres comme Bernard de Clairvaux, Catherine de Sienna, Thérèse d'Avila et Saint Jean de la Croix, cet article étudie les Œuvres de Prison de More (les écrits produits pendant les quinze mois où il fut emprisonné à la Tour de Londres) de façon à y analyser les aspects mystiques et ensuite déterminer si Thomas More peut raisonnablement figurer au nombre des mystiques catholiques.

Mots clés : Thomas More, spiritualité, mysticisme, Thérèse d'Avila, Œuvres de Prison

Este artículo pone en tela de juicio la afirmación hecha por G.K. Chesterton, según la cual Thomas More "fue un místico y un mártir". Tras procurar definir el concepto de "mística", basándonos en estudios de este fenómeno y en los escritos de místicos tan conocidos como Bernardo de Claraval, Catalina de Siena, Teresa de Ávila y San Juan de la Cruz, nos centraremos

en los trabajos que More escribió en la Torre (durante los 15 meses en los que estuvo preso). Se trata de analizar los aspectos místicos de estos textos, para determinar si podemos o no incluir a More en el grupo de los místicos católicos.

Palabras clave: Thomas More, espiritualidad, mística, Teresa de Ávila, Trabajos de la Torre

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Was Thomas More a mystic? The question has been raised before, however only incidentally. And answers have varied greatly, covering the whole spectrum between an absolute negative to the definite affirmation of G.K. Chesterton, “He was a mystic and a martyr.”¹ After Elton’s assertion that “More proved conclusively that he was never a mystic,”² and Richard Marius’ statement that “More wanted to be a mystic but lacked the gift,”³ it now appears necessary to review this matter thoroughly. Drawing material from studies on mysticism, with the aim of finding accurate definitions of the concept, and from the writings of well-known mystics, this paper intends to examine various aspects of mysticism in an attempt to answer the initial question.

¹ Chesterton, *Essential Articles*, 501.

² Elton, 402: “Genuine meditation never came very naturally to one ever inclined to instruct and exhort. The difference appears when More is set beside such as Thomas à Kempis or Marguerite d’Angoulême who also endeavoured to resolve the human condition in the face of God’s mystery: they contemplate the needs of their own souls, while More addresses himself to the souls of others. Deeply concerned with matters which moved others to exalted outpourings, *More proved conclusively that he was never a mystic*,” (italics mine). I would like to thank Catherine Donner for her useful help in researching such critical material.

³ Marius, 300.

I - Definition of mysticism

Mysticism has proved both interesting and perilous to deal with, and the concept itself is seriously being questioned in academic circles today. As long as we remain within Catholicism, the problem is not apparent. The *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* uses Jean Gerson's definition: "*Theologia mystica est experimentalis cognitio habita de Deo per amoris unitivi complexum* » (Mystical theology is knowledge of God by experience, arrived at through the embrace of unifying love).⁴ Thomas Corbishley, the author of this entry, specifies that "mystical theology" is to be distinguished from "natural theology," "which enables man to arrive at some knowledge of God by natural reason."⁵ Note that Gerson, who wrote the definition in the early 15th century, refers to "mystical theology" and not to "mysticism." It was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the term "mysticism" became used as a substantive. At the same time, as Michel de Certeau points out, "this shift was linked to a new discourse that framed contemplative figures as social types ("the mystics") and the emergence of a new understanding of the Divine as existing within human beings, a universal dimension of the deepest recesses of the mind hidden beneath the variety of religious traditions and their doctrines."⁶ By asserting that mystics are to be found in all religions, de Certeau cannot ratify Gerson's definition. Thus, theoreticians of mysticism today try a broader definition, for example Wolfson's: "mysticism relates to the capacity of the human mind to imagine what cannot be imagined and to think what cannot be thought."⁷ Wolfson adds

⁴ Corbishley, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 175.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Parsons, 3.

⁷ Wolfson, 103.

This definition satisfies both the essentialist claim that there is something we can identify as the unchanging essence of the mystical, and the constructivist claim that mystical elements need to be studied and evaluated within specific cultural contexts.⁸

However, most scholars are reluctant to abandon the idea of union with the divine or with some ultimate reality. So, in an effort to embrace polytheistic and “non-theistical” religions, such as Buddhism for instance, Zaehner writes that mysticism “means union with some principle or other. It is, therefore, a unitive experience with someone or something other than oneself.”⁹

Above all that, the debate about mysticism today stumbles especially against the denial of the reality of any mystical experience such as visions of the divine, voices, stigmas, levitation, or the feeling of another presence:

Because the supernatural does not exist in modernity, some scholars tried to account for the ancient descriptions of mystical experience in rational ways, as hallucinations or exegetical enterprise.¹⁰

But, as DeConick rightly comments, “this move to dismiss the “supernatural” conversation by rationalizing it has not increased our knowledge of ancient mysticism, although it does speak to modern perceptions that mysticism cannot exist.”¹¹

Instead of bluntly denying the existence of mysticism, on the ground that mystical experiences are not rational, let us restrict our study to a Christian definition of the concept, one that does not consider the wonder but rather the depth of the mystical

⁸ Wolfson, 103.

⁹ Gray, 69, quotes Zaehner (1957) 32.

¹⁰ DeConick, 32.

¹¹ DeConick, 32.

experience. In *Dictionnaire Critique de Théologie*, Max Huot de Longchamp reviews the evolution of mysticism over the centuries.

The word “mystical” has lost all precise meaning since Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romantics have applied it to the irrational aspect which often qualifies anything religious. We will restrict the word to its most classic Christian meaning, that of an experience of the perception of God, as it were; a veritable feast for the soul on the occasion of Christ’s intimate presence.¹²

To complete the definition, let us add a reference which accounts for the etymology of the word:

Mysticism is this very special awareness of the mystery of Christ, and the word entered the Christian vocabulary with Clement of Alexandria (160-220) precisely to evoke that awareness: to possess the knowledge of the mystery is to be mystical, that is to have the knowledge, beyond the letter of Scripture and of liturgical signs, of the reality itself of what each of them refers to, which is hidden in God.¹³

Finally, from the definitions above, the one common and essential aspect which is inherent in the mystical experience is its transcendence—indeed, by denying the existence of the supernatural,

¹² “Le mot « mystique » a perdu toute précision depuis que J-J Rousseau et les romantiques l’ont appliqué à l’irrationnel souvent prêté à la chose religieuse. Nous le restreindrons ici à son sens chrétien le plus classique, celui d’une perception de Dieu pour ainsi dire expérimentale, d’une véritable fête de l’âme lors de l’avènement intérieur du Christ.” Huot de Longchamp also quotes Tauler (1300-1361), in *Sermo XII*, who, referring to John, 7,6, emphasizes the interior fruition felt by the presence of God in the soul.

¹³ Huot de Longchamp, 779: “Il s’agit donc d’une prise de conscience toute particulière du mystère du Christ, et c’est pour l’évoquer que le mot est entré avec Clément d’Alexandrie (160-220) dans le vocabulaire chrétien : est mystique la connaissance du mystère, c’est-à-dire celle qui porte au-delà de la lettre de l’Ecriture et des signes de la liturgie jusqu’à la réalité même de ce que l’une et l’autre désignent, et qui est caché en Dieu (cf. Louis Bouyer, *Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne I*, 486-496).”

modern rationalists also dismiss the very idea of mysticism—it seems therefore that one cannot call a saintly person a mystic if that person does not admit to having felt some exceptional and secret intimacy with the divine.

II- The wish for a mystical experience¹⁴

While Thomas More mentions the union with God as a wish, even a yearning for a state to be fulfilled after death, the great mystics clearly indicate that they have experienced that union during their lives. Perhaps the most radical experience is to be found in Saint Catherine of Siena, who, on accompanying a young man to the scaffold, reveals:

Then was seen God-and-Man, as might the clearness of the sun be seen. And He stood wounded, and received the blood.¹⁵

Mystics usually insist on the transformation they have undergone following that experience, and of the joy that ensued—the “feast” we mentioned above. This is the case of Teresa of Avila who, in her very personal and exalted style, confesses to enjoying a special

¹⁴ Every theoretician of mysticism adds a list of the invariable features that allow us to pronounce a mystical experience as such. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 290-1, William James identifies the mystical state by these four characteristics: 1) *ineffability*—the mystic finds it impossible to describe with adequate words what has happened; 2) *noetic quality*—the feeling of having been given absolute knowledge and certainty (of immortality or God’s love, for instance); 3) *transiency*—the experience is brief but leaves an indelible mark; 4) *passivity*—“the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.” Huot de Longchamp adds that mystics always mention the feeling of a loving and transforming presence, 779.

¹⁵ Catherine of Siena, “Letter to Brother Raimondo of Capua of the Order of the Preachers.”

state, which gives her “los gustos de la Gloria,” a foretaste of the glory of heaven.

Everything that takes place now in this state brings the very greatest consolation; [...] The tears, which God now sends, flow with joy; though we feel them, they are not the result of any efforts of our own. [...] for the soul is already ascending out of its wretched state, and some little knowledge of the blissfulness of glory.¹⁶

For More, such an encounter with the divine can only take place after death:

For since the very substance essential of all the celestial joy standeth in blessed beholding of the glorious Godhead face to face, there may no man presume or look to attain it in this life. For God hath so said himself: “*Non videbit me homo et vivet*”—“There shall no man here living behold me.” (Exodus 33:20. 25).¹⁷

Mystical theology means that knowledge of God is acquired not through reason but on the occasion of an experience that is felt as some kind of union with the divine, which More yearns for when he expresses his “longing” to be “dissolved” in Christ.¹⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux had emphasized the same idea of heavenly nuptials, and Teresa of Avila has the comparable image of being “absorbed” (“*toda engolfada*”) in Christ:

¹⁶ Teresa de Ávila, *Vida*, ch. 14, 104: “Pues todo esto que pasa aquí es con grandísimo consuelo, [...] las lágrimas que Dios aquí da ya van con gozo; aunque se sienten, no se procuran. [...] porque se va ya este alma subiendo de su miseria y dásele ya un poco de noticia de los gustos de la gloria.” English version, 88.

¹⁷ *Dialogue of Comfort*, III-26, p.306 l.20-24.

¹⁸ “But he that hopeth well of heuen, and not onely hopeth after it, but also sore thyrsteth for it, as dyd saynt Poule whan he sayd I longe to be dyssolved, that is to haue my soule losed and departed fro my body and to be with Cryste...” *CW* 11, *The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, 103/18-22. More here follows St. Paul (Phil 1: 23).

When I formed those pictures within myself of throwing myself at the feet of Christ, as I said before, and sometimes even when I was reading, a feeling of the presence of God would come over me unexpectedly, so that I could in no wise doubt either that He was within me, or that I was wholly absorbed in Him. It was not by way of vision; I believe it was what is called mystical theology.¹⁹

More did not deny there were mystics who enjoyed a special treatment on earth. We may even imagine that he would have liked to be one of those “special servants” he mentions here:

Wherefore in the meantime, for lack of such *experimental* taste as God giveth here sometimes to some of his special servants, to the intent we may draw toward spiritual exercise too—for which spiritual exercise... God with that gift, as with an earnest penny of their whole reward after in heaven, comforteth them here in earth—let us not so much with looking to have described what *manner* of joys they shall be, as with hearing what our Lord telleth us in Holy Scripture...²⁰

More’s use of the adjective “experimental” can be understood as a reference to the mystical experience, seen as “an earnest penny”, or a foretaste of the heavenly reward, something that has not been granted to him.

I would therefore suggest that Thomas More cannot be called a mystic, since the mystical experience, or union with God, is always mentioned as a wish, as something extremely desirable to be achieved in heaven, but never as an experience which has actually taken place during his lifetime.

¹⁹ St Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 69. Santa Teresa, *Vida*, ch. 10, 86: “Acaeciame en esta representación que hacía de ponerme cabe Cristo, que he dicho, y aun algunas veces leyendo, venirme a deshora un sentimiento de la presencia de Dios, que en ninguna manera podía dudar que estaba dentro de mí, o yo toda engolfada en El. Esto no era manera de visión; creo lo llaman mística Teología.”

²⁰ *Dialogue of Comfort*, III-26, p.306 l.22-29, (my italics).

Other elements may help us understand why More could not be a mystic. In most of today's historiographical analyses, mysticism is understood as a historical phenomenon that happened in a given time of history—the Rhineland mystics in the 13th and 14th centuries, then the Spanish mystics in the 16th and 17th centuries. De Certeau points out that the phenomenon tended to take place in times of decline in the Church authority and of corruption in the clergy or in the regular orders. The mystical experiences are more often found in subjects whose sociological background bears some common features (ruined aristocrats, humiliated families, people who experienced familial or social regression).²¹ Thomas More did not fall into a category that was susceptible of producing mystics. He came from a prosperous London family and although the situation of the Church preoccupied him seriously, the Reformed Church had not yet been accepted as the national Church. As often pointed out, More lived at the cusp of two eras, but the new order would be established only after his death.

However, there is such a mystical appeal in some of More's writings that this research would not have taken place without some suspicion of More's mysticism. And indeed, had we been bent on declaring More a mystic, we would have agreed with Richard Schoeck's definition of mysticism, when he declared:

Mysticism is a direct, intuitional experience of God through unifying love; but it does not require an ecstatic experience, that is, that kind of experience which transcends personality and characteristically produces preternatural phenomena. The mystical experience can be taken as I here take it to be, simply the highest mode or expression of the spiritual life.²²

²¹ Certeau, *La Fable Mystique*, 36-44. See de Certeau's introduction which he concludes with: "Une théologie humiliée, après avoir exercé longtemps sa magistrature, attend et reçoit de son autre les certitudes qui lui échappent" 44. See also Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent*.

²² Richard Schoeck, 325.

It is true that Thomas More, like the mystics, meditates on the Passion, on the Eucharist, on the love of God. But in his meditations, we always find a pastoral concern. His spiritual writings are not the typical flow of mystical literature expressing gratitude to the divine for being singled out and granted revelations. Even in his most moving passages, the *Sadness of Christ* for instance, More writes for an audience, giving lessons, inciting his readers to believe and pray, and to reform their souls. More writes in the pastoral, not in the mystical mode.

III- Mystical aspects in More:

However this sixteenth century layman proved he was capable of the most profoundly religious reflections; he did not shun from embarking on scriptural exegeses in which mystical accents can be heard. Besides, for those who knew him intimately, his ascetic life and his contempt of the world probably ranked as the most prominent features of his mystical disposition. When, after a whole year imprisoned in the Tower, More reports to his daughter on his interrogation before the Council, he describes the very program of a mystical life. To Cromwell, the King's Secretary, who demanded he took the oath, so he "might be abroad in the world again among other men as [he] had been before," More gave this answer:

I shortly (after the inward affection of my mind) answered for a very truth, that I would never meddle in the world again, to have the world given me. And to the remnant of the matter, I answered in effect as before shewing that I had fully determined with myself, neither to study nor meddle with any matter of this world, but that my whole study should be upon

the passion of Christ and mine own passage out of this world.²³

More had elsewhere prayed God to help him “set at naught all the riches of this world,”²⁴ demonstrating the same *contemptus mundi* that mystics practice and preach.

In the opening words of the *Scale of Perfection*—which we know More had read—Walter Hilton establishes renouncing the world as a prerequisite to embark on the way to holiness: “And as thou hast forsaken the world, as it were a dead man [...], so thou be in thy heart as it were, dead to all earthly loves and fears.”²⁵ Teresa comes very near that aim when she writes, “to me it seems to be nothing else but a death, as it were, to all the things of this world, and a fruition of God.”²⁶

Mystics have traditionally recommended solitude. The cell in which More has been confined, although a condition he cannot escape, seems to afford him the solitude necessary for his program of meditation. Here’s Catherine of Siena’s advice to a young friend of hers who has recently entered a convent:

Make two homes for thyself, my daughter. One actual home in thy cell, that thou go not running about into many places, unless for necessity, or for obedience to the prioress, or for charity’s sake; and another spiritual home, which thou art to carry with thee always—the cell of true self-knowledge, where thou shalt find within thyself knowledge of the goodness of God. These are two cells in one, and when abiding in the one it behooves thee to abide in the other, for

²³ *Last Letters*, 113-4, “To Margaret” (2 or 3 May 1535).

²⁴ *Last Letters*, 126, “To Antonio Bonvisi” (1535).

²⁵ Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, Part I, ch. 1.

²⁶ Teresa de Ávila, *Vida*, Ch. 16, 112: “No me parece que es otra cosa, sino un morir casi del todo a todas las cosas del mundo y estar gozando de Dios.” English version, 97.

otherwise the soul would fall into either confusion or presumption.²⁷

To meditate on the Passion was Bernard of Clairvaux's recommendation: "So it behooves us, if we would have Christ for a frequent guest, to fill our hearts with faithful meditations on the mercy He showed in dying for us."²⁸ More devotes two treatises to that meditation, and following St. Bernard, lays emphasis on Christ's humanity. There have been many very moving pages on that topic, especially since the *Devotio moderna* with Jean Gerson and à Kempis had encouraged the appeal to the feeling of compassion for the suffering Christ. More very eloquently follows suit, although in a fairly sober way, choosing reasoning rather than descriptions. Jesus, he imagines, who was "horrified at the prospect of such cruel suffering drawing eagerly nearer and nearer," woke up his disciples and "He chose to enhearten them by the example of His own sorrow, His own sadness." As Garry Haupt remarks, when commenting on the scant descriptions, "More reminds us that the word is an image."²⁹

De Tristitia Christi, with its exceptional power in evoking not so much the actions and the violence that caused Christ's Passion, but the anguish and terror of Jesus' state of mind, can rank among the great spiritual voices of Christianity. Here is Teresa of Avila's meditation and recommendation:

Coming back, then, to what I spoke of before, the meditation on Christ bound to the pillar, it is well we should make reflections for a time, and consider the sufferings He there endured, for whom He endured them, who He is who endured them, and the love with which He bore them. But a person should not always fatigue himself in making these reflections,

²⁷ Benincasa, *Letters*, "to Monna Alessa dei Saracini," 1-2.

²⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, ch.3, 5.

²⁹ Haupt, *CW* 13, lxxxix.

but rather let him remain there with Christ, in the silence of the understanding.³⁰

If silence is so important in meditation, it is also the only answer for mystics faced with exceptional experiences, ecstasy or other abnormal phenomena. In these circumstances, although they would like to share their experience with their readers, their reaction is invariably to state the ineffability of what they have been through. So John of the Cross expresses his inability to communicate the effect of his contemplation which provides what he calls “wisdom of love”:

The wisdom of love is not secret merely in the darknesses and straits of the soul's purgation [...] but also afterward in the illumination, when it is communicated more clearly. Even then it is so secret that it is ineffable. [...] Yet the soul is clearly aware that it understands and tastes that delightful and wondrous wisdom. On beholding an object never before seen in itself or in its likeness, one would be unable to describe it or give it a name no matter how much one tried, even though understanding and satisfaction were found in it.³¹

³⁰ Teresa de Ávila, *Vida*, 103: “Pues tornando a lo que decía, de pensar a Cristo a la columna, es bueno discurrir un rato y pensar las penas que allí tuvo, y por qué las tuvo, y quién es el que las tuvo, y el amor con que las pasó. Mas que no se canse siempre en andar a buscar esto, sino que se esté allí con El, callado el entendimiento.” English version, *Life*, 87.

³¹ San Juan de la Cruz, *Noche Oscura*, 441-2: “porque no solamente en las tinieblas y aprietos de la purgación, cuando esta sabiduría de amor purga al alma es secreta, [...] mas también después en la iluminación, cuando más a las claras se le comunica esta sabiduría, le es al alma tan secreta para decir, y ponerle nombre para decirlo, que demás de que ninguna gana le da al alma de decirlo, no halla modo ni manera ni símil que le cuadre [...], aunque claramente ve el alma que entiende y gusta aquella sabrosa y peregrina sabiduría. Bien así como el que viese una cosa nunca vista, cuyo semejante tampoco jamás vió, que aunque la entendiese y gustase, no la sabría poner nombre ni decir lo que es, aunque más hiciese, y esto con ser cosa que la percibió con los sentidos.”

English version: Bk II, ch. 17 §3 at http://www.catholictreasury.info/books/dark_night/dn32.php. Accessed on July 19, 2014; See also Teresa of Avila, 101-2: “Siempre tuve esta falta, de no saberme dar a entender, como he dicho,

When Thomas More, imprisoned in the Tower, also mentions the ineffability of spiritual truths, these truths do not seem to be the result of a revelation through feeling, but the result of much thinking, reasoning and meditation. In *A Dialogue of Comfort*, More, like John of the Cross, is at a loss for words when he wishes to convince his readers of the “unspeakable” joys of heaven.

And therefore let us all that cannot now conceive such delight in the consideration of them as we should, have often in our eyes by reading... often in our ears by hearing... often in our mouths by rehearsing... often in our hearts by meditation and thinking... those joyful words of *Holy Scripture* by which we learn how wonderful, huge, and great those spiritual, heavenly joys are... of which our carnal hearts have so feeble and so faint a feeling... and our dull, worldly wits so little able to conceive so much as a shadow of the right imagination. A *shadow*, I say; for as for the thing as it is—that can not only no fleshly, carnal fantasy conceive... but, over that, no spiritual, ghostly person, peradventure, neither, that here is here living still, in this world.³²

Thomas More also lacks the words that could express the delight of heavenly nuptials to be enjoyed after death. His spiritual writings, therefore, especially his Tower works, offer a number of similarities with the most eloquent mystics, those he had read, like Bernard of Clairvaux and Catherine of Siena,³³ as well as those that were to come a few decades after him in Spain.

sino a costa de muchas palabras.” (“It has always been my failing that I could never make myself understood—as I said before—but at the cost of many words,” 85).

³² *Dialogue of Comfort*, III-26, p.308 l.8-19.

³³ More mentions Catherine of Siena in the *Supplication of Souls*, *CW* 7, 209/25.

IV- More's idea of heaven

More's most mystical passages are to be found, not in the description of a personal experience—at least he never hinted at any such revelation—but in his insistent appeal to the meditation on heaven in which he develops themes that are the traditional rewards of a mystical life: beatific vision and impatience of union with God.

In the medieval tradition, heaven was essentially represented as a place of contemplation of God. There developed the idea of the beatific vision, mentioned by John in his first Epistle (1 Jn. 3:2) as well as in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God,” and emphasized by Augustine in the *City of God*, which More knew so well.³⁴ In *A Dialogue of Comfort*, More devotes the penultimate chapter to heaven. Following Paul's words that “Now we see things imperfectly as in a cloudy mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity” (1 Cor. 13, 12), More exhorts the common sinful man to reform his earthly desires and meditate on heaven of which, though, he will only have “a glimmering,” an imperfect vision:

when he shall, I say, after this life have his fleshly pleasures in abomination... and shall of those heavenly joys, which he set here so little by, have there a glimmering... though far from a perfect sight: oh, good God, how fain will he then be—with how good will, and how gladly, will he then give this whole world if it were his—to have the feeling of some little part of those joys!³⁵

More's expectation of heaven is great indeed, and, as above, is often expressed in terms of negative comparisons which suggests that the author of these lines may know more than he can express. For lack of the right words, mystics often express their

³⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, ch. 22, section 29: “Of the Beatific Vision.”

³⁵ *Dialogue of Comfort*, III, 26, p.308, 1.3-8.

visions negatively, showing what they are not. Both excess and ineffability are recurrent rhetoric, something that More, in the Tower³⁶ reproduces in many instances.

Following Bernard of Clairvaux,³⁷ More shows an impatience of the union that is to take place in heaven. However, besides the traditional expression of joy and delight, More's paradise feels real and possible, assuming an earthly and human quality: thus, in his 1535 letter to his friend Antonio Bonvisi, More shows his assurance of soon reaching that desired place "...where no wall shall dis sever us, where no porter shall keep us from talking together, but that we may have the fruition of the eternal joy with God."³⁸ When he writes to his daughter that they both should pray "that we may merrily meet in heaven," when he assures her that he would not like to postpone the date of his execution, More seems to have been granted the courage he admired in the martyrs, and the certainty that ensues, since "our Lord saith yet, by the mouth of Saint John, that he will give his holy martyrs, that suffer for his sake, many a *special* kind of joy."³⁹

³⁶ André Prévost also reflected that the style and inspiration in More's early poem entitled "The Twelve Properties or Conditions of a Lover" (*CW* 1, 113-120) in which he describes in turn human love and divine love was not unlike those found in the later mystics, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross: "L'inspiration et le style sont ceux des mystiques espagnols de l'époque suivante, Sainte Thérèse d'Avila (1515-1582) et saint Jean de la Croix (1542-1591)," Prévost, 67.

³⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux describes paradise as a place of *voluptas* where the righteous drink from torrents of delight; a place of splendor where the righteous shine like the splendor of the firmament; a place of joy where eternal joy lies on their heads: "Lieu de volupté où les justes boivent des torrents de volupté; lieu de splendeur où les justes resplendent comme la splendeur du firmament; lieu de joie où la joie éternelle repose sur leurs têtes; lieu d'abondance où rien ne manque à ceux qui voient Dieu," *Sermones de diversis*, dans *PL*, t. 183, c. 664-665, quoted by Jean Delumeau, *Que reste-t-il du paradis ?* 190.

³⁸ *Last Letters*, To Antonio Bonvisi, 1535, 126.

³⁹ *Dialogue of Comfort*, III-26, p.309, 1.8-11.

More's exceptional hope, his meditation and pastoral writing on heaven, his last statements showing a serene expectation of his union with Christ, all this defines a man who may never have had any mystical experience as we have defined it, but who, through reasoning, reading and praying, has shown a rare degree of faith in his life after death.

Conclusion

Thomas More cannot be classified as a mystic *per se* since he never confesses to any mystical experience such as revealed by the writings of the great mystics. However, he has behaved as one insofar as his meditations are akin to those of the great figures of Christianity. Germain Marc'hadour has emphasized his exceptional hope of heaven.⁴⁰ One can almost say that More lived a holy life literally “for heaven’s sake.”⁴¹ The prisoner in the Tower, as his execution draws nearer, develops a fascinating—and if “secret” then “mystical”—personal relationship with the divine, which gets more intense, more palpable and more certain as death approaches. This can also accredit something of the mystic in him. Finally, unless the Renaissance author in him had been reluctant and remained silent

⁴⁰ Marc'hadour, *Thomas More et la Bible*, 199: “Paul emploie la périphrase *epithumian ekhôn*, que la *Vulgate* décalque en *desiderium habens*, et dont les traducteurs anglais sont unanimes à faire *desire*. C’est un des rares cas où Thomas More est seul, avec sa petite fille Mary Basset, contre Wyclif et Tyndale, Frith et Cranmer, les calvinistes de la *Genevan Bible*, les catholiques de Douai et les anglicans de l’*Authorized Version*. Seul à dire son aspiration par un terme plus fort que *desire*: il emploie *wish*, parfois, mais le plus souvent *long*. Dès son jeune âge, il frappait Érasme par la qualité de son espérance.”

⁴¹ See Marie-Claire Phélippeau, *Pour l’Amour du Ciel*, Moreana Editions, 2012.

about a special grace he had received, one almost wishes More had been granted on earth this “earnest penny of [his] whole reward after in heaven.”

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