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**Homily for 30<sup>th</sup> Friday, Saint Louis Priory School, 2015, Romans 9:1-5, Lk 14:1-6**

**Focus Statement:** We must learn about the proper path toward union with God

**Function Statement:** Everyone is called to union with God, for it is not reserved for the elite and the pursuit of it need not conflict with lay life

Is the mystical life part of the standard development of the gifts offered at Baptism and Confirmation? The 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, on the universal call to holiness, definitively sealed the debate surrounding this question, already won by the Dominicans at the Angelicum, with a resounding yes: a true mystical life, when properly understood, is neither something won by the elite nor something randomly given to the fortunate; rather, it is something that every believer could have. So, you are called to become a mystic.

Since we are called to be mystics, we must strive to understand the conditions for growth of the divine dynamism within us. Do we nurture this dynamism primarily through knowledge or primarily through love? In order to focus your initial inquiry on these questions, I would like to turn your attention to the Apostle Saint Paul, one of the Church's greatest mystics, minds, and missionaries. He counseled those in the Churches he had slaved to found both to "count everything as loss because of the excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8) and to "know Christ's love which surpasses knowledge in order that [we] may be filled unto all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). In other words, his mysticism, his activity, his deep learning, his appreciation of the knowledge of Christ as superior to all else, and his appreciation of the role of love in the Christian life, make him an excellent point of reference for understanding the way in which one grows in the Christian life unto the fullness thereof. We have time to investigate only one of his statements and its relation to these questions, but it is one that may offer an interpretative key for unlocking many of these questions. Our missionary mystic, filled not with peace but with "great sorrow," proclaimed, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people." Is this statement in tension with "counting everything as loss because of the excelling knowledge of Christ?" Or does Paul here proclaim the very height of participating in "Christ's love which surpasses knowledge in order that [we] may be filled unto all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19)? In order to understand how properly to unlock the mystical life latent within each of us, we must penetrate the motive for this statement of wanting to become anathema from God in order to help others.

To investigate this passage, I here turn to an obscure monastic text from 1170, Richard of Saint Victor's "Four degrees of violent love." Richard of Saint Victor first analyzes the four stages of progressive obsession that young lovers can experience and then applies it to the spiritual life, ultimately explaining our passage from Saint Paul as the height of Christian charity and the gateway to the highest mystical life.

The lover is first wounded by the beauty and excellence of the beloved; he is so love-struck that he is moved beyond himself to desire her good above his own. According to some of the juniors in my class, you know that you are thus wounded in some small way, if you choose to like all of a girl's pictures on Instagram. When one is not merely occasionally reminded of the beloved but is held bound by constant thoughts of her, then one has entered the second stage. According to the juniors, one has entered this stage if one cannot but talk of his beloved or one's attention drifts often into daydreams of her. Next, the obsessive attachment can deepen to the point that the poor young man cannot even find joy in spending time with his friends, for only the presence of the beloved can soothe the raging fire of his passions. Richard calls this the languid stage, for the obsession has taken possession not merely of his desire and memory but also his capacity for action. Teenage slang has developed an expression for it: the young man is "whipped." What can be worse? It is far worse when he is so obsessed that he cannot leave her presence even once he realizes that her constant presence disappoints. Richard of Saint Victor describes it thus: "the soul is thirsty and it drinks, yet drinking does not quench its thirst. Rather, the more the soul drinks, the more it thirsts. For the thirst or hunger of the greedy, nay, insatiable soul is not allayed but rather exacerbated when it enjoys at will what it has desired." (On Love: Victorine Texts in Translation, "On the Four Degrees of Violent Love," p 280-281). I am happy to report that the Juniors had neither the experience nor the imagination to express this stage adequately in a skit. Richard of Saint Victor observed that couples start to quarrel constantly once one of them has reached this stage. For the good of their relationship, they simply must spend some time apart. In reflecting on these stages, Richard is clear that the first degree is beautiful and most appropriate for those in marriage, whereas the remaining three degrees are progressively more problematic for anyone.

Let us now apply this scheme to one's love for God. Here Richard argues that each stage is progressively better. In the first stage, one is wounded by God's love and wants to serve God. In the second stage, one wants to keep God's presence in mind, and one also constantly thinks of God and God's ways. In the third stage, one's experience of God leads one to set aside time in each day to withdraw into intimate prayer in order to be in closer contact with God. "Oh how precious is that first degree of love in the love of God, when it is unconquerable!" says Richard. "More precious by far is the second, when burning emotion begins to be inseparable. Yet still by far, when one can only find delight on account of God. However, the highest and most precious degree of love exists when nothing is able to satisfy one's desire" says our guide (Ibid., p. 284). If the third degree is one of mystical encounter, then what is the fourth degree? "Everyone who wishes to touch the highest degree of consummated love ought," says Richard, "to conform himself to [the humble self-emptying kenosis of Christ], "for greater love no man has than to lay down his life for his friends." So, in his estimation, one grows in the spiritual life according to one's level of *charity*, and one reaches the heights of the mystical life only by way of a humble and heroic charity. "In the end," argues Richard, "this type of man [of the 4<sup>th</sup> degree of violent charity] desires 'to be made anathema from Christ for the sake of his brothers.'" This argument explains one of the ways by which to remain a mystic while engaging in active works. Just as a couple needs to create some space in order to maintain and improve their relationship, so too the mystic needs to pull himself away from private prayer by becoming a servant of God's children, at least for part of the day, in order to return to improve his overall relationship with God. In this way, one does not lessen but rather intensifies one's relationship with God by following Christ's self-emptying love for others. Richard notes that this

charity is in a way mystical and indeed leads to the heights of mystical encounter: “Just as that to which he ascends through faith is above the human, similarly above the human is that to which he descends through patient endurance. And so in the first degree, the mind returns to itself, in the second it ascends toward God, in the third it crosses into God, and in the fourth it descends beneath itself. In the first and second it is lifted up; in the third and fourth it is transfigured. In the first it ascends toward itself, in the second it transcends itself, in the third it is conformed to the brightness of God, and in the fourth it is conformed to the humility of Christ.”

What may we take away from these reflections? The students and faculty can note that everyone is called to union with God, for it is not reserved for the elite and the pursuit of it need not conflict with lay life. The monks can note that a monk does not necessarily compromise his pursuit of union with God by teaching in the school or eating lunch with the faculty or even descending to the level of listening to teenage conversations, for the monk already has plenty of time set aside for prayer and he likely needs to use every opportunity to grow in charity in order to capitalize on that time in prayer. Finally, we can all appreciate those who have humbly laid down their lives so that we may grow in love, in knowledge, and in holiness; let us thank Christ Jesus most especially.