

A Pastoral Note on Slaying in the Spirit

Father Ernest E. Larkin, O.Carm., of the Kino Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, has long been one of the most respected teachers of spirituality in the U.S. He was the principal writer of *Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood* for the American bishops. Deeply involved in the Renewal, he is liaison in his diocese.

My own pastoral attitude toward the phenomenon of slaying in the Spirit is suggested by St. Teresa of Avila's experience of "absorption" in the first years of her burgeoning mystical life (1554-1556, *Life*, chapters 23-24). In these absorptions St. Teresa lost control over the exercise of her interior faculties, particularly the imagination and the ability to think. Probably the external senses were also affected, though not to the point of ecstasy.

The cause of the absorptions turned out to be the mystical graces of the prayer of quiet and union Teresa was experiencing at this time. But this was not clear without testing. Two wise young Jesuits advised her to resist these absorptions and to endeavor to center her prayer on an image of Jesus, preferably in His passion, in a simple affective attention and without easily capitulating to the interior swoon. Later on St. Francis Borgia

confirmed the wisdom of this advice. But he told her that she could henceforth freely indulge the absorptions, since they were obviously of God.

Slaying in the Spirit is to be tested in a similar fashion. It is to be resisted gently, without great strain or effort, but resisted nonetheless. If it occurs anyway, let it be accepted trustingly and joyously, but without attaching undue importance to it. If the personal history of the principals, the context of the event, and the tested fruits of the experience are all positive, then it can be celebrated as a blessed happening for the favored individual and the building up of the community.

In this evaluation slaying in the Spirit is a sign of human frailty before the power of God. It is akin to ecstasy in traditional mystical theology and to be ruled accordingly.