

ASCENT

The word “ascent” in Christian Spirituality is used often to highlight the importance of ‘effort’, ‘asceticism’, ‘detachment’ and the ‘way’ to union with God. It’s literal meaning can be found in the Old Testament: Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Commandments; Jacob the Patriarch dreams of a ladder between heaven and earth (Genesis 28.12); Prophet Isaiah often making a part of his prophesy that all nations will go up to the Mountain of the Lord rejoicing and that Mountain is Mount Zion – the Holy Jerusalem; Prophet Elijah prays on Mount Carmel and takes a journey to Mount Horeb running away from Queen Jezebel; and in the New Testament Jesus ascended a mountain to be transfigured and at the end of his life he died on mount Calvary. The word ‘ascent’ and its symbolism was used by many spiritual authors to describe going up to heaven and to indicate how humans have to make efforts to climb the mountain of the Lord.

Images and expressions of ‘ascent’ in spiritual literature bring to the mind and heart of a spiritual practitioner a deep sense of drawing closer to God; and virtually points to a transcendence from transitory human world to heaven. In Christian spiritual life, experience involves ascent, progressive spiritual growth bringing us closer to God and to the transcendence of heaven. St. Bonaventure (1217-74) describes prayer and contemplation as a means of ascent to God. Journey up the mountain begins with love of Christ, sustained by meditation on Christ crucified. St. John of the Cross (1542-91), in his treatise *Ascent of Mount Carmel* makes

it very clear that Spirituality involves progressive growth that brings us closer to the summit of the mount of God

This word also has inspired writers to portray some way an ascent to God, for example Dante in his *Divine Comedy* climbs Mount Purgatory to get closer to God and Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* (1946) where he hints of his own spiritual growth in terms of 7 mountains.

In our ordinary life we get multiple examples of climbing the ladder of success and climbing the spiritual mountain through trials and temptations. All climbing is difficult and arduous. Ascending the ladder of success implies a tremendous effort and determination.

We all know that spiritual life is a journey, it is a climbing, it is a path of progress. This path is envisaged by many spiritual authors as climbing and traversing a road or a way to liberation, freedom, union, transformation and finally leading up to beatific vision. A virtuous life is a matter of effort and at the same time willingness to co-operate with the grace of God.

In spirituality climbing a mountain to experience God signifies selflessness and fulfilling a noble ideal: One of the important things we need to do in our prayer is to identify our motives. Every time Moses went up the mountain it was for God's purpose more than his. God called Moses up the mountain to speak to the Israelites. Every time Jesus went to prayer it was about the will of the Father for humanity.

A mountain top experience is a very selfless experience but somehow our generation has been convinced otherwise and has come to believe that prayer is about the blessings we can receive. It is about praying, 'yet not my will but yours be done.'

Notice that when you ascend up the mountain, you are leaving behind your camp, your situations, your life, and the whole perspective changes to that of a bird's eye view. It is no more about how you see things but about how God see things. When you are in the presence of God, the problems may not have changed below but how you see the problem will change. Hence, the word 'ascent' can make us understand the necessity of discipline, focus, attention, awareness, dedication, hard work, and at the same time multiplying our talents spiritual as well as material. This will help us to become genuinely rooted in God and our neighbour and thus create not just a spiritual joy within ourselves but attain universal brotherhood around us. That is why Jesus who ascended a small mountain to preach the Beatitudes, climbs mount Tabor to be transfigured and finally redeems humanity on Mount Calvary and ascends up into Heaven from on a Mountain inviting his disciples to go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news and baptise them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

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