



Testing Ecstasy

“We could never prove it, of course,” says Mother Saint-Raphaël of Mariette’s experience of the stigmata in Ron Hansen’s fine novel, *Mariette in Ecstasy*. “Skeptics will always prevail. God gives us just enough to seek Him, and never enough to fully find him. To do more would inhibit our freedom, and our freedom is very dear to God.”¹

Hansen, a Roman Catholic who teaches at Santa Clara University, rightly recognizes that the works of the Spirit are not easily proved. Although Hansen clearly remains open to the possibility of miracle and is favorably inclined toward his main character Mariette, the young postulant whose ecstatic experiences of Christ turn upside down a 1906 convent of the Sisters of the Crucifixion, he also commends a proper measure of caution. Mother Saint-Raphaël again:

We shall try to find a natural explanation for these phenomena if we can, and we shall deny they are holy gifts to Mariette until there is no other alternative. We know there *are* miracles in the gospels, but we show them disrespect if we dispose ourselves to believe in the simply fabulous. And we must keep in mind that there are a good many more pages in holy scripture that show how little pleasure God takes in astounding us with His powers. Let us therefore be wary of hallucinations and tricks and whatever seems wonderful or surprising.²

Elsewhere, Hansen admits that Mother Saint-Raphaël speaks for him: “Wondrous things do happen in life,” he writes, “but generally in the ordinary ways of faith and healing and love.”³

I confess that, most often, Mother Saint-Raphaël speaks for me as well. When confronted by a “spirit” (or any ecstatic “spiritual” experience), I tend to think that Scrooge’s advice is best: assume first that it is a bit of underdone potato—nothing more “religious” than an indigestion-produced hallucination. Such a perspective, no doubt, betrays my Enlightenment heritage and my one-time training as a natural scientist; worse, it may well cut me off from aspects of life and experience that potentially offer great rewards. Truth to tell, I am more open now, given my many firsthand experiences of the church in Africa; but in Africa, too, it is important to examine ecstasy as well as to experience it—to find a way to test the spirits. There is healthy ecstasy and unhealthy ecstasy, and telling the difference will be a matter of life and death, of freedom and slavery.

¹Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (New York: Edward Burlingame, 1991) 174.

²*Ibid.*, 133-134.

³Ron Hansen, “Stigmata,” in *A Stay against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 177.

Mariette recognizes the same thing. Eventually sent home from the convent because of the disruption caused by her very innocence, she discovers that Christ “loves me more, now that I am despised, than when I was so richly admired in the past. And Christ still sends me roses. We try to be formed and held and kept by him, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, Surprise me.”⁴ Her return to the world, where she must find a way to be faithful through the countless ambiguous decisions of daily life, will also require the guidance of the Spirit—no less surprising and no less miraculous for its everyday character than the wonders of her earlier stigmata.

Pastors and Christian teachers everywhere will have as one of their tasks helping people recognize and name the work of the Spirit in their lives. Shall we bid them seek the spectacular, or shall we suggest they heed Mother Saint-Raphaël: “And let us remember that sainthood has little to do with the preternatural but a great deal to do with the simple day-to-day practice of the Christian virtues”⁵ Not an either/or, no doubt, as with so many things. Pointing them to Ron Hansen’s book might help. Beautifully written and spiritually insightful, it rightly refuses to “solve” the mystery of the Spirit’s presence.

Finally, like the Spirit itself, we will want to point them to Christ and the gospel, the mystery made flesh. As Moltmann writes: “In the Spirit we perceive Christ...In this respect the Spirit is quite selfless, and points away from itself to God’s Son.”⁶ Paul got it right long ago: the true test of the Spirit will be its leading us to confess that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3). “Jesus is Lord,” however, is not a confining confession but a liberating one. So, knowing Christ—grounded in the faith given by the Spirit—we will, as Moltmann also notes, “come under the influence of the Holy Spirit...for Christ is selfless, too, and points away from himself to the Holy Spirit.”⁷ The Spirit points to Christ (Christian faith will always be centered on its liberating particularity); Christ points to the Spirit (Christian faith will always be open to God’s surprising possibility). Helping people discover the balance will require considerable pastoral grace.

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⁴Hansen, *Mariette*, 179.

⁵*Ibid.*, 134.

⁶Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 94.

⁷*Ibid.*