Christian mysticism is rooted in the reading of the Bible. The mystic, however, does not seek an academic understanding of the scriptural text; nor is he or she content with viewing the Bible only as a repository of doctrine and moral regulations. The mystic wants to penetrate to the living source of the biblical message, that is, to the Divine Word who speaks in and through human words and texts. This means that the Bible has been both the origin and the norm for Christian mystics down through the ages.

The biblical basis for Christian mysticism is evident in many ways, not least in the fact that the very term *mystical* (Greek: *mystikos*; Latin: *mysticus*) entered Christianity primarily as a way to describe the inner sense of the Bible. In ancient Greek and Latin the word originally referred to anything “hidden.” It was sometimes used religiously to point to the secret ceremonies of the mystery cults. From the second half of the second century CE, Christians began to employ the term to characterize the inner dimension of the realities of their religion. Although they spoke of mystical sacraments, of mystical contemplation, and, from around the year 500 on, even of mystical theology, the earliest, the most widespread, and the most continuous use of the word was in relation to the Bible—that is, the mystical meaning or mystical understanding of the scriptural text. This shows why the largest body of
mystical literature until circa 1200 is directly biblical in nature, that is, mystical texts mostly occur either in commentaries on the books of the Bible or in sermons preached to bring out the inner dimension of the liturgical readings drawn from scripture. Even those mystics (mostly after circa 1200) who began to place emphasis on what Bernard of Clairvaux called the “book of experience” (littera experientiae) wanted to show the conformity between what they had learned through their own contact with God and the message given to the church in the biblical text.

This kind of in-depth reading delighting in multiple meanings and in illuminating one biblical text with another often seems strange to us today, in an era shaped by historical-critical readings that seek the author’s original intent. Modern hermeneutical theories and studies in the history of the reception of texts, however, have begun to give us a better sense of the purpose of the mystical reading of the Bible. Mystical interpretation was not arbitrary, but was governed by two essential criteria: first, the usefulness of the reading for encouraging deeper contact with God; and second, the reading’s coherence with the faith of the community.

The entire Bible was viewed as having a deeper meaning. Naturally, some books lent themselves more easily to a mystical reading, thus forming a kind of “canon within the canon” for the mystical element in the history of Christianity. Some of these books, such as the Psalms in the Old Testament, and John’s Gospel and Paul’s letters in the New Testament, are evident choices, but the mystical book par excellence was the Song of Songs—a surprising choice to those who feel some discomfort with the frankly erotic language of these love songs. Christian mystics, as well as Jewish mystics, found in the Song, properly read, the supreme expression of the love of God for his community and for each person within it.

Three of the six selections in this section (Origen, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Madame Guyon) illustrate varieties of mystical readings of the Song. The other three selections show how mystical interpretation was applied to other books. Gregory of Nyssa used the story of Moses from Exodus as an archetype of the soul’s progression to God. Gregory’s younger contemporary Augustine of Hippo preached hundreds of sermons on the Psalms. The example given here from a sermon on Psalm 41 provides insight into a mystical reading directed at the whole Christian community. Meister Eckhart expressed his teaching primarily through sermons preached on texts from the liturgy, teasing out mystical readings usually from short passages of many biblical books, such as the sentence from Luke’s Gospel that is the basis for this sermon.
house of God." Still, "Hoye in God" is his answer to the soul that disturbs him.


Bernard of Clairvaux

4.

Sermons on the Song of Songs 23

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) was not a theorist of the interpretation of scripture, but his biblical sermons are among the most famous and influential of the Middle Ages. His premier mystical work, the eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs composed between about 1135 and 1153, is one of the greatest works of mystical exegesis of the medieval period. Bernard’s exegesis proceeds with contemplative leisure, reaching only to verse 4 of chapter 3 of the Song.

The rhetorical richness and theological subtlety of these sermons are difficult to convey in English, but sermon 23 shows how the Cistercian abbot used the text of the Song to present an overview of the soul’s journey to loving union with Christ the Incarnate Word. Bernard’s commentary begins with Song 1:3, “The King [i.e., Christ] has brought me [i.e., the soul as bride] into his rooms [cellars, or storerooms, in the Latin].” This in turn reminds him of two other locations mentioned in the Song, the garden of Song 5:1 and the bedroom of Song 3:4. Bernard changes the order of the biblical text, using these three places to sketch an itinerary of the soul that is also the gradual progression through three levels of reading the biblical text. The garden is the historical meaning (historia), that is, the Bible’s presentation of salvation history. The storerooms are the moral teachings (moralis sensus), i.e., the three classes of virtues by which humans correct their faults and prepare for encountering God. Finally, the bedroom where the lovers meet represents divine contemplation (theorica contemplatio), the place of the various forms of mystical union. Bernard mentions three types of union in the sermon.
“The King has brought me into his rooms” (Song 1:3). This is where the fragrance comes from, his is the goal of our running. She [i.e., the bride] had said that we must run, drawn by that fragrance, but did not specify our destination. So it is to these rooms that we run, drawn by the fragrance that issues from them. The bride's keen senses have been quick to detect it, so eager is she to experience it in all its fullness. But first of all we ought to give thought to the meaning of these rooms. To begin with, let us imagine them to be perfume-laden places within the Bridgroom's quarters, where varied spices breathe their scents (Rev 5:8), where delights are manifold. The more valuable products of garden and field are consigned for preservation to storerooms like these. To these therefore people run, at least those who are aglow with the Spirit (Rom 12:11). The bride runs, so do the maidens; but the one to arrive first is the one whose love is most ardent, because she runs more quickly (Isa 20:4). On arriva' she brooks no refusal, not even delay. The door is promptly opened to her as to one of the family, one highly esteemed, loved with a special love, uniquely favored.

Since the implications of the text are clear from what I have said, let us now try to discover the spiritual meaning of the storerooms. Further on there is mention of a “garden” (Song 5:1) and a “bedroom” (Song 3:4), both of which I join to these rooms for the purpose of this present discussion. When examined together the meaning of each becomes clearer. By your leave then, we shall search the Sacred Scriptures for these three things: the garden, the storeroom, the bedroom. The person who thirsts for God eagerly studies and meditates on the inspired word, knowing that there he is certain to find the one for whom he thirsts. Let the garden, then, represent the plain, unadorned historical sense of Scripture, the storeroom its moral sense, and the bedroom the mystery of divine contemplation.

For a start I feel that my comparison of scriptural history to a garden is not unwarranted, for in it we find people of many virtues, like fruitful trees in the garden of the Bridgroom, in the Paradise of God (Ezek 31:9). You may gather samples of their good deeds and good habits as you would apples from trees. Who can doubt that a good person is a tree of God's planting? Listen to what St. David says of such a one: “He is like a tree that is planted by a stream of water, yielding its fruit in season, and its leaves never fade” (Ps 1:3). Listen to Jeremiah, speaking to the same effect and almost in similar words: “He is like a tree that is planted by a stream of water that thrusts its roots to the stream: when the heat comes it fears not” (Jer 17:8). . . . History therefore is a garden in which we may recognize three divisions. Within its ambit we find the creation, the reconciliation, and the renewal of heaven and earth. Creation is symbolized in the sowing or planting of the garden; reconciliation by the germination of what is sown or planted. For in due course, while the heavens showered from above and the skies rained down the Just one (Isa 45:8), the earth opened for a Savior to spring up, and heaven and earth were reconciled. “For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one” (Col 1:20), making peace by his blood between all things in heaven and on earth. Renewal however is to take place at the end of the world. Then there will be “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1), and the good will be gathered from the midst of the wicked like fruit from a garden, to be set at rest in the storehouse of God. As Scripture says: “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land raised on high” (Isa 4:2). Here you have the three aspects of time represented by the garden in the historical sense.

In its moral teaching too, three things are to be taken into account, three apartments as it were in the one storeroom. It was for this reason perhaps that she used the plural; rooms, instead of room, since she must have been thinking about these apartments. Later on she glories in being admitted to the wine-room (Song 2:4). We therefore, in accord with the advice: “Give occasion to a wise man and he will be still wiser” (Prov 9:9), take occasion from the name given by the Holy Spirit to this room, and give names to the other two: the room of spices and the room of the ointments. Afterwards we shall see the reason for these names. For the moment take note that all these possessions of the Bridgroom are wholesome and sweet: wine, ointments, and spices. . . . Rightly then the bride's happiness abounds on being admitted to a place filled to overflowing with such rich graces.

But I can give them other names, whose application seems more obvious. Taking them in due order, I name the first room discipline, the second nature, and the third grace. In the first, guided by moral principles, you discover how you are inferior to others, in the second you find the basis for equality, in the third what makes you greater; that is:
the grounds for submission, for co-operation, for authority; or if you will: to be subject, to co-exist, to preside. In the first you bear the status of learner, in the second that of companion, in the third that of master. For nature has made men equal. But since this natural moral gift was corrupted by price, men became impatient of equal status. Driven by the urge to surpass their fellows, they spared no efforts to achieve this superiority; with an itch for vainglory and prompted by envy, they lived in mutual rivalry (Gal 5:26). Our primary task is to tame this wilfulness of character by submission to discipline in the first room, where the stubborn will, worn down by the hard and prolonged schooling of experienced mentors, is humbled and healed. The natural goodness lost by pride is restored by obedience, and they learn, as far as in them lies, to live peacefully and sociably with all who share their nature, with all men, no longer through fear of discipline but by the impulse of love. When they pass from here into the room of nature, they discover what is written: “How good, how delightful it is to live together as one like brothers: fine as oil on the head” (Ps 132:1–2). For when morals are disciplined there comes, as to spices pounded together, the oil of gladness (Ps 44:8), the good of nature, the resulting ointment is good and sweet. The man who is anointed with it becomes pleasant and temperate, a man without a grudge, who neither swindles nor attacks nor offends another, who never exults himself nor promotes himself at their expense (2 Cor 7:2; Lk 3:14), but offers his services as generously as he willingly accepts theirs (Phil 4:19). If you have adequately grasped the characteristics of these two rooms, I think you will admit that I have appropriately named them the spice room and the ointment room.

With regard to the wine room, I do not think there is any other reason for its name than that the wine of an earnest zeal for the works of love is found there. One who has not been admitted to this room should never take charge of others. This wine should be the inspiring influence in the lives of those who bear authority, such as we find in the Teacher of the Nations, when he said: “Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall and I am not angry?” (2 Cor 11:29). I have also named this the room of grace, not because a man may enter the other two without the aid of grace but because grace is especially found here in its fullness. For “love is the fullness of the law” (Rom 13:10), and “if you love your brother you have fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8).

The person whose character I most admire, who has attained supreme success in the way of life I have portrayed, is the one to whom it is given to sprint through or ramble round all these rooms without stumbling, who never contends with his superiors nor envies his equals, who does not fail in concern for his subjects nor use his authority arrogantly. To be obedient to superiors, obliging to one’s companions, to attend with kindness to the needs of one’s subjects—these sure marks of perfection I unhesitatingly attribute to the bride. We infer this from the words she speaks: “The king has brought me into his rooms” (Song 1:3), which show that she was introduced, not to any room in particular but to the whole complex of rooms.

Let us at last enter the bedroom. What can be said of it? May I presume that I know all about it? Far from me the pretension that I have experienced so sublime a grace, nor shall I boast of a privilege reserved solely to the fortunate bride. I am more concerned to know myself, as the Greek motto advises, that with the Prophet, “I may know what is wanting to me” (Ps 38:5). However, if I knew nothing at all, there is nothing I could say. What I do know I do not begrudge you or withhold from you; what I do not know may “he who teaches men knowledge” (Ps 93:10) supply to you.

You remember that I said the bedroom of the King is to be sought in the mystery of divine contemplation. In speaking of the ointments I mentioned that many varieties of them are to be found in the Bridegroom’s presence, that all of them are not for everybody’s use, but that each one’s share differs according to his merits. So too, I feel that the King has not one bedroom only, but several. For he has more than one queen; his concubines are many, his maids beyond counting (Song 6:7). And each has her own secret rendezvous with the Bridegroom and says: “My secret to myself, my secret to myself” (Is 24:16). All do not experience the delight of the Bridegroom’s private visit in the same room, the Father has different arrangements for each (Mt 20:23). For we did not choose him but he chose us and appointed places for us (Jn 15:16); and in the place of each one’s appointment there he is too. Thus one repentant woman was allotted a place at the feet of the Lord Jesus (Lk 10:39); another—if she really is another—found fulfillment for
her devotion at his head (Mt 26:7). Thomas attained to this mystery of grace in the Savior’s side (Jn 20:27); John on his breast (Jn 13:25); Peter in the Father’s bosom (Mt 16:17); Paul in the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2).

Who among us can see the difference between these various merits, or rather rewards? But in order to draw attention to what is known to us all, I suggest that the first woman took her rest on the secure ground of humility, the second on the seat of hope, Thomas in firm faith, John in the breadth of charity, Paul in the insights of wisdom, Peter in the light of truth. There are many rooms therefore in the Bridgroom’s house (Jn 14:2); and each, be she queen, or concubine, or one of the bevy of maidens (Song 6:7), finds there the place and destination suited to her merits until the grace of contemplation allows her to advance further and share in the happiness of her Lord (Mt 25:21), to explore her Bridgroom’s secret charms. Relying on the light it may please him to give me, I shall try to demonstrate this more clearly in its proper place. For the moment it suffices to know that no maiden, or concubine, or even queen, may gain access to the mystery of that bedroom which the Bridgroom reserves solely for her who is his dove, beautiful, perfect, and unique (Song 6:8). Hence it is not for me to undertake to make them up to me, especially since I can see that even the bride herself is at times unable to find fulfillment of her desire to know certain secrets.

But I shall tell you how far I have advanced, or imagine I have advanced; and you should not accuse me of boasting, because I reveal it solely in the hope of helping you. The Bridgroom who exercises control over the whole universe has a special place from which he decrees his laws and formulates plans as guidelines in weight, measure, and number for all things created (Wis 11:20). This is a remote and secret place, but not a place of repose. For although as far as in him lies he arranges all things sweetly (Wis 8:1)—the emphasis is on arranging—the contemplative who perchance reaches that place is not allowed to rest and be quiet. In a way that is wondrous yet delightful he teases the awe-struck seeker till he reduces him to restlessness. Further on the bride beautifully describes both the delight and the restlessness of this stage of contemplation when she says that though she sleeps her heart is awake (Song 5:2)... This place then, where complete repose is not attainable, is not the bedroom.

There is another place from which God, the just Judge, “so much to be feared for his deeds among mankind” (Ps 65:5), watches ceaselessly with an attention that is rigorous yet hidden, over the world of fallen humanity. The awe-struck contemplative sees how, in this place, God’s just but hidden judgment neither washes away the evil deeds of the wicked nor is placated by their good deeds... Who will want to rest in such a place when he sees that he, whose judgments are like the mighty deep (Ps 35:7), only spares and shows mercy to these sinners in this life that he may not do so in eternity? This kind of vision inspires a terror of judgment, not the secure confidence of the bedroom. That place is awe-inspiring (Gen 28:17), and totally devoid of quiet. I am horrified when suddenly pitched into it, and over and over I think on the words: “What man knows whether he deserves love or hate?” (Eccles 9:1). Do not be surprised that I have assigned the beginning of wisdom to this place and not to the first. For there we listen to Wisdom as a teacher in the lecture-hall, delivering an all-embracing discourse (1 Jn 2:27); here we receive it within us; there our minds are enlightened, here our wills are moved to decision. Instruction makes us learned, experience makes us wise... And so with God: to know him is one thing, to fear him is another... How truly is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom (Ps 110:10), because the soul begins to experience God for the first time when fear of him takes hold of it, not when knowledge enlightens it... Hence you must not look for the bedroom in these places, one of which resembles a teacher’s auditorium, the other a bar of justice.

But there is a place where God is seen in tranquil rest, where he is neither Judge nor Teacher but Bridgroom. To me—for I do not speak for others—this is truly the bedroom to which I have sometimes gained happy entrance. Alas! How rare the time, and how short the stay! There one clearly realizes that “the Lord’s love for those who fear him lasts forever and ever” (Ps 102:17)...
catch sight of the King who, when the crowds have gone after the day-long hearing of cases in his law-courts, lays aside the burden of responsibility, goes at night to his place, and enters his bedroom with a few companions whom he welcomes to the intimacy of his private suite... If it should ever happen to one of you to be enraptured and hidden away in this secret place, this sanctuary of God, safe from the call and concern of the greedy senses, from the pangs of care, the guilt of sin and the obsessive fancies of the imagination so much more difficult to hold at bay—such a person, when he returns to us again, may well boast and tell us: "The King has brought me into his bedroom." Whether this be the same room that makes the bride so jubilant I do not dare to affirm. But it is a bedroom, the bedroom of the King, and of the three that I have described in the three visions, it is the only place where peace reigns (Ps 75:3). . .


5.

Meister Eckhart

Sermon 2

Meister Eckhart (circa 1260–1328), the noted Dominican preacher, was also a scriptural mystic. Almost all of Eckhart's technical scholastic writings that provide the foundation for his mysticism are biblical commentaries. His vernacular mystical teaching, aside from a few treatises, is given in the approximately 120 surviving sermons preached on Bible texts found in the liturgy. Eckhart's exegesis, however, is unusual even by medieval standards, since he believed that the "excessive" or "saturated" natures of God's overflowing and inexhaustible word invited the interpreter and listener not only to read the hidden message within, but even to "break through" all images in the text to reach the divine source and then re-create the text from the perspective of the unity of God and human. This explains Eckhart's exegetical boldness in interpreting the biblical passages he preached upon.

A good example of this procedure can be found in the following sermon in which the Dominican reinterprets the opening verse of Luke's Gospel text for the Feast of the Assumption to show how it reveals fundamental themes of his mystical teaching. Eckhart plays with three aspects of Luke 10:38. First, the Latin text says that Jesus was received by a "woman," but Eckhart changes this into the paradoxical expression "a virgin who was a wife," thus enabling him in the first part of the sermon to present his teaching that it is only by becoming a "virgin," that is, empty of all images and perfectly detached from created things, that we can pass to the higher stage of being a "wife"—a soul constantly bearing God in fruitfulness. Eckhart reinforces this point by employing the German verb
Prayer is as essential to Christianity as it is to other religions. The early Christians took over the Jewish Psalms as an important component of their devotion, but there were also distinctive forms of prayer created by the new religion. The apostles asked Jesus how to pray, and he responded by teaching them the “Our Father,” the cornerstone of all Christian prayer (Mt 6:9–13; Lk 11:2–4). Another significant text was Paul’s command in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to “Pray constantly.” Prayer, most simply defined as “the lifting of the heart and mind to God,” has taken myriad forms over the centuries—vocal and mental, private and public, liturgical and nonliturgical. One customary division of prayer (based on 1 Tim 2:1) speaks of four forms: praise, thanksgiving, penance, and petition. Prayer is both an instrument in the preparation for mystical consciousness, as well as an aspect of the goal in the case of what is called contemplative prayer (see section 10). Further, the Christian always prays in and with the church as the Body of Christ, so private prayer and the public prayer of the liturgy are not two separate things, but differing manifestations of the one prayer offered by Christ the High Priest to God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. A proper view of the role of prayer in the mystical life needs to keep both modalities in mind.

The central component of liturgical prayer for Christians is the celebration of the sacraments, the ritual acts that Christians believe
were established by Christ and that transmit his saving grace to subsequent believers. The sacrament of baptism, which begins the new life of the Christian, is the foundation for all that follows and hence may be described as the basis of mysticism, but among later Christians, for whom infant baptism became the rule, it was the Eucharist, the reception of Christ's Body and Blood, that was the center of heightened consciousness of God. Given the variety of ways in which prayer, liturgy, and sacrament have functioned in Christian mysticism, the following selections can only begin to suggest the richness of this dimension of the mystical life.

Around 200 CE Tertullian wrote the first Christian treatise on prayer, a practical discussion about styles and practices of praying. About a generation later (circa 233) Origen composed a more penetrating theological tract. Origen divides his work into three parts: general issues about prayer, especially its usefulness; a commentary on the Lord's Prayer; and issues relating to the person who prays. The following selections from the introduction and first part of the work feature some of the Alexandrian's comments about the importance of prayer in the life of the Christian, as well as excerpts from his discussion of the advantages of prayer. For Origen prayer is not really about trying to influence God by petition, but is intended to enable us to come into union with the spirit of the Lord. Especially noteworthy is the insistence on the necessity of praying in and with Christ, as well as Origen's understanding of formal prayer (three times a day) as being part and parcel of an entire "prayerful life."

I. INTRODUCTION

The grace of God, immense and beyond measure, showered by him on men through Jesus Christ, the minister to us of this superabundant grace, and through the co-operation of the Spirit, makes possible through his will things which are to our rational and mortal nature im-
For forty days prayer accompanied the prophet in the recesses of his cave on Horeb (1 Kgs 19:3–8); he openly conversed with the deity (1 Kgs 19:9–13). Fiery chariots were harnessed and descended (2 Kgs 2:11); they took him up, ascending with him to the God whom he loved. The Watchers on high rejoiced at the ascent of the prophet to heaven in his body.

Prayer shut up and fettered the mouths of lions inside the pit, so that the just Daniel was not harmed (Dan 6). Prayer preserved the three children in the furnace of fire (Dan 3). Prayer opened up the wombs of barren women (1 Sam 1), providing them with heirs. Such are the wonders that prayer and faith have continuously brought about—and there are others even greater than these!


3.

JOHN CASSIAN
CONFERENCES 9 AND 10

John Cassian (circa 360–435) was a link between Eastern monasticism and early Western monasticism. A Latin speaker, though born in the East, he spent time in Palestine and Egypt as a young monk visiting the famous Fathers (abbas) of the desert. His thought was influenced by the writings of Evagrius Ponticus (see section 2.2). Cassian wandered to Constantinople and Rome before settling down around 415 in southern Gaul, where he established several monasteries. His two major writings were of great influence in the West for more than a millennium. The first was The Conferences (circa 425–29), twenty-four recollections of conversations with noted abbas about the interior spiritual practices of the monastic life. The second was The Institutes (circa 430), which describes the exterior practices of cenobitical monks (i.e., monastics living in community).

While the theological content of Cassian's thought was based on Evagrius, he brought many refinements and original elements to Evagrius's Origenist perspective. Especially important was his emphasis on "purity of heart" (puritas cordis; Mt 5:8) as the aim, or direction, the monk uses to attain the goal of the kingdom of heaven. Cassian wrote for fellow monastics, but important parts of his teaching are applicable to all devout Christians. This is especially true of his teaching on prayer, summarized in Conferences 9 and 10 by Abba Isaac. Building on Origen and Evagrius, these conferences lay out the meaning of perfect unceasing prayer and the method by which it may be attained. Conference 9 is a general treatise, structured around the four kinds of prayer mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:1 and a treatment of the "Our Father." Conference 10 emphasizes...
the constant repetition of a single verse ("O God, come to my aid; Lord, make haste to help me"—Ps 69:2) as a preparation for the highest form of prayer, which Cassian speaks of as "fiery prayer" (oratio ignita).

I.

SELECTIONS FROM CONFERENCE 9

(A) Preparation for Prayer (Sections II–III)

The Blessed Isaac finally spoke these words:

"The end of every monk and the perfection of his heart incline him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer; and, as much as human frailty allows, it strives after an unchanging and continual tranquility of mind and perpetual purity. On its account we tirelessly pursue and ceaselessly apply ourselves to every bodily labor as well as to contrition of spirit. Between the two there is a kind of reciprocal and inseparable link. For, as the structure of all the virtues tends to the perfection of prayer, so, unless all things have been joined together and cemented under this capstone, in no way will they be able to remain firm and stable. For just as the perpetual and constant tranquility of prayer about which we are speaking cannot be acquired and perfected without those virtues, neither can these latter, which lay the foundation for it, achieve completion unless it be persevered in.

"Therefore we shall be unable to deal properly with the effect of prayer or by an abrupt discourse to arrive at its principal end, which is achieved as a result of the work of all the virtues, if everything that should be either rejected or acquired in order to obtain it has not first been set out and discussed in an orderly way, and unless the things that pertain to the construction of that spiritual and sublime tower, following the directives of the gospel parable, have been carefully reckoned and prepared beforehand. Yet the things that have been prepared will be of no benefit nor will they let the highest capstones of perfection be placed properly upon them unless a complete purging of vice has been carried out first. And once the tottering and dead rubbish of the passions has been dug cut, the firm foundations of simplicity and humility can be placed in what may be called the living and solid ground of our heart, on the gospel rock. When they have been constructed, this tower of spiritual virtues which is to be built can be immovably fixed and can be raised to the utmost heights of the heavens in full assurance of its solidity. For if it rests upon such foundations, even though the heaviest rains of the passions should come down and violent torrents of persecutions should beat against it like a battering ram and a savage tempest of adversary spirits should rush upon it and press upon it, not only will it not fall into ruin but no force of any kind will ever disturb it.

"Therefore, so that prayer may be made with the fervor and purity that it deserves, the following things should be observed in every respect. First, anxiety about fleshly matters should be completely cut off. Then, not only the concern for but in fact even the memory of affairs and business should be refused all entry whatsoever; detraction, idle speech, talkativeness, and buffoonery should also be done away with; the disturbance of anger, in particular, and of sadness should be entirely torn out; and the harmful shoot of fleshly lust and of avarice should be uprooted. And thus, when these and similar vices that could also make their appearance among men have been completely thrust out and cut off and there has taken place a cleansing purgation such as we have spoken of, which is perfected in the purity of simplicity and innocence, the unshakable foundations of deep humility should be laid, which can support a tower that will penetrate the heavens. Then the spiritual structure of the virtues must be raised above it, and the mind must be restrained from all dangerous wandering and straying, so that thus it might gradually begin to be elevated to the contemplation of God and to spiritual vision.

"For whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray as a result of the operation of the memory. Hence we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful persons that we wish to be. For the mind in prayer is shaped by the state that it was previously in, and, when we sink into prayer, the image of the same deeds words, and thoughts plays itself out before our eyes. This makes us angry or sad, depending on our previous condition, or it recalls past lusts or business, or it strikes us with foolish laughter—I am ashamed even to say it—at the suggestion of something ridiculous that was said or done, or it makes us fly back to previous conversations. Therefore, before we pray we should make an effort to cast out from the innermost parts of our heart whatever we do not wish to steal upon us as we pray, so that in this way we can fulfill
the apostolic words: ‘Pray without ceasing’ (1 Thess 5:17). And: ‘In every place lifting up pure hands without anger and dissension’ (1 Tim 2:8). For we shall be unable to accomplish this command unless our mind, purified of every contagion of vice and given over to virtue alone as to a natural good, is fed upon the continual contemplation of almighty God.”

(B) The Four Kinds of Prayer (Sections IX–XV)

“Therefore, once these aspects of the character of prayer have been analyzed—although not as much as the breadth of the material demands but as much as a brief space of time permits and our feeble intelligence and dull heart can grasp hold of—there remains to us a still greater difficulty: We must explain one by one the different kinds of prayer that the Apostle divided in fourfold fashion when he said: ‘I urge first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made’ (1 Tim 2:1). There is not the least doubt that the Apostle established these distinctions in this way for a good reason.

“First we must find out what is meant by supplication, what is meant by prayer, what is meant by intercession, and what is meant by thanksgiving. Then we must investigate whether these four kinds are to be used simultaneously by the person praying—that is, whether they should all be joined together in a single act of prayer—or whether they should be offered one after the other and individually, so that, for example, at one time supplications should be made, at another prayers, at another intercessions or thanksgivings; and whether one person should offer God supplications, another prayers, another intercessions, and another thanksgivings, depending on the maturity to which each mind is progressing according to the intensity of its effort.

“First, therefore, the very properties of the names and words should be dealt with and the difference between prayer, supplication, and intercession analyzed. Then, in similar fashion, an investigation must be made as to whether they are to be offered separately or together. Third, we must look into whether the very order that was laid down on the authority of the Apostle has deeper implications for the hearer or whether these distinctions should simply be accepted and be considered to have been drawn up by him in an inconsequential manner. This last suggestion seems quite absurd to me. For it ought not to be believed that the Holy Spirit would have said something through the Apostle in passing and for no reason. And therefore let us treat of them again individually in the same order in which we began, as the Lord permits.

“First of all that supplications be made.’ A supplication is an imploring or a petition concerning sins, by which a person who has been struck by compunction begs for pardon for his present or past misdeeds.

“Prayers are those acts by which we offer or vow something to God, which is called ‘vow’ in Greek. Where the Greek text has, ‘I shall offer my vows to the Lord,’ the Latin has it: ‘I will pay my vows to the Lord’ (Ps 117:14). According to the nature of the word this can be expressed as follows: I will make my prayers to the Lord.

“This will be fulfilled by each one of us in this way. We pray when we renounce this world and pledge that, dead to every earthly deed and to an earthly way of life, we will serve the Lord with utter earnestness of heart. We pray when we promise that, disdaining worldly honor and spurning earthly riches, we will cling to the Lord in complete contrition of heart and poverty of spirit. We pray when we promise that we will always keep the most pure chastity of body and unwavering patience, and when we vow that we will utterly eliminate from our heart the roots of death-dealing anger and sadness. When we have been weakened by sloth and are returning to our former vices and are not doing these things, we shall bear guilt for our prayers and vows and it will be said of us: ‘It is better not to vow than to vow and not to pay’ (Eccles 5:4). …

“In the third place there are intercessions, which we are also accustomed to make for others when our spirits are fervent, beseeching on behalf of our dear ones and for the peace of the whole world, praying (as I would say in the words of the Apostle himself) ‘for kings and for all who are in authority’ (1 Tim 2:1–2).

“Finally, in the fourth place there are thanksgivings which the mind, whether recalling God’s past benefits, contemplating his present ones, or foreseeing what great things God has prepared for those who love him, offers to the Lord in unspeakable ecstasies. And with this intensity, too, more copious prayers are sometimes made, when our spirit gazes with most pure eyes upon the rewards of the holy ones that are stored up for the future and is moved to pour out wordless thanks to God with a boundless joy.
These four kinds sometimes offer opportunities for richer prayers, for from the class of supplication which is born of compunction for sin, and from the state of prayer which flows from faithfulness in our offerings and the keeping of our vows because of a pure conscience, and from intercession which proceeds from fervent charity, and from thanksgiving which is begotten from considering God's benefits and his greatness and loving kindness, we know that frequently very fervent and fiery prayers arise. Thus it is clear that all these kinds which we have spoken about appear helpful and necessary to everyone, so that in one and the same man a changing disposition will send forth pure and fervent prayers of supplication at one time, prayer at another, and intercession at another.

Nonetheless the first kind seems to pertain more especially to beginners who are still being harassed by the stings and by the memory of their vices; the second to those who already occupy a certain elevated position of mind with regard to spiritual progress and virtuous disposition; the third to those who, fulfilling their vows completely by their deeds, are moved to intercede for others also in consideration of their frailty and out of zeal for charity; the fourth to those who, having already torn from their hearts the penal thorn of conscience, now, free from care, consider with a most pure mind the kindnesses and mercies of the Lord that he has bestowed in the past, gives in the present, and prepares for the future, and are rapt by their fervent heart to that fiery prayer which can be neither seized nor expressed by the mouth of man.

(C) The Lord's Prayer as the Model (Sections XVIII and XXV)

And so a still more sublime and exalted condition follows upon these kinds of prayer. It is fashioned by the contemplation of God alone and by fervent charity, by which the mind, having been dissolved and fung into love of him, speaks most familiarly and with particular devotion to God as to his own father. The schema of the Lord's Prayer has taught us that we must tirelessly seek this condition when it says: 'Our Father' (Mt 6:9). When, therefore, we confess with our own voice that the God and Lord of the universe is our Father, we profess that we have in fact been admitted from our servile condition into an adopted sonship.

This prayer, then, although it seems to contain the utter fullness of perfection inasmuch as it was instituted and established on the authority of the Lord himself, nonetheless raises his familiar to that condition which we characterized previously as more sublime. It leads them by a higher stage to that fiery end, indeed, more properly speaking, wordless prayer which is known and experienced by very few. This transcends all human understanding and is distinguished not, I would say, by a sound of the voice or a movement of the tongue or a pronunciation of words. Rather, the mind is aware of it when it is illuminated by an infusion of heavenly light from it, and not by narrow human words, and once the understanding has been suspended it passes forth as from a most abundant fountain and speaks ineffably to God, producing more in that very brief moment than the self-conscious mind is able to articulate easily or to reflect upon. Our Lord himself represented this condition in similar fashion in the form of those prayers that he is described as having poured out alone on the mountain and silently (Lk 5:16), and when he prayed in his agony he even shed drops of blood as an inimitable example of his intense purpose (Lk 22:44).

II.

SELECTIONS FROM CONFERENCE 10

(A) Prayer Unites us with God (Section VII)

"For then will be brought to fruition in us that prayer of our Savior which he prayed to his Father on his disciples' behalf when he said: 'That the love which with which you have loved me may be in them, and they in us' (Jn 17:26). And again: "That all may be one, as you Father in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us' (Jn 17:21). Then that perfect love of God, by which 'he loves us first' (1 Jn 4:10), will have also passed into our heart's disposition upon the fulfillment of this prayer of the Lord, which we believe can in no way be rendered void. This will be the case when every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe, will be God, and when that unity which the Father now has with the Son and which the Son has with the Father will be carried over into our understanding and our mind, so that, just as he loves us with a sincere and pure and indissoluble love, we too may be joined to him with a perpetual and inseparable love and so united with him that whatever we breathe, whatever we understand,
whatever we speak, may be God. In him we shall attain, I say, to that end of which we spoke before, which the Lord longed to be fulfilled in us when he prayed: ‘That all may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they themselves may also be made perfect in unity’ (Jn 17:22–23). And again: ‘Father, I wish that those whom you have given me may also be with me where I am’ (Jn 17:24).

“This, then, is the goal of the solitary, and this must be his whole intention—to deserve to possess the image of future blessedness in this body and as it were to begin to taste the pledge of that heavenly way of life and glory in this vessel. This, I say, is the end of all perfection—that the mind purged of every carnal desire may daily be elevated to spiritual things, until one’s whole way of life and all the yearnings of one’s heart become a single and continuous prayer.”


4.

SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN

THE THIRD ETHICAL DISCOURSE

Symeon, called “the New Theologian,” was born in Asia Minor about 949 and died in 1022. His life spanned the greatest period of the Byzantine empire under the rule of Basil II (960–1025). Raised at the imperial court, as a young man he came under the direction of a monk named Symeon the Pious of the Studion monastery in Constantinople. About 970 he began to receive the experiences of divine light that he describes throughout his writings (see section 10.4). Symeon eventually entered Studion, but soon transferred to the monastery of St. Mamas. In 980 he became abbot, a post he held until 1005. In 1009 he was forced into exile. Though later rehabilitated, Symeon lived a life of solitude with a few disciples until his death.

Symeon was well educated in the riches of the spirituality of the Christian East, but his writings strike a new note, especially in the way in which he drew upon his own experience of divine light. His works include fifty-eight “Hymns of Divine Love” and several series of discourses. There are thirty-four Catechetical Discourses given while he was abbot of St. Mamas, as well as a group of Practical and Theological Chapters and three Theological Discourses. The fifteen Ethical Discourses, his most mature work, seem to come from the decade after he gave up his abbatial office.

This selection from the third of The Ethical Discourses illustrates one of the essential themes of Orthodox mysticism, and, indeed, all Christian mysticism—its root in the sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The discourse begins with a discussion of the rapture and hearing of “ineffable speech”
his zeal (Mc 27:69–72). Mary Magdalen said not a word, and yet the Lord himself, taken with her perfect love, became her panegyrist, saying that she had loved much (Lk 7:47). It is internally then, with dumb silence, that the most perfect virtues of faith, hope, and charity are practiced, without any necessity of telling God that you love him, hope and believe in him, because the Lord knows better than you do what the internal motions of your heart are.

How well was that pure act of love understood and practiced by that profound and great mystic, the Venerable Gregory Lopez [a Mexican hermit who died in 1596], whose whole life was a continual prayer and a continued act of contemplation, and of so pure and spiritual a love of God that it never gave way to affections and sensible emotions. Having for the space of three years continued the ejaculation, “Your will be done in time and in eternity,” repeating it as often as he breathed, God Almighty revealed to him the infinite treasure of the pure and continued act of faith and love with silence and resignation, so that he came to say that during the thirty-six years he lived after that, he always continued, in his inward self, that pure act of love, without ever uttering the least petition, ejaculation, or anything that was from the senses or sprang from nature. O incarnate seraphim and deified man! How well you knew how to enter into that internal and mystical silence and to distinguish between the outward and inward self.

Adapted from the translation first published in London in 1688 under the title The Spiritual Guide Which Disentangles the Soul and Brings It by the Inward Way to the Getting of Perfect Contemplation. This version, based on the 1685 Italian edition, has been often reprinted.

SECTION FIVE

Mystical Itineraries

The journey motif, the conception of life as a passage through a series of stages on the way to an intended goal, is deeply rooted in the human mind. The notion of being on an itinerary not only corresponds to everyday experience but also allows us to give structure and meaning to the confusion we often find in life. It is scarcely surprising that many mystics, both in Christianity and in other religious traditions, have used itineraries to describe what they experienced and what they wish to hand on to their followers.

Each person’s journey to God, of course, is unique, even if it takes place within the context of the beliefs and rituals of a religious community. To that extent, the construction of standard mystical itineraries such as those found in this section is to some degree artificial—like reading a map, not actually walking through the terrain. These itineraries are intended to be guidebooks to help people, usually with the advice of a spiritual director, to gain some sense of where they are and what lies ahead. Due to this quasi-artificial character, some mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, have refrained from constructing itineraries, but many mystical writers have left us descriptions of stages on the path to God in their writings, always with the understanding that there are many such roads, and that one type of itinerary does not rule out others.
Bonaventure wrote this treatise in 1259 while on retreat at Mount Alverna, the place where St. Francis received the stigmata (see section 7.2). In this brief and powerful work the Seraphic Doctor fused a rich range of mystical themes taken from Augustinian, Dionysian, Cistercian, and Victorine sources into a synthesis of seven stages of the mind's journey into God. Bonaventure's itinerary is structured around six levels of progressive contemplation, symbolized by the six wings of the crucified Christ-Seraph figure that appeared to Francis. The contemplative person looks toward God through and in creation as the various powers of the soul are drawn upward. On the first two levels (chapters 1–2) sense-knowledge contemplates God first through his vestiges—that is, exterior created things—and then imagination gazes at God in the vestiges. Then the soul turns inward, contemplating God by means of reason through itself as the created image (chapter 3), and then, by the higher power of intellect, in the image insofar as it is reformed by the action of grace (chapter 4).

In chapters 5 and 6 the highest knowing power (intelligentia) is lifted up to contemplate the divine light, first through the light by considering the divine unity under the name of existence (esse), and then in the light through the revelation of the proper name of the Trinity, bonum, the overflowing goodness of the three persons. The contemplative soul is then symbolically identified with the two Cherubim of Exodus 25:16–20, gazing in amazement alternatively at the essential and proper attributes of God. The Cherubim also look at the Mercy Seat over the Ark, which Bonaventure identifies with Jesus Christ, who unites God and man. Wondering amazement at God-made man provokes the ecstasy by means of which the mind in the seventh stage described in chapter 7 transcends itself to attain union with God through the burning love for the Crucified that Francis exemplified.

I.

PROLOGUE

At the outset I invoke the Eternal Father, the First Principle from whom all illuminations flow down as "from the Father of Lights," from whom "is every good present and every perfect gift" (James 1:17). I invoke him through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, so that by the intercession of the most holy Virgin Mary, bearer of the same God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and of St. Francis our leader and father, he may "illumine the mind's eyes to direct our feet on the way of his peace" (Eph 1:17–18; Lk 1:79), which "surpasses all understanding" (Phil 4:7). This is the peace that our Lord Jesus Christ gave and preached in the gospel. Our father Francis repeated his preaching. At the beginning and end of every sermon he announced peace, in every greeting he wished for peace, in every contemplation he sighed for ecstatic peace, as a citizen of that Jerusalem about which that man of peace spoke when he said, "with those who hated peace, he was peaceable: pray for the things which are for the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps 119:7, 121:6). For he knew that the throne of Solomon exists only in peace, since it is written: "His place has been made in peace, and his dwelling in Sion" (Ps 75:3).

Therefore, following the example of the most holy father Francis, I was seeking this peace with a gasping spirit, I, the sinner who, though totally unworthy in all things, succeed to that most holy father's place as the seventh Minister General of the brethren since his death. It happened by God's plan that around the thirty-third year after the saint's death I turned aside to Mount Alverna as a quiet place with the desire of seeking peace of spirit. While I was there, my mind was occupied with some forms of mental ascent to God, among them that miracle that happened to St. Francis himself in that same place, namely, the
vision of the winged Seraph in the form of the Crucified. As I was thinking it over, it immediately occurred to me that the vision set forth our father's elevation in contemplation and the path by which he got there.

The six wings can be rightly understood as six illuminative elevations by which the soul is disposed by certain steps or paths to pass over to peace through the ecstatic raptures of Christian wisdom. The only way there is through the most ardent love of the Crucified that so transformed Paul into Christ when he was “rapt to the third heaven” (2 Cor 12:2) that he said, “I am fixed to the cross with Christ; I live, now not I, Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:19–20). It also so absorbed the mind of Francis that his mind was openly visible in his flesh while he bore the most holy marks of the passion in his body for two years before his death. Therefore, the image of the six wings of the Seraph hint at six illuminative stages, which begin from creatures and lead up to God. No one can enter upon them save through the Crucified, because “one who does not enter through the door, but goes up some other way, is a thief and robber” (Jn 10:1). But if “a person shall have entered through the door, he will go in and go out and find pasture” (Jn 10:9). Therefore John says in the Apocalypse: “Blessed are those who have washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb so that they may have the right to the Tree of Life and they may enter the city through the gates” (Rev 22:14). That is to say that only through the blood of the Lamb as if through a door is it possible to enter the heavenly Jerusalem through contemplation. No one can be made ready in any way for the divine contemplations leading to mental raptures unless, like Daniel, he be “a man of desires” (Dan 9:23). These desires are enkindled in us in two ways: either through the “utterance of prayer,” which causes us to cry out “with the heart's groan” (Ps 37:9); or through “a blaze of insight” by which the mind turns itself to rays of light in the most intense and direct way.

Therefore, first of all I invite the reader to groaning prayer through Christ crucified whose blood purges us from the stains of vices. I do so lest the reader might think that reading is sufficient without heavenly anointing, or thinking without devotion, or investigation without admiration, or mere observation without rejoicing, or effort without piety, or knowledge without charity, intelligence without humility, endeavor without divine grace, [the soul as] mirror without divinely inspired wisdom. Therefore I am setting forth the following insights to those who have been prepared by divine grace, to the humble and faithful, to those with compunction and devotion, to those anointed “with the oil of gladness” (Ps 44:8), to the lovers of divine wisdom who are enflamed with its desire, to those wanting to be free to magnify the Lord, to be in awe of him, and even to taste him. I am suggesting the mirror [of the world] set forth outside counts for little or nothing unless the mirror of our mind has been cleansed and polished. Rouse yourself up, then, man of God, first to the biting goal of conscience before you lift your eyes up to the rays of Wisdom reflected in its mirrors, lest by looking at these rays you perhaps fall into a deeper pit of darkness.

It helps to divide the treatise into seven chapters, first setting forth titles to facilitate the understanding of what will be said. I therefore beg that you give more weight to the writer's good intention than to the work itself, to the sense of the words than to the uncultivated style, to the truth than to the decoration, to the exercising of the affection than to the instruction of the intellect. So that this may be the case, you should not run through the course of these insights in an inattentive way, but you should chew them over most assiduously. [Here Bonaventure lists the titles of the seven chapters of the treatise.]

II.

THE CONtemplATION OF THE POOR MAN IN THE DESERT BEGINS

Chapter 1. The steps of ascension to God and contemplating him through his visage in the universe.

“Blessed the man whose help is from you! In his heart he has decided to ascend by steps, in the valley of tears, in the place which he has set” (Ps 83:6–7). Since happiness is nothing else than the enjoyment of the Supreme Good, and the Supreme Good is above us, then no one can be made happy unless he ascends above himself, not by a bodily ascent, but by one of the heart. But we cannot be lifted up above ourselves unless a higher power elevates us. However many interior steps are set out, nothing will happen unless divine aid comes to our assistance.
vine aid will come to the assistance of those who ask for it with a humble and devout heart: that is what it is to sigh for it "in the valley of tears," which takes place through fervent prayer. Therefore prayer is the mother and source of all lifting up. And so Dionysius, wishing to instruct us about mental rapture in his Mystical Theology, begins with a prayer. Hence, let us pray and say to the Lord our God: "Lead me, Lord, on your path, so that I may enter your truth; let my heart rejoice so that I may fear your name" (Ps 85:11).

By praying with this kind of prayer we are illuminated to knowledge of the stages of ascent to God. In accord with our created state, the universe itself is a ladder for ascending to God. Among things we find some that are vestiges and some that are images; some that are corporeal, some spiritual; some that are temporal, some everlasting; and hence some that are outside us, others within us. In order to come to thoughtful consideration of the First Principle, which is totally spiritual and eternal and above us, we must pass through the vestiges that are corporeal and temporal and outside us; this is "to be led along God's path"; then we must enter into our own mind, which is God's image, everlasting, spiritual, and within us: this is "to go into God's truth"; finally, we must pass beyond what is eternal, totally spiritual, and above us, by gazing toward the First Principle; this is "to rejoice in knowledge of God and reverence for his majesty" (Ps 85:11).

This is the path of the three-day journey into the desert (Ex 3:18). This is the threefold illumination of a single day, in which the first is like the evening, the second like the morning, and the third like midday. This reflects the three forms of the existence of things, that is, in matter, in the intelligence, and in the Eternal Art, according to which it was said, "Let it be made, he made it, and it was made" (Gen 1:3ff). This also reflects the threefold substance in Christ, our ladder, namely corporeal, the spiritual, and the divine. Our mind has three chief ways of perceiving in accord with this threefold advance. The first is toward external corporeal things, and accordingly is called animal or sensual nature. The second is within and in the self, and is hence called spirit. The third is above the self and is called mind. On the basis of all these a person ought to set himself in order so that he can ascend to God so that he can love him "with all his mind and all his heart and all his soul" (Mk 12:30). The perfect observance of the Law, along with Christian wisdom, is found in this.

Each of these modes can be doubled, insofar as God can be considered as Alpha and as Omega (Rev 1:8), and insofar as one can see God in each of the modes both "through a mirror" and "in a mirror," or insofar as any single one of these considerations can be mixed with another or can be treated in its purity. Therefore, it is necessary that these three main steps advance to six, so that just as God perfected "the whole world" in six days and rested on the seventh, so too the microcosm [of man] can be led in a very well-ordered way to the repose of contemplation by six stages of illumination succeeding one another. There is a figure of this in the six steps that led up to Solomon's throne (3 Kgs 10:19). Also, the Seraph that Isaiah saw had six wings (Is 6:2); after six days the Lord "called to Moses from the midst of the cloud" (Ex 24:16); and, as it says in Matthew, "after six days Christ led the disciples up the mountain and was transfigured before them" (Mt 17:1).

Just as there are six steps of ascent to God, there are also six levels of the soul's powers by means of which we ascend from the depths to the heights, from exterior things to those within, from temporal things to those eternal. They are sensation, imagination, reason, intelligence, understanding, and the high point of the mind, or the spark of synecdothesis [i.e., conscience]. These levels are implanted in us by nature, deformed through sin, reformed through grace, purged through justifying grace, exercised through knowledge, and made perfect through wisdom.

According to nature's first state, humanity was created fit for the repose of contemplation, which is why "God planted him in the paradise of pleasure" (Gen 2:15). But when he turned away from the true light to an unstable good, he was bent crooked through his own sin and infected the whole human race by means of original sin in a twofold way: mental ignorance and carnal concupiscence. This is why humans, blinded and bent down, sit in darkness and cannot see the light without the aid of the graceful justice that acts against concupiscence and the wise knowledge that counteracts ignorance. This all happens through Jesus Christ, "whom God makes for us Wisdom and Justice and Sanctification and Redemption" (1 Cor 1:30). Since he is God's Power and Wisdom, the Incarnate Word "full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14), he created grace and truth. He pours out the grace of charity that, since it comes "from a pure heart and good conscience and un-
feigned faith” (1 Tim 1:5), justifies the whole soul following the three ways of perceiving mentioned above. He has taught the “science of truth” according to the threefold modes of theology—symbolic, proper, and mystical. Through the symbolic we make correct use of sensible objects; through tieology proper we correctly use intelligible objects; through mystical theology we are swept up to raptures above the mind.

For someone who wants to ascend to God it is necessary that after he has gotten rid of the sin that deforms nature, he must work with his natural powers in [four ways]: by prayer in the service of reforming grace; by his manner of life for purifying justice; by meditation for illuminating knowledge; and by contemplation for perfect wisdom. Just as nobody comes to wisdom without grace, justice, and knowledge, so too no one comes to contemplation without lucid meditation, a holy way of life, and devout prayer. Just as grace is the basis for an upright will and an incisive light of reason, so too we have first to pray, then lead a holy life, and third direct our attention to truth’s manifestations and, so intending, climb up, little by little, even unto “the high mountain where the God of gods is seen in Sion” (Ps 83:8).

Chapter 7. The Mental and Mystical Rapture in which Repose is Granted to the Intellect when the Affection Passes Over Totally into God in Rapture.

Therefore, we have passed through these six considerations like “the six steps of the true Solomon’s throne” (3 Kgs 10:19) by means of which a truly peaceful person comes to rest in the Jerusalem within with the mind at rest. They are like the six wings of the Seraph by means of which the mind of the true contemplative filled with the enlightenment of heavenly wisdom can be carried above. They are like the first six days in which the mind is at work so that it may finally arrive at the Sabbath rest. After our mind has gazed upon God outside itself through his vestiges and in his vestiges, and within itself through and in his image, and also above itself through a likeness of the divine light shining down over us, and in the light itself insofar as this is possible according to our station in life and our mind’s effort, then, at last, in the sixth step it comes to the point where, in the First and Highest Principle and in the Mediator of God and men, Jesus Christ, it may look upon things that are unlike anything to be found in creatures and which surpass every perception of the human intellect. It now remains that this contemplation transcends and passes beyond not only this world of sense, but also itself. In this passing, over Christ is the “way and the door” (Jn 14:6), Christ is the ladder and the vehicle insofar as he is “mercy seat placed over the Ark of God” (Ex 25:21), as well as the “mystery hidden from eternity” (Eph 3:9).

The person who looks toward the Mercy Seat with full attention—in faith, hope, and charity, devotion, awe, rejoicing, appreciation, praise, and jubilation— beholding him hanging on the cross, makes a “Pasch,” that is, a passing over, along with him, in that he passes over the Red Sea through the rod of the cross, going out of Egypt into the desert where he feeds on the “hidden manna” (Rev 2:17) and rests in the tomb with Christ, dead on the outside, but perceiving how it is still possible in this life to hear what was said on the cross to the thief who joined with Christ: “Today you shall be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43).

This was also shown in St. Francis, when in contemplative rapture on the high mountain (where I thought out the things I have written down) there appeared to him the six-winged Seraph fastened to the cross, as I and many others heard there from the companion who was with him at that time. In that place he passed over into God through contemplative rapture and was established as an example of perfect contemplation just as he had previously been of action, like another Jacob [who also became] Israel, so that through him, more by example than by word, God might invite all truly spiritual people to this form of passing over and mental rapture.

If this kind of passing over is to be perfect, it is necessary that all mental activities be left behind, and that the high point of affection [apex affectus] be wholly transferred and transformed into God. This is mystical and most secret. “No one knows it who has not received it” (Rev 2:17), and no one receives it who has not desired it, and no one desires it who is not set aflame within by the fire of the Holy Spirit that Christ sent upon the earth. This is why the Apostle says that this mystical wisdom is revealed through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10).

Nature is able to do nothing in this regard, and effort but little. Little belongs to investigation and much to action; little to speaking and much to interior rejoicing; little to word and text, but everything to God’s gift, that is, the Holy Spirit. Little or nothing belongs to the
creature, and everything to the creative essence, that is, to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as Dionysius says in speaking of God the Trinity: “Trinity. Essence above essence and God above God, and more than best Guardian of the wisdom of Christians, direct us into the more than unknown and more than illuminating and most sublime height of mystical forms of speaking. There new, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of theology are hidden according to the superluminous darkness of the silence that teaches in hidden fashion and in the deepest dark what is beyond manifestation, beyond all light, and in which all things shine forth—a darkness that more than fills the unseen intellects [of the angels] by the splendors of the invisible realities beyond goodness” [Mystical Theodicy 1.1]. This is addressed to God. To the friend to whom he writes, let us say with him: “You, O friend, in the question of mystical visions should renew your journey and leave behind all senses and intellectual operations, things sensible and invisible, and all that is not all all that is, so that, if possible, you may unknowingly be restored to unity with him who is above all essence and knowledge. Leaving behind all things and becoming free of all things, lift yourself up to the superessential ray of divine darkness by means of an immeasurable and absolute rapture of a pure mind” [ibid.].

If you ask how this all comes to be, ask grace not teaching, desire not understanding, the groan of prayer not the effort of reading, the Bridegroom not the teacher, God not man, darkness not brightness, not light but rather the fire that wholly enflames and transforms into God by its extreme anointments and most ardent affections. This fire is God and “its furnace is in Jerusalem” (Is 31:9). Christ enkindles it in the heat of his most ardent passion; he alone perceives it who says, “My soul chooses hanging and my bones death” (Jb 7:15). Whoever loves this death can see God because it is unquestionably true that “No one can see me and live” (Ex 33:20). Therefore let us die and enter into this darkness, putting silence to cares, false desires, and imaginations. Let us pass with Christ crucified “from this world to the Father” (Jn 13:1), so that when the Father has been shown to us we can say with Philip, “It is enough for us” (Jn 14:8). Let us hear along with Paul, “My grace is enough for you” (2 Cor 12:9). Let us rejoice with David and say: “My flesh and my heart have fainted away; you are the God of my heart and my lot, God forever. Blessed be the Lord forever, and let all

the people say, ‘So be it, So be it’ ” (Ps 72:26, 105:48). Amen. The End of the Journey into God.

overcoming the flesh and fleshly affections. You will read more about this in the third book and find its exercise. To that end I desire both for you and for me the grace of the Holy Spirit, which begins, carries on, and perfects everything in us to God's honor, homage, and praise. Amen.

Translated by Bernard McGinn from Johann Arndt’s Vier Bücher vom Wahren Christentum (Halle: Im Waisenhuize, 1779, 14th ed.), 489–93.

SECTION NINE

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE WAYS TO GOD

In Christian belief all things are manifestations, or theophanies, of God their Creator. But God also is infinitely beyond his creatures since they are defined by their limited nature. The first truth founds the way of kataphasis, or positive speaking about God based on creation, while God’s infinite otherness founds the way of apophasis, or the negative speaking in which all statements must be unsaid in deference to God’s hidden reality. Although Christian mystics affirm the superiority of the apophasic way—lest God be thought to be just another reality—they have insisted that both the positive and the negative approaches to speaking about God are necessary, though in different measures depending upon one’s spiritual progress. This is true even of the premier representative of apophasic mysticism, the mysterious monk of the Eastern Church who wrote under the name Dionysius and who first used the term mystical theology.

Many mystics have concentrated on the intricacies and paradoxes of negation, the ever-challenging task of unsaying God. This is evident from a number of selections scattered throughout this anthology, such as those from Gregory of Nyssa (see section 1.2), Marguerite Porete (see section 5.4), Meister Eckhart (see section 13.3), The Cloud of Unknowing (see section 8.3), Nicholas of Cusa (section 10.8), and John of the Cross (section 2.5), to name just some. But other mystics have presented messages that dwell more on the positive language of find-
ing God in erotic love and sense experience, such as Bernard of Clairvaux (see section 7.1), Hsduich (see section 3.5), Mechtild (see section 6.3), Richard Rolle (see section 10.7), and Henry Suso (see section 7.3). Another positive form of mysticism is nature mysticism, which is found in Christianity not in the sense of the identification of nature with the divine, but as discerning God's presence in, with, and through his beautiful creation. In this section two selections, those from Dionysius and from the Eckhartian poem and commentary called "Granum Sinapis," emphasize the apophatic way. Three other selections, two of them poetic, highlight how the universe gives us positive access to God.

1. Dionysius

The Mystical Theology

The collection of texts known as the Dionysian corpus dates from circa 500 CE. Five works constitute the collection (others referred to are either lost or fictitious). Two treatises deal with different kinds of hierarchies, that is, ordered manifestations of God that lead the soul back anagogically (upward movement) to the divine source. The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy explains how the liturgy and the ecclesiastical offices contribute to this process, while The Celestial Hierarchy investigates how the biblical descriptions of the angels reveal their role in our uplifting. Along with ten letters, we also find the treatise known as The Divine Names containing thirteen chapters dealing with the positive names or attributes of God as Creator. This work introduces aspects of the higher negative theology in which all symbols and names of God are denied in a process of "stripping away" (apthairesis) leading toward the darkness of "unknowing" (agnōsia) in which union (henōsis) is attained. The positive and negative paths aim toward what Dionysius called mystical theology, to which he devoted the following short summary work of five chapters. Mystical theology, as Dionysius conceives it, goes beyond both affirmation and negation.

The author of these writings presents himself as Dionysius of the Areopagus, Paul's convert mentioned in Acts 17:34. This pious fiction gave the writings a quasi-apostolic reputation that made them the authority in matters mystical for most writers of East and West down to modern times, although some Reformation figures, such as Luther, found Dionysius more Platonic than Christian. When modern scholarship showed that the Dionysian corpus used pagan Neoplatonic
thinkers of the fifth century the debate heated up. Was “Dionysius” (I prefer this title to the often-used “Pseudo-Dionysius”) a Neoplatonist masquerading as a Christian, or was he a devout monastic mystic, possibly from Syria, who transposed pagan mystical philosophy in a way that would both give theological depth to Christian mystical traditions and also perhaps attract pagan thinkers to Christ? The discussion is by no means ended, but recent study has tended to support the second view.

Dionysius’s difficult thought had great impact on the history of Christian theology and mysticism, not only with regard to the positive and negative ways to God and the nature of mysticism, but also on such matters as the role of the angels, the role of symbols in liturgical theology, and the nature of union. Translating Dionysius’s idiosyncratic Greek is always a difficult exercise. In the medieval period no fewer than five different Latin versions were made. There are a number of modern English translations. The translation I have used here gives something of the flavor of Dionysius’s unusual language.

CHAPTER I.

THE NATURE OF THE DIVINE DARKNESS

1. Trinity beyond all essence, all divinity, all goodness. God is the Divine Wisdom, direct our path to the ultimate summit of your mystical lore, most incomprehensible, most luminous, and most exalted, where the pure, absolute, and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories surpassing all beauty.

Let this be my prayer, but do you, dear Timothy, in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and nonbeing, that you might rise up unknowingly toward the union [benôsis], as far as is attainable, with him who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and of all things, you may be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential radiance of the divine darkness.

2. But these things are not to be disclosed to the uninitiated, by whom I mean those attached to the objects of human thought, and who believe there is no superessential reality beyond, and who imagine that by their own understanding they know him who has made darkness his secret place. And if the principles of the divine mysteries are beyond the understanding of these people, what is to be said of others still more incapable of it, who describe the transcendent First Cause of all by characteristics drawn from the lowest order of beings, while they deny that he is in any way above the images which they fashion after various designs; whereas they should affirm that while he possesses all the positive attributes of the universe (being the universal Cause), yet, in a more strict sense, he does not possess them, since he transcends them all; wherefore there is no contradiction between the affirmations and the negations, inasmuch as he infinitely precedes all conceptions of privation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions.

3. Thus the blessed Bartholomew asserts that the divine science is both vast and minute, and that the gospel is great and broad, yet concise and short; signifying by this that the beneficent Cause of all is most eloquent, yet utters few words, or rather is altogether silent, as having neither speech nor understanding, because he is superessentially exalted above created things, and reveals himself in his naked truth only to those who pass beyond all that is pure or impure, and ascend above the topmost altitudes of holy things, and who, leaving behind them all divine light and sound and heavenly utterances, plunge into the darkness where truly dwells, as the biblical oracles declare, that One who is beyond all things (Ex 20:21).

It was not without reason that the blessed Moses was commanded first to undergo purification himself, and then to separate himself from those who had not undergone it; and after the entire purification heard many-voiced trumpets and saw many lights streaming forth with pure and manifold rays; and that he was thereafter separated from the multitude, with the elect priests, and pressed forward to the summit of the divine ascent (Ex 19–20). Nevertheless, he did not attain to the presence of God himself; he saw not him (for he cannot be looked upon), but the place where he dwells. And this I take to signify that the divinest and highest things seen by the eyes or contemplated by the
mind are but the symbolical expressions of those that are immediately beneath him who is above all. Through these his incomprehensible presence is manifested upon those heights of his holy places. But then Moses breaks forth, even from that which is seen and that which sees, and he plunges into the truly mystical darkness of unknowing from which all perfection of understanding is excluded; and he is wrapped up in that which is altogether intangible and intelligible, being wholly absorbed in him who is beyond all. Here, being neither oneself nor another, one is supremely united to the Wholly Unknown by the inactivity of all his reasoning powers, and thus, by knowing nothing, knows beyond the mind.

CHAPTER 2.
THE NECESSITY OF BEING UNITED WITH AND OF RENDERING PRAISE TO HIM WHO IS THE CAUSE OF ALL AND ABOVE ALL

We pray that we may come into this darkness that is beyond light, and, without seeing and without knowing, see and know that which is above vision and knowledge through the realization that by not-seeing and by not-knowing we attain to true vision and knowledge, and thus praise, superessentially, him who is superessential, by the abstraction [σπαθαίρεσις] of the essence of all things. This is like those who, carving a statue out of marble, abstract or remove all the surrounding material that hinders the vision which the marble conceals and by that abstraction bring to light the hidden beauty.

It is necessary to praise this negative method of abstraction different from the positive method of affirmation. For with the latter we begin with the universal and primary, and pass through the intermediate and secondary to the particular and ultimate attributes. But now we ascend from the particular to the universal conceptions, abstracting all attributes in order that, without veil, we may know that unknowing [ἀγνώστικα] that is shrouded under all that is known and all that can be known, and that we may begin to contemplate the superessential darkness that is hidden by all the light that is in existing things.

CHAPTER 3.
WHAT ARE THE AFFIRMATIVE THEOLOGIES AND WHAT THE NEGATIVE?

In the Theological Outlines [a lost work] we have set forth the principal affirmative expressions concerning God, and have shown in what sense God's holy nature is one; and in what sense three; what is within it which is called Paternity, what Filiation, and what is signified by the name Spirit; how from the uncreated and indivisible good, the blessed and perfect rays of its goodness proceed, and yet abide immutably, one both within their origin and within themselves and each other, co-eternal with the act by which they spring from it; how the superessential Jesus enters an essential state in which the truth of human nature meets it; and other matters made known by the oracles [i.e., scripture] are expounded in the same place.

Again, in the treatise on Divine Names, we have considered the meaning, as concerning God, of the titles of Good, of Being, of Life, of Wisdom, of Power, and of such other names as are applied to him [Divine Names, chapters 4–8]. Further, in the Symbolic Theology [another lost work] we have considered what are the metaphorical titles drawn from the world of sense and applied to the nature of God; what is meant by the material and intellectual images we form of him, or the functions and instruments of activity attributed to him; what are the places where he dwells and the raiment in which he is adorned; what is meant by God's anger, grief, and indignation, or the divine inebriation; what is meant by God's oaths and threats, by his slumber and waking; and all sacred and symbolical representations. And it will be observed how far more copious and diffused are the last terms than the first, for the Theological Outlines and the discussion of the divine names are necessarily more brief than the Symbolic Theology.

For the higher we soar, the more limited become our expressions of that which is purely intelligible; even as now, when plunging into the darkness which is above the intellect, we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence, of thoughts as well as of words. Thus, in the former discourse, our thoughts descended from the highest to the lowest, embracing in ever-widening number of con-
exceptions, which increased at each stage of the descent, but in the present discourse we mount upward from below to that which is the highest, and, according to the degree of transcendence, so our speech is restrained until, the entire ascent being accomplished, we become wholly voiceless, inasmuch as we are absorbed in him who is totally ineffable. But why, you may ask, does the affirmative method begin from the highest attributions, and the negative method with the lowest abstractions? The reason is that, when affirming the subsistence of that which transcends all affirmation, we necessarily start from the attributes most closely related to it and upon which the remaining affirmations depend; but when pursuing the negative method to reach that which is beyond all abstraction, we must begin by applying our negations to things which are most remote from it. For is it not more true to affirm that God is life and goodness than that he is air or stone; and must we not deny to him more emphatically the attributes of inebriation and wrath than the applications of human speech and thought?

CHAPTER 4.
THE PREEMINENT CAUSE OF ALL THAT IS SENSIBLE IS NOT HIMSELF SENSIBLE

We therefore maintain that the universal and transcendent Cause of all things is neither without being nor without life, nor without reason or intelligence; nor is he a body, nor has he form or shape, quality, quantity, or weight; nor has he any localized, visible, or tangible existence; he is not sensible or perceptible; nor is he subject to any disorder or disturbance, nor influenced by any earthly passion; neither is he rendered impotent through the effects of material causes and events; he needs no light; he suffers no change, corruption, division, privation, or flux; none of these things can either be identified with or attributed to him.

CHAPTER 5.
THE PREEMINENT CAUSE OF ALL THINGS INTELLIGIBLE IS NOT HIMSELF INTELLIGIBLE

Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that he is neither soul nor intellect; nor has he imagination, opinion, speech, or understanding; nor can he be expressed or conceived, since he is neither number nor order, nor greatness nor smallness, nor equality nor inequality, nor similarity nor dissimilarity; neither is he immoveable, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has he power nor is power, nor is he light; neither does he live nor is he life; neither is he essence, nor eternity nor time; nor is he subject to intelligible contact; nor is he knowledge nor truth, nor kingship, nor wisdom; neither one nor oneness, nor divinity nor goodness; nor is he Spirit according to our understanding, nor Filiation nor Paternity; nor anything else known to us or to any other beings of the things that are or the things that are not; neither does anything that is know him as he is; nor does he know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to him, nor name him, nor know him; neither is he darkness nor light, nor the false nor the true; nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to him, for although we may affirm or deny the things below him, we can neither affirm nor deny him, inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple preeminence of his absolute nature is outside of every negation—free from every limitation and beyond them all.

Adapted and corrected from the anonymous translation found in The Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite, translated from the Greek with commentaries by the editors of The Shrine of Wisdom and Poem by St. John of the Cross (Nrl. Godalming, Surrey: The Shrine of Wisdom, 1923), 9–16.
come from five different poets over three centuries—two Anglican, two Catholic, and one (Blake) a great independent. Some of these poems are simple and direct; others, more complex. They are not of equal poetic merit, though they address the same goal.

I.

GEORGE HERBERT (1593–1632)

THE ELIXER

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in any thing
To do it as for Thee.

Not rudely, as a beast,
To runne into an action;
But still to make Thee prepossess,
And give it his perfection.

A man that looks on glasse,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,
And then the heaven espie.

All may of Thee partake:
Nothing can be so sweet
Which with his tincture, "for Thy sake,"
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine;
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.
II. THOMAS TRAHERNE (1636-74)

THE RAPTURE
Sweet Infancy!
O fire of heaven! O sacred Light
How fair and bright,
How great am I,
Whom all the world doth magnify!

O Heavenly Joy!
O great and sacred blessedness
Which I possess!
So great a joy
Who did into my arms convey?

From God above
Being sent, the Heavens me enflame:
To praise his Name
The stars do move!
The burning sun doth shew His love.

O how divine
Am I! To all this sacred wealth,
This life and health,
Who raised? Who mine
Did make the same? What hand divine?

III. WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

THE DIVINE IMAGE
To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our Father dear;
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is man, His child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.
And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

IV. GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS (1844-89)

GOD'S GLANDEUR
The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil,
It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck His rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade, blearied, smeared with toil,
And bears man's smudge, and shares man's smell; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights from the black west went,
Oh, morning at the brown brick eastwards springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast, and with, ah, bright wings.
JOSEPH MARY PLUNKETT (1887–1916)

I see His Blood upon the Rose
I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower;
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice—and carven by his power
Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-bearing sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His cross is every tree.


5.

PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

HYMN OF THE UNIVERSE

The Jesuit scientist and writer Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born in France in 1881 and died in New York, fittingly on Easter Sunday, 1955. After his theological studies, he was trained in geology and paleontology. Teilhard made his first trip to China in 1923–24; he returned several times for extended periods, teaching and excavating. He spent World War II in Beijing, and then returned to France for a time (1946–51) before ending his days in the United States. Teilhard achieved fame as a paleontologist due to his role in the discovery of the early hominid known as Peking man (1928–29). His reputation as a thinker and writer came later, as he worked on his major texts for several decades. Teilhard’s desire to show the harmony between evolution and Christian faith was set forth in The Phenomenon of Man. The work was finished in 1940, but Teilhard’s challenging views aroused suspicion among some Jesuits and in the Roman curia. He was denied permission to publish this and other works. It was only after his death that his writings began to appear.

Teilhard was many things—not least a mystic. Indeed, the inner vision that unifies his many endeavors was a mystical sense of God’s presence in the created cosmos and the role of divine energy in the evolutionary process aimed toward what he called the “Omega point,” or “the Prime Mover ahead.” Teilhard’s conviction about the divine presence in matter marks him as one of the most original Christian cosmic mystics, but, as the following excerpts show, his mysticism is also deeply trinitarian, Christological, and eucharistic. For the French Jesuit the meaning of the universe is found in the taking on of flesh by the Word of God so
like the pagan I worship a God who can be touched; and I do indeed touch him—this God—over the whole surface and in the depths of that world of matter which confines me but to take hold of him as I would wish (simply in order not to stop touching him), I must go always on and on through and beyond each undertaking, unable to rest in anything, borne onwards at each moment by creatures and at each moment going beyond them, in a continuing welcoming of them and a continuing detachment from them.

like the quietest I allow myself with delight to be cradled in the divine fantasy: but at the same time I know that the divine will, will only be revealed to me at each moment; if I exert myself to the utmost I shall only touch God in the world of matter, when, like Jacob, I have been vanquished by him.

Thus, because the ultimate objective, the totality to which my nature is attuned has been made manifest to me, the powers of my being begin spontaneously to vibrate in accord with a single note of incredible richness wherein I can distinguish the most discordant tendencies effortlessly resolved: the excitement of action and the delight of passivity: the joy of possessing and the thrill of reaching out beyond what one possesses; the pride in growing and the happiness of being lost in what is greater than oneself.

Rich with the sap of the world, I rise up towards the Spirit whose presence is the magnificence of the material universe but who smiles at me from far beyond all victories; and, lost in the mystery of the flesh of God, I cannot tell which is the more radiant bliss: to have found the Word and so be able to achieve the mastery of matter, or to have mastered matter and so be able to attain and submit to the light of God.


SECTION TEN
VISION, CONTEMPLATION, AND RAPTURE

What can it mean to see God? In many ancient religions this was not a problem, because the gods were conceived of as taking animal or human forms and as being present in cult images. But in the centuries before Christ the possibility of seeing the real God had been attacked both by Jewish prophets and Greek philosophers. Nevertheless different layers in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament present contradictory views on seeing God, at least in this life. God tells Moses (Ex 33:20), “You cannot see my face, for no one will see my face and live”; but in Genesis 32:30, Jacob who becomes Israel (“he who sees God”) announces, “I have seen God face to face and my soul has been saved.” In the beatitudes Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8), but the prologue of John’s Gospel declares, “No one has ever seen God; the Only Begotten Son of God, who is in the Father’s bosom, has revealed him” (Jn 1:18). Texts from the Pauline and Johannine letters stress the difference between vision here and now and the eschatological vision to come in heaven. Foremost among these is 1 Corinthians 13:12: “We see now mysteriously through a mirror, but then face to face; now I know in part; then I will know as I am known” (see 1 Jn 3:2).

Despite these divergent views, early Christian texts are replete with visionary narratives. From the second century on, we also find increasing emphasis on the contemplative vision of God (theoria theou) as the
ultimate goal of the devout Christian. The Greek contemplative ideal behind such accounts goes back at least to Plato (circa 429–347 BCE), who taught that the soul's fulfillment was in the beatifying sight of the Absolute Good. In his Symposium, Plato has the seer Dionysius describe how the true lover begins from love engendered by the sight of a beautiful body to gradually ascend to a momentary glimpse of the very Form of Beauty: "Turning towards the main ocean of the Beautiful, he may by contemplation of this bring forth in all their splendor many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in a plenteous crop of philosophy." In the second century CE Justin Martyr, describing his philosophical journey that ended in Christianity, says of his time as a Platonist, "I expected quite soon to look upon God, for this is the goal of Plato's philosophy." Justin became convinced, however, that while Plato was right about the goal, he was wrong about how to get there: Seeing God depends on the grace given by Christ.

Although visionary narratives have been part of Christianity from the outset, not all visions need be thought of as mystical. Stories of appearances of God and other celestial beings have served many purposes in Christian history, such as admonition, encouragement, instruction, as well as direct and transformative contact with God that is properly mystical. Many Christian mystics have expressed their teaching through visionary accounts, as will be evident from selections 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, and 11 in this section. Some mystics, Augustine prominent among them, sought to describe and classify the types of visions (selection 2); others analyzed the nature and forms of contemplative vision and explored how contemplation is related to the beatific vision of heaven (selection 6). Seeing or contemplating God has often been associated with extraordinary states of consciousness, periods of being "snatched away, or raptured" (Latin: raptus), or "standing outside oneself" (estasias), or being "outside or beyond the mind" (excessus mentis). These terms, all found in the Latin Bible, helped nourish belief that God could be experienced and/or seen and known in special modes of consciousness during this life (see selections 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, and especially 7). Despite the variety of uses of vision, contemplation, and ecstasy in the mystical tradition, there is an inner connection among these themes that the following selections are designed to reveal.

Among the most powerful contributions of the Classical tradition to Christian mysticism was the introduction of the term contemplation (theoria) as a favored way of expressing the vision of God promised in scripture. The word had already enjoyed a long development in Greek thought; in Christianity it was to have an even more lengthy and intricate history. Clement of Alexandria, a late-second-century convert, was among the most learned of the Fathers in Hellenic philosophy and culture; he was also the pioneer in introducing contemplation into Christian thought. Clement was not a systematic thinker, but he did explore some of the key issues involved in trying to understand what it means to gaze at, or contemplate, God. For Clement, "contemplation of God" was connected to two other essential themes: the saving knowledge (gnosis) made available in Christ; and the state of perfect harmony (apatheia) that ascetic practice and contemplative vision are meant to grant in this life.

Texts in John's Gospel (e.g. 1:18 and 14:8–9) insist that the only way to "see" the hidden divine Father is through his eternal Son, the Word, who became flesh in Jesus Christ. This element distinguishing Christian contemplation from purely philosophical forms came more and more to the fore among the Fathers, as seen in the passage from Origen's Commentary on John given here. The patristic writers also wrestled with the paradox of how the invisible God allows himself to be seen (in some way) by those who are never comprehended, or exhausted, by human gaze. A passage from Gregory of Nyssa's Homilies on the Song of
Augustine's Confessions ranks among the masterworks of Christian literature. Composed circa 397–400, the book is a prayerful meditation on human nature in light of Augustine's life story (books 1–9), as remembered in the present (book 10) and illuminated through an interpretation of the Genesis account of creation (books 11–13). Augustine portrays one man as everyman, using his own story of sinful fall away from God and gradual conversion through the action of grace as a model for the meaning of human existence. The Confessions is a conversation that we are invited to overhear, as Augustine addresses his prayerful witness to God, who responds to him in the words of scripture (constituting about a third of the work).

As a part of the ongoing conversion process, Augustine recounts several experiences of contact with God granted him during his time at Milan (386) and in Ostia (388). These narratives owe much to Augustine's reading of the pagan philosopher-mystic Plotinus, but they also reflect his own deepening awareness of God's action in his life. Book 7 recounts several brief visions of Divine Truth. Augustine emphasizes that these contemplations were imperfect because they were not rooted in Christ. More famous is the account from book 9 of the ascent to a "touching" of Divine Wisdom that he shared with his mother, Monica. The joint nature of this rapture, more an auditory and tactile experience than a visionary one, underlines Augustine's message that finding God is not a solipsistic affair, but is essentially ecclesiastical, something given to believers as members of the Church.

Later in life, in book 12 of his Literal Commentary on Genesis (circa 415), Augustine took up vision and rapture more systematically, exploring the meaning of the paradise to which Paul was raptured in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, and seeking to reconcile biblical prohibitions against seeing God in this life with the accounts of the visions ascribed to Moses and Paul. At this point the bishop advances a distinction of three forms of vision that was to have great influence on subsequent mysticism.

(A) And so, admonished to return to myself, I entered into my inmost parts with you leading me on. I was able to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and saw with my soul's eye (such as it was) an unchanging Light above that same soul's eye, above my mind. It was not this common light that can be seen by all flesh, nor was it like a greater one of the same kind, as if this light should gleam forth more and more brightly and fill up everything with its greatness. It was not like this, but was different, very different from all these. It was not above my mind as oil floats above water, nor as heaven is above earth; but it was higher because it created me, and I was lower because I was something made. He who knows the truth knows that light, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. O Eternal Truth and True Love and Beloved Eternity! You are my God, to you I sigh day and night. When I first came to know you, "You lifted me up" (Ps 26:10) so that I might see that there was something to be seen but that I was not yet the one to see it. And you beat back the weakness of my gaze, powerfully blazing into me; and I trembled with love and dread. And I found myself to be far from you in the land of unlikeness, as I heard your voice from on high: "I am the food of the strong. Grow and you will eat of me. And you will not change me into yourself, like the food of your flesh; but you will be changed into me." …

(B) And I marveled that I now loved you, and no phantasm instead of you. And yet I did not merit to enjoy my God, but was transported to you by your beauty, and presently torn away from you by my own weight, sinking with grief into these inferior things. This weight was
carnal custom. Yet was there a remembrance of you with me; nor did I any way doubt that there was one to whom I might cleave, but that I was not yet one who could cleave to you; for the body that is corrupted presses down the soul, and the earthly dwelling weighs down the mind that thinks upon many things (Wis 9:15). And I was most certain that your invisible things are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood by the things that are made, even your eternal power and Godhead (Rom 1:20). For, inquiring whence it was that I admired the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or terrestrial, and what supported me in judging correctly about mutable things and pronouncing, "This should be thus, this not,"—inquiring, then, whence I so judged, seeing I did so judge, I had found the unchangeable and true eternity of Truth, above my changeable mind. And thus, by degrees, I passed from bodies to the soul, which makes use of the senses of the body to perceive; and thence to its inward faculty, to which the bodily senses represent outward things, and up to which reach the capabilities of beasts; and thence, again, I passed on to the reasoning faculty, to which whatever is received from the senses of the body is referred to be judged, which also, finding itself to be variable in me, raised itself up to its own intelligence, and from habit drew away my thoughts, withdrawing itself from the crowds of contradictory phantasms; that so it might find out that light by which it was besprinkled, when, without all doubting, it cried out that the unchangeable was to be preferred before the changeable; whence also it knew that unchangeable, which, unless it had in some way known, it could have had no sure ground for preferring it to the changeable. And thus, with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrived at That Which Is. And then I saw your invisible things understood by the things that are made (Rom 1:20). But I was not able to fix my gaze on it; and, my infirmity being beaten back, I was thrown again on my accustomed habits, carrying along with me nothing but a loving memory of it, and an appetite for what I had, as it were, smelled the odor of, but was not yet able to eat.

And I sought a way of acquiring strength sufficient to enjoy you; but I did not find it until I embraced that Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5), who is over all, God blessed for ever (Rom 9:5), calling me, and saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), and mingling that food which I was unable to receive with our flesh. For the Word was made flesh (Jn 1:14), so that your wisdom, by which you created all things, might provide milk for our infancy. For I did not grasp my Lord Jesus—I, though humbled, grasped not the humble One; nor did I know what lesson that infirmity of his would teach us. For your Word, the Eternal Truth, preeminent above the higher parts of your creation, raises up those that are subject to itself; but in this lower world built for itself a humble habitation of our clay, whereby he intended to abide from themselves such as would be subjected and bring them over unto himself, allaying their swelling, and fostering their love; to the end that they might go on no further in self-confidence, but rather should become weak, seeing before their feet the divinity weak by taking our coats of skins (Gen. 3:1), and wearied, might cast themselves down upon it, and it rising, might lift them up.

II.

THE RAPTURE AT OSTIA (CONFESSIONS 9.10)

As the day now approached on which she [Monica] was to depart this life (which day you knew, we did not), it happened—you, as I believe, by your secret ways arranging it—that she and I stood alone, leaning in a certain window, from which the garden of the house we occupied at Ostia could be seen. At this place, removed from the crowd, we were resting ourselves for the voyage, after the fatigues of a long journey. We then were conversing alone very pleasantly; and, forgetting those things that are behind, and reaching forth to those things that are before (Phil 3:13), we were seeking between ourselves in the presence of the Truth, which you are, of what nature the eternal life of the saints would be, which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man (1 Cor 2:9). But yet we opened wide the mouth of our heart, after those supernal streams of your fountain, the fountain of life, which is with you (Ps 35:10); that being sprinkled with it according to our capacity, we might in some measure weigh so high a mystery.

And when our conversation had arrived at that point, that the very highest pleasure of the carnal senses, and that in the very brightest material light, seemed by reason of the sweetness of that life not only
not worthy of comparison, but not even of mention, we, raising ourselves up with a more ardent affection toward the Selfsame (Ps 4:9), did gradually pass through all corporeal things, and even the heaven itself, whence sun, and moon, and stars shine upon the earth. Yes, we soared higher yet by inward musing, and discoursing, and admiring your works; and we came to our own minds, and went beyond them, that we might advance as high as that region of unfailing plenty, where you feed Israel forever with the food of truth (Ezek 34:14). There life is that Wisdom by whom all these things are made, both which have been, and which are to come. Wisdom is not made, but is as she has been, and so shall ever be. Rather, to have been and to be hereafter are not in her, but only to be, seeing she is eternal—for to have been and to be hereafter are not eternal. And while we were speaking like this, and straining after Wisdom, we slightly touched her with the whole effort of our heart. And we sighed and there left bound the first fruits of the Spirit (Rom 8:23), and we returned to the noise of our own mouths where the word uttered has both beginning and end. And what is like your Word, our Lord, who remains in himself without becoming old and makes all things new? (Wis 7:27).

We continued to talk, saying: If to any person the tumult of the flesh were silenced—silenced the images of earth, waters, and air—silenced, too, the poles of heaven; yes, the very soul be silenced to herself and go beyond herself by not thinking of herself—silenced be dreams and imaginary revelations, every tongue, and every sign, and whatsoever exists by passing away, since, if any could listen, all these say, “We did not create ourselves, but were created by him who lives forever.” If, having uttered this, they now should be silenced, having only awakened our ears to him who created them, and he alone speak not by them, but by himself, that we may hear his word, not by fleshly tongue, nor angelic voice, nor sound of thunder, nor the obscurity of a similitude, but might hear him whom in these we love without them, it would be just as we now strained forward and with rapid thought touched on that Eternal Wisdom that remains over all. If this could be sustained, and other visions of a far different kind be withdrawn, and this one ravish, and absorb, and envelop its beholder amid these inward joys, so that his life might be eternally like that one moment of knowledge that we now sighed after, were not this to “Enter thou into the joy of Thy Lord”? (Mt 25:21). And when shall that be? When we shall all rise again; but all shall not be changed (1 Cor 15:51).

Such things was I saying, and if not after this manner and in these words, yet, Lord, you know that or that day when we were talking like this, this world with all its delights grew contemptible to us, even while we spoke.

11.

THE THREE FORMS OF VISION
(LITERAL COMMENTARY ON GENESIS 12).

[Augustine's theory of the three forms of vision and the nature of rapture is presented in a detailed and digestive way in book 12. The following selections provide the gist of his thought.]

(A) Book 12.6.15

To see something not in an imaginative way, but properly, and not to see by means of a body, is to see by a form of seeing that surpasses all others. I will try to explain these kinds of seeing and their differences, insofar as God gives me aid. The three kinds of visions come together in the one precept that reads, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39). One way is through the eyes by which the letters are seen; the second is through the human spirit by which we think about our neighbor, even when absent; the third is through a mental gaze by means of which love itself is beheld in an intellectual way. [These three modes of seeing—corporeal, spiritual, intellectual—are realized on both a natural and a supernatural register. The supernatural mode is when God directly provides new bodily forms, images, or truths to the visionary.]

(B) Book 12.12.25

When we are awake and not mentally separated from our bodily senses, we are in a state of corporeal vision and we distinguish it from the spiritual vision by means of which we think in an imaginative way of absent bodies, whether by remembering those we knew, or by somehow mentally forming in the spirit others that we have not known,
even by arbitrary fancy creations that do not exist. We distinguish the bodies that we actually see and are present to our corporeal senses from all these images, so that we do not doubt that these are bodies and those are images of bodies. But it sometimes happens that by too much mental concentration, or due to some illness (as happens to those delirious with fever), or by the action of some spirit, good or bad, images of corporeal things are produced in the spirit in such a way that they are presented to the corporeal senses as if they were bodies, although we still remain attentive in our senses. In this way we see what are images of bodies in the spirit, just as we see real bodies by means of the body, so that at the same time we behold a present person with our eyes and an absent person with the eyes of the spirit... But when the soul's intention is completely turned away or snatched away from the body's senses, then it is more usually called ecstasy. Then whatsoever kind of bodies are present are not seen, even open eyes, nor are any voices heard. The soul's entire gaze is directed to images of bodies in its spiritual power, or through its intellectual power toward incorporeal things without any bodily form...

(C) Book 12.26.53–54

For this reason there are times when the soul is raptured into things seen that are similar to bodies, but are beheld in the spirit in such a way that the soul is totally removed from the bodily senses, more than in sleep but less than in death. By divine warning and assistance the soul knows that she does not behold bodies, but things like bodies seen in a spiritual way, just as people sometimes know they are dreaming even before they awake. Even future things seen there in present images are recognized as future, either because the person's mind is assisted by God, or because there is someone present in the vision to explain the meaning, as in the case of John in the Apocalypse (Rev 1:10). This is a major revelation, even if the person to whom it is shown does not know whether he is out of the body, or is still in the body with his spirit seeing while removed from the senses (2 Cor 12:2). A person raptured in this way may not know this, if it is not manifested to him. Furthermore, it is possible that a person may be raptured from the corporeal senses to be present amid the likenesses of bodies seen by the spirit in such a way that he is also raptured above them in order to be lifted up into the region of intellectual and intelligible realities where the plain truth is beheld without any bodily likeness. There no clouds of false opinions darken the scene, nor are the soul's virtues difficult and laborious... There the one and the total virtue is to love what you see and the greatest happiness is to have what you love. There the blessed life is imbibed at its source, and from that source something of it is sprinkled on this human life so that one can live with temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence in the midst of the world's temptations.

For the sake of attaining this goal, where there will be secure rest and the ineffable vision of truth, we take on the work of restraining ourselves from pleasure, of bearing hardships, of helping those in need, and of resisting deceivers. There the brightness of the Lord will be seen, not through a vision signifying something else, either a bodily one like that seen on Mount Sinai (Ex 19:18), or a spiritual one such as that Isaiah saw (Is 6:1), or John in the Apocalypse; but through direct appearance, not through enigmatic vision, insofar as the human mind can grasp it with the aid of God's elevating grace, so that God speaks mouth-to-mouth to him who has been made worthy of such conversation—by the mouth of the mind, not of the body. Translations: Confessions 7.10 is translated by Bernard McGinn from the text in PL 32:742; the other passages from Confessions 7 and 9 are adapted from the version of J. G. Pilkington in Whitney J. Oates, Basic Writings of Saint Augustine (New York: Random House, 1948), Vol. 1:104–6, 140–41. The translations from book 12 of Literal Commentary on Genesis are by Bernard McGinn from the text in PL 34:458–80.
3. GREGORY THE GREAT

DIALOGUES 2.35

The four books of Gregory the Great’s Dialogues, probably composed in the 590s, recount the lives and miracles of the holy men of sixth-century Italy. Their popular style and delight in the miraculous have led some critics to condemn them as an example of the new “vulgar Catholicism” of the Middle Ages, but they were popular both in the West and in translation in the Greek East. The second book of the work is devoted to Benedict of Nursia, the author of the Rule for Monks that became standard in the West in the ninth century. (Gregory mentions it briefly but tellingly: “He wrote a rule for monks that is remarkable for its discretion and its clearness of language.”) Gregory gives a portrait of Benedict as an archetypal holy man and monastic founder. As the only source for the life of the saint, Gregory’s account became one of the most influential hagiographical works of the Latin tradition.

Toward the end of Benedict’s life, Gregory recounts a number of visions granted to the saint. The one given here, which would have taken place in 543, is the most famous nonbiblical vision of the early Middle Ages. Gregory’s account of Benedict’s sight of the soul of Bishop Germanus of Capua ascending to heaven falls into two parts: a historical narration perhaps based on an oral tradition; and the pope’s explanation of the deeper meaning of the event to his dialogue partner, Deacon Peter. The vision is the concluding point of the three stages of Benedict’s life: separating himself from the world; living within himself as an anchorite; and his final years as a spiritual leader whom God raptures above himself (capitur super se). The text fuses language taken from Sotiris and Pla-tonic sources with a deep biblical teaching about contemplation. The interplay of inner and outer light, the notion of the expansion of the soul due to divine action, and the insistence on the limitation of all vision here below are hallmarks of Gregory’s teaching on contemplation.

GREGORY: Before the night office began, when the man of God Benedict was standing at the window in prayer to Almighty God while the brethren were asleep, in the dead of night he suddenly gazed and saw light poured down from on high that cast away all the night’s gloom and blazed forth with such splendor that this light illuminating the darkness would have surpassed daylight. A very marvelous thing followed that sight, because, as he himself later said, the whole world was brought before his eyes, gathered together, as it were, in one ray of light. As the venerable father fixed his gaze on this brilliant gleam of light, he saw the soul of Germanus the bishop of Capua carried into heaven in a fiery sphere by angels. Then, wanting to have a witness of so great a miracle, he called out for Deacon Servandus, two or three times repeating his name with a loud voice. When Servandus was aroused by the unaccustomed shout of the great man, he went up, looked, and just in time saw a small bit of the light. The man of God told him what had happened in detail as he stood in wonder at so great a miracle. And Benedict immediately ordered the devout Theoprophus to go to Cassino and to send a messenger the same night to the city of Capua to find out what had happened to Bishop Germanus and let us know. It was done, and the one who was sent discovered that the most reverend bishop was already dead, and, after asking more closely, he learned that he had died at the very same moment that the man of God had seen his ascent.

PETER: This is certainly a wonderful event; quite marvelous! But what was said about the whole world being brought before his eyes, as though gathered into one ray of light, I don’t know how to take since I’ve never had such an experience. How is it possible that the whole world can be seen by one person?

GREGORY: Pay attention to what I say, Peter. To the soul that sees the Creator every creature is limited. To anyone who sees even a little of the light of the Creator everything created will become small, because in the very light of the inner vision the mind’s core is opened up.
It is so expanded in God that it stands above the world. The soul of someone who sees in this way is even above itself. When the soul is raptured above itself in God’s light, it is enlarged in its interior parts, and while it gazes upon what is beneath it, in its elevated state it comprehends how small something is that it could not grasp when it was in its lowly state. Therefore, the person who gazed upon the fiery sphere and also saw the angels returning to heaven without doubt could only do so in God’s light. What wonder is it then if he also saw the world gathered together before him, since he was lifted up outside the world in the light of the mind? That the world is said to have been gathered together before his eyes is not because heaven and earth were made small, but because the intellectual soul of the person seeing was enlarged. A person who is raptured up in God can see everything that is beneath God without difficulty. In the light that shone upon his external eyes there was an interior light in the mind that showed the intellectual soul or the person seeing, because he had been rapt to higher things, just how limited everything beneath it really is.


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**4. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN**

**HYMN 18**

Symeon the "New Theologian" (thus equated with John the Evangelist and John Chrysostom) was a monastic leader in Constantinople at the turn of the first millennium (see section 3.4). Symeon was famous for descriptions of his reception of the divine light. Although it was unusual for early mystics to speak of their own experiences, it is important to remember that Symeon grounded his personal accounts in a solid grasp of the patristic theology of divinization—"God became man, so that man might become God" (see section 12). Nevertheless, Symeon was a controversial figure in his day, not least due to his insistence that receiving the divine light was the mark of the true Christian and that such experiences provided mystics with authority in the church.

Symeon’s theology of divine illumination made him a key figure in the development of Hesychast tradition in the Christian East—that is, the teaching that special forms of prayer, physical and mental, can lead to the vision of divine light. While Symeon’s prose works are often polemical, his fifty-eight surviving hymns, written in the last decades of the tenth century, present the light experience in an evocative, personal way. The following excerpts from hymn 18 give some sense of a message that, though often repeated, never seems to become repetitive due to the power of Symeon’s personal testimony.
Who has shown me the path of repentance and compassion from which I discovered the day which has no end? It was an angel, not a man; nevertheless he is a man, and the world is ridiculed by him and the dragon is trampled under foot and the demons tremble in his presence. How shall I tell you, brothers, what I've seen in Egypt, the marvels and the wonders he accomplished? I will only tell you what is here, for I cannot say everything. The fact is that he came down and found me a slave and stranger and said, "Come, my child, I will lead you to God." I told him: from the depth of my unbelief, "And what sign will you show me to ensure me that you, you, can tear me away from Egypt and snatch me from the hands of the crafty Pharaoh, so that, after having followed you, I do not risk greater dangers?" "Light a fire," he said, "so that I may penetrate to the center, and if I do not remain untouched, do not follow me!" This remark struck me with amazement and I did what he had commanded. And the flame burned and he stood in the middle, intact, uninjured, and he called me to him. "Master," I said, "I am afraid, I am a sinner." He stepped out, he came towards me and he embraced me: "Why were you afraid, tell me, why fear and tremble? The marvel is great and redoubtable, but you will see greater ones yet." Struck with amazement, I said to him: "Lord, I dare not approach you and do not wish to appear bolder than the fire, for I see that you are a man who is more than a man. I dare not even look at you, you whom the fire has spared." He made me come close, he clasped me in his arms and he kissed me again with a holy kiss and he himself gave out a scent of immortality.


In recent decades Hildegard of Bingen has emerged as one of the most remarkable women in the history of Christianity. Born in 1098 to a noble family, she joined the convent at an early age and was trained under a female recluse named Jutta. Around 1141 she began to record the visions she had been receiving from childhood, at the same time embarking on a campaign of public dissemination of her message through letters sent to the major clerical and lay leaders of Europe. In the course of this campaign, Hildegard moved her community of nuns from Disibodenberg to the Rupertsberg near Bingen at the confluence of the Rhine and Nahe rivers. The acceptance of Hildegard's claims to have received messages directly from God about the state of the church, the need for reform, and the impending end of time gave her an authority perhaps never before accorded to a woman in Christian history, as shown by the four preaching missions she conducted in Germany in the years between 1158 and her death in 1179.

Hildegard's three major works, *Scivias* (i.e., Know the Lord's Ways), The Book of the Life of Merits, and The Book of Divine Works, were based on the interpretation of her visions and auditions. In these books Hildegard speaks primarily as an original monastic theologian with a strong interest in cosmology and eschatology (her later reputation was largely as an apocalyptic reformer), but she was also a poet, a playwright, a composer, an artist, a physician, and more. Hildegard's reputation was founded on her visionary claims. The extent to which her visions can be described as mystical is still under discussion.
While many of her showings are primarily didactic, others are unitive and transformative in a mystical sense. Hildegard was not only a visionary but also a "visionologist," in the sense of someone who reflected on the mode in which her showings were received and the effect that they had upon her consciousness.

I.

LETTER 103R. TO GUIBERT OF GEMBOUX (1175)

Hildegard to Guibert the Monk. I speak these words not on my own or from another person, but I set them forth as I received them in a vision from on high. O servant of God, you look into the mirror of faith in which God is known, and, O son of God, this is possible through the creation and humanity in whom God established and sealed his miracles. Just as in the case of a mirror whatever is seen in it is fixed in its container, so too the rational soul is placed into the body as in an earthen vessel, so that it may rule it by giving it life and the soul may contemplate things celestial through faith. Listen to what the never-failing Light declares.

O faithful servant, I, a poor little person in female form, speak these words to you again in a true vision. If God were pleased to lift up my body in this vision, just as he has my soul, I would still have fear in mind and heart, because I know that I am a human being, though from infancy I have been a cloistered nun. Many wise men were so filled with miracles that they revealed a great number of secrets, but they fell because in their vanity they ascribed these miracles to themselves.

From my infancy, when my bones and nerves and veins were not yet full grown, even unto the present time, I have always enjoyed the gift of this vision in my soul—I who am already over seventy! In this vision, as God wills, my spirit ascends into the height of the firmament and the shifting air, and it spreads itself abroad among different peoples though they are in distant regions and places far from me. And because I see these things in such a manner, I therefore also behold them in changing forms of clouds and other created elements. But I do not hear them with my bodily ears, nor with my heart's thoughts, nor do I perceive them by the use of any of my five senses, but only in my soul, with my outer eyes open, so that I never experience their failure in ecstasy. Rather, I see these things wide awake, day and night. But I am inhibited by constant illness and so wrapped in terrible pain that the threat of death is near. But God has sustained me up to the present.

The light that I see is not spatial, yet it is far brighter than a cloud surrounding the sun. I cannot discern height or length or breadth of it, and I call it "the shadow of the Living Light." As the sun, moon, and stars appear reflected in water, so too writings, speeches, virtues, and deeds of people are given form and shine out to me in this light.

Whatever I see or learn in this vision, I retain for a long time in my memory, so that I remember what I heard and saw at any time. At one and the same time I see and I hear and I know, and in an instant I learn what I know. I have no knowledge of what I don't see there, because I am not learned. What I see and hear in the vision I write down, and I put down only the words I hear there. In unpolished Latin words I put forth what I hear in the vision, since I have not learned to write down the vision as philosophers write. The words I see and hear in the vision are not like the words that sound from a human mouth, but they are like shooting flame and a cloud moved in clear air. I am in no way able to understand the form of this light, just as I can't gaze fully upon the sphere of the sun.

In the same light I sometimes, no, often, see another light, which I call "the Living Light." I can say much less about how I see it than in the case of the other light, and while I am gazing at it all sadness and all pain are taken from me, so that I am like an innocent girl and not an old woman. But due to the constant illness I suffer, I sometimes am exhausted in putting forth the words and visions that are shown me there. Still, when my soul sees and takes them, I am so changed into a different mode of being that, as I said above, I consign all pain and suffering to forgetfulness. My soul drinks in as from a fountain what I see and hear at that time in the vision, and that fountain remains always full and inexhaustible.

My soul never lacks the first kind of light, what I called the shadow of the Living Light. I see it like the dome of heaven in a bright cloud and I behold it without stars. In this light I see what I often speak
about, and from the flash of the Living Light I give answer to those who ask questions of me....


II.
LIFE OF SAINT HILDEGARD, BOOK 2,
CHAPTER 16

[Book 2 of the monk Theodore's Life of Saint Hildegarde is based upon a lost spiritual diary in which the seer recounted the different kinds of visions given her over the years. The following is the last and highest form.]

THE SEVENTH VISION. Finally, at a later time [circa 1167] I saw a mystical and wondrous vision, such that my insides were disturbed and my body's power of sensation was extinguished, because my knowing was transmuted to another mode as if I did not know myself. And from God's inspiration, as it were, drops of sweet rain splashed into my soul's knowing, just as the Holy Spirit filled John the Evangelist when he sucked supremely deep revelation from the breast of Jesus, when his understanding was so touched by holy divinity that he revealed hidden mysteries and works, saying, "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn 1:1).

The Word, who existed without beginning before all creatures and who will exist without end after them, commanded all creatures to come forth, and he produced his work in the likeness of a smith who causes his work to blaze out, because what he had kept in his predestination before the ages, now appeared in a visible way. And so humanity and every creature is God's work. But humanity is also the workman of divinity and the reflection of his mysteries, and he ought to reveal the Trinity in all things, because God made him "in his image and likeness" (Gen 1:26). Just as Lucifer in his ill will was not able to break God apart, so too he is not capable of destroying humanity's state of being, although he attempted it in the case of the first man. Therefore,
restfulness is demanded for seeking and retaining this state, because it can never be gained or retained in too much bodily motion or in inconstancy or mental wandering. Therefore, where a person has been chosen to be elevated to this, he lives in great joy and full of virtue, and he dies in a sweet peacefulness. After this life he will be placed among the higher choirs of angels and nearer to God.


Nicholas of Cusa
On the Vision of God
Excerpts from Chapters 5, 6, and 13

Nicholas of Cusa's major contribution to the history of mysticism is the treatise On the Vision of God, which he sent to the monks of Tegernsee in the fall of 1453. In this work the cardinal rethought the basic issues found in previous attempts to bring together the apparent scriptural texts that on the one hand presented the vision of God as the goal of existence (e.g., Mt 5:8) and on the other hand denied that God could ever be seen (e.g., 1 Tim 6:16). Cusa's solution used aspects of the thought of Neoplatonic mystics, such as Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, and Meister Eckhart, but it was also very much a new creation. Like Dionysius, he insisted that seeing God always remains a paradoxical "not-seeing seeing." Along with Eriugena, he identified God's seeing with his creative activity; finally, he took over from Eckhart the idea of the mutuality of the gaze that the Dominican expressed in the famous statement: "The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me."

Cusa's treatise begins with a practical exercise designed to provide "ready access to mystical theology." He sent the monks an all-seeing picture of Christ and suggested a para-liturgy in which the community would process around the icon to induce wonder in the "change of the unchangeable gaze" directed to each and all. This experiment was accompanied by a treatise in the form of a prayer divided into three parts. Chapters 4–16 are an extended analysis of the meaning of "seeing God" (visio dei), understood both as God's own seeing and our vision of him. Central to this section are the notions of the biblical "face-to-face vision" (1 Cor 13:12), the "wall of paradise" (murus paradisi), or limit of all rational
thought; and finally naming God as "absolute infinity" (infinitas absoluta). The core message of this presentation of the dynamics of the gaze is that God is never the object of seeing but is always its subject. The brief second section (chapters 17–18) shows why the proper understanding of seeing God reveals that God is a loving Trinity of persons. Finally, chapters 19–25 demonstrate that the only way we can attain to the vision of the triune God is through the filiation, or adoptive sonship, made available to us through the union of the divine and human natures in Jesus. The reflections given here illustrate the three essential themes of the first section.

I.

CHAPTER 5.13-15. GOD’S SEEING IS TASTING, SEEKING, SHOWING MERCY, AND WORKING

“How great is the multitude of your sweetness which you have hidden from those who fear you” (Ps 30:20). This is the inexpressible treasury of the greatest joy. To taste your sweetness is to apprehend by experiential contact the sweetness of all delights in its principle; it is to attain the source of all that is desired in your wisdom. To see the absolute source, which is the source of all things, is nothing else but to taste you mentally, God, since you are the very sweetness of existence, life, and understanding. Lord, what else is your seeing than for you to be seen by me when you look upon me with the eye of your mercy? In seeing me, you, who are the hidden God (Is 45:15), give yourself to be seen by me. No one can see you unless you grant that you may be seen. To see you is nothing else than for you to see the one who sees you.

I see in this icon of you how ready you are, Lord, to show your face to all who seek you, for you never close your eyes and never turn them somewhere else. And although I turn myself away from you when I look completely toward something else, you nonetheless do not change your eyes or your gaze because of this. If you do not look upon me with the eye of grace, it’s my fault because I have separated from you through turning away and turning toward something else that I prefer to you. You still do not turn totally from me, but follow after me with your mercy so that I might at some time want to return to you in order to be open to your grace. You not looking upon me is because I do not look toward you, but reject and spur you.

O infinite mercy, how unhappy is every sinner who has deserted you, the source of life, and who seeks you not in yourself but in what is nothing in itself and would remain nothing did you not call it forth from nothingness. How foolish is the one who seeks you, Goodness itself, and while he seeks you departs from you and turns his eyes away. All seekers seek only the good, and everyone who seeks the good and departs from you departs from what he seeks. Therefore, every sinner wanders away from you and goes off a long way. But when he returns to you, you meet him without delay, and before he looks upon you, you cast your eyes of mercy upon him with fatherly love (Lk 15:20).

For you to have mercy is the same thing as for you to see. Your mercy follows after each person as long as he lives, and wherever he goes, just as your seeing never abandons anyone. As long as a person lives, you do not cease to follow after him and to urge him on with a sweet and interior warning to leave error and to be converted to you in order to live happily. Lord, you are the companion of my pilgrimage. Wherever I go, your eyes are always upon me. Your seeing is also your moving. Therefore, you move with me and never cease moving as long as I move. If I am at rest, you are with me; if I ascend or descend, so do you; wherever I go, you are there (Ps 138:8). You do not forsake me in time of tribulation. As often as I call on you, you are there, for to call on you is for me to turn myself to you. You cannot fail a person who turns toward you, nor can anyone turn toward you unless you are there first. You are present before I turn myself to you, for unless you were present and invited me, I would be wholly ignorant of you. And how could I be converted to you if I did not know you?...

II.

CHAPTER 6.17. FACIAL VISION

Lord my God, the longer I behold your face the more it appears to me that you cast the gaze of your eyes more acutely upon me. Your gaze now moves me to consider how this icon of your face is painted in a perceptible way in such a manner that the face cannot exist without
color, just as the color cannot exist without quantity. I behold the truth of
your invisible face signified in this contracted shadow here not by
the fleshly eyes that look upon it but by mental and intellectual eyes.
But your true face is free from every form of limitation: it has no quanti-
ty, quality, time, or place. It is the absolute form, the face of faces. I
am astounded when I consider how this face is the truth and most
exact measure of all faces. There is no quantity in this face that is the
truth of all faces; it is not smaller or greater than any other face. Be-
cause it is not more nor less, it is equal to any and every face, but it is
not equal to any single face because it is not quantified but is unlimited
and high above all: it is therefore the truth that is equality itself free
from every form of quantity. Thus, Lord, I grasp that your face pre-
ceeds every face capable of taking a form and is the exemplar and
truth of all faces. All faces are images of your face, which is incapable
of contraction and of participation. Therefore, every face that can
gaze upon your face sees nothing different or other than itself, because
it sees its truth. Exemplary truth cannot be different or strange, but
these aspects occur in an image because it is not the Exemplar...

111.

CHAPTER 13.51–54. GOD IS SEEN
TO BE ABSOLUTE INFINITY BEYOND
THE WALL OF PARADISE

Lord God, the helper of all who seek you, I see you in the garden of
paradise and I do not know what I see because I see nothing of what is
visible. I know this alone, that I know I do not know what I see and that
I can never know it. I do not know how to name you because I do not
know what you might be. If anyone were to ask me to use one or an-
other name, by the very fact that the name would be used I know that
it is not your name. The limit of every mode of signifying by names is
the wall beyond which I see you. If anyone were to make use of some
concept in order to conceive of you, I know that that concept is not
yours, because every concept reaches its limit at the wall of paradise.
And if someone were to make use of some likeness and to say that you
are conceivable according to it, I also know that that likeness is not
yours. If someone were to proclaim some understanding of you, de-
siring to provide a mode for understanding you, this would still be
far from you, for you are separated from all such things by the most
lofty wall. The wall separates you from everything that can be said or
thought, because you are free from all that can fall under any kind of
concept whatever.

Hence, when I am lifted up on high, I see you as infinity. It is be-
because of this that you are inaccessible, incomprehensible, unnameable,
unmultiplied, and invisible. Therefore, it is necessary that someone
approaching you ascend above every limit and every end and every-
thing finite. But how can someone come to you who are the end toward
which he aims if he ought ascend above that end? Doesn’t someone
who ascends above the end enter into what is undetermined and con-
fused, and thus into the ignorance and darkness of intellectual confu-
sion as far as the intellect is concerned? Therefore, if someone wants
to see you, his intellect must become ignorant and set in shadow. O my
God, what is an intellect in ignorance? Isn’t it learned ignorance? No
one can draw near you who are infinity, God, save through one whose
intellect is ignorance itself, that is, who knows that he is ignorant of
you. How can any intellect grasp you who are infinity? To understand
infinity is to comprehend the incomprehensible. The intellect knows
that it is ignorant of you because it knows that you cannot be known
save by knowing what is not knowable and seeing what is not visible
and drawing near to what is not accessible.

My God, you are absolute infinity itself, which I see as the infinite
end. But I do not know how to grasp how an end without end can be an
end. God, you are your own end, because you are whatever you have.
If you have an end you are that end. Therefore, you are the infinite end
because you are your own end and because your end is your essence.
The essence of the end is not limited or ended in something other than
the end but in itself. Therefore, the end that is its own end is infinite,
and every end that is not its own end is a finite end. Lord, because you
are the end that puts an end to all things, therefore you are the end that
is not an end, and thus an end without end, or infinite. What surpasses
all reason involves a contradiction. Hence when I assert the existence
of the infinite, I admit a light that is dark, a knowledge that is igno-
rant, and something necessary that is impossible. Because we admit to
an end of what is finite, we necessarily admit to the infinite, or the final
end, or the end without end. Just as we must admit that finite things
exist, we must also admit that the infinite exists. Therefore, we admit a coincidence of contradictions above which is the infinite. That kind of coincidence is the contradiction without contradiction, just as it is the end without end.

You tell me, Lord, that just as in unity otherness exists without otherness because it is unity, so too in infinity contradiction exists without contradiction because it is infinite. Infinity is simplicity itself. Contradiction cannot exist without otherness, but in simplicity otherness exists without otherness because it is simplicity itself. Everything that is predicated about absolute simplicity coincides with it because there is where it exists. The opposite of opposites is an opposite without opposite just as the end of things finite is the end without end. Therefore, you, God, are the opposite of opposites because you are infinite. And because you are infinite you are infinity itself—in infinity the opposite of opposites exists without an opposite. . . .


Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) is best known as the founder of the Jesuits, the new religious order that helped revitalize Roman Catholicism in the wake of the Reformation. Ignatius was a superb organizer and a skilled spiritual director; he was also a mystic. One of his followers spoke of him as “contemplative in action” (in actione contemplativus). Born of minor nobility in the Basque area of Spain, Ignatius became a soldier. Badly wounded in 1521, he experienced a conversion during his convalescence and took up the life of a wandering holy man. He spent almost a year (1522–23) at Manresa near Montserrat, deepening his prayer life, undergoing temptations, and experiencing visions. During this time he began writing down the notes on spiritual direction that eventually grew into his most famous work, the Spiritual Exercises (first published in 1548). The Exercises are a set of guidelines for spiritual directors to use in giving retreats.

Ignatius made pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem before deciding that God wanted him to become a priest, so he spent the years 1524 to 1535 studying in Spain and Paris. During this time the force of his personality and the depth of his spiritual vision began to attract followers, and in 1534 he and six others founded what was to become the Society of Jesus, officially sanctioned by Paul III in 1540. Ignatius moved on to Rome in 1537 and spent the rest of his life there, organizing the order, preaching, and guiding souls, and conducting a large correspondence. During this time he continued to experience visions and other mystical gifts, often while saying Mass. Fragments of a Spiritual Diary that he kept
equal to it. [Here the scribe adds: This left his understanding so enlightened that from that day on he seemed to be quite another man, and possessed of a new intellect.]

This illumination lasted a long time. While kneeling before a nearby cross to give thanks to God, there appeared to him that object he had often seen before, but had never understood. It seemed to be something most beautiful, and, as it were, gleaming with many eyes. This is how it always appeared. While before the cross, he clearly noticed that the object did not have its former beautiful color. He understood clearly with strong agreement of his will that it was the devil. Later, whenever the vision appeared to him for a long time, as it did often, with contempt he dispelled it with the staff he used to carry in his hand.


Among the most noted descriptions of an ecstatic vision in Christian mysticism is the account given by Teresa of Avila in her Life of the piercing, or “transverberation,” of her heart. The event appears to have taken place about 1560. The theme of the “wound of love, or charity” often invoked the text of Song of Songs 2:5, which in the Old Latin version reads, “because I have been wounded by charity.” In commenting on this verse, Origen gave a rare personal reference: “If there is anyone who at some time has received the sweet wound of him who is the chosen dart, as the prophet says [Is 49:2]; if there is anyone who has been pierced by the love-worthy spear of his knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for him by day and night; … if such there be, that soul then says in truth, ‘I have been wounded by charity’” (Commentary on the Song of Songs, book 3).

During the late-medieval period, many mystics, especially women, provide us with descriptions of the wound of love. Teresa’s account is among the most potent and erotic. The experience became emblematic of her status as the premier Catholic mystic of the Counter-Reformation period. Editions of her works often included a picture of the scene, and Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s sculptural version (1647–51) in the Cornaro chapel of the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome is the most famous depiction of ecstasy in the history of Christian art. The transverberation was accorded its own feast day by Benedict XIII in 1726.
These other impulses are very different. It is not we who apply the fuel; the fire is already kindled and we are thrown into it in a moment to be consumed. It is by no efforts of the soul that it sorrows over the wound caused by the Lord's absence. Rather, an arrow is driven into the entrails to the very quick, and into the heart at times, so that the soul knows not what is the matter with it, nor what it wishes for. It understands clearly enough that it wishes for God, and that the arrow seems tempered with some herb that makes the soul hate itself for the love of our Lord, and willingly lose its life for him. It is impossible to describe or explain the way in which God wounds the soul, or the very grievous pain inflicted, which deprives it of all self-consciousness; yet this pain is so sweet that there is no joy in the world that gives greater delight. As I have just said, the soul would wish to be always dying of this wound.

This pain and this bliss carried me out of myself, and I could never understand how it was. Oh, what a sight a wounded soul is—a soul, I mean, so conscious of it as to be able to say of itself that it is wounded for so good a cause! It sees distinctly that it never did anything whereby this love should come to it, and it sees that it does come from that exceeding love our Lord bears it. A spark seems to have fallen suddenly upon it that has set it all on fire. Oh, how often I remember, when in this state, those words of David: “As the hart longs for the fountain of waters, so is my soul longing for you, O my God” (Ps 41:2). They seem to me to be literally true of myself.

Our Lord was pleased that I should have at times a vision of this kind: I saw an angel close by me, on my left side, in bodily form. This I am not accustomed to see, except very rarely. Though I have visions of angels frequently, yet I see them only by an intellectual vision, such as I have spoken of before [chapter 27.2]. It was our Lord's will that in this vision I should see the angel in this way. He was not large, but small of stature, and most beautiful—his face burning, as if he were one of the highest angels, who seem to be all of fire: They must be those whom we call Cherubim. Their names they never tell me; but I see very well that there is in heaven so great a difference between one angel and another, and between these and the others, that I cannot explain it. I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. It is a caressing of love so sweet that now takes place between the soul and God that I pray God of his goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.

During the days that this lasted I went about as if beside myself. I wished to see or speak with no one, but only to cherish my pain, which was to me a greater bliss than all created things could give me. I was in this state from time to time, whenever it was our Lord's pleasure to throw me into those deep raptures that I could not prevent even when I was in the company of others, and which, to my deep vexation, came to be publicly known. Since then I do not feel that pain so much, but only that which I spoke of before—I do not remember the chapter [chapter 20.9]—which is in many ways very different from it and of greater worth. On the other hand, when this pain of which I am now speaking begins, our Lord seems to lay hold of the soul and to throw it into an ecstasy, so that there is no time for me to have any sense of pain or suffering, because fruition ensues at once. May He be blessed for ever, who has bestowed such great graces on one who has responded so ill to blessings so great!

SECTION THIRTEEN

UNION WITH GOD

Becoming one with God has often been seen as the defining characteristic of mysticism, although the ways that mystics have described their sense of God's direct presence have been quite varied. The term *mystical union* occurs as early as the late fourth century, but was employed sparingly by Christian mystics. It is only in the modern study of mysticism that mystical union (*unio mystica*) attained a central place.

The Bible's use of the language of union is sparse, which is why a few texts took on great importance in the later tradition. Perhaps the most frequently cited biblical passage in the history of Christian mysticism is Paul's claim in 1 Corinthians 6:17 that "He who adheres to God becomes one spirit with him." In John's Gospel, Jesus' prayer for his disciples that "all may be one as you Father are in me and I in you" (Jn 17:21) was also much cited by later mystics. These texts, however, suggest rather different views of union—oneness of spirit, and a oneness that shares in the essential unity of the three persons in the one God.

Pagan Neoplatonic mystics, especially Plotinus (204–70), left profound analyses of the metaphysical and existential meaning of mystical union (*henosis*). This concern with mystical union appears to be the reason why some Fathers, such as Augustine, avoided the language of union, except when speaking about how believers are united in the Body of Christ. Nevertheless, other Christian mystics were willing to
speak about being united to God, even in an essential way. Among the earliest uses of mystical union or mystical fellowship (koinōnia mystiκė) are those found in the Mcarmon Homilies, one of which is the first selection given here. Other Eastern Christian texts speak more clearly of a union that involves identity or merging. Evagrius Ponticus (see section 2.2) used an analogy often repeated in later mystical literature. Speaking of the eventual union of fallen minds with God, he said: “When minds flow back into him like torrents into the sea, he changes them all completely into his own nature, color, and taste. . . . And as in the fusion of rivers with the sea no addition in its nature or variation in its color or taste is to be found, so also in the fusion of minds with the Father no duality of natures or quaternity of persons comes about” (Letter to Melania 6). At the beginning of The Mystical Theology (see section 9.1) Dionysius also spoke of union with God. A passage from The Divine Names 2.9 provided a classic account of a uniting with God. In this text (often commented upon) Dionysius describes his teacher Hierotheus as “not only learning but experiencing [i.e., passively receiving] divine things,” and because of his sympathy with them, being “perfected in a mystical union [koinōnia mystiκė] and an untaught faith in them.” Maximus the Confessor (see section 12.3) was the first to use three comparisons of union with God repeated by many authors—a drop of water in wine, molten iron in fire, and air in sunshine. These images suggest a fusion of being, but were actually used by most mystics to illustrate loving union of wills.

Extensive analyses of the forms of union began in the twelfth century in the West. Although these presentations are varied, they fall into two broad traditions. The first takes its cue from the Pauline text cited above, insisting that union with God is a “union of spirits” (unitas spiritus), that is, a uniting of willing and loving in which the infinite Divine Spirit and the finite created spirit nonetheless always maintain their ontological distinction. The selection from Bernard of Clairvaux given below is a good example of this perspective. In the thirteenth century, however, there was a surge of accounts that speak of union of identity or indistinction with God (unitas identitas/unitas indistinctionis). Although this form of union often used philosophical categories drawn from Neoplatonic philosophy, it was not an academic revival, but was part of the lived experience of the exponents of the New Mysticism. The foremost spokesman of the union of identity in which the soul becomes annihilated in order to be totally merged with God is Meister Eckhart. Selection 3 is one of Eckhart’s best-known sermons on mystical unity, here presented as the true poverty of spirit.

Union of identity remains controversial. Does such a view elude the distinction between Creator and creature that is essential to Christian faith? Perhaps so, but two points should be borne in mind in evaluating claims to such strong forms of union. First, Eckhart, as well as the other proponents of mystical identity such as Marguerite Porete (see section 5.4), insisted that while identity is reached on one level, on another level there always remains a distinction between God and creature. Second, many mystics continued to employ both kinds of union language, perhaps reflecting a similar commitment to both identity and distinction.

After the condemnations of Marguerite Porete and Eckhart, later mystics wrestled with how best to correlate their understanding of union and the church’s teaching. The selection from the Dutch mystic John Ruysbroeck is one of the most subtle attempts to incorporate an Eckhartian sense of mystical identity into a more complete analysis of the interpenetrating forms of union realized both in this life and the next. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross both attempted to clarify mystical union understood as spiritual marriage. The proper view of union remained an important issue in the Golden Age of French Mysticism during the seventeenth century. The selection from Francis de Sales is a summation of traditional teaching on mystical union, while the passage from Marie of the Incarnation represents a personal account of becoming one with God.
Sometimes called the “Poverty Sermon,” this homily is one of Eckhart’s most famous. It was translated into Latin and used by a number of later mystics, including John Ruusbroec. The Poverty Sermon represents Eckhart at his most challenging. The sermon’s organization, with its triple analysis of true poverty as wanting nothing, knowing nothing, and having nothing, has a clarity unusual in the Meister’s homilies. It appears to be among the last of Eckhart’s sermons, possibly preached in Cologne in 1327 for the Feast of All Saints. The nature of poverty was one of the most controversial religious issues of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Eckhart’s answer to what constitutes true poverty characteristically moves quickly past external poverty to explore the inner poverty of the annihilation of the will that leads back to our pre-creational state and even beyond, breaking through to identical union with the God beyond God. Recent scholarship has shown that some phrases in the sermon echo Marguerite Porete’s condemned work, The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls (see section 5.4).

*Beati pauperes spiritu,* quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum. Beatitude itself opened its mouth of wisdom and said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). All angels, all saints, and everything that was ever born must keep silent when the Wisdom of the Father speaks: for all the wisdom of angels and all creatures is pure folly before the unfathomable wisdom of God. This Wisdom has declared that the poor are blessed.

Now there are two kinds of poverty. The one is external poverty, and this is good and much to be commended in the person who practices it voluntarily for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he himself possessed this on earth. About this poverty I shall say no more now. But there is another poverty, an interior poverty, to which this word of our Lord applies when he says: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Now I beg you to be like this in order that you may understand this sermon: for by the eternal truth I tell you that unless you are like this truth we are about to speak of, it is not possible for you to follow me.

Some people have asked me what poverty is in itself, and what a poor person is. This is how we shall answer. Bishop Albert [Albert the Great] says a poor person is one who finds no satisfaction in all things God ever created, and this is well said. But we shall speak better, taking poverty in a higher sense: a poor person is one who wants nothing, knows nothing and has nothing. We shall now speak of these three points, and I beg you for the love of God to understand this wisdom if you can; but if you can’t understand it, don’t worry, because I am going to speak of such truth that few good people can understand.

Firstly, we say that a poor person is one who wants nothing. There are some who do not properly understand the meaning of this; these are the people who cling with attachment to penances and outward practices, making much of these. May God have mercy on such folk for understanding so little of divine truth! These people are called holy from their outward appearances, but inwardly they are asses, for they are ignorant of the actual nature of divine truth. These people say that a poor person is one who wants nothing and they explain it this way: A person should so live that he never does his own will in anything, but should strive to do the clearest will of God. It is well with these people because their intention is right, and we commend them for it. May God in his mercy grant them the kingdom of heaven! But by God’s wisdom I declare that these folk are not poor men or similar to poor men. They are much admired by those who know no better, but I say that they are asses with no understanding of God’s truth. Perhaps they will gain heaven for their good intentions, but of the poverty we shall now speak of they have no idea.

If, then, I were asked what is a poor person who wants nothing, I
should reply as follows. As long as a person is so disposed that it is his will with which he would do the most beloved will of God, that person has not the poverty we are speaking about; for that person has a will to serve God’s will—and that is not true poverty! For a person to possess true poverty he must be as free of his created will as he was when he was not. For I declare by the eternal truth, as long as you have the will to do the will of God, and longing for eternity and God, you are not poor: for a poor person is one who wills nothing and desires nothing.

While I yet stood in my first cause, I had no God and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth. Then I wanted myself and wanted nothing other thing: what I wanted I was and what I was I wanted, and thus I was free of God and all things. But when I went out from my free will and received my created being, then I had a God. For before there were creatures, God was not God: He was that which he was. But when creatures came into existence and received their being, then God was not God in himself—He was God in creatures.

Now we say that God, inasmuch as he is God, is not the supreme goal of creatures, for the same lofty status is possessed by the least of creatures in God. And if it were the case that a fly had reason and could intellectually plumb the eternal abyss of God’s being out of which it came, we would have to say that God with all that makes him God would be unable to fulfill and satisfy that fly! Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there where the highest angel, the fly and the soul are equal, where I stood and wanted what I was, and what I wanted. We conclude, then: if a person is to be poor of will, he must will and desire as little as he willed and desired when he was not. And this is the way for a person to be poor by not wanting.

Secondly, a person is poor who knows nothing. We have sometimes said that a person should live as if he did not live either for himself, or for truth, or for God. But now we will speak differently and go further, and say: For a person to possess this poverty he must live so that he is unaware that he does not live for himself, or for truth, or for God. He must be so lacking in all knowledge that he neither knows nor recognizes nor feels that God lives in him; more still, he must be free of all the understanding that lives in him. For when that person stood in the eternal being of God, nothing else lived in him: what lived there was himself. Therefore we declare that a person should be as free from his own knowledge as he was when he was not. That person should let God work as he will, and himself stand idle.

Everything that ever came out of God is directed toward pure activity. The proper work of man is to love and to know. Now the question is: Wherein does blessedness lie most of all? Some masters have said it lies in knowing, some say that it lies in loving; others say it lies in knowing and loving, and they say better. But we say it lies neither in knowing nor in loving: for there is something in the soul from which both knowledge and love flow; but it does not itself know or love in the way the powers of the soul do. Whoever knows this, knows the seat of blessedness. This has neither before nor after, nor is it expecting anything to come, for it can neither gain nor lose. And so it is deprived of the knowledge that God is at work in it: rather, it just is itself, enjoying itself God-fashion. It is in this manner, I declare, that a person should be so finished and free that he neither knows nor realizes that God is at work in him: in that way can a person possess poverty.

The masters say God is a being, an intellectual being that knows all things. But we say God is not a being and not intellectual and does not know this or that. Thus God is free of all things, and so he is all things. To be poor in spirit, a person must be poor of all his own knowledge: not knowing anything—not God, nor creature, nor himself. For this it is necessary that a person should desire to know and understand nothing of the works of God. In this way a person can be poor of his own knowledge.

Thirdly, he is a poor person who has nothing. Many people have said that perfection is attained when one has none of the material things of the earth, and this is true in one sense—when it is voluntary. But this is not the sense in which I mean it. I have said before, the poor person is not he who wants to fulfill the will of God, but he who lives in such a way as to be free of his own will and of God’s will, as he was when he was not. Of this poverty we declare that it is the highest poverty. Secondly, we have said he is a poor person who does not know of the workings of God within him. He who stands as free of knowledge and understanding as God stands of all things, has the purest poverty. But the third is the strictest: poverty, of which we shall now speak: that is when a person has nothing.

Now pay earnest attention to this! I have often said, and eminent
authorities say it too, that a person should be so free of all things and all works, both inward and outward, that he may be a proper abode for God where God can work. Now we shall say something else. If it is the case that a person is free of all creatures of God and of self, and if it is still the case that God finds a place in him to work, then we declare that as long as this is in that person, he is not poor with the strictest poverty. For it is not God's intention in his works that a person should have a place within himself for God to work in: for poverty of spirit means being so free of God and all his works, that God, if he wishes to work in the soul, is himself the place where he works—and this he gladly does. For, if he finds a person so poor as this, then God performs his own work, and the person is passive to God within him, and God is his own place of work, being a worker in himself. It is just here, in this poverty, that man enters into that eternal essence that once he was, that he is now and evermore shall remain.

This is the word of St. Paul. He says: "All that I am, I am by the grace of God" (1 Cor 15:10). Now this sermon seems to rise above grace and being and understanding and will and all desire—so how can St. Paul's words be true? The answer is that St. Paul's words are true: it was necessary for the grace of God to be in him, for the grace of God effected in him that the accidental in him was perfected as essence. When grace had ended and finished its work, Paul remained that which he was.

So we say that a person should be so poor that he neither is nor has any place for God to work in. To preserve a place is to preserve distinction. Therefore I pray to God to make me free of God, for my essential being is above God, taking God as the origin of creatures. For in that essence of God in which God is above being and distinction, there I was myself and knew myself so as to make this man. Therefore I am my own cause according to my essence, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is temporal. Therefore I am unborn, and according to my unborn mode I can never die. According to my unborn mode I have eternally been, am now, and shall eternally remain. That which I am by virtue of birth must die and perish, for it is mortal, and so must perish with time. In my birth all things were born, and I was the cause of myself and all things; and if I had so willed it, I would not have been, and all things would not have been. If I were not, God would not be either. I am the cause of God's being. If I were not, then God would not be God. But you do not need to understand this.

A great master says that his breaking-through is nobler than his flowing out, and this is true. When I flowed forth from God all creatures declared: "There is a God!" but this cannot make me blessed, for with this I acknowledge myself as a creature. But in my breaking-through, where I stand free of my own will, of God's will, of all his works, and of God himself, then I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature, but I am that which I was and shall remain for evermore. There I shall receive an imprint that will raise me above all the angels. By this imprint I shall gain such wealth that I shall not be content with God inasmuch as he is God, or with all his divine works: for this breaking-through guarantees to me that I and God are one. Then I am what I was, then I neither wax nor wane, for then I am an unmoved cause that moves all things. Here, God finds no place in man, for man by his poverty wins for himself what he has eternally been and shall eternally remain. Here, God is one with the spirit, and that is the strictest poverty one can find.

If anyone cannot understand this sermon, he need not worry. For so long as someone is not equal to this, he cannot understand my words, for this is a naked truth that is come direct from the heart of God. That we may so live as to experience it eternally, may God help us. Amen.

John of the Cross wrote the first thirty-one stanzas of the poem titled "Songs Between the Soul and the Bridegroom" while he was in prison in 1578. He later reworked this recasting of the Song of Songs in two versions: the Sanluca text finished circa 1582 in thirty-nine stanzas, and the Jaen text of forty stanzas completed circa 1585. At the request of Mother Ana de Jesus he composed prose commentaries on both versions in 1584 and 1585. In his prologue John cautions the reader about the limits of any commentary, saying: "Since these stanzas were composed in a love flowing freely from abundant mystical understanding (abundante intelligencia mystica), I cannot explain them adequately and I do not intend to do so." Nevertheless, the Spiritual Canticle, especially the longer version, part of which is given here, is John's most complete presentation of the three stages of the mystical life: the purgative, illuminative, and unitive (see section 5.1). It is also the saint's fullest exploration of the erotic model of loving union, involving both temporary spiritual betrothal and the higher and permanent spiritual marriage. The first twelve stanzas describe the bride's anxious search for the Divine Bridegroom through the purgative and illuminative ways. Stanzas XIII–XXI deal with the transition between illumination and the movement into the preliminary union of the betrothal. Stanzas XXII–XXXV deal with the spiritual marriage, while the final stanzas (XXXVI–XL) discuss the soul's desire for the glory of heaven.

STANZA XXII
The bride has entered into the pleasant garden of her desire
And at her pleasure rests, Her neck reclining
On the gentle arms of the Beloved.

COMMENTARY:
"THE BRIDE HAS ENTERED"

...3. For the better understanding of the arrangement of these stanzas and of the way by which the soul advances until it reaches the state of spiritual marriage, which is the very highest (and which by the grace of God I am now about to treat), we must keep in mind that before the soul enters this state she must be first tried in tribulations, in sharp mortifications, and in meditation on spiritual things. This is the subject of this canticle until we come to the fifth stanza, beginning with the words: "A thousand graces diffusing." Then the soul enters on the contemplative life, passing through the ways and straits of love that are described in the course of the canticle until we come to the thirteenth, beginning with "Turn them away, O my Beloved!" This is the moment of the spiritual betrothal. Then the soul advances by the unitive way, as the recipient of many and very great communications, jewels, and gifts from the Bridegroom as to one betrothed, and grows into perfect love. All this is described in the stanzas from where the betrothal is made with "Turn them away, O my Beloved," down to the present stanza that begins with "The bride has entered."

The spiritual marriage of the soul and the Son of God now remains to be accomplished. This is, beyond all comparison, a far higher state than that of betrothal, because it is a complete transformation into the Beloved; whereby they surrender each to the other the entire possession of themselves in the perfect union of love, wherein the soul becomes divine, and, by participation, God, so far as it is possible in this life. I believe that no soul ever attains to this state without being confirmed in grace, for the faithfulness of both is confirmed; that of God being confirmed in the soul. Hence it follows, that this is the very highest state possible in this life. As in the consummation of carnal mar-
riage there are “two in one flesh” (Gen 2:24), as sacred scripture says, so also in the consummation of spiritual marriage between God and the soul there are two natures in one spirit and love, as we learn from St. Paul, who made use of the same comparison, saying: “He who adheres to our Lord is one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:17). So, when the light of a star or of a candle is united to that of the sun, the light is not that of the star, nor of the candle, but of the sun itself, which absorbs all other light in its own.

4. It is of this state that the Bridegroom is now speaking, saying: “The bride has entered,” that is, has gone out of all temporal and natural things, out of all spiritual affections, ways, and methods, having left on one side and forgotten all temptations, trials, sorrows, anxieties, and cares, and is transformed in this embrace. Therefore, the following line says, “Into the pleasant garden of her desire.”

5. This is like saying that she has been transformed in God, who is here called the pleasant garden because of the delicious and sweet repose that the soul finds in him. But the soul does not enter the garden of perfect transformation, the glory and the joy of the spiritual marriage, without passing first through the spiritual betrothal, the mutual faithful love of the betrothed. When the soul has lived for some time as the betrothed of the Son of God, in perfect and sweet love, God calls her and leads her into his flowering garden for the consummation of the spiritual marriage. Then the two natures are so united, what is divine is so communicated to what is human, that, without undergoing any essential change, each seems to be God. Yet in this life the union cannot be perfect, though it can neither be described nor conceived.

6. We learn this truth very clearly from the Bridegroom himself in the Song of Songs, where he invites the soul, now his bride, to enter this state, saying: “Come into my garden, O my sister, my bride. I have gathered my myrrh with my aromatic spices” (Song 5:1). He calls the soul his sister, his bride, for she was such in the love and surrender that she made of herself to him before he had called her to the state of spiritual marriage, where, as he says, he gathered his myrrh with his aromatic spices, that is, the fruits of flowers now ripe and ready for the soul. These are the delights and grandeurs communicated to her by himself in this state, that is, he communicates them to her in himself, because he is to her the pleasant and desirable garden.

7. The whole aim and desire of the soul and of God in all her works is the accomplishment and perfection of this state, and the soul is therefore never weary until she reaches it. In this state she finds a much greater abundance and fullness of God, a more secure and lasting peace, and a sweetness incomparably more perfect than in the spiritual betrothal, seeing that she reposes between the arms of such a Bridegroom, whose spiritual embraces are so real that through them she lives the life of God. Now is fulfilled what St. Paul referred to when he said: “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). And now that the soul lives a life so happy and so glorious, as it is the life of God, consider what a sweet life it must be—a life where God sees nothing displeasing, and where the soul finds nothing irksome, but rather the glory and delight of God in the very substance of itself, now transformed in him. Hence the next line reads, “And at her pleasure rests, her neck reclining...”

8. The neck is the soul’s strength, by means of which its union with the Beloved is accomplished; for the soul could not endure so close an embrace had she not been very strong. And as the soul has labored in this strength, practiced virtue, overcome vice, it is fitting that she should rest there from her labors, “her neck reclining on the gentle arms of the Beloved.”

8. This reclining of the neck on the arms of God is the union of the soul’s strength, or, rather, of the soul’s weakness, with the strength of God, in whom our weakness, resting and transformed, puts on the strength of God himself. The state of spiritual marriage is therefore most fitly designated by the reclining of the neck on the gentle arms of the Beloved; seeing that God is the strength and sweetness of the soul, who guards and defends it from all evil, and gives it to taste of all good.

Hence the bride in the Song of Songs, longing for this state, says to the Bridegroom: “Who shall give you to me, my brother, nursed at the breasts of my mother, that I may find you alone outside and kiss you, and no one despise me” (Song 8:1). By addressing him as her brother she shows the equality between them in the betrothal of love, before she entered the state of spiritual marriage. By saying, “Nursed at the breasts of my mother” she means: You dried up the passions and desires, which are the breasts and milk of our mother Eve in our flesh, which are a hindrance to this state. The “finding him outside” is to find
him in detachment from all things and from self when the bride is in solitude, spiritually detached, which takes place when all the desires are quenched.

There I, being alone, "kiss you," who are alone. This is to say that my nature, now that it is alone and stripped from all impurity, natural, temporal, and spiritual, may be united with you alone, with your nature alone without any intermediary. This only happens in the spiritual marriage, in which the soul, as it were, kisses God when none despises her nor makes her afraid. For in this state the soul is no longer molested, either by the devil, or the flesh, or the world, or the desires. Here is fulfilled what is written in the Song of Songs: "Winter is now past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land" (Song 2:11–12).


Francis de Sales (1567–1622) was the most noted exponent of the "Devout Humanism" that characterized French spirituality and mysticism in the seventeenth century. As he once said, "I am as human as anyone can possibly be." As a young student in Paris, grace had rescued him from the temptation to despair. Francis devoted his life as bishop, preacher, spiritual guide, and writer to win others to the love of God by his gentle manner and ironic approach in an age of religious hatred and conflict. He was closely associated with the aristocratic circles that initiated the great age of French mysticism, in later years he worked with his friend St. Jane Frances de Chantal in establishing a new form of religious life for women (see section 4.4).

Francis’s main contributions to Catholic spirituality were two very influential books. The Introduction to the Devout Life, first published in 1608, was a landmark in the history of Christian life and thought, because of how it proposed a spirituality for people in all walks of life. Published in 1616, The Treatise on the Love of God was a summary of Catholic mystical teaching centered on, as the preface puts it, "the birth, the progress, and the decay of the operations, characteristics, benefits, and excellence of divine love." Addressed to a fictional "advanced soul" (Thevitis), the twelve books of the treatise begin with a general section devoted to the preparation for and birth of divine love (books 1 and 2), the progress and perfection of love (book 3), its decay and ruin (book 4), and its two main exercises: complacency and benevolence (book 5). The remaining books are directly mystical. Book 6 deals with love as exercised in prayer,
Mysticism involves not just intense forms of contact with God, of whatever duration, but also a transformed life. It is part of a process that begins, as we have seen, with acts of asceticism, reading the scripture, spiritual direction, and preparatory forms of prayer; but it is meant to spill out and over into a new mode of living. Many of the texts already found in this collection have spoken about the new life that the mystic is to live, but in Christianity the relation between forms of direct contact with God and everyday life has often been discussed under the rubric of the relation between the contemplative life and the active life. This way of framing the effect of meeting God on how we live was part of the classical heritage of Greece and Rome that Christians adopted and transformed. Greek philosophers had discussed the difference between the bios praktikos, the life of the citizen with its political duties, and the bios theoretikos, the life of the philosopher given over to speculative pursuit of truth. These notions were adopted by Christians when they took over the term theoria contemplatio to describe the vision of God promised in scripture (see section 10.1).

But Christians altered the meaning of the terms. Action and contemplation were no longer understood as alternative lifestyles, as they had been among classical authors; rather, they were seen as related modalities of the life of every believer. The active life (vita activa) was that part of existence in which the Christian is called upon to serve his
neighbor in love, while the contemplative life (vita contemplativa) is that aspect devoted to love of God and desire for the vision of God. All Christians are called upon to make use of both modalities, though in differing degrees depending on their station in the church.

Although Christians considered both forms of life necessary, there were many ways of understanding how they were to be related. The standard model, worked out in the patristic period, saw the contemplative life as higher and more desirable, but the active life often as more pressing due to the obligations of Christian love. This perspective, represented here by selections from Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and The Cloud of Unknowing, held to some kind of oscillation between the two lives as the best that could be hoped for in this fallen world. In the late Middle Ages, however, some mystics questioned this paradigm and argued that the supreme form of Christian life was not pure contemplation, but a fusion of contemplation and action on a higher level, where one could be (in words once used of Ignatius of Loyola) “active while in contemplation” (in contemplatione activo). This approach to the mystical life is illustrated here by selections from two fourteenth-century mystics, Eckhart and Catherine of Siena, but many other texts could have been used from such mystics as Ignatius and Teresa of Avila. The issue remains, if under different names, so the section closes with a passage from Thomas Merton (the most recent author included in this anthology), reflecting on the nature of contemplation and how it calls for communication with others, whatever the difficulty.

1.

**Gregory the Great**

**Pastoral Care 2.5**

Origen and other Greek Fathers had already taken up the issue of the relation between the contemplative and the active lives. The Alexandrian was the first to see in some paired figures of the Old and New Testaments biblical proof for the superiority of contemplation over action. The most important of these twinned figures were the sisters Mary and Martha visited by Jesus in Luke 10:38–42. Origen identified Mary with contemplation and Martha, who was “busy about many things” with action, so Jesus’ statement that Mary “has chosen the best part which shall not be taken from her” proved the superiority of contemplation. Many later mystics followed Origen’s view, but by no means all. Augustine took up the question and laid down three principles that governed the discussion of the relation of the active and contemplative lives during much of Western history: (1) Both forms of life are good; (2) the contemplative life is higher; and (3) contemplation should yield to action when the neighbor’s need requires it. Augustine’s view was taken up and developed by Gregory the Great in a number of places in his writings. Gregory was a contemplative monk who became an active pope. He insisted that all Christians, even the active laity, were called to some measure of contemplation. The Augustinian–Gregorian position calls for a necessary oscillation between action and contemplation for all Christians, but especially for the rulers of the church (rectores/pastores), that is, the bishops who are called upon to be the models of a life that is the highest form of both action and contemplation. The following text is a passage from Gregory’s handbook for bishops (and by extension all priests), known as the Pastoral Care (Regula Pas-
Hence, too, he says: "And I became to the Jews, a Jew" (1 Cor 9:20). He did this, not by abandoning his faith, but by extending his loving-kindness. Thus, by transfiguring the person of the unbeliever into himself, he purposed to learn personally how he ought to compassionate others, how he should bestow on them what he would rightly wish them to bestow on himself, if their places were interchanged. Therefore, he says again: "Whether we be transported in mind, it is to God, or whether we be sober, it is for you" (2 Cor 5:13). For he knew how to transcend himself by contemplation and how to employ restraint by his condescension for his hearers.

Thus Jacob, as the Lord leaned on the ladder above and the anointed stone was below, saw angels ascending and descending (Gen 28:11–18), which was a sign that true preachers do not only aspire by contemplation to the Holy Head of the Church above, namely, the Lord, but also descend to its members in pity for them. Thus Moses frequently goes in and out of the Tabernacle, and while within he is caught up in contemplation, outside he devotes himself to the affairs of the weak. Inwardly he considers the hidden things of God, outwardly he bears the burdens of carnal men. In doubtful matters, too, he always returns to the Tabernacle to consult the Lord in front of the Ark of the Covenant. He thus, no doubt, sets an example to rulers, that when they are uncertain what dispositions to make in secular matters, they should always return to reflection, as though to the Tabernacle, and there, as it were, standing before the Ark of the Covenant, should consult the Lord, whether they should seek a solution of their problems in the pages of the Sacred Word.

Thus the Truth itself, manifested to us by assuming our human nature, engaged in prayer on the mountain and worked miracles in the towns (Lk 6:12). He thus showed the way to be followed by good rulers, who, though they strive after the highest things by contemplation, should nevertheless by their compassion share in the needs of the weak. Then, indeed, charity rises to sublime heights, when in pity it is drawn by the lowly things of the neighbor, and the more kindly it stoops to infirmity, the mightier is its reach to the highest. But those who rule others should show themselves such that their subjects are not afraid to reveal their hidden secrets to them. Thus, when these little ones are enduring the waves of temptation, they will have recourse to the pastor's understanding as to a mother's bosom; and in
the solace of his comforting words and in their prayerful tears they will cleanse themselves when they see themselves defiled by the sin that buffets them. Hence also it is that in front of the doors of the Temple there is a sea of brass for washing the hands of those who enter the Temple, that is to say, a laver, supported by twelve oxen, whose faces are plainly visible, but whose hinder parts are not visible (3 Kgs 7:23–24). What else is symbolized by the twelve oxen but the whole order of pastors? Of these the Law says, as Paul reports: “You shall not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treads out the corn” (1 Cor 9:9). We see the work they do openly, but do not see the rest that later awaits them in the secret requital of the strict Judge. Those, however, who make ready in their patient condescension to cleanse the confessed sins of the neighbor, support the laver, as it were, in front of the door of the Temple. Whosoever, then, is striving to enter the gate of eternity, may reveal his temptations to the mind of the pastor, and cleanse the hands of thought or deed, as it were, in the laver of the oxen.

Now, it happens frequently that, while the ruler’s mind in his condescension learns of the trials of others, he also is assailed by the temptations which he gives ear to; for in the case of the laver, too, that was mentioned as serving the cleansing of the multitude, it is certainly defiled. In receiving the filth of those who wash in it, it loses its limpid clearness. But the pastor need not fear these things at all, for when God weighs all things exactly, the pastor is the more easily delivered from temptation, as he is the more compassionately afflicted by the temptations of others.


2.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

SERMONS ON THE SONG OF SONGS 50

In commenting on the Song of Songs, Bernard took up the famous verse in Song 2:5 where the bride says, “He set charity in order in me.” The “order of charity” (ordo caritatis) was a major theme in Christian mysticism for many centuries—how are we to arrange the various forms of love to which we are called so that all can be observed in their proper relationship? Among the issues involved in the correct ordering of charity, not least was that of the relation of active love of neighbor and contemplative love of God. As might be expected, Bernard adheres to the traditional view set down by Augustine and Gregory the Great. Contemplative love of God is always higher, but contemplation must yield to action, as the Gospel teacher, when our neighbor’s need calls out for active assistance. Where Bernard advances beyond his sources is in rooting this teaching in his theology of charity, with its two forms of love of action and love of feeling based upon the Song of love, as the following part of sermon 50 shows.

Love exists in action [actus] and in feeling [affectus]. And with regard to love in action, I believe that a law, an explicit commandment, has been given to men (Dt 5:6); yet how can one’s feelings correspond to the commandment? The former therefore is commanded in view of merit, the latter is given as a reward. We do not deny that the present life, by divine grace, can also experience the beginning and progress of love of feeling, but we unreservedly maintain that its consummation is in the
with the love of love itself. "Do not love in word or speech," he said, "but in deed and in truth" (1 Jn 3:18).

Do you see how cautiously he takes a middle path between vitiated and affective love, while distinguishing from both the love that is active and salutary? He neither finds room in this love for the figment of a lying tongue, nor does he yet demand the flavor of loving wisdom. “Let us love in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18), he says, because we are moved to do good more by the vigorous urging of truth than by the feeling of relished love. “He set love in order in me” (Song 2:4). Which of these loves do you think? Both of them, but in reverse order. Now the active prefers what is lowly, the affective what is lofty. For example, there is no doubt that in a mind that loves rightly, the love of God is valued more than love of men, and among men themselves the more perfect is esteemed more than the weaker, heaven more than earth, eternity more than the flesh. In well-regulated action, on the other hand, the opposite order frequently or even always prevails. For we are more strongly impelled toward and more often occupied with the welfare of our neighbor; we attend our weaker brothers with more exacting care; by human right and very necessity we concentrate more on peace on earth than on the glory of heaven (Lk 2:14); by worrying about temporal cares we are not permitted to think of eternal things; in attending almost continually to the ills of our body we lay aside the care of our soul; and finally, in accord with the saying of the Apostle, we invest our weaker members with greater honor (1 Cor 12:23), so fulfilling in a sense the word of the Lord: “The last shall be first and the first last” (Mt 20:16). Who will doubt that in prayer a man is speaking with God? But how often, at the call of charity, we are drawn away, torn away, for the sake of those who need to speak to us or be helped! How often does dutiful repose yield dutifully to the uproar of business! How often is a book laid aside in good conscience that we may sweat at manual work! How often for the sake of administering worldly affairs we very rightly omit even the solemn celebration of Masses! A preposterous order; but necessity knows no law. Love in action devises its own order, in accord with the command of the householder, beginning with the most recent (Mt 20:8), it is certainly dutiful and correct, without favoritism (Acts 10:34), swayed not by worldly values but by human needs.

happiness of the life to come. How then should that be ordered which can in no way be fulfilled? Or if you prefer to hold that affective love has been commanded, I do not dispute it, provided you agree with me that in this life it can never and will never be able to be fulfilled by any man...

This is what I should say if we were agreed that affective love were a law commanded. But that seems especially to apply to love in action, because when the Lord said: “Love your enemies,” he referred right afterwards to actions: “Do good to those who hate you” (Lk 6:27). Scripture also says: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink” (Rom 12:20). Here you have a question of actions, not of feeling. But listen also to the Lord’s command about love of himself: “If you love me, keep my words” (Jn 14:15). And here too, by enjoining the observance of the commandments, he assigns us to action. It would have been superficial for him to warn us to act if love were but a matter of feeling. Hence it is necessary that you accept as well that commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Mt 22:39), even if it is not expressed as clearly as this. Do you then consider that you do enough to fulfill the command to love of neighbor if you observe perfectly what the natural law prescribes for every man: “What you would not wish done to yourself, avoid doing to another” (Tob 4:16), and also: “Always treat others as you like them to treat you” (Mt 7:12)?

There is an affection which the flesh begets, and one which reason controls, and one which wisdom seasons. The first is that which the apostle says is not subject to the law of God, nor can be (Rom 8:7); the second, on the contrary, he shows to be in accord with the law of God because it is good (Rom 7:16)—one cannot doubt that the insubordinate and the agreeable differ from each other. The third, however, is far from either of them, because it tastes and experiences that the Lord is sweet (Ps 33:9); it banishes the first and rewards the second. The first is pleasant, of course, but shameful; the second is emotionless but strong; the last is rich and delightful. Therefore, by the second good deeds are done, and in it love reigns not that of the feelings, which, growing richer with the seasoning of wisdom’s salt (Col 4:6), fills the mind with a mighty abundance of the sweetness of the Lord (Ps 30:20), but that rather which is practical, not yet indeed imparting the delightful refreshment of sweet love, but still vehemently aflame.
Selections From Sermon 86

33. Essential Writings of Meister Eckhart

This sermon is one of the most difficult and fascinating of those ascribed to Meister Eckhart. Although some of its vocabulary is unusual for the Dominican, it is clearly based on a thorough knowledge of the life and teaching of St. Mary Magdalene. The main theme of this sermon is the importance of contemplation and meditation in the spiritual life. Eckhart stresses the importance of knowing one's true self and the need to cultivate a spirit of detachment from the world. He argues that through contemplation, one can achieve a deeper understanding of the divine and a closer relationship with God. This sermon is considered one of the most significant works of Meister Eckhart and continues to be studied by scholars today.
5. Catherine of Siena

The Dialogue

Chapters 64 and 76

Catherine of Siena (1347–80) is one of the most remarkable women in Christian history. Born into a middle-class family, she was known for her piety and visions from childhood. About 1365 she received the habit of a Dominican tertiary. Her mystical gifts, including marriage to Christ, an exchange of hearts with him, and a mystical death in 1370, are typical of many ecstatic women. But Catherine broke with this pattern in the 1370s as she gathered around her a group of clerical and lay admirers and set increasingly called by God to take an active role in the troubled age in which she lived. Especially in the last five years of her life Catherine emerged as an apostola, a woman called by God to spread his message of love and peace. As her biographer, the Dominican Raymond of Capua, put it: "From that time on the Lord began to show himself familiarly and openly to his spouse [Catherine] not only in secret, as he had formerly done, but also in public; both while she was on the road and staying in some place" (Large Life 2.6). Catherine's political role in helping bring the Avignon popacy back to Rome, in trying to bring peace to the Italian city-states, and in preaching the need for church reform is a clear example of the combination of contemplation and action, but she went further by making this message integral to her teaching.

The saint's main work, her Dialogue composed 1377–78, is an extended series of conversations between her and God in ten sections following a pattern of petition to God, his response, and Catherine's thanksgiving. The work is not constructed in a linear fashion, but presents a theology of redemption structured according to a network of interlocking symbols and images. The central symbol is the blood of Christ, the fluid that redeems, bathes, nourishes, and binds us to the Savior. Christ himself is presented as the three-stage bridge or ladder that leads us to God (chapters 26–87): (1) Christ's feet are the affections that enable us to move upward; (2) Christ's heart represents the stage of loving union; and (3) Christ's mouth is the stage that combines inner peace and the call to apostolic action. In the following two sections, Catherine dwells on the reciprocity of love of God and love of neighbor found in this third stage of the mystical life. God is speaking in these excerpts.

I.

Chapter 64

I want you to know that everything, imperfect and perfect, is manifested and acquired in me, and so it is manifested and acquired also by means of your neighbor. Simple folk know this well, because in many cases they love creatures with spiritual love. If you have received my love honestly without any self-interest, you will drink your neighbor's love in an honest way. It is like filling a jug at a fountain, because if you draw it forth from the fountain and drink from it, the jug will be empty, but if you drink from it in me, it will not be empty but will always be full. In this manner love of neighbor, spiritual and temporal, ought to be drunk in me without any self-interest.

I charge you to love me in the same love that I have loved you. You cannot do this for me, because I have loved you without being loved. Every love that you have for me is a love that comes from duty and not from graciousness, because you ought to do it. I love you from graciousness and not from duty. This is why you cannot give me the love that I am requesting of you. And therefore I have put you in the midst of your neighbor, so that you can do for him what you cannot do for me, that is, to love him without any self-interest from graciousness and without looking for any benefit. And what you do for him I consider as done for me.

My Truth showed this when he said to Paul who had been persecuting me, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). He considered that Paul was persecuting me when he persecuted my faithful. Thus, your love should be honest—you should love them with the love with which you love me.
II.

CHAPTER 76

Now I say that you know that everything I have told you was what was given you in the response of my Truth. In his person I have told you what was said from the beginning, so that you recognize the excellence of the place where the soul is who has climbed up to the second stage, where the soul recognizes and gains such a great fire of love that she quickly runs up to the third stage, that is, to the mouth where she has manifestly come to the state of perfection.

By what means did she come? By means of his heart, that is, the memory of the blood where she is baptized again, leaving behind imperfect love through the recognition that she drew from heartfelt love by seeing, tasting, and experiencing the fire of my charity. She has come to the stage of the mouth and therefore she will demonstrate this by performing the tasks of the mouth. A mouth speaks with the tongue that is in it; it tastes with its taste. The mouth takes in what is offered and presents it to the stomach, and the teeth chew it up because food cannot be absorbed in any other way.

It is the same with the soul. First she speaks to me with the tongue that stands in the mouth of her holy desire, that is, the tongue of holy and continual prayer. This tongue speaks both exteriorly and mentally; mentally offering me sweet and loving desires for the salvation of souls; and exteriorly it speaks by proclaiming the teaching of my Truth, warning, giving counsel, and confessing without any fear of the punishment that the world may desire to cause her, but ardently confessing before every creature in different ways and to each according to its station.

I say that she eats by taking the food of souls in my honor at the dinner table of the most holy cross (see Jn 4:34). This food cannot be eaten in true perfection in any other way or on any other table. Because the food cannot be absorbed in any other way, I say that she chews it with the teeth (that is, of love and hate), two rows of teeth in the mouth of holy desire. She takes this food chewing it with hatred of herself and with love of virtue, both in herself and in her neighbor. She chews up every injury: mockery, rudeness, tortures, and reproaches with great persecution; she bears hunger and thirst, cold and heat, as well as painful longings and sweatings for the salvation of souls. She chews up all these things in my honor, hearing and sustaining her neighbor. After she has chewed up this food, she enjoys its taste, savoring the fruit of her effort and the delight of the food of souls, tasting it in the fire of charity for me and for her neighbor. And so this food comes down into the stomach, because out of desire and hunger for souls she is disposed to wish to receive it in the heart's stomach with heartfelt love, loving and lovingly in love of neighbor. She takes delight in it and chews it over in such a way that she loses her affection for corporeal life through the power of eating this food upon the dinner table of the cross, that is, of the teaching of Christ crucified.

Then the soul grows fat in true and real virtue and becomes so expanded through the abundance of this food that in the case of her sense appetite she bursts the clothing of her own sensuality, that is, the body that covers over the soul. A person who bursts dies, and so the sensual will is left dead. This is why the well-ordered will of the soul lives in me, clothed with my eternal will, and why the sensual will is dead.

This is what the soul does who has in truth attained the third stage of the mouth. The sign that she is there is this: Her own will dies when she tastes the attraction of my charity, and therefore she found peace and quiet in her soul in [Christ's] mouth. You know that the mouth gives the peace [i.e., kiss of peace at Mass]. Hence the soul finds peace in this third state in such a way that nothing is able to disturb her because she has lost and drowned her own will. When this will is dead it gives peace and rest. She gives birth to virtues for her neighbors without any pain. It is not that pains are not pains in her, but for the dead will they are not pains because she voluntarily bears pain for my name.

Such souls traverse with care the whole teaching of Christ crucified. They do not slow down in their advance for any injury that may be done to them, nor for any persecution, nor for any pleasure that they discover (that is, the pleasure that the world wants to give them). But they step over these things with true strength and perseverance, clothed with the love of my charity, tasting the food of the soul's salvation with true and perfect patience. Such patience is the demonstrable proof that the soul loves perfectly and without any self-interest, for if she loved me and her neighbor for her own benefit she would be impatient and would slow down in her progress. Because they love me through myself since I am the highest Good and worthy to be loved,
and because they love themselves and their neighbor through me, to give glory and praise to my name, therefore they are patient and strong in suffering and in perseverance.


6. Thomas Merton

New Seeds of Contemplation

The Cistercian monk Thomas Merton (1915–68) has been called the most significant figure in twentieth-century American Catholicism. Merton’s quest reflected the searching of his generation, and his ability to communicate the importance of spiritual questions to the modern world was second to none. He was not a plas-ter saint, or a figure from another age, but a contemporary whose fundamental honesty about the problems of church and society, as well as his own failures, continues to guarantee him a wide audience.

Merton was more than just an apologist for the monastic life. Although he never abandoned monasticism, he realized how challenging it was to be a real monk. He summarized the monk’s special role in the Asian Journal that he kept during the trip to the East to meet with Buddhist monks, the journey on which he died. The monk, he said, “is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience.” Although a marginal man during his life, especially in his last decade, Merton became passionately involved in many public debates, such as racial and social justice, peace and war, and the relations of East and West. He wrote extensively throughout his lifetime, not only on religious concerns, but also on literary and political issues.

A good deal of his output deals with spirituality and mysticism, both in its historical dimensions and in current applications. One of the books that he himself valued most highly was the work he called New Seeds of Contemplation, a 1962 revision of Seeds of Contemplation first published in 1949, not long