

Mystics of the Church 14

Modern Catholic Mystics

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- We will see considerable variety among Catholic mystics in the modern period as throughout the centuries. Thomas Merton continued the Benedictine tradition, adapting it in significant ways to the challenges of contemporary western society. By way of contrast Teilhard de Chardin sought to integrate traditional Catholic mystical theology with modern scientific concepts of the universe in somewhat the way earlier mystics adapted Christian thought to Platonism and Aristotelianism. On the other hand, Mother Teresa of Calcutta immersed herself in care of the “least of these” in urban ghettos while pursuing an intense desire for intimacy with God.

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- I. Thomas Merton
 - Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is the first mystic we in Kentucky will think about when we speak of mystics. Because I have taught a course on Merton, I will not follow the usual format in presenting his mystical thought but simply give a digest, mostly in Merton's own words, of *The Inner Experience*, a work he drafted in 1959 and revised three times before his death. It was not published until 2003, however. Merton gave the revised copy to his long time friend and mentor Daniel Walsh around May 14, 1968. Walsh gave the copy to Dom Flavian Burns and he to the Merton Trust. It appeared serially in *Cistercian Studies* in 1983 and 1984. Lawrence Cunningham published part of it in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* in 1992. We are fortunate that the present edition edited by William Shannon appeared in 2003.

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- Merton used the word mystic or mysticism sparingly. He spoke instead about prayer and contemplation as his vocation.
- A. A Preliminary Warning
 - 1. “The first thing that you have to do, before you even start thinking about such a thing as contemplation, is to try to recover your basic natural unity, to *reintegrate* your compartmentalized being into a coordinated and simple whole and learn to live as a unified *human person*. This means you have to bring back together the fragments of your distracted existence so that when you say ‘I,’ there is really someone present to support the pronoun you have uttered.” (3-4)

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- 2. “But the exterior ‘I,’ the ‘I’ of projects, of temporal finalities, the ‘I’ that manipulates objects in order to take possession of them, is alien from the hidden, interior ‘I’ who has no projects and seeks to accomplish nothing, even contemplation. He seeks only to be, and to move (for he is dynamic) according to the secret laws of Being itself and according to the promptings of a Superior Freedom (that is, of God), rather than to plan and to achieve according to his own desires.” (5)

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- B. The Awakening of the Inner Self
 - 1. “From what has been said, it is clear that there is and can be no special planned techniques for discovering and awakening one’s inner self, because the inner self is, first of all, a spontaneity that is nothing if not free. . . . The inner self is not part of our being, like a motor in a car. It is our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level.” (6)
 - 2. “The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. . . . All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart, and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of *his* presence.” (7)

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- 3. *“Nevertheless, a certain cultural and spiritual atmosphere favors the secret and spontaneous development of the inner self. . . . Unfortunately such a cultural setting no longer exists in the West or is no longer common property. It is something that has to be laboriously recovered by an educated and enlightened minority.”* (7)
- 4. Zen Buddhism also seeks to discover the inner self. “This discovery of the inner self plays a familiar part in Christian mysticism. But there is a significant difference, which is clearly brought out by St. Augustine. In Zen there seems to be no effort to get *beyond* the inner self. In Christianity the inner self is simply a stepping stone to an awareness of God.” (11) “Hence the Christian mystical experience is not only an awareness of the inner self, but also, by a supernatural intensification of faith, it is an experiential grasp of God as present within our inner self.” (12)

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- 5. “According to the Christian mystical tradition, one cannot find one’s inner center and know God there as long as one is involved in the preoccupation and desires of the outward self. . . . Freedom to enter the inner sanctuary of our being is denied to those who are held back by dependence on self-gratification and sense satisfaction, whether it be a matter of pleasure seeking, love of comfort, or proneness to anger, self-assertion, pride, vanity, greed, and all the rest.” (15)
- 6. John of the Cross speaks about this as “faith.” Faith means more than assent to dogmatic truths. “It is personal and direct acceptance of God Himself, a ‘receiving’ of the Light of Christ in the soul, and a consequent beginning or renewal of spiritual life.” (15) This is the “dark night.”

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- 7. “Yet at the end of this journey of faith and love which brings us into the depths of our own being and releases us that we may voyage beyond ourselves to God, the mystical life culminates in an experience of the presence of God that is beyond all description, and which is only possible because the soul has been completely ‘transformed in God’ so as to become, so to speak, ‘one spirit’ with Him.” (17) “Since our inmost ‘I’ is the perfect image of God, then when that ‘I’ awakens, he finds within himself the Presence of Him Whose image he is. And, by a paradox beyond all human expressions, God and the soul seem to have but one single ‘I.’ They are (by divine grace) as though one single person. They breathe and live and act as one. ‘Neither’ of the ‘two’ is seen as object.” (18)

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- C. Society and the Inner Self
 - 1. Merton argues in this chapter against the view that the inner and spiritual identity is recovered solely by isolation and introversion. Far from it, removal from contact with the world would lead to “complete frustration in our quest for spiritual awareness.” (19) Contemplation, rather, should lead the inner self to see the world “from a deeper and more spiritual viewpoint.” (19) A child’s rather than a lumberman’s vision of a tree! No one can “arrive at a genuine inner self-realization unless he had first become aware of himself as a member of a group--as an ‘I’ confronted with a ‘Thou’ who completes and fulfills his own being.” (22) The Christian contemplative is not merely “alone with the Alone” “but he is One with all his ‘brothers in Christ.’ His inner self is, in fact, inseparable from Christ

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- and hence is in a mysterious and unique way inseparable from all the other 'I's' who live in Christ, so that they all form one 'Mystical Person,' which is 'Christ'." (22) Charity is awakened by other selves in Christ.
- 2. "In a word, the awakening of the inner self is purely the work of love, and there can be no love where there is not 'another' to love. Furthermore, one does not awaken his inmost 'I' merely by loving God alone, but by loving other men." (24) False mysticism and pseudo-religiosity represent withdrawal "into the darker subterranean levels of the exterior self, which remains alienated and subject to powers from the outside." (25)

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- 3. "It is important at all times to keep clear the distinction between true and false religion, true and false interiority, holiness and possession, love and frenzy, contemplation and magic. In every case, there is an aspiration toward inner awakening, and the same means, good or indifferent in themselves, may be used for good or evil, health or sickness, freedom or obsession." (27) "The important thing in contemplation is not enjoyment, not pleasure, not happiness, not peace, but the transcendent experience of reality and truth in the act of supreme and liberated spiritual love. The important thing in contemplation is not gratification and rest, but awareness, life, creativity and freedom. . . . It is the confrontation of man with his God, of the Son with His Father. It is the awakening of Christ within us, the establishment of the Kingdom of God in our own soul, the triumph of the Truth and of Divine Freedom in the inmost 'I' in which the Father becomes one with the Son in the Spirit Who is given to the believer." (34)

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– D. Christian Contemplation

- 1. “The story of Adam’s fall from Paradise says, in symbolic terms, that man was created as a contemplative. The fall from Paradise was a fall from unity.” (35) Man “became an exile in a world of objects, each one capable of deluding and enslaving him. . . . In such a condition, man’s mind is enslaved by an inexorable concern with all that is exterior, transient, illusory, and trivial. And carried away by his pursuit of alien shadows and forms, he can no longer see his own true inner ‘face,’ or recognize his identity in the spirit and in God, for the identity is secret, invisible, and incommunicable.” (35-36)

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- 2. “But man must return to Paradise. He must recover himself, salvage his dignity, recollect his lost wits, return to his true identity. There is only one way in which this could be done, says the Gospel of Christ. God Himself must come, like the woman in the parable seeking the lost groat.” (36)
- 3. “The Christian life is a return to the Father, the Source, the Ground of all existence, through the Son, the Splendor and the Image of the Father, in the Holy Spirit, the Love of the Father and the Son.” (36)

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- a. **Contemplation and Theology.** “The very first step to a correct understanding of the Christian theology of contemplation is to grasp clearly the unity of God and man in Christ, which of course presupposes the equally crucial unity of man in himself. For the soul and body are not divided against one another as good and evil principles; and our salvation by no means consists of a rejection of the body in order to liberate the soul from the dominance of the evil material principle.” (39-40) “We not only passively receive in us the grace of Christ, but we actively renew in our own life the self-emptying and self-transformation by which God became man.” (41) “The result of this indwelling of Christ and of the Holy Spirit is the overflowing fullness of new life, of charity, divine love, and a spiritual comprehension of the mystery of God’s life within us in all its dimensions, through the experience of Christ’s love for us ‘which surpasses all understanding.’” (42) “At

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- the moment it is sufficient to say categorically that this contemplation is a deep participation in the Christ-life, a spiritual sharing in the union of God and Man which is the hypostatic union. This is the whole meaning of the doctrine of divine sonship, of our being sons of God in Christ and having the Spirit of Christ.” (42)
- b. **Contemplation and the Gospels.** “The life of contemplation is, then, not simply a life of human technique and discipline; it is the life of the Holy Spirit in our inmost souls. The whole duty of the contemplative is to abandon what is base and trivial in his own life, and do all he can to conform himself to the secret and obscure promptings of the Spirit of God. This of course requires a constant discipline of humility, obedience, self-trust, prudence, and above all faith.” (45) “So the Holy Spirit is intimately united to our own inmost self, and His presence in us makes our ‘I’ the ‘I’ of Christ and of God.” (46)

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- “By virtue of this hidden presence of the Spirit in our inmost self, we need only to deliver ourselves from preoccupation with our external, selfish, and illusory self in order to find God within us.” (47) “Contemplation is the conscious, experiential awareness of the mission of the Son and of the Spirit, a reception of the Word Who is sent to us not only as life but also as light.” (47)
- “If a man wants to prepare himself to receive the Holy Ghost and His Love, he must withdraw his desires from all the ambitions, the external satisfactions and the temporal interests this world has to offer, for spiritual things cannot be appreciated or understood by the mind that is occupied with *superficial* and merely external satisfactions.” (49)

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- c. **Sacred and Secular.** “The secular and sacred reflect two kinds of dependence. The secular world depends upon the things it needs to divert itself and escape from its own nothingness.” (52)
- “In the sacred society, on the other hand, man admits no dependence on anything lower than himself, or even ‘outside’ himself in a spatial sense. His only Master is God. Only when God is our Master can we be free, for God is within ourselves as well as above us.” (52)

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- “The truly sacred attitude toward life is in no sense an escape from the sense of nothingness that assails us when we are left alone with ourselves. On the contrary, it penetrates into that darkness and that nothingness, realizing that the mercy of God has transformed our nothingness into His temple and believing that in our darkness His light has hidden itself. Hence the sacred attitude is one which does not recoil from our own inner emptiness, but rather penetrates into it with awe and reverence, and with the awareness of mystery.” (53)

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- E. Infused Contemplation [Mystical Experience]
 - Merton summarizes the essential elements of mystical contemplation.
 - 1. “It is an intuition that on its lower level transcends the senses. On the higher level it transcends the intellect itself.” (72)
 - 2. “Hence it is characterized by a quality of light in darkness, knowing in unknowing. *It is beyond feeling, even beyond concepts.*” (72)
 - 3. “In this contact with God, in darkness, there must be a certain activity of love on both sides. On the side of the soul, there must be a withdrawal from attachment to sensible things, a liberation of the mind and imagination from all strong emotional and passionate clinging to sensible realities. . . . But also, we must go beyond intelligence itself and not be attached even to ‘simple (*intuitive*) thoughts.’ . . . But the *final ecstatic* movement by which the contemplative ‘goes beyond’ all things is passive and beyond his own control.” (72-73)
 - 4. “Contemplation is the work of love, and the contemplative proves his love by leaving all things, even the most spiritual things, for God in nothingness, detachment, and ‘night.’” (73)

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- 5. "This knowledge of God in unknowing is not intellectual, nor even in the strict sense affective. It is not the work of one faculty or another uniting the soul with an object outside itself. It is the work of interior union and of identification in divine charity. One knows God by becoming one with Him." (73)
- 6. "CONTEMPLATION IS A SUPERNATURAL LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD, SIMPLE AND OBSCURE, INFUSED BY HIM INTO THE SUMMIT OF THE SOUL, GIVING IT A DIRECT AND EXPERIMENTAL CONTACT WITH HIM." (73)
- 7. "St. Bernard remarks that love is sufficient to itself, is its own end, its own merit, its own reward." (74)
- 8. "The experience of contemplative prayer, and the successive states of contemplation through which one passes, are all modified by the fact that the soul is passive, or partly passive, under the guidance of God." (74)

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- 9. "Contemplation is the light of God playing directly upon the soul. But every soul is weakened and blinded by the attachment to created things, which it tends to love inordinately by reason of original sin. Consequently, the light of God affects that soul the way the light of the sun affects a diseased eye. It causes *pain*. God's love is too pure." (75)
- 10. "Infused contemplation, then, sooner or later brings with it a terrible interior revolution. Gone is the sweetness of prayer. Meditation becomes impossible, even hateful. Liturgical functions seem to be an insupportable burden. The mind cannot think. The will seems unable to love. The interior life is filled with darkness and dryness and pain." (75)
- 11. "This testing of the individual may perhaps be intensified by institutional circumstances." (76)

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– F. Prospects and Conclusions

- 1. The contemplative “is not simply a specialist in a certain esoteric spiritual field. . . . No, his mission is to be a complete and whole man, with an instinctive and generous need to further the same wholeness in others and in all mankind. He arrives at this, however, not by superior gifts and special talents, but by the simplicity and poverty which are essential to his state because they alone keep him traveling in the way that is spiritual, divine, and beyond understanding.
- 2. “He is the one who is best attuned to the logos of man’s present situation, immersed in its mystery, acquainted with its deepest suffering, and sensitive to its most viable hopes.” (148)

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- 3. “The contemplative life is, then, a matter of the greatest importance for modern man and is important to him in all that is most valuable in his ideal. Today more than ever, man in chains is seeking emancipation and liberty. His tragedy is *that he seeks* it by means that bring him into ever greater enslavement. But freedom is a spiritual thing. It is a sacred and religious reality. Its roots are not in man, but in God. For man’s freedom, which makes him the image of God, is a participation in the freedom of God. Man is free insofar as he is like God. His struggle for freedom means, then, a struggle to renounce a false, illusory autonomy in order to become free beyond and above himself. In other words, for man to be free he must be delivered *from himself*.” (153)

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- II. Mother Teresa of Calcutta
 - Few saints have equaled Mother Teresa in the breadth of their impact on the world in our time. What accounts for it? Could it be what someone once remarked about Baron Friedrich von Hügel: “A soul like that, you have to have God to account for it”? If that is where the answer lies, we had best look into her “inner experience.” In her case those who know nothing about mystics may find quite puzzling and disturbing her complaints about forsakenness and darkness. Those complaints, however, would get knowing nods from mystics such as John of the Cross.

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- A. Life
 - Agnes Gonxh Bojaxhiu was born in Skopje in what is now Macedonia on August 27, 1910, of Albanian parents. She was educated in public schools in Skopje. At age twelve, after hearing a Jesuit priest speak about the needs of people in India, she confided her desire to be a missionary. At age eighteen she joined the Irish sisters of Our Lady of Loreto in Rothfarnham, near Dublin. In 1929 the order dispatched her to Calcutta. A year later, she took temporary religious vows. May 14, 1937 she took permanent religious vows and served as a teacher and principal of Saint Mary’s High School in Calcutta. On September 10, 1946, on board a train from Calcutta to Darjeeling, she experienced a night of inspiration to minister to the poor. In *My Life for the Poor* (7) she

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- wrote, “The message was quite clear. I was to leave the convent and help the poor whilst living among them. It was an order. I knew where I belonged, but I did not know how to get there.” She persisted in efforts to obtain her release. Thanks to support of the head of her order and of the Archbishop of Calcutta, Pope Pius XII issued a letter granting it on August 9, 1948. After a four-month course in hygiene, she opened a school in Calcutta. In October 1950 she got approval for the “Missionaries of Charity,” whose charter called for them “to be carriers of Christ’s love to the slums.” In 1952 she started her ministry to the dying, founding a hostel that she named *Nirmal Hriday* (Immaculate Heart). Within two decades the movement had spread throughout the world. December 10, 1979, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She died September 6, 1997.

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- B. Writings
 - Mother Teresa was an activist and not a writer, but, thanks to several editors, she did leave behind some materials. *A Gift for God: Prayers and Meditations* (1975) contains nuggets from various speeches. Other expressions of her thought include: *Life in the Spirit: Reflections, Meditations, Prayers* (1983); *My Life for the Poor* (1985); and *A Simple Faith* (1995). *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta”* consists chiefly of correspondence, edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC (2007), in which she shared openly her experience of the absence of God, abandonment, suffering, etc. Books and articles about Mother Teresa are extensive.

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- C. Behind Her Life Work
 - 1. Mother Teresa's thought was very simple. It focused on the two great commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. "A Missionary of Charity is a person who is sent. Being Missionaries of Charity, we are sent to bring God's love, to prove God's love: that God loves the world, that God loves the poor. He shows his love through us for them." (*My Life for the Poor*, 17-18.) The world has two kinds of poverty. One is the poverty of material things. "But there is also a much deeper, much greater hunger. That is the hunger for love and that terrible loneliness of being unwanted, unloved, being abandoned by everybody. . . ." (51-52) "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, deserted by everybody. The greatest evil is the lack of love and charity, the

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- terrible indifference towards one's neighbor who lives at the roadside, the victim of exploitation, corruption, poverty, and disease." (52) The West's poverty—loneliness—is greater than India's. "The world never needed more love than today: people are starving for love." (57) "Where God is, there is love. And where there is love, there is always service." (73) "The meaning of my life is the love of God. It is Christ in his distressing disguise whom I love and serve." (95) "I am nothing. He is all. I do nothing on my own. He does it. That is what I am, God's pencil. A tiny bit of pencil with which he writes what he likes." (95) "God has not called me to be successful. He has called me to be faithful." (98)

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- 2. In a speech to the International Association of Co-Workers in March 1969, Mother Teresa outlined her philosophy of serving one person at a time.
 - Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, everywhere, all the time seeing His hand in every happening is contemplation. No contemplation is possible without asceticism and self-abnegation. (Michael Collopy, *Works of Love Are Works of Peace* [1996], 30.)
 - Love to be real, it must cost—it must hurt—it must empty us of self. (30)
 - I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look only at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time.
 - Just one, one, one. You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, “Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do it to me.”

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- So you begin . . . I begin.
- I picked up one person—maybe if I didn’t pick up that one person I wouldn’t have picked up all the others.
- The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if we don’t put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less.
- Same thing for you. Same thing in your family. Same thing in the church where you go. Just begin. . . one, one, one. (Collopy, 35.)
- 3. On another occasion, she explained the central focus of everything, JESUS: “All we do—our prayer, our work, our suffering—is for Jesus. Our life has no other reason or motivation.” (Collopy, 98) Asked about her “secret,” she confessed, “My secret is quite simple—I pray!” (Collopy, 103.) “Love is the reason for my life.” (Collopy, 188.) About the Missionaries of Charity she explained: “We are not social workers. We may be doing social work in the eyes of some people, but we must be contemplatives in the heart of the

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- world. . . . If we are contemplatives in the heart of the world with all its problems, these problems can never discourage us." (Collopy, 195.) Contemplation and service are both about Jesus. "Until you can hear Jesus in the silence of your own heart, you will not be able to hear Him saying 'I thirst' in the hearts of the poor." (Collopy, 197.) "The heart and soul of Missionaries of Charity is only this—the thirst of Jesus' Heart, hidden in the poor. This is the source of every part of Missionaries of Charity life." (Collopy, 198.) "Do not underestimate our practical means—the work for the poor, no matter how small or humble—that make our life something beautiful for God." (Collopy, 198.) "Our Home for the dying is the home for the homeless Christ. Our hungry people are the hungry Christ." (*My Life for the Poor*, 93.)

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- 4. Mother Teresa's concept of prayer was simple, too. "Prayer is simply talking to God. He speaks to us: we listen. We speak to him: he listens." (*My Life for the Poor*, 104.) She outlined "The Simple Path."
 - The fruit of silence is
 - PRAYER.
 - The fruit of prayer is
 - FAITH.
 - The fruit of faith is
 - LOVE.
 - The fruit of love is
 - SERVICE.
 - The fruit of service is
 - PEACE.

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- “Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God’s gift of himself.” (*My Life for the Poor*, 49.) “Joy is prayer. Joy is strength. Joy is love. Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls. The best way to show gratitude to God and the people is to accept everything with joy. A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love.” (*My Life for the Poor*, 37.)

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- D. The Saint’s Cry of Absence
 - 1. Many like to think that a saint experiences God non-stop, without interruption, trouble-free. Surely someone who dedicated her life to God in selfless service of others like Mother Teresa did would merit such consideration. Like the Beguines, she gave herself to Christ body and soul. Everything she did, she did for him. When she took her final vows on May 24, 1937, she committed herself to Jesus in spousal love for the rest of her life. In a letter written to her confessor afterwards, she explained what becoming Teresa rather than Gonxh meant: “Only one thing is different—my love for Jesus—I would give everything, even life itself, for Him.” (*Come Be My Light*, 25.) She kept that pledge. Wouldn’t He, therefore, reciprocate with wonderful tokens of his love, sweet nothings, or the like?

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- comes.—The torture and pain I can't explain.—From my childhood I have had a most tender love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament—but this too has gone.—I feel nothing for Jesus—and yet I would not miss Holy Com. [Communion] for anything.”
(*Come Be My Light*, 210.)
- 3. She went on to explain how much she wanted God alone. The work she did was God's. But the situation leaves her in great confusion.
 - Before I could spend hours before Our Lord—loving Him—talking to Him—and now—not even meditation goes properly—nothing but “My God”—even that sometimes does not come.—Yet deep down somewhere in my heart that longing for God keeps breaking through the darkness. When outside—in the work—or meeting people—there is a presence—of somebody living very close—in very me.—I don't know what this is—but very often, even every day—that love in me for God grows more real.

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- 2. She may have had great moments, but what stands out in these private documents is her cry of desolation. In a letter to Father Joseph Neuner after a retreat in 1961 she lamented the loss of the intimacy with Christ she had experienced in Loreto days.
 - Now Father—since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart.—Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason.—The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me.—When the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there.—Heaven—souls—why these are just words—which mean nothing to me.—My very life seems so contradictory. I help souls—to go where? God does not want me.—Sometimes—I just hear my own heart cry out—“My God” and nothing else

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- —I find myself telling Jesus unconsciously most strange tokens of love. (*Come Be My Light*, 211.)
- 4. I think Father Neuner correctly interpreted this as “the dark night of which all masters of spiritual life know.” Humans have no remedy for it. “The sure sign of God’s hidden presence in this darkness is the thirst for God, the craving for at least a ray of His light. No one can long for God unless God is present in his/her heart. Thus the only response to this trial is the total surrender to God and the acceptance of the darkness in union with Jesus.” (*Come Be My Light*, 214.) One thing is sure: People who have only a casual interest in God will not experience this “darkness.” The more Mother Teresa immersed herself in seeing and serving Christ in the poor, the more she shared God’s suffering in them.

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- III. A Profile of Christian Mysticism
 - In this final session I would like to put together a profile of Christian mysticism. I am drawing the main lines for it from *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, edited by Bernard McGinn, whose *The Presence of God* has supplied much of the material for our study of the mystics of the Church up to the 14th century. McGinn has organized the selections for this anthology in three major parts: Foundations of Mystical Practice, Aspects of Mystical Consciousness, and Implications of the Mystical Life. He has devoted the major share of the selections to the second part.

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- A. Foundations of Mystical Practice
 - On what did the mystics base their quest for God? The order in which McGinn has listed his selections may occasion some surprise among Protestants, but I think our study would confirm the appropriateness of placing scriptures in first place.
 - 1. **Biblical Interpretation.** Until about 1200, the mystics wrote chiefly on scriptures—the Psalms, Paul, John, and, above all, the Song of Songs. Of the four senses of scripture—literal, moral, anagogical, and spiritual—the spiritual sense was paramount. They interpreted the Song of Songs, for instance, as God or Christ (the Lover) speaking to the Church or the individual soul (the beloved). They interpreted the Psalms christologically. In the New Testament Paul’s “in Christ” mysticism and many parts of the Johannine writings fit the mystic outlook, but parts of the New

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- Testament were also allegorized or spiritualized. From about 1200 on, the New Testament, especially the Gospels, became more prominent than the Song of Songs as the imitation of Christ assumed greater importance.
- 2. **Asceticism and Purgation.** Although the mystics viewed consciousness of the presence of God as a gift of grace, they considered a certain amount of self-denial essential as preparation. Discipline (*ascesis*) in food, sex, sleep, and possessions, they believed, prepared them for encountering the divine. It purged or purified and thus liberated them from the “worldly” things that held them so that they might “see” God. Jesus’ beatitude “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” set the bar high. They longed for purity of heart by virtue of which they would be fit to enter into the divine Presence.

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- **3. Prayer, Liturgy, and Sacraments.** For the mystics prayer is both the means for attaining the goal of union with God and, in contemplative prayer, an aspect of the goal. Throughout the centuries of Christian history saints have sought to fulfill Paul's directive to the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Th 5:17). Not surprisingly, the mystics outlined the stages of the mystical journey as degrees or types of prayer. Worship, the liturgy, is corporate prayer. Celebration of the sacraments is the central component of the liturgy.

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- **4. Inner and Outer Practices.** The mystics have cultivated certain inner and outer practices out of concern to advance the mystical life. The most important of these include **solitude and silence**. Apophatic mystics especially have insisted that, since God is beyond human comprehension, we encounter God primarily in verbal and mental silence. These two practices have an intimate connection with some others such as **detachment, releasement, and abandonment**. In addition, the mystics have relied on **spiritual friendship** and **direction**. The Holy Spirit is the primary director of souls, but does not preclude turning to other humans for guidance.

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- **5. Mystical Itineraries.** Although they recognized that each person's journey is unique, the mystics did create some guidebooks to help others. Many have described stages of the mystical path despite an awareness that their approach will not rule out others. Pseudo-Dionysius, for instance, constructed the traditional threefold path of purgation, illumination, and perfection or union. Richard of St Victor envisioned four degrees of "violent charity." Bonaventure outlined a seven-stage process in the journey of the mind to God. Marie of the Incarnation, Ursuline nun and missionary to Canada, projected thirteen stages of prayer!

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- B. Aspects of Mystical Consciousness
 - In the preceding section we have examined some basic elements on which mystics build. We proceed in this one to delineate ways in which the mystics construed their experience of God theologically.
 - **1. Living the Trinity.** Christianity is Trinitarian, so it is to be expected that the mystics would interpret their encounter with God in Trinitarian terms. The anchor for their interpretation was Genesis 1:26: "Let us make man in our image and after our likeness." Christian theologians read those words not simply as *imago Dei* but also as *imago Trinitatis*. Later mystics built especially on Augustine's classic *On the Trinity*, in which he argued that the human mind provides an analogy of the Trinity in its activities of remembering, knowing, and loving. These three functions do not provide real knowledge of the Trinity itself, but they reveal the participation of the human mind in the divine life. Augustine's concept helped later mystics express their inner sharing in the life of the Trinity.

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- **2. Encountering Christ.** Christian mysticism revolves around Christ in the sense that it is in, through, and by Christ, the God-Man, that we have access to God. Virtually all writings of Christian mystics show that Christ is the way and the goal of the mystical life. In Bernard of Clairvaux visitations of the Word, in Francis of Assisi experience of the stigmata, in Henry Suso from literal imitation of Christ to mystical detachment and union with the Trinity, in Julian of Norwich suffering literally the wounds of Christ, and in Simone Weil reciting George Herbert's "Love bade me welcome. . . " we see the varied ways encounter with Christ occurred among the mystics.

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- **3. Love and Knowledge.** Virtually all mystics have ascribed importance to both love and knowledge on the path to God. Because of early Christian conviction that God is Love, however, most have given a higher role to loving than to knowing in achieving oneness with God. The ways in which the two have been interrelated in the history of mysticism, however, have varied. Mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry, and Nicholas of Cusa tried to coordinate them. Some late-medieval mystics such as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* took a more negative stance toward knowing, questioning how far it could lead in entering into intimacy with God. Other mystics stressed the need for both knowing and loving, although affirming the higher role of love.

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- **4. Positive and Negatives Ways to God.** Many mystics—Gregory of Nyssa, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Nicholas of Cusa, and John of the Cross—have accentuated the apophatic perspective that God is infinitely beyond the grasp of finite creatures. Other mystics—Bernard of Clairvaux, Hadewijch, Mechthild, Richard Rolle, and Henry Suso—have dwelled more on erotic love and sense experience as media of finding God. A variation on the kataphatic is experience of God through nature as a manifestation of God, as in New England Transcendentalism. “All the world’s alive with God, and every bush is a ‘burning bush’.”

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- **5. Vision, Contemplation, and Rapture.** Scriptures present divergent views about seeing God. Some Old Testament texts warn against such expectations. In Ex 33:20 God warned Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no one will see my face and live.” Some others record such encounters. In Gen 32:30, Jacob announces, “I have seen God face to face and my soul has been saved.” Thence he took the name Israel, “he who sees God.” So, too, in the New Testament. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8) stands in contrast to “No one has ever seen God; the Only Begotten Son, who is in the Father’s bosom, has revealed him” (John 1:18) and “We see now mysteriously through a mirror, but then face to face” (1 Cor 12:12). Nevertheless, early Christian texts teem with vision narratives.

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- From the second century on, early Christians emphasized the vision of God (*theoria*) as the goal of the Christian life. Not all of the accounts of visions need be considered mystical, but mystics did express much interest in them. Augustine classified them by types. Others analyzed contemplative visions and how they related to the beatific vision of heaven. Some mystics followed the Apostle Paul (2 Cor 12:1-10) in placing rapture, ecstasy, and *excessus mentis* ("being outside the mind") at the highest level of mystical experience. Women mystics evidently invoked visions, locutions, *et al.*, to give authority to their writings in an age when men dominated church and society.

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- **6. Distress and Dereliction.** On the opposite pole from vision and rapture was the mystics' "dark night." Some biblical figures such as Abraham, Job, and Elijah experienced deep dread, and it turns up often among the mystics. Closely allied to it is a sense of forsakenness, similar to Christ's cry from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46=Psalm 22.2). Mystics considered it a test, whether they were willing to be sent to Hell if it were God's will. In the 17th century Quietists were condemned for "resignations to hell," but the theme had substantial roots in earlier mysticism. Female mystics such as Hadewijch especially experienced dereliction, but it is found also in John Tauler, John of the Cross, Martin Luther, Thérèse of Lisieux, and, more recently, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

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- **7. Deification and Birthing.** Deification took root early in Christian thinking, grounded in New Testament teaching about God's redemptive activity through the Incarnation. It is closely related to the notion of rebirth as "children of God." In baptism we are born again to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4). In Christian mysticism, however, birthing took on greater significance. We are not only reborn, but we participate in the birthing process whereby God is born in us and in others, as in Gal 4:19: "You are my own children, and I am in labor all over again until you come to have the form of Christ." Just as Mary was privileged to have the Word in her womb, so too we can have the Word dwell in us spiritually, if not physically. Although Meister Eckhart developed this thinking extensively, it appeared early in Irenaeus (c. 185-189), Clement of Alexandria (c. 180-200), and Origen (c. 250).

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- **8. Union with God.** The concept of mystical union with God attained a central place in the modern day. The scriptures use the language of union sparsely. Frequent usage by Neoplatonic mystics caused some church Fathers, e.g., Augustine, to avoid the word except when speaking to Christians about being united in the Body of Christ. Nevertheless, others such as Macarius, Evagrius Ponticus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor, employed the term freely. Maximus was the first to use the three analogies—a drop of water in wine, molten iron in fire, and air in sunshine—to illustrate. During the twelfth century, the mystics began to analyze forms of union. Two traditions emerged. One, represented by Bernard of Clairvaux, insisted that union with God is a "union of spirits" wherein there is always an ontological distinction. The other, exemplified by Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, spoke of a union of identity or indistinction. It has remained controversial. Efforts at finding the proper understanding of union, however, continued in John Ruusbroec, Teresa of Avilá, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, and Marie of the Incarnation.

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- C. Implications for the Mystical Life
 - McGinn added a short section on implications of the mystical life to consider the issues of “Mysticism and Heresy” and “Contemplation and Action.”
 - **1. Mysticism and Heresy.** Some posit an inherent tension between the inner experience of mystics and institutional religion, but McGinn argues for a more dialectical relationship between the two. In both Judaism and Christianity mystics have upheld and enriched tradition. Through the centuries the Christian Church and the main group of mystics have recognized certain aberrations from “orthodoxy.” These include certain forms of Gnosticism in the early centuries, the heresy of the Free Spirit in the late middle ages, certain teachings of Meister Eckhart (condemned posthumously), Quietism, and even Cardinal François Fénelon’s defense of Quietism.

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- **2. Contemplation and Action.** Mysticism entails not only inner experience but also transformed lives. What begins in ascetic acts, reading of scriptures, spiritual direction, and preparatory forms of prayer spills over into action. In the early middle ages the contemplative life was typically ranked above the active, for instance, by Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. From about 1200 on, the mystics—Eckhart, John of Ruusbroec, Catherine of Siena, Ignatius, Teresa of Avilá—questioned the earlier paradigm and looked more and more positively on the active life as an authentication of the inward experience. Thomas Merton raised the issue in a new way in the 20th century as he challenged contemplatives to offer to a world of endemic

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- violence and “collective unreason” insights drawn from contemplation. “Action is the stream, and contemplation is the spring,” he said. “When action and contemplation dwell together, filling our whole life because we are moved in all things by the Spirit of God, then we are spiritually mature.” (*No Man Is an Island*, 65.)