

# Mystics of the Church

## Victorines and Franciscans

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- Part 1: The Victorines
  - The Abbey of St Victor was founded at Paris in 1108 by William of Champeaux, teacher of Peter Abelard, and constructed in 1113 with funds supplied by King Louis VI. The monastery adopted the Rule of St Augustine. Although never composed of large numbers, the Augustinian canons regular of St Victor attracted some outstanding scholars—Hugh or Hugo (d. 1142), Richard (d. 1173), Adam (d. between 1177 and 1192), and Walter (d. after 1180). They distinguished themselves by linking the contemplative tradition with scholasticism, as one might expect of a house located so close to the University of Paris. Hugh, in fact, is usually listed with Anselm, Abelard, and Peter Lombard among the originators of scholasticism. Although Richard surpassed his teacher Hugh in his contribution to mystical theology, he reflected clearly his profound influence.

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- I. Hugh of St. Victor
  - A. Life
    - Some sources ascribe Hugh's birth to the area around Ypres, others to Saxony. An uncle may have held the position of archdeacon of the church of Halberstadt, and he dedicated his treatise on *The Soul's Betrothal Gift* to the Augustinians of Hamersleben near Halberstadt. He probably entered St Victor around 1115. He left it only once, to visit the court of Pope Innocent II.

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- B. Writings
  - In his writings Hugh covered a wide field. His works included grammar and theology; a *Summary of Philosophy*; a chronicle; the *Didascalion*, a guide to the study of the arts and theology; biblical commentaries on the Octateuch and Lamentations; homilies on Ecclesiastes; a commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchies*; a large-scale treatise on *The Mysteries of the Faith*; and works on spirituality such as *Noah's Ark*, *The Vanity of the World*, *Praise of Love*, and numerous shorter works.

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- C. Hugh as Schoolman
  - 1. Hugh established St Victor's reputation and set the pattern for its mystical thought. He vindicated his eminent position among early scholastics in two ways: (1) his thought as to how theology related to other forms of science, and (2) how to present the teaching of theology according to proper scientific and pedagogical standards. Hugh did not separate *philosophia* and *theologia* or *scientia* and *sapientia*. He thought all forms of human learning should contribute to the work of restoring in humans the image of God damaged by sin. In a commentary on Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchies* he identified *theologia* as "the height of philosophy and the perfection of truth than which there can be nothing higher to the contemplating soul." (Prologue)

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- 2. Hugh also played a role in systematizing Christian doctrine by adopting a middle ground between the *summa* of the schoolmen and the "order of history" of monastics in his classic work on *The Mysteries of the Christian Faith*. In his *Didascalicon* he gave the first scholastic integration of human arts, scriptural exegesis, and the new scientific theology in the service of the goal of contemplation of God. For exegesis he spoke of a "double foundation" in scripture—literal and spiritual. Scripture contains many things that seem contradictory and even absurd if interpreted literally, but the spiritual understanding does not allow contradiction.

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- D. Mystical Theology
  - 1. In the first homily of his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* Hugh connected the three books ascribed to Solomon with the three stages of the soul's ascent to God: *cogitatio*, *meditatio*, and *contemplatio*. "Thinking is when the mind is touched in a passing way by the notion of things. . . . Meditation is the persistent and discerning recalling of thinking. . . . Contemplation is the attentive and free gaze of the intellectual soul poured out everywhere over the things to be discerned. . . . There are two kinds of contemplation: one prior and of beginners, treating of the consideration of creatures; the other later and of the perfect in the contemplation of the Creator. In Proverbs Solomon proceeds as if by meditating. In Ecclesiastes he ascends to the first stage of contemplation; in the Song of Songs he transports himself to the supreme level." (*Eccles. 1.*) Hugh distinguished himself from earlier writers, however, in integrating the ascent to God (*anagoge*) with doctrine and historical exposition. He used a variety of biblical images to present the marriage of logic and symbol in his treatises on Noah's ark, written between 1125 and 1130. As McGinn

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- observes, Hugh sought to make clear that "the cosmos and world history manifested by ark symbol will reveal its inner meaning only within the universal matrix of the theophany of the Word." (McGinn, *Growth*, 378-379.) In *Noah's Moral Ark* the ark "symbolizes the presence of eternity in time, the only security and stability humanity can possess amid the dual flood of the welter of history and the interior raging of the unquiet heart." (Ibid. 380.) In *Noah's Mystical Ark* progression up the pyramidal ark invokes the ascent of Mount Sinai with Moses, the only one to reach the top, as the type of persons who "along with the perfection of work also have repose of mind." (*Mystical Ark 7.*) At the center, however, is Christ. "He rose from the earth and pierced the heavens; he came to the depths without leaving the heights; he is both above and below, above in majesty, below in compassion. He is above to draw our desire and below to give us assistance." (*Noah's Moral Ark 2.7.*)

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- 3. McGinn has given this diagram of Hugh's map of the ascent:

<i>Ascent</i>	<i>Christ's Role</i>	<i>Degree</i>
– Awakening	Book corrects	Fear, Sorrow, Love
– Purgation	Tree shades	Patience, Mercy
		Compunction
– Illumination	Book illumines	Thinking, Medit., Contemp.
– Union	Tree nourishes	Temperance, Prudence, Fortitude

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- Hugh summarized in this way: "The integrity of the soul which ignorance shatters, thinking discovers, meditation collects, contemplation pours by its melting action into the die of the divine likeness in order to be reformed through the fire of divine love." (*Noah's Mystical Ark* 9.) The three treatises on Noah's ark constituted the core of Hugh's distinctive combination of the traditional monastic approach with the new theological model of scholasticism.

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- 2. In *The Soul's Betrothal Gift* Hugh made clear that, like all Christian mystics, he believed that love rather than knowledge or understanding leads to God, but he did ascribe considerable importance to knowledge. Reason confronts the soul about the disordered love it has for the things of the world, but real love is due only to God. The Word condescends to take flesh in order to save the unworthy bride, who needs to repair her fallen condition by becoming once again worthy of marriage with God. Hugh ended on an optimistic note: "He shows that he is always present; he is always ready. No matter where I turn, he does not desert me; wherever I am, he does not depart. Whatever I do is with his help. . . .It is clear from this that though his countenance still is hid from us, his presence can never be avoided." (*The Soul's Betrothal Gift*, in McGinn, *Growth*, 392.) Hugh had a special predilection for the imagery of fire in discussing the relation of love and contemplation. Divine love has a great capacity for *melting* the human heart.

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- II. Richard
  - Hugh shaped the mystical tradition of St Victor, but Richard added to it richly. Like his mentor, Hugh, he underscored the importance of demonstration and argument in theological issues, and he made fun of contentment with simply citing authorities. In stressing the importance of an empirical basis of proof for God's existence, he pointed forward toward Thomas Aquinas. But unlike the latter, he did not think it possible to arrive at the essentials of the doctrine of the Trinity by the processes of speculative reasoning.

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- A. Life
  - Apparently a native of Scotland, Richard entered the Abbey of St Victor as a young man. He became sub-prior in 1159 and prior in 1162. He died in 1173.
- B. Writings
  - Richard's most important theological writing was a treatise *On the Trinity* in which one may find his main philosophical views. His most important writings in mystical theology, however, were works devoted to biblical exegesis, particularly *On the Preparation of the Intellectual Soul for Contemplation or the Book Called Benjamin Minor* and *The Mystical Ark*, also called *On the Grace of Contemplation or Benjamin Major*. *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity* sketched briefly an itinerary as to how vehement love leads to union with God and more perfect service of neighbor.

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- C. Mystical Theology
  - 1. McGinn judges that Richard did not possess Hugh's gift for uniting the horizontal and ascensional dimensions of Christian thought nor the fullness of doctrinal treatment. (*Growth*, 399.) He excelled him, however, in the psychological depth he brought to his arrangement of Christian teaching on contemplation. Although Hugh pioneered in Victorine investigation of human nature, Richard developed his anthropology and psychology more richly than Hugh did, more in line with Cistercian treatment. Drawing from Boethius and Hugh for his intellectual pattern, he assigned two main components to his affective pattern: a theory of how seven virtues cleanse the soul's basic power of will and attraction, and a treatment of the four degrees of the progress of love found in *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity*. Of particular importance for him was how the

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- affective-voluntaristic drive of the human likeness to God gets back on its tracks after being derailed by original sin. His answer was the sevenfold affective progression of virtues beginning with the fear of God and progressing through sorrow, hope, initial love of God, joy, and hatred of vice to end with the virtue of ordered shame. Richard's treatise on *The Twelve Patriarchs* (*Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Major*), notes McGinn (401), combined "the practical and theoretical aspects of the spiritual exercise that prepares the soul for immediate contact with God, nourishes the experience itself, and enhances its effects." This major work distinguished the "historical sense" from the "mystical sense." The latter consists of three senses—tropology or moral teaching, allegory or "the mystical teaching of the mysteries," and anagogy, the "mystical understanding that leads above." The purpose of the

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- treatise is to come to know ecstatic contemplation ("Benjamin") at least through knowledge by teaching if not experientially. Fear, grief, hope, and love of justice form the basis for the soul's journey to ecstasy. In the final section of *The Twelve Patriarchs* three things stand out: (1) the continued insistence on how contemplation must be based on self-knowledge and discretion; (2) the Christological dimension introduced by the transfiguration motif; and (3) the hint that reason's death is tied to the revelation of the inmost divine mystery, that of the Trinity. Richard's main concern was to analyze contemplation as *intelligentia pura*, "pure understanding." He spoke of two kinds of contemplation: "above but not beyond reason" and "both above and beyond reason." The latter provides knowledge of "things which seem to contradict all human reason" (ch 86).

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- 2. In *The Mystical Ark* he developed his teaching on contemplation further, marking a new moment in the growth of western mysticism, according to McGinn (*Growth*, 405). He envisioned six stages of contemplation as McGinn has outlined:
- | <i>Level of Knowing</i>                         | <i>Form of Contemplation</i>                    | <i>Object</i>                      |
|---|---|------------------------------------|
| • Understanding directed to intelligible things | (6) beyond reason                               | Trinity                            |
| • Reason directed to intelligible things        | (5) above but not beyond reason                 | God                                |
| • Imagination directed to sensible things       | (4) in reason but not according to reason       | spirits (angels) and human (souls) |
| • Understanding directed to intelligible things | (3) in reason and according to reason           | qualities of invisible things      |
| • Imagination directed to sensible things       | (2) in imagination and according to reason      | ideas of visible things            |
| • Understanding directed to intelligible things | (1) in imagination and according to imagination | visible things                     |

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- I translate: At levels (1) and (2) we admire the Creator on seeing God's works. At levels (3) and (4) we move to the inner meaning of things. At level (4) imagination has withdrawn and reason operates on its own. At levels (5) and (6) divine illumination comes into play. They are above reason and depend on the work of grace.
- 3. In the fifth book of *The Mystical Ark* Richard focused on ecstasy. He used three figures to represent three modes of experiencing the grace of contemplation portrayed in the ark: Moses receives the grace of contemplation alone. Bezeleel obtains it from the cooperation of grace and his own effort. Aaron gets it from somebody else's instruction. Enlargement of the mind is a work of human effort in which contemplation expands and sharpens the intellectual soul's point of concentration. The primary concern of Book 5 is

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- “alienation of the mind” or *excessus mentis*. Richard saw three ways it may happen: (1) by “greatness of devotion” in which the mind is heated by the flame of love so that it liquefies and rises like smoke to God; (2) by “greatness of wonder” wherein the intellectual soul is irradiated by divine light like a flash of lightning so that it loses all sense of itself in wonder and awe and plunges to the depths and rises to the heights in its desire for God; and (3) by “greatness of exultation” when “the human mind is alienated from itself, when having drunk of the inner abundance of interior sweetness, indeed fully inebriated by it, the mind completely forgets what it is and what it has been and is carried on into an ecstasy of alienation by the excess of its dance and is suddenly transformed into a form of supermundane attraction under the influence of a state of wondrous happiness.” (*Benjamin Major* 5.5; McGinn, *Growth*, 412.) Richard illustrated with biblical figures. The love of the Bride of the Song of Songs illustrated the greatness of exultation.

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- 4. Richard underscored the role of love and desire in *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity*. He displayed here his most sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of love, both between human lovers and between finite subject and infinite subject. *The Four Degrees* correlate with the doctrinal breakthrough that he achieved in *The Trinity*. In the latter he explored the mystery of the God who is perfectly one and yet also supremely three. The fact that God, who is perfect love, possess the fullness of goodness, the fullness of happiness, and the fullness of glory necessitated a plurality of persons. Rightly ordered love demonstrates the full equality of the plural persons in true divinity, but it raises the question as to what kind of plurality this is. Richard’s answer was that true love expressed between two subjects demands a willingness to share such love with a third person. In true scholastic fashion Richard theorized a fourfold distinction in the violence of loving: wounding love, binding love, languishing love, and the love which causes one to faint away in a state of permanent desire in which the soul can find no satisfaction.

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- Psychologically, he summarized the four types of love as *amor insuperabilis*, *amor inseparabilis*, *amor singularis*, and *amor insatiabilis*. Only the first level is healthy in human love relationships. Along with Hugh and the great Cistercian mystics, Richard would insist that mystical experience is not just for the individual but for the whole human community.
- III. Adam of St Victor
  - Probably British, Adam was educated at Paris. Around 1130 he entered the Abbey of St Victor. He attained recognition as the finest liturgical poet of his era, composing forty-nine sequences. He also wrote a number of prose works.

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- Part 2: Franciscans
  - Bernard McGinn has noted that a “new mysticism” appeared around 1200 as a consequence of three factors: (1) new attitudes toward the relation between world and cloister, (2) a new relationship between men and women in the mystical path, and (3) new forms of language and modes of representation of mystical consciousness. Whereas early medieval mysticism emphasized withdrawal from the world, the new mysticism contended that flight from the world was not a necessary precondition for consciousness of the immediate presence of God. God could be found anywhere by anyone. Whereas men dominated the earlier mysticism, women now began to assume important roles, although much of what we learn about them comes from the pens of male recorders or admirers. Whereas for more than a century study of medieval thought concentrated almost exclusively on professional, scientific, and academic theology of the Schoolmen, recent research has required paying

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- attention also to monastic and vernacular theology. All three forms tried to achieve two goals—deepening understanding of faith and enkindling love so as to arrive at a higher understanding of love.
- I. Francis of Assisi
  - Francis of Assisi (1182-1225) marked a new epoch in western mysticism. Despite modest cultural background and little theoretical interest, he has surpassed all other mystics in his popularity and influence eight centuries after his own time. He has himself been labeled a “nature mystic,” but the image he left on later generations is more complex. Within his own lifetime his simple Rule composed of four quotations from the Gospels yielded to more traditional rules, and Francis himself became a simple lay brother in an order he didn’t intend to found. Francis emphasized love, poverty, and the imitation of Christ. His followers added

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- devotion to Francis himself. A more traditional presentation of the legend of Francis and of the path to God was the contribution of John di Fidanza, Bonaventure, the seventh master general of the Order of Friars Minor. Francis’s own vision, however, did not die. It continued in the Spiritual Franciscans, who sought as nearly as they could to live Francis’s ideal of poverty, and in some Third Order Franciscans, notably Jacopone da Todi, Angela of Foligno, and Ramon Lull.
- B. Life
  - Legends wrapped around the life of Francis from the time of his death make it difficult to say what happened. He was born in Assisi in 1182 during the absence of his father, Peter Bernadone. His mother named him John, but his father

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- changed his name to Francesco. In 1202 he took part in a conflict of Assisi with neighboring Perugia, was captured and spent a year in prison. Between 1202 and 1206 he endured a struggle of soul and experienced conversion that involved liberation from affluent lifestyle provided by his family's wealth. During the beginning of the disastrous Fourth Crusade in 1204, he suffered a long illness. In 1206 he began his new venture repairing the Church of San Damiano, the Church of San Pietro, and the Portiuncula. Over the next four years he gained followers, who named themselves *Fratres Minores* and engaged in mission work. Around 1209 or 1210 the "Brothers" moved into

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- the Portiuncula. In 1210 Francis drafted the First Rule and presented it to Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). To what extent the pope gave approval is uncertain, but the *Fratres Minores* continued their preaching. In 1219 Francis sailed to Acre and to Damietta in Egypt, arriving on June 24. A year later, he returned to Italy during the spring or summer and resigned from the order. In 1221 the Friars drew up the First Rule, making Elias the Vicar. In 1223 they drafted the Second Rule approved by Pope Honorius III on November 29. Around September 24, 1224 Francis received the stigmata at La Verna. Ill and nearly blind, in 1225 he composed the Canticle of Brother Sun. He died October 3, 1226. Pope Gregory IX canonized him July 16, 1228.

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### – B. Writings

- There is much debate as to what writings we can reliably ascribe to Francis himself. He probably played some part in composing the Rules of 1221 and 1223 that replaced his original Rule of 1210. He wrote a number of letters. Whether he did a Paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer and some other prayers is debated. More confidently ascribed to him is *The Canticle of Brother Sun*. One of Francis's first followers, Thomas of Celano, composed two lives, the first evidently in support of Francis's canonization and the second around 1250. In 1246 three of Francis's early followers—Leo, Rufino, and Angelo—put together the anecdotal *Legend of the Three Companions*. On orders from the General Chapter in 1260 Bonaventure wrote a corrective biography to effect a reconciliation between "Spirituals" and "Conventuals." The text was approved as the official biography in 1263. In 1266 it was authorized as the only canonical, definitive, and exclusive text; all other biographies were to be burned.

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### – C. Mysticism

- Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic*, has said: "Saint Francis was not only a mystic but a nature mystic. Like Clement of Alexandria before him, he saw nature as sanctified by the Incarnation; and like William Blake later, he could see heaven in a wild flower." (9) He added, "For him nature spoke of God. All created things pointed beyond themselves to their Creator." (11) Francis was not a pantheist but a sacramentalist. That is clearly attested by Francis's *Canticle of Brother Sun*, and nature stories saturate accounts of his life. His conversion to following Jesus just as literally as he could entailed a reverence for God in nature. As Armstrong has remarked, "he set forth in utmost humility to live as nearly as he could the life of Christ and to bring the world to His allegiance." (219) Armstrong has defined Francis's nature mysticism in this way: "The theologian or psychologist might

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- define the Christian nature mystic as a person of Christian faith who, through the apprehension of the beauty, goodness, and glory of God revealed in Creation, is uplifted to an ineffable experience; but there are many gradations between the pangs of delight and thankfulness in the presence of earth's loveliness felt by ordinary Christian folk and the raptures of such as Saint Francis." (17) His devotion to nature was closely linked to his gaiety and devotion to Lady Poverty and had antecedents in Irish missionaries such as Columban. Armstrong points to the depictions of Francis and the birds, animals of household and farm, "small deer," fish, reptiles, and dragon, and furred beasts. *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, composed late in his life, represents the maturation of his nature mysticism.

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- II. Bonaventure
  - Francis's life laid the foundation for Franciscan mysticism, but Bonaventure erected the theological structure on that foundation. He owed much, however, to a Victorine named Thomas Gallus.
  - A. Thomas Gallus
    - Gallus's writing has become known only recently, for it was long published under Bonaventure's name. Thomas Gallus was the first to formulate what is known as "affective Dionysianism," an approach that contrasted with the speculative Dionysianism of Albertus Magnus. As others in the Victorine tradition, Gallus wrote systematic mystical

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- theory. He was the first author to hold that affectivity tends to exclude rather than subsume human knowledge in the highest stages of the mystical journey. He came to this view as he sought to show that “the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and the Song of Songs were not only mutually compatible but two sides of the same coin: the positive and negative versions of the higher knowledge of God that alone can lead to uniting with God (*unitio*) in this life.” (McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 79.) Like the Cistercians, Gallus saw the Song of Songs as the key to unlocking the central message of the whole Bible, but he did something distinctive in using Pseudo-Dionysius as the key to unlock the key.

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- B. Life
  - John di Fidanza (c. 1217-1274) was born in Bagnoregio, near Viterbo, about sixty miles north of Rome. He studied in the faculty of Arts in the University of Paris. Probably in 1234 he entered the Franciscan Order and studied theology under Alexander of Hales. He began to teach publicly in 1248 and continued in that role until 1257. On February 2, 1257 the Franciscans elected him Minister General. He played a significant role in trying to settle the controversy between “conventuals” and “spirituals.” The Order approved his *Life of St Francis* as the official biography in 1263 and decreed the destruction of all other biographies in 1266. In 1271 he played a major role in the election of Teobaldi Visconti as Pope Gregory X. Elected Cardinal Bishop of Albano in 1273, he played a prominent role in the Council of Lyons in 1274 but died during the council.

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### – C. Writings

- Bonaventure's writings fall into three periods. During his years at the University of Paris (1248-1257) he wrote a *Commentary on the Sentences* (of Peter the Lombard); biblical commentaries on Ecclesiastes, Luke, and the Gospel of John; three sets of disputed questions—*On Evangelical Perfection*, *On Christ's Knowledge*, and *On the Mystery of the Trinity*; a summary of his theology in the *Breviloquium*; and perhaps *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*. In the second period (1257-1267) after his appointment as Minister General he did his most spiritual writings: *The Soul's Journey into God*; *The Tree of Life*, his meditation on the life of Christ; *The Triple Way*, his systematic treatment of the stages of the spiritual life; *Soliloquy on the Four Spiritual Exercises*; *On the Government of the Soul*; *On the Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*; and *The Life of St Francis*, plus a shorter version for liturgical usage. In the third period he engaged in controversy. Works included: *Defense of the Poor* against attacks on the mendicants; *On the Ten Commandments*; *On the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit*; and *The Six Days of Creation*.

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### – D. Mystical Theology

- 1. Bonaventure based his Trinitarian theology on the Dionysian concept that goodness must diffuse itself. The Father is the foundation of Bonaventure's thought, but the second person of the Trinity, the "Expressive Word," is the exemplary cause of everything. "Word" rather than "Son" is the best way to speak about the second person. The uncreated Word had to take flesh as the Incarnate Word and present God's message throughout history through the inspired Word, the Bible. The mediating activity of the Word implies a third metaphysical principle, a "consummation," that is, a return to the Highest Source. McGinn has observed, "The whole of the Franciscan's mystical theology can be seen as an attempt to present the proper understanding of our *reductio* (*Reductio* should be understood in the Latin sense of "leading back.") to God." (*Flowering*, 91.) Bonaventure argued in *The Reduction of the Arts to Theology* that "just as things went forth from God through the Word of God, so it is necessary for a

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- complete return that the Mediator of God and humans be not only God but also man to lead humans back to God.” (23) The action of returning to God involves both the Son and the Holy Spirit, so that all three persons of the Trinity are always at work in our lives.
- 2. Bonaventure did more than synthesize earlier mystical traditions. He transformed them in large part through meditation on Francis’s relation to the Incarnate Word. McGinn has summarized the logic in this way:
  - Since the universe is the expression of the Trinity produced through the *Verbum increatum*,
  - and since the *Verbum incarnatum* expresses himself best in dying for humanity on the cross,
  - then Francis, as the ideal expression of the crucified Jesus, is the exemplar of our journey, or reduction, back into God. (*Flowering*, 93.)

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- 3. Bonaventure’s many sermons on Francis, his *Life of St Francis*, the appeal to Francis in the *Collations on the Hexameron*, and the inspiration Francis provided for *The Mind’s Journey to God* all present Francis as more than just another saint. He is “the mirror of sanctity and the exemplar of all evangelical perfection.” (*Life of St Francis* 15.1.) Bonaventure’s treatment of the stages of contemplative ascent laid out what had taken place in the soul of Francis as a model for all ecstasies. Francis’s exemplarity has two poles, a vertical and a horizontal one. Vertically, he is the “hierarchic man” or “angelic man” ascending to full experience of God (as Dionysius and Gallus). Horizontally, he is the angel of the Sixth Seal of the Revelation 7:2, who marks the faithful for the end (a la Joachim of Fiore). In his *Life of St Francis* Bonaventure weaves these two together in such a way that Francis

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- reveals the meaning of the Verbum incarnatum as we approach the end of the age. As Bonaventure recounted Francis's *Life*, he often dwelled on ecstatic experiences and viewed the stigmata as the highest of them. As the completion of the prophecy found in the Revelation, Bonaventure ascribed to Francis a unique historical role. Francis not only had angelic status, but he created the new *ordo* of contemplatives. "The third order is of those contemplating God according to the mode of elevation, that is, the ecstatic or excessive mode. . . . This is the seraphic order. It seems that Francis belonged to this. . . . In these people the church will be consummated. But what this future order is to be, or if it already exists, is not easy to know." (*Hexaemeron* 22.22; McGinn, 99.) Bonaventure's devotion to Francis was not an end in itself but a channel to the Incarnate Word. Bonaventure gave special emphasis to the Passion. In his view, the whole Christian life should be an *imitatio Christi*, which necessarily involved imitating the passion.

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- 4. Although the Cross is sufficient in itself, Bonaventure recognized that most people need help in this path that leads to transformation, "passing over" into God. In *The Mind's Journey to God* and *The Threefold Way* he summarized aspects of the new mysticism of the later Middle Ages. In *The Threefold Way* he sought to create a map for the use of three spiritual practices—meditation, prayer, and contemplation—to be used in the three hierarchical stages—purgative, illuminative, and unitive—to enflame the devout soul with "the love of his supreme desirable presence" and be lifted above "everything sensible, imaginable, and intelligible" to the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity (*Threefold Way* 1.11-17). He appealed in this to conformity between the earthly and heavenly churches. We can see in his "three ways" the outline of *lectio Divina*—*lectio* and *meditatio* elided into one, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. *Contemplatio* applies to all three stages in the spiritual journey. At the highest level it

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- brings believers into contact with angelic orders. Bonaventure offered two different models of contemplation—one with seven purgative contemplations that lead to peace, the other with seven illuminative ones directed to Christ on the Cross that lead to sweetness of love.
- 5. In *The Mind's Journey to God* Bonaventure picked up all of the themes treated in *The Threefold Way* and added to them not only an emphasis of Francis as exemplar of the mystical life but a profound exposition of the cosmic and anthropological dimensions of the return to the source. He drew deeply from both Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius for his basic theological perspective, but his model of the path to God represented a fusion of itineraries taken from both Cistercian and Victorine models. He employed two master symbols—the six-winged seraph signifying the ascent to God

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- and the tabernacle described in Exodus 26-27 and 38-39 symbolizing the process of interiorization to God present in the depths of the soul. Bonaventure claimed to have gotten a flash of insight for the itinerary from meditation on the seraph that appeared to Francis on Mount Alverna. The seven stages of the itinerary are these:
- (1) The exterior senses supply us with knowledge of God through reason, faith, and intellectual contemplation.
- (2) God is contemplated in creaturely vestiges, that is, as God is in them by essence, power, and presence.

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- (3) Reason proper is analyzed as the “image of the Trinity” through its three powers of memory, intellect, and will.
- (4) Contemplation of the First Principle in ourselves by means of discernment brings us to the level of grace. Christ alone restores the possibility of the contemplative ascent.
- (5) The soul engages in cognitive activity of suprarational understanding in contemplating God *through* the divine light.
- (6) The soul next engages in cognitive activity of suprarational understanding in contemplating God *in* the divine light.
- (7) The soul passes over into God “through mental and mystical *excessus*.” The cherubim represent the highest form of knowing the essential attributes of God and those

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## Victorines and Franciscans

- proper to the Persons of the Trinity. They face each other across the Mercy Seat (Ex 25:20). Bonaventure challenged each reader to become a cherub so as to contemplate the union in the Divine-Human nature of Christ. We must contemplate Christ precisely as both God and Human in order to reach *excessus mentis* (rapture).
- Where Bonaventure goes beyond Dionysius was in giving a central place to the death motif, dying into love. Where Thomas Gallus insisted that love excluded human knowledge, Bonaventure preserved the Cistercian stress on the necessity of collaboration between love and knowledge. Knowing is insufficient, but it is not cut off. Ecstasy is the supreme way of knowing. What is known in ecstasy is the God who is Trinity. Rapture gives us a foretaste of heaven.

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