

CHAPTER 1

How Mysticism Can Change Us



Our hearts are restless, and only one reality in the universe can still that restlessness: the love that is God. Each of us hungers for a love that can finally unruffle us, nurture us, bind up our wounds, and so touch us that we look out at our everyday world with wonder.

Other people, no matter how much they love us, are unable to love us like that, for no love compares to the love of God, a love that is pure, constant, and satisfying. When the need for that love remains unmet, we cling tight to others, hoping in vain they will meet that need. We hold on to the world by the grass. We look to achievements or status, or we feed our hungers with addictions.

What the light of the sun is to a flashlight beam and what the ocean is to a pool left by the tides, such is the love of God compared with all other love.

We have not earned this love; God gives it freely. Neither distant nor abstract, this love comes near to us in the person of Jesus. Those who bask in that love can be called “mystics,” and the art of disposing ourselves to that love can be called “mysticism.”

As we will see in future chapters, Christian mysticism, rooted in Scripture and centered on Christ, once flourished like spring grass after a rainstorm. In past eras, mysticism permeated society from top to bottom.

These mystics, these “lovers of God” who have gone before us, have left us a vast and nearly indescribable heritage of practical knowledge in how to open up to God’s love. Even more, they have left us their own transforming stories. Just hearing these stories opens up bright realities in our hearts. Taking the journey into the heart of mysticism is, in part, a great treasure hunt for something essential that may be, to some extent, missing in our lives and in the life of the Church.

I wrote this book to be more than ideas. I wrote this book to be a pilgrimage, a journey into the very heart of God, a journey that can forever transfigure our world and us.

The mystical journey changes how the world seems to us. As God floods our hearts, we see the world with new eyes, shimmer with his presence. The embrace of a loved one, a sunset, spring water flowing over rocks, the wonder in a toddler’s eyes surprise us, and reality takes on a new splendor.

Brother Lawrence, writing in the seventeenth century during a time of his awakening to God’s love, exclaims:

Natural objects were glorified. My spiritual vision was so clarified that I saw beauty in every material object in the universe. The woods were vocal with heavenly music....Oh, how I was changed! Everything became new. My horses and hogs and everybody became changed....When I went in the morning into the fields to work, the glory of God appeared in all his visible creation. I well remember we reaped oats, and how every straw and head of the oats seemed, as it were,

arrayed in a kind of rainbow glory, or to glow, if I may so express it, in the glory of God.¹

Mysticism offers possibilities to enrich our relationships, to love from the core of ourselves and to develop what Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth-century English abbot, describes as “spiritual friendship.” The great poet Dante concurs when he says that “when a soul ceases to say mine, and says ours, it makes the transition from the narrow, constricted, individual life to the truly free.”²

History is full of stories of people who went on journeys into God’s love and whose lives became guiding beacons to others. For instance, crowds in the third century followed Saint Anthony of the Desert, and people calmed down just by standing close to him. Mechtilde of Hackeborn, a thirteenth-century nun, was well-known for her mysticism. She became a solace and a refuge to the sisters in her convent as well as to ordinary people in her community. Just being in her presence had a healing effect on many souls. People revealed themselves to her because she was a reader of hearts who helped people open the hidden secrets of their life in an atmosphere of caring.

Mystics show us that time spent in God’s nurturing love enables us to become nurturers. Time spent in the depths of his healing enables us to become channels of his healing. When, with God’s help, we face down the terrors of the pains within, an ease, a peace, and a depth of love so permeate our whole personality that we become peace-bearers to all we meet.



DOUG’S STORY

Part of the mystical journey means facing the wounds in our souls and then meeting the one who can truly mend them—

1. As quoted in Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Book, 2005 edition), 132.

2. Quoted in Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1937), 25.

Jesus. The story of a man who attended a parish retreat I presented shows how the salve of God's mystical love can transform the deepest hurts.

Doug had been in love once, beautifully, exquisitely in love. The woman's name was Rose and he met her his first year of medical school. Their love blossomed and they married immediately upon his graduation. Over the next seven years, they had two girls, and despite the rigors of internship and residency, their family life seemed idyllic.

Then one morning a police car stopped in front of Doug's house. From the moment he saw the car pull up, he knew bad news was coming. He just didn't know how bad.

The officer went straight to the point. "Your wife and two-year-old were in a head-on car collision and both died. Your six-year-old is critical and just clinging to life at the hospital."

Doug rushed to the hospital to find that his six-year-old girl had died moments before he arrived. He ran into the bathroom, where he threw up violently. Everything around him appeared unreal. The walls, the floor, the windows wavered unsteadily. He entered into a trance of grief. Despite the power of the emotions, he did not cry. His father taught him that boys don't cry.

Doug passed through two years of emptiness and great despair. Everything remained unreal. And as much as he wanted them to come, the tears resisted.

Though he had had a satisfying exposure to Church as a youth, he allowed busyness to keep him and Rose from attending Mass during their marriage. One Sunday after the tragedy, his older brother insisted Doug join him and his wife for Mass. The music that day was first-class. Doug let the melody sweep through him, and unexpectedly and without trying, he began to shed tears. *God cares*, he thought, but the pain of loss remained.

He began attending Mass each Sunday, and every time the tears came, emptying him, sweetly consoling him. He attended

a retreat on contemplative prayer, a type of prayer that can dispose us to mystical encounter, at the nearby retreat house.

He then became addicted, with a holy addiction, to prayer. He lit a candle each night and spent an hour or two in quiet prayer and Scripture reflection. At first, he took this quiet time because he needed a love beyond himself to help fill the big holes left by his losses. Gradually, his heart began to sink deeper and deeper each night into the living stillness that is prayer. Before long, he became aware that he was experiencing something more than the mending of wounds; he was falling in love again, beautifully, exquisitely in love again. This time he fell in love with God.

As he prayed, an everlasting beauty and loveliness drew him deeper and deeper into God. He truly began to see God as the lover of his soul.

One night as he was praying, with the eyes of his heart he saw the room brighten with a vast light. The light was alive; its beauty stunned him. The light was the light of God. Doug breathed in the light, letting it fill every cell of his body until he was bathed inside and out with light.

He pondered the possibility of leaving his medical practice and becoming a monk, and he even tried spending one month at a nearby monastery but found it unfulfilling. He needed a more active life; he missed practicing medicine and helping people as a doctor.

In the months that followed his mystical experience, he began seeing a woman, June, who had attended the same retreat on contemplative prayer that he had attended. At first he wondered if it might be a betrayal of God and his late wife to fall in love again, but then he realized that God wanted him to share the love that now permeated his heart. Two years later, he and June were married. Because they were both people of prayer, their marriage became a sublime spiritual friendship as well.

Practical Steps

- ▶ Think back over your life. Have there been times when you have yearned for an infinite love, a love that could perk you up and brighten everything around you?
- ▶ Think over some of the times you have tasted that love. Perhaps it was your First Communion, the baptism of your child, a time you looked over an eye-catching scene in nature and said to yourself, *This is so beautiful there has to be a God*. That love is waiting for you, waiting for you to say yes, waiting for you to spend time basking in that one love.
- ▶ In your journal write a short account of a time God touched your heart.

Scripture Reflection

When we encounter God's love, we encounter his future: a great glory to come that will transfigure all creation and us. In our encounter with God, his future breaks in even in the midst of our human struggles. When we feel restless and disconcerted, it can be good to reflect that a day is coming when all can be mended, reconciled and brightened in God's coming glory. Read the following Scripture slowly and carefully, and let the reality of the coming glory flood your very soul:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

• ROMANS 8:18–23

Guided Meditation

Let your heart grow still. Notice your breathing in and your breathing out. Let each breath remind you of the breath of the Spirit. Each time you exhale, breathe out tension and anxiety. Each time you inhale, breathe in God's love.

Let yourself slowly sink into God's great relaxing peacefulness. Rest a moment in the stillness.

Imagine yourself seated on a folding chair. Immediately in front of you, seated in another folding chair, is Jesus. Imagine him in any way that is comfortable for you. See the holy light surrounding him. That light expands now, surrounding you also. That light calms you, caresses you.

You breathe it in until you are saturated inside and out in that loving light. Be still for a moment in the light.

Look at Jesus. What do you see in his eyes? Jesus stretches out his hands palms upward, and you know what he wants you to do; he wants you to place both your palms in his. You can feel the tension, fear, and anxiety leave you just by touching him. You feel warm tenderness pass from his palms to yours. Rest in the peace of that moment.

Jesus gently removes his hands from yours, reaches inside his robe, and pulls out a beautifully gift-wrapped present. He hands you the package and says, "Inside this package is a gift that symbolizes my love for you." You carefully open the present.

What is the gift? How does it remind you of his love?

Quietly return to this present moment, but retain the memory of this gift. From now on you can be reminded of God's love simply by recalling it.