THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Reading the Mystics

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

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The Saints

Reading the Mystics

Finding the Door Most Catholics Never Find

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INTRODUCTION

The Door Most Men Never Find

Somewhere in the Catholic tradition there is a body of writing so rich, so deep, and so alive that those who find their way into it are often changed for the rest of their lives. It was written by the mystics, the men and women who went furthest into the life of prayer and union with God, and who left behind maps of the country they explored. Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Catherine of Siena, and a whole company of others wrote down what they found in the depths of the interior life, and their writings are among the greatest treasures the Church possesses, guides to the deepest reaches of prayer written by those who traveled there.

And almost no ordinary Catholic ever reads them. Most men who might be drawn to these writings pick one up, perhaps The Interior Castle or The Dark Night of the Soul, read a few pages, find them dense, strange, and difficult, and quietly put them down, concluding that the mystics are beyond them, written for another kind of person in another kind of age, not for an ordinary man with an ordinary life. The door is right there, but they cannot find the handle, and so they turn away, and the treasure stays locked, and they never discover what generations of readers have discovered in these pages: some of the most profound wisdom about God and the soul ever written.

Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls. — Psalm 42:7

This book exists to hand you the handle. The mystics are not, in fact, beyond the ordinary man; they wrote for ordinary souls seeking God, and their wisdom is available to anyone willing to learn how to read them. But they must be read differently than a man reads anything else, and this is what no one tells him. He approaches them as he approaches other books, expecting to read quickly and understand everything, and by that method the mystics are genuinely impenetrable. Read the right way, slowly, prayerfully, a little at a time, with the right expectations, they open, and a man finds himself drawn into a wisdom that can transform his prayer and his whole relationship with God.

We will look first at what mysticism actually is, because the word itself is badly misunderstood and the misunderstanding keeps men away. We will see why the mystics are worth the effort, and why men bounce off them. We will learn how to read them, the method that unlocks what the ordinary approach cannot. We will find where to start, the accessible on-ramps rather than the deep end. We will take a brief guided tour of the major mystics and what each offers. And we will address what to expect from the

encounter, including the important cautions the mystics themselves insist on. This book belongs in the saints section of this library, alongside the book on the saints as companions, because the mystics are saints who left us their maps of the journey into God.

The aim is that you find the door most Catholics never find, and walk through it into one of the richest rooms in the whole house of the faith, the wisdom of the men and women who went furthest into God and wrote down what they found.

There is a particular reason the mystics matter for the modern man, beyond their timeless value. Ours is an age of noise, distraction, and spiritual shallowness, in which even religious life often stays on the surface, a matter of rules kept and boxes checked, with little sense that there are depths to be explored, that prayer can go somewhere, that union with God is a real country a man might actually enter. The mystics are the great antidote to this shallowness. They insist, by their very existence, that there is more, that the life of prayer has depths most Catholics never suspect, that a man is called not merely to keep the rules but to enter into a transforming union with God. Simply to know that the mystics exist, that such depths are real and were reached by real people, expands a man's sense of what the spiritual life is for and what it might become. In an age that has largely forgotten the depths, the mystics are a rumor of the deep country, a summons past the shallows, a reminder that the faith is not finally about behavior management but about union with God, and that the union is real, and reachable, and worth everything. For the modern man starved of depth without quite knowing it, the mystics are a feast he did not know existed.

CHAPTER ONE

What Mysticism Actually Is

Not Weird Experiences, But Deep Union

The word mysticism carries a great deal of baggage, and most of it is misleading. To many, it suggests strange experiences, visions and ecstasies and levitation, a spirituality of the bizarre reserved for a few unusual souls. This misunderstanding must be cleared away first, because it both frightens men off and points them at the wrong thing.

Union, Not Phenomena

At its heart, Christian mysticism is not about extraordinary experiences at all. It is about union with God, the deep, transforming union of the soul with God in love, which is the

goal of the entire Christian life and to which every soul is called. The mystics are simply those who went furthest into this union and wrote about it. The extraordinary phenomena that sometimes accompanied their journey, the visions and ecstasies, were incidental, and, as we will see, the mystics themselves consistently warned against seeking or prizing them. What the mystics were actually about was love, the union of the soul with God in a love that transforms it, and their writings are maps of that journey into union, not catalogs of spiritual fireworks. To read the mystics rightly, a man must set aside the association with the bizarre and understand that they are writing about the one thing that matters, the union with God in love that is the destiny of every soul, described by those who traveled deepest into it.

> *That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.* — John 17:21

The Call Is Universal

This means, crucially, that the mystical life is not reserved for a spiritual elite. The union with God that the mystics describe is the goal of the ordinary Christian life, the thing to which every baptized soul is called, the deepening of prayer and love that is meant to be the normal trajectory of a life given to God. The mystics are not a separate species; they are ordinary souls who went far, and the road they traveled is, in principle, the road every serious Christian is on. This is why their writings matter for the ordinary man: not because he is called to be a spectacular mystic with visions and ecstasies, but because he is called to the same union with God that the mystics reached, and their maps can guide him along the same road, however far he travels it. The mystics wrote for every soul seeking God, and the depths they describe are, by grace, open to anyone. A man reads them not as reports from a country he will never visit but as guides to the journey he is himself already making, into the union with God for which he was created.

Maps of the Interior Country

The best way to understand the mystical writings is as maps of the interior country, the terrain of the deep life of prayer, drawn by those who explored it furthest. A man beginning to pray seriously enters a country he does not know, with its own landmarks, its own difficulties, its own stages and passages, and he can easily get lost, mistake the landmarks, misread the difficulties, give up at exactly the point where he should press on. The mystics have been through this country, all of it, and they drew maps: this is what happens at this stage, this is what this difficulty means, this is the passage that feels like abandonment but is actually progress, this is the way forward. To read the mystics is to consult these maps, to have the guidance of those who traveled the interior country before us and charted it, so that a man does not wander lost but has, available to him, the

accumulated wisdom of the greatest explorers of the life of prayer. This is what the mystical writings are, and it is why they are worth the effort of learning to read them.

Everyone Is Called to Contemplation

The Church's tradition holds something that surprises many Catholics: that contemplation, a simple, loving gaze upon God, a resting in his presence beyond words and concepts, is not the reserve of cloistered mystics but a gift offered, in some measure, to every soul that prays faithfully. The ordinary progression of a serious life of prayer tends, over time, from much talking and thinking toward a simpler, quieter, more loving attentiveness to God, and this simpler prayer is the threshold of the contemplation the mystics describe. This means the mystics are not writing about a country closed to the ordinary man but about the natural, if grace-given, deepening of the very prayer he is himself already practicing. As a man's prayer matures, it tends toward what the mystics map, and their writings become less a report from a foreign land and more a description of where his own prayer is heading. This is why the mystics repay reading even for the ordinary man: they describe the deepening toward which his own faithful prayer is already tending, and they can guide him into it. The call to contemplation is, in the end, universal, and the mystics are its great teachers.

CHAPTER TWO

Why They Are Worth the Effort

The Value of the Mystical Writings

Given that the mystics are difficult, a man might reasonably ask whether they are worth the effort, whether he might not do just as well with easier spiritual reading. The answer is that the mystics offer something no easier writing can, and that the effort of learning to read them is repaid many times over.

Depth Available Nowhere Else

The mystics went deeper into the life of prayer and union with God than almost anyone else in the history of the Church, and they wrote down what they found at those depths. This means their writings contain wisdom about the deep interior life that is simply not available in easier, more surface-level spiritual books. On the further stages of prayer, on the purifications the soul undergoes, on the nature of union with God, on the obstacles and passages of the deep interior life, the mystics are the great authorities, having been there, and a man who wants to understand these depths must, sooner or later, go to

them, because no one else charted this territory as they did. For the man serious about the interior life, who wants to go far and not merely paddle at the edges, the mystics are indispensable, the great guides to the depths, offering a wisdom about the deep life of prayer that he will find nowhere else.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! — Romans 11:33

Guides Through the Hard Passages

The mystics are especially valuable as guides through the hard passages of the spiritual life, the times of dryness, darkness, and apparent abandonment that come to everyone who prays seriously and that cause many to give up. The mystics, above all John of the Cross, mapped these passages with extraordinary precision, explaining what is really happening when God seems to withdraw, why the darkness is often not a sign of God's absence but of a deeper work he is doing, how to endure the hard passages rather than fleeing them. A man in the midst of such a passage, who does not understand it, is likely to conclude that his prayer has failed and to give up; the same man, guided by the mystics who charted exactly this territory, can understand what is happening and persevere through it to the growth on the far side. This alone makes the mystics worth reading, that they are the surest guides through the hard passages that wreck the prayer lives of those who face them without guidance.

A Fire That Kindles

And beyond their wisdom, the mystics have a power to kindle love in the reader, because they wrote from the fire of their own love for God, and that fire leaps from the page. To read the mystics is not merely to learn about the love of God but to be drawn into it, warmed by the intensity of souls who loved God with a depth few reach, provoked toward a deeper love oneself. There is a heat in these writings, a passion for God, that can kindle a corresponding fire in the reader, and many have found their own love for God deepened simply by dwelling in the company of these souls who loved him so intensely. This is a further reason to read them: not only for their wisdom but for their fire, which can kindle a man's own cold heart toward the deeper love of God for which he was made.

Rigorous, Not Sentimental

A man may suspect the mystics of being soft, sentimental, all feeling and no rigor, the kind of gushing spirituality he instinctively distrusts. The reality is the opposite. The great mystics are among the most rigorous, precise, and demanding thinkers in the Church's tradition. John of the Cross writes with the exactness of a systematic theologian, mapping the stages of the soul's purification with a precision that has been compared to a

science of the interior life. Teresa is shrewd, practical, and psychologically acute, with a hard-headed realism about self-deception that would impress any skeptic. These are not sentimentalists but explorers and cartographers of the soul, rigorous observers who charted the interior country with exacting care. The demandingness that makes them hard to read is the same demandingness that makes them trustworthy: they did not settle for easy feeling but pressed into the hardest truths of the interior life and reported them with precision. A man who distrusts sentimental spirituality should feel at home with the mystics, for they are the least sentimental of spiritual writers, rigorous to the point of severity, and all the more reliable for it.

CHAPTER THREE

Why Men Bounce Off

The Mistakes That Make Them Impenetrable

If the mystics are so valuable, why do so many men bounce off them, picking them up and putting them down defeated? The reasons are identifiable, and every one of them is a mistake in approach rather than a real barrier in the mystics themselves. Correct the mistakes, and the mystics open.

Reading Them Like Modern Books

The first mistake is reading the mystics the way a man reads a modern book, quickly, for information, expecting to understand each page before moving to the next. The mystics do not yield to this approach. They wrote slowly, out of deep contemplation, and they must be read slowly, contemplatively, a little at a time, more like Scripture than like a modern nonfiction book. A man who tries to read The Interior Castle at the pace he reads a business book will find it dense and impenetrable, because he is reading it wrongly, racing through writing that was meant to be pondered. The mystics are not to be consumed but savored, read in small portions, slowly, with pauses for reflection and prayer. Read at their proper pace, they open; read at the modern pace, they close. Much of the bouncing-off is simply a matter of pace, of a man reading contemplative writing at an informational speed, and the remedy is to slow down drastically.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight.
— Psalm 19:14

Starting in the Deep End

The second mistake is starting with the wrong works, plunging into the deep end when one should begin in the shallows. A man hears that John of the Cross is a great mystic and picks up The Dark Night of the Soul or The Ascent of Mount Carmel, some of the most demanding works in the whole tradition, and is promptly overwhelmed, concluding the mystics are beyond him. But he began in the wrong place. There are accessible on-ramps to the mystical tradition, gentler works by which a man can enter gradually before attempting the demanding heights, and starting with these rather than the deepest works makes all the difference. The next chapters will point to the right starting places. The mistake is not in reading the mystics but in beginning with the hardest of them; begin with the accessible ones, grow into the difficult ones over time, and the tradition opens in the right order.

Expecting to Understand Everything

The third mistake is expecting to understand everything, and giving up when one does not. The mystics write about the deepest realities of the interior life, often reaching for language to describe what exceeds language, and no reader understands all of it, least of all at first. A man who expects full comprehension will be frustrated and quit; a man who accepts that he will understand some things and not others, that he will grasp a portion now and more later, that some passages will open only after years of his own prayer, can read the mystics fruitfully, taking what he can and letting the rest wait. The mystics are not meant to be fully mastered on a first reading, or perhaps ever; they are meant to be dwelt with, returned to, understood gradually as a man's own experience catches up to what they describe. Release the expectation of understanding everything, take what opens to you now, and let the rest wait for later, and the mystics become fruitful rather than frustrating.

CHAPTER FOUR

How to Read Them

The Method That Unlocks the Mystics

Having named the mistakes, here is the positive method, the way of reading that unlocks the mystics and lets their wisdom open to an ordinary man. It is not complicated, but it is different from how a man reads almost anything else.

Read Slowly, Like Prayer

The heart of the method is to read the mystics slowly and prayerfully, more as prayer than as study. This is essentially the approach of Lectio Divina, described in its own book in this library, applied to the mystics: reading a small portion slowly, pausing to ponder, letting a phrase sink in, turning it into prayer, dwelling rather than racing. A man reading the mystics well might cover only a page or two in a sitting, reading slowly, stopping whenever a passage strikes him to ponder and pray it, treating the reading itself as a form of prayer rather than a task to complete. This slow, prayerful, dwelling pace is the single most important key to reading the mystics, and it transforms the experience: what was dense and impenetrable at speed becomes, at this contemplative pace, rich and opening. Read the mystics as you would pray, slowly and attentively, a little at a time, and they will begin to open to you.

I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. — Psalm 119:15

Take What Opens, Leave the Rest

As a man reads slowly, he takes what opens to him and lets the rest wait, without frustration. On any page, some passages will strike him, opening with light and speaking to his condition, while others will remain closed, obscure, not yet ready to yield their meaning. The method is to receive gratefully what opens and to pass gently over what does not, trusting that it may open on a later reading, when his own experience has deepened. This is why the mystics reward return; a passage that meant nothing on a first reading can blaze with meaning years later, when a man has himself passed through what it describes. So a man reads without anxiety about the closed passages, taking the gifts that are given now, and returning over time to receive more. The mystics are not a wall to be scaled all at once but a well to be returned to, yielding more with each visit as a man's capacity to receive grows.

Let Your Own Prayer Be the Interpreter

Finally, a man reads the mystics best when his own life of prayer is the interpreter, when he brings to the reading his own experience of prayer and lets the mystics illuminate it. The mystics describe the interior country, and a man understands their descriptions in proportion to his own travels in that country; the more he prays, the more the mystics make sense, because he recognizes in their maps the terrain he is himself crossing. This means the reading of the mystics and the practice of prayer feed each other: prayer opens the mystics, and the mystics deepen prayer. A man should therefore read the mystics not as an armchair student but as a fellow traveler, bringing his own prayer to the reading, letting the mystics name and illuminate what he has himself begun to experience, and letting their maps guide his further travels. Read this way, in tandem with a real life of

prayer, the mystics come alive, because a man is reading them from the inside, as one who is himself on the road they charted.

A Few Practical Helps

Some practical matters ease the reading. First, translations matter, because these works were written in older languages and centuries ago, and a good modern translation can be the difference between accessibility and impenetrability; a man does well to seek a respected, readable modern translation rather than struggling with an archaic one. Second, a good introduction and notes help enormously, orienting a man to the work, its structure, and its context before he begins, so that he is not lost; many good editions include such helps, and they are worth having. Third, it helps to keep a notebook, jotting the passages that strike a man and his own reflections, both to slow his reading to the proper pace and to capture what opens to him, so that the fruit of the reading is not lost. And fourth, it helps to read within some structure, a little each day at a set time, as part of one's regular prayer, rather than in occasional bursts, so that the slow work of the mystics can accumulate over time. These simple helps, a good translation, a good introduction, a notebook, and a regular rhythm, remove much of the friction and let a man settle into the fruitful, unhurried reading the mystics require.

CHAPTER FIVE

Where to Start

The Accessible On-Ramps

For the man ready to begin, the practical question is where to start, and here it matters enormously to begin with the accessible works rather than the demanding ones. Beginning in the right place is often the difference between a man who enters the tradition and one who bounces off it.

Begin With the Gentle Guides

Before the demanding mystics, a man does well to begin with the gentler classics of the spiritual life, works that are accessible, practical, and warm, which open the door to the deeper tradition without overwhelming him. Several classic works have served countless ordinary Christians as entry points, written in a plainer and more practical style than the great mystical treatises. These accessible classics introduce a man to the deep interior life gradually, in language he can follow, and prepare him to attempt the more demanding mystics later. Here are some of the traditional on-ramps.

The Imitation of Christ (Thomas à Kempis), *Perhaps the most widely read spiritual classic after the Bible. Short, plain, practical chapters on the interior life. An ideal first book.*

Introduction to the Devout Life (Francis de Sales), *A warm, practical guide to holiness for ordinary people in the world, written for a laywoman. Accessible and immensely wise.*

The Practice of the Presence of God (Brother Lawrence), *A short, simple account of living in constant awareness of God amid ordinary work. Deeply accessible and deeply profound.*

Story of a Soul (Thérèse of Lisieux), *The autobiography of the saint of the little way, tender and accessible, teaching holiness through small things done with great love.*

Any of these makes an excellent first step into the deeper spiritual tradition, accessible to any reader while genuinely opening onto the depths. A man new to this reading does well to begin with one of them, growing accustomed to the slow, prayerful pace and the interior subject matter, before attempting the demanding mystics. Master the pace and the disposition on these gentler works, and the harder mystics become approachable.

Then the Great Mystics

Once a man is accustomed to reading slowly and prayerfully, and has grown comfortable with the interior subject matter through the gentler classics, he can begin to approach the great mystics themselves, still choosing, among their works, the more accessible before the most demanding. Among the towering mystics, some works are gentler doorways than others, and a wise reader enters through those. Even here, the method holds: read slowly, take what opens, return over time, and let your own prayer be the interpreter. Approached this way, in the right order, at the right pace, the great mystics who once seemed impenetrable begin to open, and a man finds himself, gradually, at home in writing he once could not read at all.

CHAPTER SIX

A Brief Tour of the Great Mystics

Who They Are and What They Offer

It helps to have a sense of the major mystics and what each offers, so that a man knows something of the landscape and can choose where to go as his reading deepens. Here is a

brief tour of some of the greatest, in substance rather than detail, so that their distinct gifts are clear.

Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun and reformer, is one of the greatest teachers of prayer in the history of the Church, declared a Doctor of the Church for the depth of her wisdom on the interior life. Her most famous work, The Interior Castle, uses the image of the soul as a castle with many dwelling places, through which the soul journeys inward, stage by stage, toward the innermost chamber where it is united with God at the center. It is a map of the whole journey of prayer, from its beginnings to the heights of union, and it is one of the great classics of the interior life, though demanding. Teresa also wrote The Way of Perfection, a more practical guide to prayer for her nuns, which is somewhat more accessible, and an autobiography recounting her own journey. Teresa is warm, vivid, and intensely practical even at great depths, a wise and human guide to the whole life of prayer, and among the mystics she is one of the more approachable once a man is ready for the great ones.

I sought him whom my soul loves., Song of Songs 3:1

John of the Cross

John of the Cross, a Carmelite friar and Teresa's collaborator in reform, is perhaps the most profound and the most demanding of all the mystics, also a Doctor of the Church. His great works, including The Dark Night of the Soul, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Spiritual Canticle, and The Living Flame of Love, chart the soul's journey to union with God with extraordinary depth, above all the painful purifications, the dark nights, through which God strips the soul of its attachments to bring it to himself. John is the great teacher of the dark passages, of what is happening when God seems to withdraw and prayer goes dark, and his wisdom on these purifications is unmatched. But he is demanding, and a man should not begin with him; John of the Cross is for the reader who has grown into the tradition, and even then he is read slowly, a little at a time, as some of the deepest and most challenging writing the Church possesses. Approached when ready, he is a guide of incomparable depth through the hardest passages of the interior life.

It is worth pausing on John's central image, the dark night, because it is so often misunderstood and so valuable rightly grasped. When people speak of a dark night of the soul, they usually mean simply a hard time, a period of suffering or depression. John meant something more precise and more hopeful. The dark night, in his teaching, is a purification God works in a soul that is genuinely advancing, in which he withdraws the

felt consolations of prayer and leads the soul through a painful darkness precisely in order to purify its love, to wean it from seeking his gifts and teach it to seek him alone, and to bring it to a deeper union than it could otherwise reach. The darkness feels like abandonment but is actually intimate divine work; it feels like going backward but is actually the way forward; it feels like God′s absence but is actually his nearer, deeper, purifying presence, too close and too pure for the soul yet to perceive as light. A man in such a passage, who understands it through John, can endure what would otherwise defeat him, knowing that the darkness is not failure but the very road to the union he seeks. This one insight, that the dark passages of prayer are often God′s deepest work rather than his absence, has saved countless souls from giving up at exactly the wrong moment, and it is among the greatest gifts the mystics offer.

Catherine of Siena and the Others

Catherine of Siena, a lay Dominican who became one of the most influential figures of her age and another Doctor of the Church, left a great work called The Dialogue, a profound conversation between the soul and God, rich in wisdom on the spiritual life, on truth, on the love of God and neighbor. Beyond these towering figures stretches a whole company of others: the anonymous English author of The Cloud of Unknowing, who teaches a way of prayer that reaches toward God beyond concepts and images; Julian of Norwich, whose Revelations of Divine Love dwell on the boundless love and mercy of God; Augustine, whose Confessions, though more than a mystical work, contains passages of profound mystical depth; and many more across the centuries. Each offers his own gift, his own angle on the one union with God toward which all of them point. A man need not read them all; he does well to find the ones that speak to him, to dwell with them, and to let them guide him deeper into the life of prayer, drawing on the wider company as his reading and his own interior life grow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

What to Expect, and What to Avoid

The Cautions the Mystics Themselves Insist On

Finally, a man reading the mystics should know what to expect from the encounter and, importantly, what to avoid, because the mystics themselves are emphatic about certain cautions, and heeding them keeps a man from the errors into which the mystical writings can, misused, lead him.

Do Not Seek Extraordinary Experiences

The most important caution, on which the mystics themselves insist with one voice, is not to seek or prize extraordinary experiences, the visions, ecstasies, locutions, and phenomena that sometimes accompanied their journeys. This is essential, and it is exactly the opposite of what a man drawn to mysticism by curiosity about the bizarre might expect. The great mystics, John of the Cross above all, warn urgently against seeking such phenomena, teaching that they are not the point, that they can be occasions of pride and self-deception, that the enemy can counterfeit them, and that a soul should neither seek them nor rest in them but press on toward God himself in pure faith and love. The goal is union with God in love, not spiritual experiences, and a man who reads the mystics hungry for extraordinary phenomena has misunderstood them entirely and put himself in real spiritual danger. Read them instead for what they actually teach: the way of love and union, pursued in faith, indifferent to phenomena. This caution, insisted on by the mystics themselves, is among the most important things a reader can carry, and it aligns with the wisdom of discernment treated elsewhere in this library.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. — John 20:29

Expect Slow, Quiet Growth

What a man should expect from reading the mystics is not dramatic experience but slow, quiet growth, a gradual deepening of his prayer and his love for God, a clearer understanding of the interior life, a wisdom that seeps in over time. The fruit of reading the mystics is usually undramatic: a prayer that goes a little deeper, an interior life a little better understood, a love for God slowly kindled, a capacity to endure the hard passages a man could not have endured before. This quiet growth, not spiritual fireworks, is what the mystics offer and what a man should expect, and it is worth far more than any dramatic experience. Read them patiently, over years, and let them do their slow work of deepening, and do not be disappointed by the absence of drama, which was never the point.

Keep a Guide and Stay Grounded

As with the deep interior life generally, a man venturing far into the mystics does well to keep a wise guide, a spiritual director or a mature and experienced Christian, with whom to discuss what he is reading and experiencing, because the deep interior life has its subtleties and dangers, and the counsel of the experienced is a protection. And he stays grounded in the ordinary means of grace, the sacraments, the Church′s teaching, the daily disciplines of prayer, never letting the mystical reading pull him toward a private, ungrounded spirituality that floats free of the Church. The mystics themselves were,

almost without exception, deeply grounded in the Church, obedient, sacramental, orthodox, and their heights of union grew from that grounding, not apart from it. So a man reads them within the same grounding, letting the mystics deepen a life firmly rooted in the Church and the sacraments, never setting the mystical reading against that foundation but building it upon it. Grounded this way, and guided where the road grows deep, a man can venture safely into the great tradition of the mystics and receive its treasures.

How They Change Your Own Prayer

It is worth naming, finally, what the mystics actually do to a man's own prayer over time, because this is the real payoff and it is quiet and cumulative. A man who reads the mystics faithfully, over months and years, finds his own prayer changing. He becomes less anxious about method and more attentive to God himself. He recognizes the stages and passages of his own prayer, having seen them mapped, and is less thrown by dryness and darkness, understanding them now as the mystics taught him to. His desire for God deepens, kindled by their fire. He grows more patient, more trusting, more willing to let God lead his prayer where God wills rather than clutching at his own control. And slowly, beneath all of it, his prayer goes deeper, drawn by the maps and the fire of those who went before him toward the union they describe. This is what the mystics finally offer, not information about a distant country, but a real transformation of a man's own prayer and his own journey toward God, worked slowly through the faithful reading of their wisdom. The door most Catholics never find opens, in the end, onto this: a man's own prayer, deepened and transformed by the company of those who went furthest into God.

CONCLUSION

The Room You Can Now Enter

Return to the door most Catholics never find, the entrance to the rich room of the mystical writings, standing right there and yet somehow closed to most who pass it. This book has tried to hand you the handle: to show that mysticism is not about weird experiences but about the union with God in love to which every soul is called; that the mystics are the great explorers of the interior country, who left us their maps; that they are worth the effort for their unmatched depth, their guidance through the hard passages, and their power to kindle love; that men bounce off them only by reading them wrongly, at the wrong pace, starting in the wrong place, expecting to understand everything; and

that read rightly, slowly, prayerfully, in the right order, with the right expectations, they open.

The room is now yours to enter. Begin gently, with the accessible classics that open the door without overwhelming. Grow accustomed to the slow, prayerful pace, reading a little at a time, taking what opens and letting the rest wait, letting your own prayer be the interpreter. Then, as you are ready, approach the great mystics themselves, Teresa and her castle, John and his dark night that is really the coming of dawn, Catherine and her dialogue with God, and the whole company of those who went furthest into God and wrote down what they found. Keep the cautions they themselves insist on: do not seek experiences, expect slow and quiet growth, keep a guide, stay grounded in the Church. And let them do their work, over years, of deepening your prayer and kindling your love.

What waits behind the door is one of the richest treasures the Church possesses, the accumulated wisdom of the greatest lovers and explorers of God, available to any man willing to learn how to read them. Most Catholics never find the door. You have found it now, and you have the handle. Turn it, and enter, slowly and reverently, into the company of the mystics, and let them guide you deeper into the union with God for which you, like them, were made.

Deep calls to deep. The mystics heard the call and followed it further than almost anyone. Their maps are waiting. Learn to read them, and let them lead you toward the deep for which your own soul, beneath all its restlessness, has always been calling.

✦ ✦ ✦

Reading the Mystics: Finding the Door Most Catholics Never Find is part of The Daily Bread Library.