

*Talk Given by Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault
at Aspen Chapel on March 7, 2004,
marking a month-long focus on mysticism*

There's a famous-allegedly true-story I may have told you before concerning a school board in Tennessee debating about whether or not to introduce the study of foreign languages into the high school curriculum. "Hell, no!" said one board member: "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for my son."

We're in pretty much the same predicament when it comes to looking at the roots of mysticism in the Christian faith. In recent years, you may have noticed, the word "orthodox" applied to Christian belief has come to designate "Biblically based" and "confessing the creeds"-**"DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY AND ETERNAL SON OF GOD, DIED FOR YOUR SINS?"** But what's generally overlooked is that for the first four centuries-its formative and most fruitful years-Christianity had no Bible and no creeds. The Nicene Creed came only in 325, the Bible more than a half century later. What really held the Church during those formative centuries-what gave it life and hope and wings-is a quality not even really recognizable to us anymore, although it is desperately needed. It is best approached through the word "mysticism."

Throughout these next four weeks here at the chapel we are going to attempt to discover together what is meant by mysticism: how it is the real formative ground of Christian orthodoxy, how it applies to ordinary and busy people living in the world today, and how we can regain a collective practice of it to reconnect us to those wellsprings of grace, clear vision, and compassionate love so needed in the Church and in the world. The centerpiece of our work together will take place in a five-day seminar March 15-19, when we'll study Olivier Clement's *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, a marvelous sourcebook and commentary on the mystical foundation of our Christian faith. The opening words of Clement's introduction actually sum up the whole project:

"This book is intended not so much to popularize its subject as to make it known in the first place. Not only is Christianity something strange to people today, but it cannot even attract by its strangeness because people are familiar with the distortions and caricatures of it that are constantly being hawked about. Therefore I have tried to allow the chief witnesses of the undivided Church to speak for themselves, to make audible the voice of tradition from which all the churches spring."

So what is mysticism, anyway? Right here I think we tend to get off on the wrong foot. We look at it as an individual, subjective, and usually ineffable experience of God that some people have and others don't. Remember that old joke: "What did the mystic say to the hot dog vendor?" "Make me one with everything." In that experience of oneness people get swept up into ecstasy and come back babbling nonsense.

But this is a very post-romantic (and probably post LSD) interpretation of mysticism. In the early Christian Church, mysticism means something much more akin to unitive seeing. It's not so much "make me one with everything;" but that you see the unity underlying and holding all the diversity. Rather than getting lost in the forms of consciousness, you experience consciousness itself, directly, as reality. You travel upstream on the river of consciousness and join God at that point of origin where Being, differentiation, form, begin to emerge out of that great, endless stillness of the divine abyss; where Being tumbles out of non-Being.

That's the mystical journey back to Source. But the journey doesn't end there. Having touched Source, you then flow out from it, seeing and witnessing to the unity underlying the diversity... and helping to give shape and voice to the new expressions of divine creativity as at cascades (as it does) into form.

So the mystic is first and foremost a spiritual visionary: the midwife of what is coming into being from the realms above. Jacob Boehme, one of my favorite 17th century mystics, beautifully summarizes the vocation in the following words:

"For you must realize that earth unfolds its properties with Heaven aloft above us, and there is one Heart, one Being, one Will, one God, all in all."

The mystic is one who has verified that statement in his or her own being.

Nowadays we like to think of this kind of seeing as a specialized gift or individual aptitude, but for the early Christians, this was path: a way of seeing that was the fruit of spiritual practice.

And the spiritual practice, in a nutshell, was learning to open the eye of the heart.

When we see with the MIND-linear, rationalistic, egocentric-we see only this world.

When we see with the eye of the HEART, what emerges before us is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Two thousand years ago Jesus burst into planetary space and time-the world's quintessential mystic-speaking about something he called "The Kingdom of Heaven." It was his themesong, his leitmotif: in all his teaching he was pointing to it, trying to explain it. "It's within you," he said; "it's very near"-not a place you go to when you die, or a political utopia, but a way of seeing and being in THIS world which manifests that "one Heart, one Being, one Will, one God, all in all." In the Sermon on the Mount he lay down a core spiritual practice for attaining this state, making it an abiding state of being. And he promised his followers-and sealed this promise at the Last Supper-that whenever and wherever they could sustain this state of total mystical openness, they would meet him, beyond time and beyond death, in the eternal present which is our heart's true home.

Mystical seeing is the inevitable fruit of opening the heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," Jesus taught. When the lens of perception is clear, reality sparkles before you.

So how does the eye of the heart open-or in other words, how do you become a mystic? The earliest Christians were preoccupied with that question, because if they got that right, the rest would flow. Again and again they pointed to a few basic practices: recollection (the ability to stay still and present in one place), non-attachment, surrender, mindfulness, compassion. These practices nourish the heart. And as the heart comes alive as an organ of spiritual perception, we are able to perceive the invisible Kingdom of Love that surrounds us-and live it into being.

The earliest Christian seemed to intuitively know this; right practice was of far greater importance to them than right dogma. (In fact, the word "ortho-dox" actually means "right glory:" right showing forth of the divine Self-manifestation.) Just stay in alignment with the Risen Christ, and the rest would take care of itself.

And it did. Out of those earliest four centuries of Christian life flowed an almost inexhaustible wealth of mystical vision and spiritual energy.

A year ago I had a chance to visit Cappadocia, in central Turkey. Some of you may know that this was the home to a huge and vibrant Christian monastic community, a kind of turbine of Christian mysticism. During periodic persecutions the community moved underground, living in a honeycomb of churches and monasteries carved into the sandstone rock. This is the community in which Basil the great and the two Gregories (Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzen) formulated the doctrine of the Trinity-not as doctrine, but as a mystical mandala of how the Divine moves into form. And as I wandered about through the churches with their remarkable frescoes, I knew I was in the presence of an authentic Wisdom School.

Earlier today we read the Gospel of the Transfiguration. And I saw that Gospel portrayed over and over on the walls and ceilings of these little churches, but in no way that I'd ever seen it anywhere in the West. In the place of that glowing halo we're familiar with today, Jesus was literally giving transmission-"shishk," as they call it in Turkey (as in shishkebob"): rays of light streaming out from him skewering either the heads or the hearts of the sleeping disciples. It was clearly: "I am with you always. I will put my light into your own hearts and minds, and by that light you will recognize me." It is a strong portrait of spiritual transmission-shaktipat--conveyed from master to student through the direct opening of the heart.

How did that era fade? That's a whole other story at the end of an already too long talk. Let me just say that the Mystery of the Risen Christ is always there before us-no farther away than the opening of our own hearts. As we recover contemplative practice in the Church, we recover the mystical seeing that arises inevitably with it. The roots of Christian mysticism are not really in historical time; they are in the Kingdom. And Mysticism seem in this light is not an individualized, subjective experience of God. It is the tie-rod connecting the worlds.

-Cynthia Bourgeault