Cistercian Mysticism

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Table of Contents

Preface to *Cistercian Mysticism*

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University of Chicago

Cistercian mysticism is alive and well, as is demonstrated by this collection of essays gathered from the recent years of the Cistercian Studies Sessions at the annual International Medieval Studies Conferences at Kalamazoo, Michigan. For almost a century now, the religious thought of the White monks and nuns has had an increasing impact on Western spiritual and mystical traditions. What explains this phenomenon? The nine essays in this collection help us to understand important aspects of this appeal.

To be sure, the great Cistercian authors, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint-Thierry, and Aelred of Rievaulx, were notable theologians, the depth of whose insights still provoke speculative interest, as a number of the following essays show. Nevertheless, the basic thrust of these essays is to show that the Cistercian achievement was fundamentally setting out a map of spiritual experience leading to God and, therefore, providing guidance to souls on the path to union, the *unitas spiritus* that the Cistercians spoke of so frequently. Living realities, not abstract theological concepts, was the coin of the Cistercian treasure horde. Their aim was not knowing more about God, but entering into a lived relation with the Trinity, that is, a state of spiritual transformation. Those who read the great Cistercian masters are not primarily seeking more knowledge about an important historical movement (useful as that may be), but searching for a spiritual wisdom that, for all its differences from today, still touches the hearts of spiritual seekers.

The general contours of this interpretation of the Cistercian movement are laid out in the first essay by María Gonzalo-García, "I've Been There: The Mapping of Spiritual Experience in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writings." Sister Gonzalo-García explains how the Cistercians use Scripture and their own experience of God to guide souls towards a deeper recognition of where they stand in the spiritual life so that they too may be able to say, "Yes, I've been there," that is, God has given me some taste of inner joy. As this essay points

out, Cistercian spirituality is not a program for self-improvement, but is rather a call to break out of our self-centeredness through dependence on Christ. "The conversion of the soul is the working of the divine, not the human voice," as Bernard reminds us at the outset of his sermons *De conversione*; hence, we must wait, patiently and longingly, for God's action in our lives.

The remaining essays fill out many aspects of this overall Cistercian strategy. A century ago, the name of William of Saint-Thierry, Bernard's friend and biographer, was known to only a few medievalists. One of the remarkable aspects of the study of the Cistercians over the past hundred years has been the emergence of William as perhaps the most profound of the Cistercian mystics, a point illustrated by the four essays devoted to him here. Each of these pieces investigates an aspect of William's spiritual teaching. Throughout his life, William had a profound interest in the *visio dei*, that is, what it means to see God, both here and hereafter. Carmen Cvetkovic investigates what "seeing God" means for William in the first essay of this section. The basic point of the analysis is that, for William, the *visio dei*, as well as the related motif of "seeking the face of God" (*quaerere faciem dei*), can be best understood as a form of *unitas spiritus*, the "oneness of spirit" that the Cistercians found in Paul (1 Cor. 6:17). Among William's more neglected works are the *Meditativae Orationes (Meditative Prayers)*, a series of prayers in which he wrestles with his own relationship with God, both the positive and the negative aspects. These moving prayers, written between 1121 and 1135, provide us with an insight into William's *persona* second to none, as shown in Delphine Conzelmann's essay, "The Praying Soul understanding Herself—Mystical Experience and Language in William of Saint-Thierry's *Meditativae Orationes*." Professor Conzelmann demonstrates that William's prayers join "exegetical virtuosity with intimate confession and constitute their own genre." Another key theme of William is the *sensus amoris*, that is, the special perception by which the soul recognizes God. In the third of these essays, F. Tyler Sergent argues for a new genealogy of this key concept and shows that it is the central motif for William's understanding of loving and enjoying God. Finally, Aage Rydstrom-Poulsen, in "The Mysticism in William of Saint-Thierry's *Golden Letter* and in Peter Lombard's *Dist.* I.17," argues for a close relation between William's view of the *unitas spiritus* and Peter Lombard's claim that the love with which we love God and our neighbor is actually the Holy Spirit living within us (*Libri Sententiarum*, Book IV, dist. 17). Because this teaching was rejected by Thomas Aquinas, many modern scholars have dismissed it as theological mistake or a mere byway in

medieval thought, but this paper shows that it was widespread for centuries and was actually still supported by many theologians in the thirteenth century.

Bernard of Clairvaux remains the dominant and most read of the Cistercian authors. The reasons are obvious: Bernard was a supreme stylist (although reading him in translation always blunts the power of his Latin artistry); Bernard was a great theologian; and Bernard was a profound spiritual guide. William has had a good deal written about him over the past century; Bernard has been extensively studied and written about since his death in 1153. He remains one of the supreme spiritual guides of the whole Christian tradition. Three essays here consider Bernard and aspects of his spiritual teaching. Bernard was much influenced by a number of patristic authors, especially Augustine. However, the abbot's masterwork, the *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum (SC),* also shows the impact of Origen's commentary on the Song in a number of places. In his treatise *De Isaac vel de anima*, Ambrose of Milan was the first Latin author to make extensive use of a mystical reading of the Song of Songs in sketching out a picture of the soul's ascent to God. Daniel Marcel La Corte explores the role of Ambrose's use of the Song in Bernard's Sermons. Bernard famously proclaimed in the third of the *Sermones super Cantica* that "Today we read in the book of experience." The abbot's appeals to *experientia*, however, are subtle, so we must be careful to avoid thinking of them as purely subjective references to one's own feelings and sensations. Philip F. O'Mara's essay, "Typical, Normal (Almost) Personal: 'I Think' Passages in Bernard's *Sermons in Cantica*," shows that such misperceptions are also often the case when Bernard uses first-person language, as when he says, "I can learn the truth" (SC 78.5). Here, Bernard is actually making a general reference to what all believers should strive to realize, not to his own insights. Once again, Bernard is the teacher of mystical truth for the Church, not just a witness to his own experience. The figures of the sisters Mary and Martha from Luke 10 are famous in Christian history as images of the contemplative life and the active life. James Kroemer, in his essay, "Mary, Martha, and Lazarus," shows that Bernard uses them in this sense (e.g., SC 51), but that the abbot also at times (e.g., SC 57) includes their brother Lazarus in his preaching as an image of the yearning for resurrection that should always characterize the Christian life. Such a reading shows the innovative nature of Bernard's biblical interpretation.

The third of the great trio of Cistercian mystics is the English abbot, Aelred of Rievaulx, the author of many sermons, but also two classic mystical treatises, *De spirituali amicitia* and the *Speculum caritatis.* Rose Marie Tillisch's essay, "Beautiful Friendships," takes the former work as its subject, showing how

Aelred adapted the philosophical dialogue tradition to create a picture of true friendship in Christ in three books that constitute an exploration of the relation between an Augustinian view of beauty and the Ciceronian notion of friendship as "the agreement in all things human and divine with good will and charity."

Why do we read the Cistercian mystics today? Doubtless, their significance as characteristic voices of the twelfth century still moves students of history and, especially, the history of theology. Perhaps there are also students of Latin literature who are drawn to their supple and effective Latinity. What the essays in this volume suggest, however, is that the deepest reason for our ongoing desire to return to the Cistercian masters again and again is that they are great spiritual teachers, ever ready to share their wisdom about the way to God. This is the path that William of Saint-Thierry famously described as following three stages—animal, rational, and spiritual. Concerning the goal of the final spiritual stage, that is, the vision of God, William says: "We are wholly incapable of thinking about this goal, but he whom we love, and of whom we confess we can neither speak nor think in a worthy way, forgives us. And nevertheless, we can speak and think of him as inspired and drawn on by his love, or the love of his love" (*Epistola Aurea* 299).

Introduction

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Mysticism is a crucial phenomenon in the history of the culture of the Western world since it deals with the highest goals and values of human life. The meeting with the highest, the divine, is perceived by human thought and feeling and expressed in human language. It was an important part of the Medieval monastic world, and together with many other things, it deeply influenced the intellectual and spiritual culture of the Western world. The history of mysticism in the Western world can well be seen as a history of the highest and most important ambitions and possibilities of the individual regarding the understanding of oneself and the highest at all. The Cistercian Mysticism is an outstanding example of this with names such as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint-Thierry, Aelred of Rievaulx and their patristic sources in Augustine and Ambrose of Milan.

The commonly used definition of mysticism as "Experience of the Divine" has, to a certain degree, been challenged by the Chicago professor Bernard McGinn who suggested a more broad definition of mysticism in Christianity as "that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to the immediate or direct presence of God."[1] However, it may be sufficient to talk about the Christian mysticism in its core as simply the individual meeting with the divine. At least, this is what can be summarized from the following nine chapters on the special Cistercian contribution in the blooming twelfth century to the Western history of Christian mysticism. The following presentation of the anthology consists almost entirely of the authors' abstracts of their contributions. For references, please see the chapters.

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[1] Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century. The Presence of God*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 1994), xi. See also C. Cvetković, art. "Mysticism" (1090-1582), *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1434.

In the first chapter, "I've Been There: The Mapping of Spiritual Experience in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writings," Sr. María Gonzalo-García shows how the longing to see God and the commitment to this search are at the heart of monastic life, and that *The Rule of St. Benedict* entrusts those who begin their journey to someone skilled in winning souls. The Cistercian writers of the twelfth century took upon themselves this care of souls, using different literary styles to address a central goal: the mapping of spiritual experience. Being aware of the purpose of these writers can help modern readers approach their works, which otherwise may defy their genre expectations. In his *Sermon 84 On the Song of Songs*, Bernard of Clairvaux expresses his solicitude toward those who do not know how to interpret their spiritual experience, "How can we make them believe that it is the Bridegroom who deals thus with them, when they themselves cannot yet perceive what is happening to them?" This concern, that of the need for a teacher to point out to the less advanced where, how, and by what path they are to seek happiness through love, can also be traced throughout the writings of William of Saint-Thierry and Aelred of Rievaulx. But these writers were more than teachers. They themselves have run after the Bridegroom, just like the bride in the Song of Songs, and they have become mothers, ready to feed others with the milk of their experience. Similarly, the best way to understand the interior landscape they described is to follow along with them. Receiving the kind of knowledge they wanted to transmit implies embarking on this inner journey of transformation, a process that leads to enlightened love, this is the wisdom that can discern, savor, and choose the good, aided by the recognition, "I've been there."

In the second chapter, "*Deum invisibiliter videre*: William of Saint-Thierry's View on *Visio Dei*" Carmen Cvetković gives a presentation of William of Saint-Thierry (c. 1080-1148) as a monk meant to live a life of constant search for direct contact with God. In his works, he described, often from different perspectives, what entailed such a direct encounter with God. Thus, he talked about tasting God, enjoying God, loving God and experiencing union with God. In addition, following in the footsteps of his Christian predecessors, in particular Augustine, William frequently described the soul's encounter with God as a vision. However, in modern scholarship William's notion of seeing God has not been much discussed. The chapter explores William's view on *visio Dei*, a topic that preoccupied him from his very first work, entitled *De Contemplando Deo* and that remained of constant interest throughout his theological career, being discussed again in *Meditativae orationes* and especially in the mature treatise *Aenigma fidei*. How is it possible, according to William, for human

beings to see God in this life, and if so, under which circumstances? Why is William urging his fellow monks to seek the very face of God, and what are the effects of the vision of God, if any, on the life of monks?

The third chapter, "The Praying Soul Understanding Herself – Mystical Experience and Language in William of Saint-Thierry's *Meditativae Orationes*," Delphine Conzelmann focuses on the transposition of mystical themes into the personal and self-reflective world of prayer, by analyzing a selection of prayers contained in the *Meditationes Devotissimae* of William of Saint-Thierry. There are within the literary corpus of William other sources that provide a more systematic overview of his conception of the human soul, such as *De natura corporis et animae* or the *Aenigma fidei*. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a schematic representation of William's anthropology, but rather to explore how William poetically and emotionally discusses the way in which he perceives his own relationship with God. The transformation of the soul toward the state of image-likeness and through the process of self-knowledge is a central theme in William's thought, yet it is usually discussed in doctrinal terms. The chapter augments this perspective with a consideration of William's more self-reflective and personal texts. Though certainly composed in a literary way, the *Meditationes* contain an unsparing account of the daily monastic experience and its psychological dimensions. The exegetical and speculative ideas contained in other areas of his work come to fruition in the *Meditationes*. As William sets them in relation to his life as a Cistercian monk, they reveal ethical, liturgical and pastoral areas of his thought. Viewing the mystical images and themes in William's work through the lens of his prayers provides a fuller and more accurate understanding of his spirituality.

Chapter four, "*Sensus Amoris* in William of Saint-Thierry's Mysticism" by F. Tyler Sergent, shows how the phrase *sensus amoris* ("sense of love") has few—if any—literary precedents prior to William, who uses the term seventeen times in five different works and may have coined the phrase. S*ensus amoris* is one of many metaphors William uses to describe how the human soul attains knowledge, understanding, and enjoyment of God in the present life. The sense of love, however, is more significant than many other metaphors because it relates directly to love – which, for William, is the primary means of knowing God and the only means for loving and enjoying God. In his usage of *sensus amoris*, William begins with the analogy of physical senses and sensory perception to spiritual senses and the epistemology of love. He delves most deeply into his meaning of *sensus amoris* throughout his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*. The meaning he formulates for *sensus amoris* and *sensus amoris*

illuminati in the context of the soul's mystical union with God and the process for this union as interpreted allegorically from the Song of Songs remains the foundational meaning that appears in his later writings. As a result, *sensus amoris* becomes central to William's spiritual theology for understanding, loving, and enjoying God—leading to mystical union with God, including as much as possible in the present life. William provides both the phrase and the concept of *sensus amoris* as original contributions to the Christian monastic spiritual and mystical tradition.

My chapter, "Mysticism in The Golden Letter of William of Saint-Thierry and Peter Lombard's Dist. I,17," takes a starting point in William's *Golden Letter* that ends "Secretum meum mihi, secretum meum mihi." But William is not silent about the experience and the way into this experience which we call mysticism. The expression "mysticism" is blurred and gives the impression of something above understanding, but William describes how the steps are to be seen to arrive at the goal: the meeting with the divine. William has found "the ancient fervor of Egypt among the brothers at Mont-Dieu," and he wants, as he says, his soul to run with them "in the joy of the spirit and with a smiling heart…" to "taste him (God), understand him, … enjoy him." It is about knowledge of God face to face "in this life." It is not about a flight from this life in the world; the partnership of the body is needed because the body shall serve the spirit, William points out. And "the lofty flights of contemplation do not entitle to neglect the fellowship of the common life and the sweetness of fraternal charity." In short, William says, "Let us strive … to see, by seeing to understand, by understanding to love, by loving to possess." The chapter shows how William understands what we call mysticism as an expressly ambitious, goal-oriented process to reach the highest possible in this life and to live in this situation. The chapter goes on to show, as it has been remarked in modern scholarship, that the Lombard's famous identification of *caritas*, by which humans love God and neighbor, with the Holy Spirit (in his *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae* from the middle of the 1150s) is close to, if not the same, as the fundamental teaching of William of Saint-Thierry on *Unitas Spiritus* (in his *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei* from the middle of the 1140s *et passim* in his writings before). Both William and Peter are well rooted in Augustine on this issue, in accordance with Rom 5:5 and 1. Jo 4:16b, and the theory is clearly not a "*Sonderlehre*" by the Lombard as maintained in earlier scholarship. The chapter sketches out how widespread this teaching was in the Western theological tradition from Augustine and up to the twelfth century, as well as how many followers it had among the early scholastic teachers. The question is considered whether William of Saint-

Thierry can be said to be the important monastic source of the dissemination of this mystical theory in the twelfth century and thus for the history of the theological anthropology of the Western world.

Chapter six, "Mystical Kisses: The Song of Songs in the Works of Ambrose of Milan and Bernard of Clairvaux" by Daniel Marcel La Corte, deals with Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* that is hailed as his most sophisticated mystical text. The tradition on which Bernard drew and contributed, reflects an immersion in and great debt to a deep literary heritage, both "secular and patristic." Étienne Gilson writes that Bernard's understanding of the mystical life would have been influenced by Tertullian, Origin, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Gregory the Great, as one would suspect. Yet it is another, sometimes neglected Church Father, Ambrose of Milan, who may have had an influence on Bernard's words in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. In his *Mystical Theology* of Bernard, Gilson mentions that Bernard "… follows Saint Ambrose [here], there Saint Augustine …." Yet, Gilson fails to follow up his assertion with sources for this influence. Further, he still maintains that "It is unnecessary then to say that Saint Ambrose should be regarded as one important source of Cistercian mysticism." In his *The Growth of Medieval Theology,* Jaroslav Pelikan offers three possible Ambrosian influences on Bernard's thought, but there is little analysis or explanation, and no sources. Another Ambrosian connection is found in Bernard McGinn's *Foundations of Mysticism*. McGinn writes, "Ambrose's recognition of the pattern of experience of God's presence and his absence, found in *On Isaac* ... may well have influenced his ... later readers, especially the great commentaries of Bernard of Clairvaux ... who also explored the dialectic of presence and absence found in the *Song of Songs*." Again, there is no note or reference to demonstrate this connection or influence specifically. This chapter explores Ambrose's *On Isaac* for possible influences on Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*.

The seventh chapter, "Typical, Normal (Almost) Personal: 'I Think' Passages in Bernard's Last Sermons In Cantica" by Philip F. O'Mara, shows how Bernard of Clairvaux often adds "I think" to passages in the *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, seeming to report an insight of his own. This is rarely the case. The *Sermons* are a classic of mysticism, with such interjections as "poor as I am" (S. 70) having a different character. Thus, in Sermon 78.5, "I can learn truth" refers directly to anybody who loves truth. "I" refers to typical outlooks or sometimes to normative understandings of the life of faith. "I" thus approaches a modern meaning of "one," such as "one feels free to assert." Bernard's teaching, irrelevant to his unique religious experience, is proper to the abbot's task to

clarify, e.g., in *Sermon* 69, how God's promises apply both universally to the Church and, in privileged hope, to monks with limited comprehension of purifying mercy and charity, and most needed, for those in the expanding Clairvaux affiliation, who are called to leadership. In *Sermon* 81, "I" means "one" in a discussion of the soul lacking sanctifying grace, its paradoxical freedom only to ratify and continue its sinfulness until grace is given. The "I" passage restates, with a care for precision that would do credit to William of Saint-Thierry, the Augustinian teaching that such a soul sins in all of its responsible acts.

Chapter eight, "Mary, Martha, and Lazarus: The Interplay of the Contemplative Life, the Active Life, and a Yearning for Resurrection in the Mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux" by James Kroemer, shows that the use of the New Testament figures Mary and Martha was, according to Giles Constable, quite common in Christian writings. Bernard of Clairvaux would, on occasion, use the Mary and Martha metaphor to discuss the contemplative and active life. For example, in *Sermon* 51 on the Song of Songs, he wrote that contemplation does not last long in the body, but when one falls from contemplation, then it is time to take refuge in action. Contemplation and action can live together, according to Bernard, because Martha is sister to Mary. However, in *Sermon* 57 on the Song of Songs, Bernard included Lazarus in his Mary and Martha metaphor. This sermon was written sometime around 1147, as Bernard was preaching the Second Crusade. The abbot complained in this sermon, "You see here a holy man, violently tossed between the fruit of action and the quiet of contemplation." He added, "When at prayer I accuse myself of indifference at work, when at work of upsetting my prayer." He then pointed to the Mary and Martha relationship, which one might think would justify how contemplation and action can coexist together. But the abbot startled by including the brother of these two sisters, Lazarus. "I refer to Martha as serving, Mary in repose, and to Lazarus groaning beneath the stone beseeching the grace of resurrection." Martha represented Bernard's preaching or active life. Mary represented his contemplative life. And their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, represented the grace of the resurrection. *Sermon* 57 clearly shows that Bernard's Lazarus, or an eschatological desire, shared a room in his soul along with Martha and Mary. The chapter argues that a yearning for the resurrection of the body on the Last Day played an integral part in the mysticism of Bernard.

The ninth chapter, "Beautiful Friendships" by Rose Marie Tillisch, shows how Aelred of Rievaulx's way of building his treatise *De spirituali amicitia* follows an

Augustinian theological rhythm unfolded in a philosophical tradition of dialogue. The structure is built on the history of salvation, while the content is built on Cicero's book on friendship serving as a kind of "Old Testament," the three dialogue books then becoming a "New Testament" of friendship. Aelred of Rievaulx's treatise *On Spiritual Friendship* is a mirror to the heavenly, the experience of transcendence in immanence, and sometimes even juggles this dynamic with a cancellation of the object-subject relationship. Aelred manages to expand the concept of love changing through practice and self-reflection, into true friendship. It serves as a practical and spiritual pastoral care by using literary figures, aspects of himself, and spiritual experiences as examples. Aelred comes before God as though juggling his literary alter egos, selecting each, in turn, to show which one is needed most in a specific situation in order to help the readers or listeners to recognize the same kind of experience in themselves.

We are most thankful to Vernon Press for taking the initiative to edit this anthology after having noticed the sessions on Cistercian Mysticism at the International Congresses on Medieval Studies in 2022, 2023, and 2024, all at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan, just as two sessions on Cistercian Mysticism are scheduled for the same Medieval Congress in May 2025.

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PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

Index

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

O

P

R

S

T

U

V

W