

A mystical renaissance is at work in our world. Like a subtle field of grace that surrounds our world, individuals everywhere are exploring the seductive invitation to develop a joyful and intimate relationship with God. In keeping with the nature of this mystical awakening, more and more people are discovering the need to develop a more refined spiritual path. This new path that so many are drawn to today embodies characteristics once so familiar to the great mystics of the medieval and Renaissance eras. These mystics, our great spiritual teachers, include Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Francis of Assisi, St. John the Evangelist, Meister Eckhart, Francis de Sales, Catherine of Sienna, Thérèse of Lisieux, Evelyn Underhill, and Mother Teresa in modern times.

Simply described, these mystics drew their strength from a devotion to prayer, contemplation, and self-reflection. They knew that a daily practice of time alone with God was required to review the day and reflect upon the well being and harmony of their souls. Today, we are rediscovering the way in which they knew God. For all their differences, the common ground these mystics shared was a devotion to prayer and an unyielding faith in their mystical relationships with God.

As mystics in their day, these great spiritual teachers knew that God expected a great deal of them. God

was, first of all, their most intimate companion. They knew the Divine through direct experience, not through intellectual discourse. Their lives were a continual Holy Communion with the Divine. That did not make their physical lives easy, and it didn't clear their paths of the boulders of fear and doubt. Such intimacy, however, did make their faith unrelenting and their understanding absolute in terms of what was real or unreal, authentic, or illusory. They knew when God spoke directly to them and commanded them into action. "Francis," the Lord said, "rebuild my church." Perhaps Francis of Assisi paused for several moments, maybe even several days, wondering about that voice. But once he realized that God had spoken to him, he became illuminated with a fullness of grace. Nothing could dissuade him from his Divine orders.

The mystics knew when to hold tight to their faith, especially when they were confronted with attacks from both inside and outside their monasteries. Attacks came mostly from those who envied the stamina in the souls of these saints. Mystical experiences and intimacy with the Divine do not translate into lives of ease. Rather, they produce people of truth, strength, and courage. No life path—even a mystic's—can alter the nature of life itself. Life is an ongoing journey of change and choice, a surrendering of the old and a trust in new beginnings. What these saints ultimately realized—and revealed to others—is that refining a relationship with God is the life choice on which all else is built. Once

that choice is made, it becomes your guide, no matter what difficulties life brings your way. No one can avoid hardships because life includes pain and heartache. But life can also include love and service to others and endless acts of creation on this earth. Love, service, and creation are legendary hallmarks in the lives of the saints. So, faith and prayer are not just resources we can turn to when we are in crisis. They are indispensable. As Teresa of Avila taught her nuns so well, "Learn to see God in the details of your life, for He is everywhere."

These wonderful mystics are enjoying a renewed popularity precisely because so many people are recognizing the need to find the Sacred once again. These men and women seek weekend retreats in monasteries just to be in the silence that was so familiar to those devoted full-time to contemplative life. The ordinary person, the "mystic out of a monastery" is now seeking an extraordinary spiritual life. If you are one of these, you will discover that the wisdom and the writings of these wondrous saints are as valuable today as they were hundreds of years ago. The truth is that the journey of the soul has never changed. We need to clearly mark that well-worn path to the Divine on which we see footprints of these saints.

In teaching about prayer, I am inevitably confronted with many questions from people. "What is prayer?" "How do I pray?" "What are the right prayers to say?" The awkwardness that people have around prayer reveals their awkwardness around God. We have built a

culture on the intellectualizing of God. Talking about God or reading about what we think God is or is not can feel like a spiritual practice. But talking or reading about God is just that—no more and no less.

True prayer, on the other hand, is the practice of shutting down the mind and reflecting upon an elevated truth or mystical thought. This thought lifts you beyond the limitations of your five senses. In describing a mystical experience, Teresa wrote that her mind and eyes wanted to come with her, but they simply could not make the journey. Her senses were simply unable to withstand the presence of God. Only her soul had the stamina to be in the company of the Divine. In truth, these mystics realized what we all long to realize—intimacy with the Sacred. We are born with a yearning for God that we can try to fill with material goods and worldly accomplishments. At the end of the day, however, we are left wanting more. Julian of Norwich understood this so well, saying that ultimately, “Nothing less than God can satisfy us.”

Life is an empty journey without the companionship of God. And developing a sense of Divine intimacy requires time set aside to be with God in prayer, reflection, and contemplation. I am a passionate lover of Teresa of Avila, and I use her prayers daily. I find her prayer, “Let nothing disturb the silence of this moment with you, Oh Lord,” the most comforting prayer I have ever found in my life. I repeat that prayer as often as a dozen times a day. It brings me back into my castle,

back into my soul, and I am once again with God. Immediately, I feel surrounded by a field of grace, no matter where I am or what is happening around me. Then I select some of her other prayers. With her words, I close the drawbridge into my castle, withdrawing from the world of my senses and from the clutter of my mind. Alone with God, I dwell on Teresa's wisdom: "If you have God you will want for nothing." Her words lift me beyond the boundaries of my ordinary life. I often feel as if I am hovering over my body, the temporary me experiencing—just for a second—the width and breadth of eternity. Against that backdrop, I project what is troubling me, and it vanishes. Such is the enduring power of prayer and grace in the pages of Teresa's books.

The writings of Teresa and other mystics are alive and full of grace in this series—30 Days with a Great Spiritual Teacher. To read one of their prayers is to read about their experiences of God. Take this grace into you and let it take you away from the here and now of your life. Let the wisdom of these teachers hover over your life. Make contact with your own eternal self.

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