
The Transparent Self

BY BETTY W. TALBERT

The ancient Greek Fathers of the Church taught that all Christians, through mystical experience of God, can become windows through which the light of God shines without hindrance. How does mystical experience, gladly received, transform us so that our transparent selves become a catalyst for the conversion of others?

The children's Sunday school class members were now old enough to take a walking tour of "big church" where the lovely stained glass windows depicted past heroes of faith like Francis of Assisi, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, and John Wesley. So the teacher asked the children, "Who were the saints?" For a moment there was silence. Then a boy grinned and replied confidently, "The saints are the Christian heroes in the windows of our church. They are the people the light shines through."

Indeed, these heroes' mystical experiences of God had the effect of making them transparent for God's light to shine through their lives to others. The example of their lives raises the question: How does Christian mystical experience, gladly received, transform such individuals who are so illumined that their transparent selves become a catalyst for the conversion of others?

Mystical experiences of God often occur in childhood and at midlife. The young seem by their very nature to be especially open to God. Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century church reformer, refocused the piety of his day on the earthly Jesus because of a vision he had as a six year old during midnight Mass. He dreamed that he was present at the birth of Jesus, and this gave him a sense of a familial connection to Jesus throughout his life. In the fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena was about the

same young age when she saw a vision of God above a Dominican church in her village. As a result, she served the Lord as a Dominican for the rest of her life. These childhood mystical experiences that bore fruit throughout the lives of these saints offer an important reminder to the Church today. God continues to touch and call our children in the present. We should be prepared to nurture such experiences and direct their effects.

At midlife, when their self-constructed self-images and worldviews broke apart, some of our heroes found themselves vulnerable, lonely, and desperate for a new identity. Francis of Assisi was such a man. Having failed at his life goal of becoming a chivalrous knight, he turned to plead with God for help. Looking up at the crucifix in the church of San Damiano, he saw Jesus weeping real tears. This awakened Francis to the call to be the greatest evangelist of the thirteenth century. John Wesley in the eighteenth century and Frank Laubach in the twentieth century, both failed missionaries, are other saints who experienced God's mystical touch in a time of spiritual failure. As a result, their lives were changed and their ministries greatly expanded. The crises of midlife often create a second openness not unlike the openness of childhood. In the context of this openness, a life-changing experience with the numinous can become the cornerstone on which to build a new life and a touchstone to which one returns during periods of doubt and discouragement.

What would we look like today if, like the spiritual heroes of the past, we enjoyed a mystical experience of God? The young boy's comment in Sunday school that "the saints are the people the light shines through" says a lot about what happens when we open ourselves to God in mystical experience. The promise of the Christian past is that we too may become so transparent to God's light that other people will be able to see through us to God.

The ancient Greek Fathers of the Church taught that all Christians, through mystical experience of God, can become windows through which the light of God shines without hindrance. They made three suggestions about how we can cooperate with God's initiative in making us transparent for God's light. First, they advised purgation. This means using the light we have from the experience of God and from Scripture to wash out of our lives those thoughts and habits that obscure the light of God in the self. Second, they advocated frequent participation in Holy Communion. That is, they encouraged meeting with other Christians regularly and, after confessing our sins, eating the ritual meal Jesus established. This allows God's grace to work in our lives to cleanse the window of the self. Third, they urged us to enter daily and deeply into silent prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to take away all that is false within the self. Purgation, participation in Holy Communion, and silent prayer are how we cooperate with God who comes to us in mystical experience.

Surveys indicate that most Americans believe they have had a mystical experience of some kind or other. Christian theology instructs us that the test of legitimate mystical experience with God is found in the effects of the encounter. True mystical experience changes the self, making it transparent before God and allowing God's light to shine through to others. It calls for an appropriate faithful response on the part of Christian recipients. The saints model both the transformative effects of their mystical experience and the appropriate faithful response to God's gracious gift.



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