

*'This was the first time I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality  
in anyone who professed Christianity.'*

**The Dalai Lama**

# THE ASCENT TO TRUTH

*A study of St John of the Cross*

**THOMAS MERTON**



## THE ASCENT TO TRUTH



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NO MAN IS AN ISLAND  
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THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE  
BREAD IN THE WILDERNESS  
THE LIVING BREAD  
THE NEW MAN

# THE ASCENT TO TRUTH

THOMAS MERTON

BURNS & OATES

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To  
Our Lady of Mount Carmel

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

As soon as the reader has penetrated to the substance of this book, he will understand why it is dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It is chiefly concerned with the doctrine of the Carmelite theologian, Saint John of the Cross. Then again, under her title (among others) of Our Lady of Mount Carmel the Blessed Virgin is venerated as patroness of contemplatives and, above all, of those who try to share with others the fruits of their contemplation. The whole aim of the Order founded in her honour is to enable its members to reach the height of contemplation under her guidance and to bring others to that same end, aided by her intercession.

There is no member of the Church who does not owe something to Carmel. But there are few who owe more to the saints of Carmel and to its Queen than does the author. Above all, this book was written, so to speak, under her direction and tutelage. Difficult technical problems and other obstacles which had delayed its writing for two years suddenly vanished after the feast of Saint John of the Cross in 1951 when, among other graces, the author came by a precious relic of the great Mystic of Carmel. From then on, it was relatively smooth sailing, and the author is left with the impression that his finished manuscript reached the publication stage in a manner totally unexpected, not because of his abilities but rather in spite of his limitations.

The dedication of this book is also a special expression of gratitude and of brotherly affection for all those Discalced Carmelites with whom the author is united by bonds of friendship, including Father François de Sainte Marie, Friar of Avon in France, and all the members of three Carmels in particular—the convents in Louisville, San Francisco, and New York. That these have been singled out does not imply exclusion of other Carmelites, both Regular and Tertiaries; for all are one with the author in the pursuit of Divine Union. May their prayers make up for the defects of this book, which is intended for the glory of Christ,

through Our Lady, and ensure that it does not fall short of her desires.

To end here would perhaps leave the reader with the impression that the book was solely inspired from on high and that the author owed nothing to any human instructor. This would be a false impression and quite contrary to the spirit of Catholicism, besides being an injustice to living writers to whom I am much indebted. The first of these is Jacques Maritain, who, in his longest and greatest work, *Degrees of Knowledge*, has given us an orderly and luminous treatment of the whole ascent to truth. I refer the reader to everything that has been said by Jacques Maritain, here and elsewhere, about scientific and philosophical knowledge. It forms the necessary groundwork for the doctrine which I here propose: I am particularly indebted to Part Two of the *Degrees of Knowledge* and to the little book, *Prayer and Intelligence*. Another excellent book, which gives a simple but lucid outline of the questions which have most exercised me in the present work, is *The Dark Knowledge of God* by Monsignor Charles Journet of the University of Fribourg.

Needless to say, I am also in everlasting debt for the aid given me by the friendship, inspiration, and prayers of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. I cannot omit my indebtedness in this same regard to my friends, Dr. Daniel C. Walsh and Sister M. Thérèse, S.D.S. Finally, of course, I express my gratitude to Professor E. Allison Peers of the University of Liverpool, the translator of *Saint John of the Cross*, whose translation I have quoted even more extensively here than elsewhere.

It gives me great joy to feel that by virtue of the present book, whatever may be its failings, the charity of Christ has united me with these and numberless other guides, advisers, and friends, under the peaceful shadow of Our Lady's mantle.

FR. M. LOUIS MERTON, O.C.S.O.

*Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani*

**“ In His hands He hideth the light and commandeth  
it to come again. He sheweth His friend concerning it,  
that it is His possession and that he may ascend to it ”**

**JOB 36:32-33**

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## PROLOGUE

### MYSTICISM IN MAN'S LIFE

**T**HE ONLY THING that can save the world from complete moral collapse is a spiritual revolution. Christianity, by its very nature, demands such a revolution. If Christians would all live up to what they profess to believe, the revolution would happen. The desire for unworldliness, detachment, and union with God is the most fundamental expression of this revolutionary spirit. The one thing that remains is for Christians to affirm their Christianity by that full and unequivocal rejection of the world which their Baptismal vocation demands of them. This will certainly not incapacitate them for social action in the world, since it is the one essential condition for a really fruitful Christian apostolate.

The human race is facing the greatest crisis in its history, because religion itself is being weighed in the balance. The present unrest in five continents, with everyone fearful of being destroyed, has brought many men to their knees. This should not lead us into the illusion that the world is necessarily about to return to God. Nevertheless, the exposure of the nineteenth-century myths—"unlimited progress" and the "omnipotence" of physical science—has thrown the world into confusion. Many are spontaneously turning to the only evident hope for spiritual and moral integration—an order based on philosophical and theological truth, one which allows free expression to the fundamental religious instinct of man. So vast is this movement that a psychoanalyst as important as Carl Jung can make the following declaration:

I have treated many hundreds of patients, the larger number being Protestants, a smaller number Jews and not more than five or six believing Catholics. Among all my patients in the second half of my life . . . there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given their followers and none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.<sup>1</sup>

The big problem that confronts Christianity is not Christ's enemies. Persecution has never done much harm to the inner life of the Church as such. The real religious problem exists in the souls of those of us who in their hearts believe in God, and who recognize their obligation to love Him and serve Him—yet do not!

The world we live in is dry ground for the seed of God's Truth. A modern American city is not altogether a propitious place in which to try to love God. You cannot love Him unless you know Him. And you cannot come to know Him unless you have a little time and a little peace in which to pray and think about Him and study His truth. Time and peace are not so easily come by in this civilization of ours. And so those who profess to serve God are often forced to get along without either, and to sacrifice their hopes of an interior life. But how far can one go in this sacrifice before it ceases to be a sacrifice and becomes a prevarication? The truth is, we are simply not permitted to devote ourselves to God without at the same time leading an interior life.

The reason for this is plain. Everything we do in the service of God has to be vitalized by the supernatural power of His grace. But grace is granted us in proportion as we dispose ourselves to receive it by the interior activity of the theological virtues: faith, hope, charity. These virtues demand the full and constant exercise of our intelligence and will. But this exercise is frequently obstructed by exterior influences which blind us with passion and draw us away from our supernatural objective. This cannot be avoided, but it must be fought against by a constant discipline of recollection, meditation, prayer, study, mortification of the desires, and at least some measure of solitude and retirement.

It is certainly not possible, or even desirable, that every Christian should leave the world and enter a Trappist monastery. Nevertheless, the sudden interest of Americans in the contemplative life seems to prove one thing quite clearly: that contemplation, asceticism, mental prayer, and unworldliness are elements that most need to be rediscovered by Christians of our time. There is little danger that we will neglect apostolic labour and exterior activity. Pope Pius XII in a recent Exhortation drew attention to the fact that external activity had perhaps been over-

stressed in some quarters, and reminded Catholics that their personal sanctity and union with Christ in a deep interior life were the most important things of all. His Holiness writes:

We cannot abstain from expressing our preoccupation and our anxiety for those who, on account of the special circumstances of the moment, have become so engulfed in the vortex of external activity that they neglect the chief duty [of the Christian]: his own sanctification. We have already stated publicly in writing that those who presume that the world can be saved by what has rightly been called the "heresy of action" must be made to exercise better judgment.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the Communists used to be in revolt against everything "bourgeois" imposed on every serious Communist the obligation to practise a strict and almost religious asceticism with regard to practically everything that is valued by the society he hates. I say that this *used to be* the case, because it is clear that the Stalinist empire has rapidly reached a cultural level in which everything that was basest in bourgeois materialism has become the Stalinist ideal. If Christianity is to prove itself in open rebellion against the standards of the materialist society in which it is fighting for survival, Christians must show more definite signs of that *agere contra*, that positive "resistance," which is the heart of the Christian ascetic "revolution." The true knowledge of God can be bought only at the price of this resistance.

We, who live in what we ourselves have called the Atomic Age, have acquired a peculiar facility for standing back and reflecting on our own history as if it were a phenomenon that took place five thousand years ago. We like to talk about our time as if we had no part in it. We view it as objectively as if it existed outside ourselves, in a glass case. If you are looking for the Atomic Age, look inside yourself: because you are it. And so, alas, am I.

The evil that is in the modern world ought to be sufficient indication that we do not know as much as we think we do. It is a strange paradox indeed that modern man should know so much and still know practically nothing. The paradox is most strange because men in other times, who have known less than we know, have in fact known more.

True, in all times there has been wickedness and great blind-



ness in this world of men. There is nothing new under the sun, not even the H-bomb (which was invented by our Father Adam). And it is also true that the ages of greatest despair have sometimes ended up by being ages of triumph and hope. There would be little point in writing a book about the Ascent to Truth if there were no hope for the sanity of the human race. Now that we have awakened to our fundamental barbarism, it seems to me that there is once again a hope for civilization, because men of good will want more than ever to be civilized. And now that we have our tremendous capacities for evil staring us in the face, there is more incentive than ever for men to become saints. For man is naturally inclined to good, and not to evil. Besides our nature, we have what is infinitely greater—the grace of God, which draws us powerfully upward to the infinite Truth and is refused to no one who desires it.

The whole happiness of man and even his sanity depend on his moral condition. And since society does not exist all by itself in a void, but is made up of the individuals who compose it, the problems of society cannot ultimately be solved except in terms of the moral life of individuals. If the citizens are sane, the city will be sane. If the citizens are wild animals, the city will be a jungle.

But morality is not an end in itself. Virtue, for a Christian, is not its own reward. God is our reward. The moral life leads to something beyond itself—to the experience of union with God, and to our transformation in Him. This transformation is perfected in another life, and in the light of glory. But even on earth man may be granted a foretaste of heaven in mystical contemplation. And whether he experiences it or not, the man of faith, by virtue of his faith, is already living in heaven. *Conversatio nostra in coelis!*

The fact that contemplation is actually the lot of very few men does not mean that it has no importance for mankind as a whole.

If the salvation of society depends, in the long run, on the moral and spiritual health of individuals, the subject of contemplation becomes a vastly important one, since contemplation is one of the indications of spiritual maturity. It is closely allied to sanctity. You cannot save the world merely with a system.

You cannot have peace without charity. You cannot have order without saints.

2

Our nature imposes on us a certain pattern of development which we must follow if we are to fulfil our best capacities and achieve at least the partial happiness of being human. This pattern must be properly understood and it must be worked out in all its essential elements. Otherwise, we fail. But it can be stated very simply, in a single sentence: *We must know the truth, and we must love the truth we know, and we must act according to the measure of our love.*

What are the elements of this "pattern" I speak of? *First*, and most important of all: I must adapt myself to objective reality. *Second*, this adaptation is achieved by the work of my highest spiritual faculties—intelligence and will. *Third*, it demands expression when my whole being, commanded by my will, produces actions which, by their moral vitality and fruitfulness, show that I am living in harmony with the true order of things.

These are the bare essentials of the pattern. They represent a psychological necessity without which man cannot preserve his mental and spiritual health.

I have only stated these fundamentals of our nature in order to build on them. Contemplation reproduces the same essential outline of this pattern, but on a much higher level. For contemplation is a work of grace. The Truth to which it unites us is not an abstraction but Reality and Life itself. The love by which it unites us to this Truth is a gift of God and can only be produced within us by the direct action of God. The activity which is its final and most perfect fruit is a charity so supreme that it gathers itself into a timeless self-oblation in which there is no motion, for all its perfection is held within the boundless radius of a moment that is eternal.

These are difficult matters. To return to our simple sentence: When I say that we must know the truth and love the truth we know, I am not talking primarily about the truth of individual facts and statements but about truth as such. Truth is reality

itself, considered as the object of the intellect. The Truth man needs to know is the transcendent reality, of which particular truths are merely a partial manifestation. Since we ourselves are real, this Truth is not so far distant from us as one might imagine.

Our ordinary waking life is a bare existence in which, most of the time, we seem to be absent from ourselves and from reality because we are involved in the vain preoccupations which dog the steps of every living man. But there are times when we seem suddenly to awake and discover the full meaning of our own present reality. Such discoveries are not capable of being contained in formulas or definitions. They are a matter of personal experience, of uncommunicable intuition. In the light of such an experience it is easy to see the futility of all the trifles that occupy our minds. We recapture something of the calm and the balance that ought always to be ours, and we understand that life is far too great a gift to be squandered on anything less than perfection.

In the lives of those who are cast adrift in the modern world, with nothing to rely on but their own resources, these moments of understanding are short-lived and barren. For, though man may get a glimpse of the natural value of his spirit, nature alone is incapable of fulfilling his spiritual aspirations.

The Truth man needs is not a philosopher's abstraction, but God Himself. The paradox of contemplation is that God is never really known unless He is also loved. And we cannot love Him unless we do His will. This explains why modern man, who knows so much, is nevertheless ignorant. Because he is without love, modern man fails to see the only Truth that matters and on which all else depends.

God becomes present in a very special way and manifests Himself in the world wherever He is known and loved by men. His glory shines in an ineffable manner through those whom He has united to Himself. Those who as yet know nothing of God have a perfect right to expect that we who *do* pretend to know Him should give evidence of the fact, not only by "satisfying every one that asketh us a reason of that hope which is in us,"\* but above all by the testimony of our own lives. For Christ said, in His priestly prayer:

*The glory which thou hast given me I have given them, that they may be one as we also are one: I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one: and the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them as thou hast also loved me.<sup>4</sup>*

It is useless to study truths about God and lead a life that has nothing in it of the Cross of Christ. No one can do such a thing without, in fact, displaying complete ignorance of the meaning of Christianity. For the Christian economy is by no means a mere philosophy or an ethical system, still less a social theory.

Christ was not a wise man who came to teach a doctrine. He is God, Who became incarnate in order to effect a mystical transformation of mankind. He did, of course, bring with Him a doctrine greater than any that was ever preached before or since. But that doctrine does not end with moral ideas and precepts of asceticism. The teaching of Christ is the seed of a new life. Reception of the word of God by faith initiates man's transformation. It elevates him above this world and above his own nature and transports his acts of thought and of desire to a supernatural level. He becomes a partaker of the divine nature, a son of God, and Christ is living in him. From that moment forward, the door to eternity stands open in the depths of his soul and he is capable of becoming a contemplative. Then he can watch at the frontier of an abyss of light so bright that it is darkness. Then he will burn with desire to see the fullness of Light and will cry out to God, like Moses in the cloud on Sinai: "Show me Thy face!"

3

The function of this book is to define the nature of the contemplative experience, to show something of the necessary interior ascesis which leads up to it, and to give a brief sketch of mature contemplation. When faith opens out into a deep spiritual understanding and advances beyond the range of concepts into a darkness which can only be enlightened by the fire of love, man truly begins to know God in the only way that can satisfy his soul.

Concepts tell us truth about God, but their light is so very far from being perfect that the man who is fully content with

conceptual knowledge of God, and does not burn to possess Him by love, has never really known Him. But if the contemplative experience of God goes beyond concepts, is it purely subjective? Does it imply a complete rejection of scientific truth? Does it evade the reach of every authority? Is the mystic a kind of religious genius who lives in an atmosphere entirely his own and whose inspiration is nobody else's business? Perhaps the reason why William James admitted the validity of mystical experience was precisely because it could be fitted into the context of his pragmatism by an absolutely affirmative answer to these questions.

All these problems furnish the subject matter of the present volume. My solutions can be condensed as follows.

First of all, the contemplative life demands detachment from the senses, but it is not therefore a complete rejection of sense experience. It rises above the level of reasoning, yet reason plays an essential part in the interior ascesis without which we cannot safely travel the path of mysticism. Mystical prayer rises above the natural operation of the intelligence, yet is always essentially intelligent. Ultimately, the highest function of the human spirit is the work of the supernaturally transformed intelligence, in the beatific vision of God. Nevertheless, the will plays an integral part in all contemplation since there is, in fact, no contemplation without love. Love is both the starting point of contemplation and its fruition.

Furthermore, contemplation presupposes ascetic action. By this interrelation of the work of intelligence, will, and the rest of our being, contemplation immolates our entire self to God. God is the principal agent in this sublime work. Contemplation is His gift, and He is free to dispose of it as He sees fit. It can never, strictly speaking, be merited by any generosity of ours. However, in actual fact, God usually grants this gift to those who are most generous in emptying themselves of every attachment to satisfactions that fall outside the periphery of pure faith.

Finally, mystical contemplation comes to us, like every other grace, through Christ. Contemplation is the fullness of the Christ-life in the soul, and it consists above all in the supernatural penetration of the mysteries of Christ. This work is performed in us by the Holy Ghost substantially present in our

soul by grace, along with the other two Divine Persons. The highest peak of contemplation is a mystical union with God in which the soul and its faculties are said to be "transformed" in God, and enter into a full conscious participation in the hidden life of the Trinity of Persons in Unity of Nature.

My chief preoccupation in this work has been not to describe or account for the highest levels of mystical experience, but only to settle certain fundamental questions which refer more properly to the ascetical preparation for graces of mystical prayer. The chief of these questions concerns the relations of the intellect and will in contemplation.

The reason I have insisted on this is that we stand in very great danger of a wave of false mysticism. When the world is in greatest confusion, visionaries become oracles. Panic, like every other passion, blinds the intelligence of man, and he is glad of an excuse to take refuge from everything that bewilders him by giving it a "supernatural" interpretation. Therefore it must be made quite clear that traditional Christian mysticism, although it is certainly not intellectualistic in the same sense as the mystical philosophy of Plato and his followers, is nevertheless neither anti-rational nor anti-intellectualistic.

There is absolutely no enmity between Christian mysticism, on the one hand, and physical science, natural philosophy, metaphysics, and dogmatic theology on the other. Contemplation is suprarational, without in the least despising the light of reason. The modern popes have insisted on the fundamental harmony between "acquired" or speculative wisdom and the "infused" wisdom which is a gift of the Holy Ghost and is true contemplation. Pope Pius XI, in holding up Saint Thomas Aquinas as a model for priests and theologians, pointed out that the sanctity of the Angelic Doctor consisted above all in the marvellous union of speculative science and infused contemplation which combined to feed the pure flame of his perfect love for God, in such a way that the whole theology of Saint Thomas has but one end: to bring us to intimate union with God.<sup>5</sup>

Pius XII, in his encyclical *Humani Generis*, insisted on the perfect conformity that exists between theological science and the "connatural" knowledge of God by love in mystical contemplation, while at the same time reproving loose philosophical state-

ments which confused the action of the intelligence and the will in the speculative knowledge of divine things.

All this reminds us that the intelligence has a vitally important part to play in Christian sanctity, and that no one can pretend to love God while rejecting all desire to know Him better and to study His perfections in the truths He has revealed to us about Himself. Nevertheless, love remains the very essence of Christian perfection and sanctity, since it unites us to God directly and without medium even in this life. Love also, which is the fruit of our vision of Him in heaven, will be our purest joy in heaven because by it we will be able not merely to receive of His infinite bounty but also to repay Him out of the treasury of His own unbounded perfections.

The traditional teaching of the Church, which has been so strongly emphasized by the encyclicals of recent popes and which is the very heart of the *Summa Theologica*, refuses to divide man against himself. The sanity of Catholic theology will never permit the ascetic to wander off into bypaths of angelism or gnosticism. The Church does not seek to sanctify men by destroying their humanity, but by elevating it, with all its faculties and gifts, to the supreme perfection which the Greek Fathers called "deification." At the same time, the Church does not leave man under any illusion about himself. She clearly shows him the powerlessness of his natural faculties to achieve Divine Union by their own efforts.

There are, then, two extremes to be avoided. On the one hand, false mysticism ascribes to human nature the power and the right to acquire supernatural illuminations by the effort of our own intelligence. On the other hand, false mysticism darkens the intelligence altogether in a formal rejection of truth in order to seek Divine Union in an ecstasy of blind love which takes no account of the intelligence, and which accepts deification as a gift so pure that no effort is required on the part of the one who receives it.

But what is the true nature of mystical contemplation? It is first of all a supernatural experience of God as He is in Himself. This experience is a free gift of God in a more special sense than are all the other graces required for our sanctification, although it forms part of the normal supernatural organism by which we

are sanctified. Essentially, mystical experience is a vivid, conscious participation of our soul and of its faculties in the life, knowledge, and love of God Himself. This participation is ontologically possible only because sanctifying grace is imparted to us as a new "being" superadded to our nature and giving it the power to elicit acts which are entirely beyond its own capacity.

More particularly, however, the mystical experience is directly caused by special inspirations of the Holy Ghost substantially present within the soul itself and already obscurely identified with it by grace. The effect of these inspirations is to enable the soul to "see" and appreciate, in a manner totally new and unexpected, the full reality of the truths contained in hitherto "untasted" conceptual statements about God. But above all, this experience gives us a deep penetration into the truth of our identification with God by grace. Contemplative experience in the strict sense of the word is always an experience of God Who is apprehended not as an abstraction, not as a distant and alien Being, but as intimately and immediately present to the soul in His infinite Reality and Essence.

This is the substance of Catholic mysticism. I propose to study this substance as it is expounded in the works of the Church's "safest" mystical theologian, the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite, Saint John of the Cross.

This great servant of God, who joined Saint Teresa of Avila in the work of restoring the purity of Carmelite life and of teaching his world the ways of mystical prayer, stands at the culminating point of the mystical tradition which used to be ascribed to the Pseudo-Dionysius. Saint John of the Cross is the leader of the "apophatic" theologians, the teachers of the "dark" knowledge of God. He completes and fulfils the tradition of the greatest contemplatives among the Greek Fathers—Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who really founded the apophatic school; Evagrius Ponticus, and Saint Maximus. But what is much more important, he avoids all the ambiguities and exaggerations inherent in Patristic mysticism, and he does so by basing his whole doctrine upon the solid foundation of Thomism, which he acquired at the University of Salamanca.

The doctrine of Saint John of the Cross is so clear, so solid,



and so universal that Pope Pius XI could say without hesitation that he "points out to souls the way of perfection as though illumined by life from on high, in his limpidly clear analysis of mystical experience." The Pontiff adds: "And although [the works of Saint John of the Cross] deal with difficult and hidden matters, they are nevertheless replete with such lofty spiritual doctrine and are so well adapted to the understanding of those who study them that they can rightly be called a guide and handbook for the man of faith who proposes to embrace a life of perfection."<sup>6</sup>

The proper Mass of Saint John of the Cross approved by the Church for the Discalced Carmelites is filled with the Scriptural images which he used to illustrate his mystical theology. The Preface of that Mass is a brief but eloquent summary of his doctrine of renunciation and of "Night" as the sure path to Divine Union.

Testimony such as this gives evidence of the great importance which the Holy See attributes to the teaching and intercession of so great a saint. The development of interest in his theology, and especially the studies in which Dominican theologians have illustrated the fundamental harmony of the mysticism of Saint John of the Cross with the dogmatic theology of Saint Thomas, lead us to expect, in all confidence, that some day Saint John of the Cross will assume his rightful place as the *doctor communis* of Catholic Mystical Theology. In the Apostolic Letter from which I quoted above, Pope Pius XI concludes that present-day theologians can turn to Saint John of the Cross and verify for themselves his greatness as a master of the spiritual life by "drawing from his doctrine and writings the limpid purity of all the spiritual teaching that has ever poured forth from the fountain-head of Christian thought and from the spirit of the Church."

*PART ONE*

THE CLOUD AND THE FIRE