

**I**  
**A Grammar of Holy Mystery:**  
**The Contemplative Path**  
**Father Larry**

*Tree at my window, window tree,  
My sash is lowered when night comes on;  
But let there never be curtain drawn  
Between you and me.*

*Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,  
And thing next most diffuse to cloud,  
Not all your light tongues talking aloud  
Could be profound.*

*But, tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,  
And if you have seen me when I slept,  
You have seen me when I was taken and swept  
And all but lost.*

*That day she put our heads together,  
Fate had her imagination about her,  
Your head so much concerned with outer,  
Mine with inner, weather.*

(Robert Frost, *Tree At My Window*)

Concerned With The Inner Weather

We are all philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, and theologians. We cannot escape it. There are certain fundamental questions that just go with being human. We are all, sometimes more and sometimes less, concerned with the inner weather – with our internal processes and how they connect, if at all, with the deepest experiences of others and with the great unknown dimensions of the cosmos. We all want to know where we came from, what are our spiritual genetics? Are we here by Divine intention, or are we the impersonal result of a primordial chemical accident? What is the nature of reality? Is it hot, cruel, and angry? Or, is it loving, alive, and personally benevolent? And, is there a transcendental eloquence to our being; or, do we, in the words of a poem I read in my high school anthology, “just stupidly consume corn, fowl and fish, leave a clean plate and die.”

All the great religions of the world insist that this “self consciousness” of human beings, this interior looking, this hungry questioning is much more than the mechanics of Western psychology. It is a manifestation of the Spirit. “The Book of Beginnings,” *The Book of Genesis*, states that God made the first person in “God’s own image, and after God’s own likeness.” Into Adam God breathed the breath of life so that Adam became a living soul. To have the breath of God in us is to share something of the divine nature. The Spirit of God is the breath of the mystic. We were created for communion. We may ignore or suppress it in some way, but the desire to turn home to God is always there. Just as surely as we are made for each other, we are also made for God. As Gerald May observed, “In most of us the desire for love has often been distorted or buried, but if you look at your own life with honest and gentle eyes, you can discern it in yourself as a deep seeking of connectedness, healing creation, and joy. This is your true identity, it is who you truly are and what you exist for. . . it connects you with all other human beings and with all of creation.”

Communion, conscious contact between persons, rather than things or abstract concepts, is at the center of reality. Every ecumenical and historic Christian believer, every orthodox Christian, believes that at the center of reality is not a thing, or an idea, or some nebulous force, but the personal God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, and of Jacob and Rachel. And that to be in communion, to be at one, with the Living God is to be desired above every thing else. “Thus says the Lord, ‘Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast be sure to boast in this, that they know and understand me’” (Jeremiah 9:23,24). All real living is relational – is the experience of a warm, loving, vital relationship. Without that we may become psychologically disordered, and may even become physically ill and possibly die. All real living is an encounter between persons, a meeting of persons, and Scripture emphasizes that the primary encounter or meeting of real living is with God. It might be argued that this is an immature, anthropomorphic, understanding which fails to grasp that God is not just another person, that the reality of God has to be more than even that of a super person. However, while it is true that God is more than a person, God is never less than personal. I am sure that the love with which God loves is purer, truer, and more beautiful than the love with which the best among us love, that it is a reality greater than any of us can conceive, but it is not less than what we mean by personal. To seek the knowledge of God, to seek the experiential knowledge of God’s presence, this is life’s great quest. It is the road taken by every contemplative – both the great and lesser ones.

### Defining the Indefinable

And what is the contemplative path, what is the way of the mystic? The question itself suggests that contemplation, mysticism, meditation, and the kinds of things we ordinarily mean when we talk about prayer all involve far more than things we do -- they are, in fact, a way of being, a way of being in the world -- a way of being in God. Our daughter’s favorite teacher in college was a mathematics professor, Dr. Goro Kato. I had the privilege, and genuine pleasure, of meeting Dr. Kato on one occasion. He didn’t look

at all like an academic. Sweeping into the gathering of math students and parents with his long raincoat, his bald forehead head and short ponytail he looked like a samurai warrior. After that meeting that's how I thought of him – as a mathematical samurai. Speaking in his strong Japanese accent he even sounded as if he might be imparting some ancient wisdom known by those who understood the spirituality of the martial arts. He told his students: “Remember this: In America everyone is friendly, but that doesn't mean they like you. In Japan everyone is polite, but that doesn't mean they respect you.” Dr. Kato was, of course, simply alerting his students to the incongruity that very often exists between what people say or do, and what they feel or actually are on the inside. There may be a huge incongruity between the manner in which we outwardly present ourselves, and the inner reality of our spiritual life, but there is also a very real and deeper sense in which there is never any separation between our spirituality and daily life. Although what we are talking about here can never really be defined, it might help to clarify matters, at least a little, if a few gestures were made in that direction.

Spirituality and Religion: Usually when people distinguish between spirituality and religion, they are thinking of religion as participation in a particular faith group, or Christian denomination. That is a fairly new distinction and I think arises out of the yearning of people for something deeper than what they have found in many faith communities. The English word “religion,” which has been in use since the thirteenth century, seems to go back to the Latin *religare* probably meaning “to reconnect, tie, or bind.” Religion therefore points to our being tied, connected, or bound to God, and to those attitudes, practices, and ideas by which we are bound or connected, or which shape our lives so that we experience intimate communion with God. Spirituality has to do with our most intense concerns and passions, “the propelling forces of our lives.” It is seen in our most extraordinary experiences, but it is also present in every common ordinary event, it flows in and through all our experiences. Some of our experiences may involve moments of astounding ecstasy, but probably most of the time they will be that of a simple awareness of a strong quiet presence that is constantly with us. For me personally there is really no appreciable difference between a religious and a spiritual experience, but if it is helpful to you to make that distinction I see no real problem in doing so. The important thing is that whether we say “religion” or “spirituality” we are indicating something about our desire to be “fully human, fully alive” – about our desire for communion and love.

Mysticism: Saint Paul, observed in writing to his young friend and student Timothy, “This Christian life is a great mystery” (1 Timothy 3:16). The Greek term used by Paul is *mysterion*. Harvey Egan notes that it is used to signify what many today consider Christian mysticism to involve: the hidden presence of God and Christ in Scripture, the sacraments, and the events of daily life. Mysticism,” he writes, “can be tentatively defined as the universal thrust of the human spirit for experiential union with the Absolute and the theory of that union.” As used in Scripture a mystery is a secret known and understood by those who have been initiated into the fellowship. But in Judeo/Christian spirituality mystery is not an ordinary secret. It is not like a puzzle where no secret remains once the puzzle has been solved. With mystery every insight arrived at leads to ever-deeper questions and insights. Although mysticism is never irrational it is

suprarational, and is known more through the faculties of appreciation, awe, wonder, and intuition than it is through formal logic. It's more like seeing the one you love in the beautiful shading of candlelight than in the harsh glare of a florescent lamp. Mysticism has been defined in many ways, but simply put mysticism has to do with experiencing the infinite nearness of God first-hand. The Christian mystic is a man or woman who has discovered immediate communion with Christ; and, who in unity with Christ recognizes his or her connection to all others. Having discovered the joy of the dance the mystic seeks to include others, helping people to feel more loved and cared for – especially the poor, the outsider, the powerless and the dispossessed.

Spiritual Practice: Our devotion to the good, the true, and the beautiful is increased, and the depth of our consecration to God deepened, by spiritual practice. Alasdair MacIntyre uses playing chess as an example of practice. Chess is a practice in that it is something you do. It is a coherent practice in that there are complex connections that a player must see, and the further a player goes the more and deeper connections he or she sees. It is a communal, or common, practice in that it is played with someone else, and is learned from someone – from a master teacher. The great players and masters of the past are studied and learned from. In that sense it is not only communal, but is a community possessing wise traditions. Players learn the game of chess simply because they love it. They do not learn to play for money, or fame, although as a result of their skill they may become wealthy or famous, but the joy of playing the game is its own reward. And, there are standards of excellence to the game of chess that have to be followed in order to be good. Playing chess is a practice in that it is something you do. However, it is different from an activity in that it meets the criteria just given. I can play chess in that I know how to move the pieces, and the object of the game. But I don't love the game – I haven't played a game of chess for years. If I were to play it would be purely to pass the time enjoyably with someone, maybe a grand child, without any investment in my level of play or the outcome, or with any passion. Of course, the end of all our spiritual practices is that we come to a place where we are what we practice – we are not just praying but we are prayer, we are not just contemplating or meditating, but we are contemplative, we are not acting with kindness and love and compassion, but we are kind, loving, and compassionate. We come to a place where we do without doing.

Spiritual Formation: Very similar to spiritual practice is spiritual formation, which refers to all the practices and disciplines which deepen our faith and further our spiritual growth. Personally I use the expression “spiritual formation” very little any more. This is because in the Episcopal Church “spiritual formation” has pretty much come to mean what used to be described more prosaically as “Christian Education.” I am sorry “spiritual formation” got usurped in that way. I would suggest that if you are going to use it that you do so with some clarity as to what you mean. Especially if you are going to use it interchangeably be clear as to whether you are thinking about all the things which actually form, shape, and transform your life or whether you are talking about a Christian education program – a practice and a program are not the same thing.

Contemplation: Contemplative prayer is prayer which contains no words, no thoughts, and no images. It is not, of course, a matter of having a totally blank mind, but of not

chasing and grasping onto thoughts. We cannot prevent thoughts from floating down the river of consciousness, but we don't have to wade, or swim, out into the water and grab hold. We can simply allow thoughts to float peacefully by and away. Sometimes contemplative prayer is called "the prayer of silence," or "the prayer of the heart," or "the prayer of loving intention." Centering Prayer, as explained by Basil Pennington, William Menninger, and Thomas Keating is one form of contemplative prayer. In this prayer we are not seeking insight, searching for answers, or reaching for conclusions. We are not trying to make anything happen, nor are we trying to keep anything from happening. We relinquish all efforts to control our world. No analysis takes place. It is non-conceptual prayer. We do not ask for anything. We are not looking for experiences or trying to achieve "enlightenment." Our one loving intention is to be with God. The anonymous Medieval Christian mystic who authored the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Book of Privy Counselling* provides this instruction:

When thou comest by thyself think not before what thou shalt do after but forsake as well good thoughts as evil thoughts. And pray not with thy mouth. . . And look that nothing remain in thy mind but a naked intent stretching unto God, not clothed in any special thought of God in himself, how he is in himself, but that God is as he is.

When this author speaks of "naked intent," he is speaking of an act of love. William Johnston, who is an authority on the *Cloud of Unknowing*, explains that in authentic Christian contemplation there is a movement of unrestricted and unconditional love in the core of one's being. When you sit in loving emptiness, loving silence, loving awareness you are not just practicing a prayer of being, but a prayer of "being in love." That is what makes Christian contemplation very different from many other traditions. As contemplation is carried into daily life, we begin to live free of our compulsivity, free of our attachments -- the things we are "nailed to." We quit trying to control things. We no longer try to force things. We quit acting as if we can make ourselves, and everyone else, happy by managing life well. We begin to live life in conscious love for God and others. And, we become more aware of how, in the words of Saint Paul, "We live, move, and have our being in God"(Acts 17:28). This, and much more, is what it means to be a contemplative.

Infused Contemplation: The idea of infused contemplation goes back to Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. The point they wanted to make by using the word "infused" was that mystical experience, or the felt presence of God, is a gift. However, talking about contemplation, and then infused contemplation seems to me to be an unnecessary confusion and distraction. And Contemplative Outreach under the guidance of Thomas Keating, has only added to the confusion by describing Centering Prayer as leading to contemplation. So, instead of simply practicing contemplative prayer many people get all caught up in whether they are engaged in contemplative prayer, or centering prayer, or whether what they are doing is not contemplative prayer but might someday lead to contemplative prayer. We really just shouldn't make it that complicated. If you are

engaged in centering prayer you are engaged in contemplative prayer. If you have an especially profound experience of God's presence and reality, that is a gift – appreciate it as gift, and don't worry about attaching labels such as "infused." Actually, from the perspective of Christian spirituality everything, absolutely everything, is gift, and as long as you recognize with a grateful heart the givenness of everything good, you don't need to be concerned with whether your prayer is infused or not. If you are sitting in silent contemplation it is a gift, and if you enter some deep place where Christ is completely real and present to you, that is a gift. Our existence, the food we eat, the water we drink, family and friends, our passions, the oxygen we inhale and the breath of the Spirit we breathe is all gift – sheer gift.

Meditation: In the Western tradition meditation is a more reflective and discursive exercise using our imagination, our intellect, and our will. The Hebrew word means "to mutter," and therefore indicates turning something over and over in our mind – chewing on some truth like a dog chews on a bone. In the Eastern tradition meditation is what we call "contemplation", and contemplation is what we call "meditation". A meditative life-style in the Christian tradition, then, would be one which is deeply thoughtful, insightful, and reflective. In this way we are made simple, and better prepared to respond to what is truly needed in the moment out of our innermost values and sense of being, rather than reacting out of our own anxiety and inner turmoil. Lao Tsu pointed to the meditative spirit perfectly:

Can you allow the mud to settle?  
Can you wait for the moment of right action to emerge?

Intuition: When we talk about intuition we are not talking about a wild hunch or a sixth sense, but rather something that is more like seeing the reality or truth of something simply, and without having to work it out like a math problem. Sometimes we know something, and we know it without the inference of reason. Somehow, we are able to cut through the thick cloudy surface of things and to see, without any mental effort, what is there, and to see it with great clarity and understanding. This is intuition. The word "intuition" comes from the Latin *intueri*, meaning to look inside. We are talking then about a way of knowing that does not come from trying hard to figure something out. Intuition is something more relaxed than the mechanical like work of philosophical logic. Rather than trying to solve a problem, it is simply open and appreciative of mystery. Intuition is patient in that it waits for answers to emerge naturally, and allows things to reveal themselves without coercion. Contemplatives are, by and large rather intuitive. This does not mean that they are illogical, but that they are frequently able to look at things in a way that transcends the rigid linear thinking and rationalism that is so characteristic of the Western world.

Saint: Since I use the word "saint" in what I write, I had probably best give some indication here of what I mean. A saint, as found in Scripture and understood in

Protestant thought, is one whose life is genuinely consecrated to God. When a saint talks about faith, hope and love, or about beauty, truth and goodness, we are compelled to listen because he or she is someone whose outward and visible life so obviously and authentically backs up what they say they have discovered interiorly.

In your reading of literature on Christian spirituality you will sometimes find all of these terms used interchangeably. Sometimes they may be used in a rather technical sense, and at other time in a broader and more general sense. This is because we are trying to talk about something where words are always inadequate – something better felt than taught, and that is always beyond the reach of our definitions and descriptions. The more you develop an inner feeling for what all these words have in common, the more you will intuitively understand the meaning of Christian spirituality.

### An Impressionistic Portrait

The life of saint and mystic is mysterious and profound. It is often characterized by puzzling paradoxes and delicate nuances. To attempt to explain it is, to use T.S. Elliot's phrase, "a raid on the inarticulate." The overall experience of such a life is ineffable. All that can be done is to provide a sort of descriptive portrait; however, such a portrait will of necessity be impressiostic – giving a sense of the rhythm, atmosphere texture, character and feel of the contemplative life rather an exhaustive definition. Lao-tsu created this sort of impressionistic portrait of the fully accomplished Taoist in the *Tao Te Ching*. I have paraphrased him here in order to get a feel for this kind of description in regard to Christian spirituality:

The ancient saints were subtle, profound, responsive.  
The depth of their wisdom was unfathomable.  
Because it was unfathomable,  
All we can describe is their appearance.

They were watchful, as someone crossing an iced-over stream.  
Alert as a soldier in enemy territory.  
Courteous, like a visiting guest.  
Yielding and fluid, like melting ice.  
Simple and shapeable, like an uncarved block of wood.  
Empty and receptive, as a hollow cave or an open valley.  
Clear, like still pools of water.  
Can you wait quietly while the mud settles?  
Can you remain still until the moment for right action arises?  
Observers of the way do not seek personal fulfillment.  
Not expecting, they are present, and can welcome all things.

There are many portraits like this in our own Holy Scripture – simple, deep, and beautiful. One of the most compelling and meaningful to me is the Sermon on the Mount. I offer the following brief reflection on just the first two of the Beatitudes as an attempt to provide something of an impressionistic answer to the question: “What does a Christian saint or mystic look like?”

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” When the famous pollster George Gallup asked the question, many years ago now, “Where are the saints among us?” He discovered that while the answer was that saints in America were to be found everywhere and among all classes of people, they were more likely to be found among poor black women in the South than anywhere else. To be poor is to be without resources. Saints have security in nothing – in “no thing.” Sister José Hobday told of a wealthy woman who wanted to learn to live simply and to care for the inner city poor. But Sister José found it to be no easy task to teach simplicity and caring to someone who had virtually unlimited financial and human resources backing her and her project. To have the spirit of poverty is to recognize that no matter how much money or talent or anything else we have, we really don’t own or control anything. The saint knows there is no way we can create our own security; and, therefore, there is nothing which one truly possesses, not even oneself. Human existence itself is provisional. “Our needs,” as Johannes Metz says, “are always beyond our capacities.”

The contemplative, then, is someone who is not possessive, or clinging, or grasping. There is no clinging to substances, goods, successes, failures, people, pleasures, pain, relationships, self-reliance, or self-image. In the spiritual tradition of the Mennonites, where I sojourned for a number of years, this letting go, this surrender, and the calmness and composure which follows, is what is meant by the untranslatable German word *gelassenheit*. Philippians 2:6,7 says that although Christ Jesus existed in the form of God he did not regard that as something to be clung to at all costs, but instead emptied himself. “Although Christ was rich,” Paul writes elsewhere, “He became poor so that through his poverty you might be made rich” (1 Corinthians 8:9). Christian spirituality is a spirituality of the open hand rather than the clinched fist. It has to do with generosity of heart, with humility, with self-emptying love, and with poverty of spirit in which there is no effort to maintain any particular self-image whether negative or positive. The way of the contemplative saint and mystic is the way of non-attachment.

However, the contemplatives in their poverty become one with what is beyond possession so that everything is theirs – “whether the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). With nothing to protect, and nothing to defend, and nothing to lose the contemplative is free to appreciate and find joy in everything. Theirs is the freedom to love others without any attempt to use them for personal benefit or self-gratification. “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Having surrendered possessiveness the saint is free to live in the here and now. The Sermon on the Mount teaches us not to worry about what we will eat, or wear, or our shelter, or the future, or our life any more than the birds of the air or the flowers of the field worry. If you are with a contemplative and mystic you will have the sense that this person is really present with you rather than preoccupied –

“attempting to fill their time and place before they are there.” You will sense that this person is living here and now rather than waiting for some future achievement or event before beginning to live. If you meet a saint you will find someone who can enjoy the beauty of garden estate without having to live there; or, the stylish art of a new car without having to own it. You will see someone who is tolerant rather than competitive, who wants to make a contribution rather than to be “better than,” who is free of rigid expectations, and who can offer guidance without interfering. You will observe someone who is like a weaned child resting against its mother. An unweaned child is restless, demanding, agitated. The weaned child is at rest, quietly enjoying being close to its mother.

O Lord my heart is not proud,  
nor my eyes haughty;  
Nor do I involve myself in great matters  
or in things too difficult for me.  
Surely I have composed and quieted my soul:  
like a weaned child rests against its mother,  
my soul is like a weaned child within me.  
O Israel, hope in the Lord  
from this time forth and forever.  
(Psalm 131)

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land.* The metaphor of the weaned child is also appropriate for picturing meekness. Meekness describes what in the East is known as the quality of “non-action.” The meek do not try to make things happen. The meek are not compulsively trying to get things done; they are not obsessively trying to achieve something. The truth is the meek do not have, and know they do not have, the power to make things happen. They are people without economic, social or political clout. They are rather powerless over their own circumstances. This is the fundamental meaning of the Hebrew *anawim* (“meek”) in Psalm 37 – the Psalm from which this Beatitude is directly drawn. In Psalm 37 the Psalmist reflects on how evil people prosper while good people suffer. Not only do the good suffer, but they seem so powerless when it comes to doing anything effective about their situation or in dealing with the wicked:

Do not fret because of the wicked;  
Do not be envious of wrong doers,  
For they will soon fade like the grass,  
And wither like the green herb.  
Trust in the Lord, and do good;  
So you will live in the land, and enjoy security.  
Take delight in the Lord;  
And he will give you the desire of your heart.  
Commit your way to the Lord;  
Trust in him, and he will act.

He will make your vindication to shine like the light,  
 And the justice of your cause like the noonday.  
 Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;  
 Do not fret over those who prosper in their way,  
 Over those who carry out evil devices.  
 Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.  
 Do not fret – it only leads to evil.  
 For the wicked shall be cut off,  
 But those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.  
 Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;  
 Though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.  
 But the meek shall inherit the land,  
 And delight themselves in abundant prosperity.  
 The wicked plot against the righteous,  
 And gnash their teeth against them;  
 But the Lord laughs at the wicked,  
 For he sees their day is coming.

(Psalm 37:1-13)

In spite of their scheming and their working, and their seeming power, the wicked have no real substance and come to nothing. But the meek, who have no control or influence over matters, wait in faithfulness and in goodness of heart, and in time inherit the land. An inheritance is a gift. It is something received rather than achieved. Shakers and movers mistakenly think they can create something themselves. The meek know how to receive. They know how to allow themselves to be loved by God. They let the love of God happen in their own heart. As with Paul the Apostle, it is when we are meek, helpless, and weak that the strength and power of God is made obvious in and through us. So, “the sage works without doing.” Relaxed trust accomplishes in every sphere what no amount of anxious striving can ever achieve. The mystic is inclined to the way of non-action rather than the way of conscious effort. “Here,” as William Johnston says, “I am less concerned with doing things, and more able to let things happen, less intent on making decisions and more able to allow the true decision to well up from the depths of my being.” Furthermore, because they are not striving to achieve something contemplatives can enjoy what they are doing for its own sake. And, because they are not attached to a particular outcome, but wait patiently for grace to happen, they are not given to catastrophizing.

As alluded to earlier the second chapter of Philippians furnishes a profound commentary on the Beatitudes, particularly on these first two. In that chapter Paul urges his readers to practice humility, and to have within themselves the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Paul elaborates on the theme of humility by saying that although Jesus Christ was God, Christ did not cling to Divinity but emptied himself. Now this is a difficult text, which as you can imagine has been much discussed by scholars. But one thing we can say on the basis of Philippians 2:7 is that what Christ emptied himself of was “self.” Jesus was not caught in the struggle of enhancing, or enlarging “self” – or in advancing the ego’s agenda. Instead of being empty, most of us are full of self. And we

are self-centered, which E. Stanley Jones once said means we are off center. Whether the issue is a false pride in which we have feelings of being overly empowered and of self-grandeur; or, whether the issue is low self-esteem, in which case we feel disempowered, unacceptable and ashamed, the problem is essentially the same – pathologically focusing on the self rather than letting go. If being Christian means being like Christ, then Christian spirituality means becoming empty like Jesus so that we may be filled with the Spirit of God from whom we receive our true life (Philippians 2:5-18).

Because of a storm a friend and colleague of mind found her flight delayed. In fact many flights were delayed. The large international airport was crowded with tired, disappointed and frustrated people. It seemed to my friend that everyone was pushing, shoving and shouting, trying almost frantically to correct what they saw as a huge problem. The whole airport was in turmoil. Then she saw a monk standing quietly. He was not pushing or shoving or shouting. He was not attempting to correct anything. He wasn't trying to change the weather or to show the airlines how to rearrange their schedules. He was meek, and his gift was peace, and the gift he gave to my friend was the desire for the peace and equanimity of the contemplative life.

### Something More

Many years ago I realized that there is infinitely more to Christianity than what I had been told before my baptism, or taught in preparing for the ministry. In time I came to know that the something more I had longed for since boyhood was God; and, that in my soul I was as thirsty for God as the desert land is for water. Somewhere along the way I began to ask questions like: “What precisely is Christian spirituality? What are the practices of the Judeo/Christian tradition, which when taken into the heart, purify the spirit, heal afflictive states of consciousness, and open one to an experience of the mysterious presence of God that is, in the words of C.S. Lewis, “as immediate as the taste of color.” As one committed to Christ, to Scripture, and to the Christian community I wanted to know, “What are the identifying marks, what are the Biblical and theological dynamics, of a decidedly Christian spiritual life?” What I knew all those years ago, even as I started to ask these questions, was that academic answers are helpful but insufficient. Biblical and theological studies are like a road map in that they offer good, and even essential, guidance, but they are not the same as being there. What counts most is not learning a lot of definitions, but whether we are open to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit within us. There are many academic books written on Christian spirituality, but it matters little what books we have read and studied if we have never knelt at the inner rail of Holy Communion. Better that you pray contemplatively than that you know its definition or can explain the method of centering prayer. There is no substitute for a long practice in the same direction.