

“This new book from Anne Hunt is one that we have long needed, not only in theology, but also in the wider Christian community. An obvious gap in the current renewal of the theology of the Trinity has been that we have yet to retrieve the rich insights of the Christian mystics. Anne Hunt brings eight great mystical writers to life, and leads us into a deep appreciation of their experience and understanding of the triune God. This is a beautiful book, well-structured, well-written, abounding in insights, and accessible, a book that draws the reader to wonder and to prayer.”

–Denis Edwards
Professor of Theology
Flinders University, Australia
Author of *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit*

“With unusual insight and clarity, Anne Hunt has shown how central to Christian life the experience and worship of the Trinity should be by appropriating for contemporary spirituality and theology the extraordinary Trinitarian consciousness of eight mystical titans.”

–Harvey D. Egan, SJ
Professor of Systematic and Mystical Theology
Boston College

“A feature of post-conciliar theology has been the recovery of the centrality of the Blessed Trinity both for the daily life of believers and for theology. A major contributor to this development is the eminent Australian theologian, Anne Hunt. In books such as *Trinity* (2005) Professor Hunt communicates the riches of contemporary Trinitarian theology, while in a volume such as *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery* (1997) she connects the Trinity and the Cross, communicating the thought of the principal authors in the field and then proposing further possible developments. Now in this new volume she presents the experience of the Blessed Trinity on the part of eight mystics of the second millennium—William of St. Thierry, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich and Blessed Elizabeth of Dijon. Her goal is ‘to probe through their witness to the mystery of the Trinity,’ convinced that they offer ‘rich seams of data for systematic theology.’ She notes that they would all want us to reflect on the Trinity as the eternal event of love by which believers are welcomed into the very midst of the Eternal Three, attaining an entry into the Trinitarian relations. This work—each chapter a fascinating portrait of both the life and the Trinitarian experience of a particular mystic—presents ‘new ways of knowing the Trinity.’ Professor Hunt has enriched again the theology of the Trinity.”

–Thomas J. Norris
Professor in Systematic Theology
Maynooth, Ireland

THE TRINITY
INSIGHTS FROM THE MYSTICS

ANNE HUNT



A Michael Glazier Book

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Illustration: *True Trinity in True Trinity* by Hildegard of Bingen, c. 1180.

Excerpts from *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, translated by Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, Copyright © 1990 by Abbey of Regina Laudis: Benedictine Congregation Regina Laudis of the Strict Observance, Inc. Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahwah, NJ. Reprinted by permission of Paulist Press, Inc. www.paulistpress.com.

Excerpts from *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994 and 1998). By permission of Oxford University Press. www.oup.com.

Excerpt from “Little Gidding” in *FOUR QUARTETS*, copyright 1942 by T. S. Eliot and renewed 1970 by Esme Valerie Eliot, reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Excerpts from “Little Gidding” from *Four Quartets* in T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963). Used by permission of Faber and Faber.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2010 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John’s Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hunt, Anne, date

The Trinity : insights from the mystics / Anne Hunt.

p. cm.

“A Michael Glazier book.”

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-8146-5692-1 – ISBN 978-0-8146-5731-7 (e-book)

1. Trinity—History of doctrines—Middle Ages, 600–1500. 2. Mysticism. I. Title.

BT109.H85 2010

231'.044—dc22

2009048453

CONTENTS

Introduction vii

Chapter 1: William of St. Thierry (ca. 1080–1148) 1

Chapter 2: Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) 23

Chapter 3: Bonaventure (ca. 1217–1274) 48

Chapter 4: Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328) 73

Chapter 5: Julian of Norwich (1342/3–ca. 1416) 98

Chapter 6: Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) 122

Chapter 7: John of the Cross (1542–1591) 144

Chapter 8: Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880–1906) 168

Conclusion 182

Index of Names 188

INTRODUCTION

The mystery of God as Trinity stands at the center of the Christian faith. The radically trinitarian shape of the church's faith has its origins in the post-Easter consciousness of Jesus' disciples. Through their experience of the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, their perception of the mystery of God was profoundly reshaped. They came to understand, however strange it seemed to their Jewish monotheistic faith, that the unity of God implies a divine *communion* of life and love. Thus it was that the Christian conviction that God is somehow both Three and One emerged. It took root in the prayer and liturgy of the early Christian community. In the following centuries, it led to the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹

Throughout the two millennia since those heady days of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, the best and brightest of Christian minds have struggled to express the mystery in a coherent and plausible way. In their efforts, they have most often looked for analogies for this Three-in-Oneness with things known in the natural world, the world of our everyday experience. St. Patrick took the example of the shamrock. St. Augustine of Hippo took the human mind and its activities or faculties of memory, understanding, and love. Richard of St. Victor took the example of interpersonal love to demonstrate that God is necessarily threefold in divine

1. See Sebastian Moore's very imaginative and very plausible reconstruction of the disciples' experience, what he calls "the grass-roots derivation of the mystery," in *The Fire and the Rose Are One* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980). For a study of the biblical evidence concerning the emergence of trinitarian belief, see Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003); also *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). See also Anne Hunt, "The Emergence of Devotion to Jesus in the Early Church: The Grass-Roots Derivation of the Trinity," *Australian E-Journal of Theology*, issue 4 (February 2005), <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal> (accessed October 25, 2009).

personhood, for, Richard argued, the perfection of interpersonal love requires not just two coequals who love each other, but their shared love for a third coequal. An understanding of the mystery was also advanced, albeit less frequently, by an exploration of the interconnection of the mystery of the Trinity with other mysteries of Christian faith, for example, with grace or with the Eucharist. Philosophical resources were also brought to bear in explicating the mystery, a strategy that reached its brilliant apogee in the highly refined and metaphysically elegant theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and his masterful appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy. Throughout the centuries, theology sought in these ways to further faith's understanding of this most sublime and ineffable mystery.

Meanwhile, at various times in the history of Christianity, in the Eastern as well as the Western tradition, there are mystics who, in their profound encounters with God, have gleaned distinctly trinitarian insights. Of course, in all Christian mysticism, by virtue of the Christian faith from which it issues, God is necessarily trinitarian. But for some mystics, such as Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross, their consciousness of God as Trinity is heightened to a more intense and explicit degree in and through their mystical encounters.

As is right and fitting, theology recognizes the beauty and the drama of the mysteries of faith unfolding in the very lives as well as the testimonies of the mystics. What is rather remarkable, however, is that in fact theology, in its task of faith seeking understanding, has paid little systematic attention to the insights offered by the mystics. Theology, by and large, has not probed Christian mysticism as a rich seam of data for the understanding of Christian faith. Yet surely, if theology is to be true to itself, it must attend to the actual witness of the mystics and the intense consciousness of the mysteries that they manifest.²

Not a few theologians, including the great Karl Rahner, SJ, have be-moaned the divide between mystical consciousness and doctrinal theology. Rahner, for example, speaks of bridging "the rift" between "lived piety and abstract theology," and of "how religious experiences of a spiritual or mystical kind can overflow and be transposed into the idiom of theological reflection."³ More recently, then-president of the Catholic Theological

2. Joan M. Nuth suggests that the rift between theology and mysticism perhaps has its origins in the distinction between scholastic theology and monastic theology in the Middle Ages. See Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 611–45, at 613.

3. Karl Rahner, *Experience of the Spirit, Source of Theology*, vol. 16 of *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Morland (New York: Crossroad/Seabury Press, 1979), 72, n.12.

Society of America, theologian Michael J. Buckley, SJ, also posed the question: “Is it not extraordinary that so much Catholic formal theology for centuries . . . has bracketed this actual witness [the spiritual experiences of the saints/mystics] as of no cogency. . . ? Is it not a lacuna in the standard theology, even of our day, that theology neither has nor has striven to forge the intellectual devices to probe in these concrete experiences the warrant they present for the reality of God and make them available for so universal a discipline?”⁴ Buckley, like Rahner, challenges theologians to find in the consciousness and insights of the mystics a *locus theologicus*, a source and a resource for theological reflection on the mysteries of Christian faith.

The aim of this book is to take up that challenge and at least to examine a number of mystics who have had what could be described as distinctly trinitarian insights. Our goal is to probe, through their witness, the mystery of the Trinity, and so to deepen faith’s understanding of the mystery. Such an approach has the advantage of avoiding the philosophical issues that have proved so problematic in trinitarian theology in recent times, such as the relationship between the immanent and the economic Trinity, or the relative virtues of the psychological analogy compared to, say, the social model in explicating the mystery. Instead, the mystics offer not an explication of the mystery per se but rather, as near as possible in this world, a rendering of an unmediated experience of the Trinity. What is also interesting is that, whereas women are by and large eclipsed in the classical theological tradition of Christianity, their voices deemed to have very limited authority, they figure just as strongly as the men in the tradition of Christian mysticism.⁵ Indeed women mystics are apparently more numerous than their male counterparts, certainly in the Middle Ages. In

4. Michael J. Buckley, Presidential Address, *The Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 47 (1992): 77.

5. Bernard McGinn recounts that the scholastic theologian Henry of Ghent, around 1290, in his *Summae Quaestionum Ordinarium*, Art XI, quaest. 11, ff 77v–78r, addressed the question: “Whether a woman can be a doctor of theology?” Henry argued that women cannot be doctors of theology because (ex officio) they cannot have the four public marks required for doctoral status: constancy, efficacy, authority, and effect. Henry added a further note, however: “Speaking about teaching from divine favour (ex beneficio) and the fervour of charity, it is well allowed for a woman to teach just like anyone else, if she possesses sound doctrine. But this should be done privately and in silence, not in public and before the church” (and, moreover only to other women and girls, not to men as it might incite lust). See McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 1.

the tradition of Christian mysticism, their voices are by no means silenced. Moreover, women's mystical insights are particularly noteworthy, given that most of them did not have access to the education and scholarly training that was granted to their male contemporaries.

Methodological and Hermeneutical Issues

Given the necessarily limited scope of the project, we have chosen William of St. Thierry (ca. 1080–1148), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Bonaventure (ca. 1217–1274), Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328), Julian of Norwich (1342/3–ca. 1416), Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), John of the Cross (1542–1591), and Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880–1906) for this study. We hope that a further study will include mystics from the early Christian centuries and also mystics from the Christian tradition of the East.

Of our chosen mystics, all are continental or English. All belong to the Western tradition of Christianity. Four are women, four men. Most are monastic in their formation, some scholastic; one is an anchorite. They range from the eleventh century (William of St. Thierry) to the twentieth century (Elizabeth of the Trinity). Some lived in that richly creative period, the Middle Ages (1100–1450), but by no means all. Some are visionaries, some not; some indeed have little interest in visions or ecstasies. Some are teachers and preachers, some prophets, some poets, some artists indeed. All of them are relatively well known, with the exception of William of St. Thierry who is included because of the significant role he played in the development of trinitarian devotion in the Cistercian tradition, albeit his writings were mistakenly ascribed to his friend Bernard of Clairvaux for some centuries. What unites our chosen mystics is that each offers penetrating insights into the mystery of the Trinity and the soul's mystical union with it. Each communicates a distinctly trinitarian encounter with God and invites others to enter into the mystery of God who is Trinity.

The men—William of St. Thierry, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross—are all well educated, trained in Latin, the Sacred Scriptures, and theology. William and John belong to the monastic tradition. Bonaventure belongs to the newly founded Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans). Meister Eckhart of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) is the brilliant Master of Paris, master of scholastic theology and meister of the spiritual life. None of the women—Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, and Elizabeth of the Trinity—had the privilege of the high level of education in theology and Scripture that was given to their male contemporaries. Admittedly, Julian is clearly well educated in Latin and well

read in the spiritual classics, and Hildegard has at least working knowledge of Latin but, nevertheless, neither has training in theology as such. Julian, Teresa, and Elizabeth write in the vernacular, while Hildegard, with the assistance of her secretary-scribe, writes in Latin. Three of the women have remarkable visionary experiences, particularly Julian and Hildegard. Their visions, together with the claim that their writings are divinely inspired, give their teachings an authority otherwise not granted—indeed not permitted—to them as women.

They write for a variety of reasons—some for teaching on prayer and contemplative practice, others for exhortation, others for more classically theological purposes, but rarely for precise elucidation of the mystery of the Trinity. Consequently, their writings show a variety of forms of mystical discourse, ranging from scholastic treatises and biblical commentaries, through accounts and interpretations of their visions, to sermons and letters and poems. All call for a rather different kind of reading and comprehending, for more of a kind of *lectio divina*, a rumination, a meditation, rather than a linear analytic examination of a text, not that such a method is totally excluded. Hildegard's writings also include a remarkable series of intricately detailed illuminations, which are by no means mere illustrations of or a supplement to the written text, but integral to her theology. Indeed, for Hildegard, the two forms of communication are inextricably connected; her theology is as much visual as it is verbal.

Together, our chosen mystics exemplify different styles of theology, which can be broadly classified as monastic, scholastic, and vernacular. On the one hand, monastic theology strives for an understanding of the mysteries of faith that is the fruit of prayer, liturgy, and contemplation. Focused on interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures, it is basically exegetical in method. Its goal is experience, contemplation: believe in order to experience. Its most common genres are the biblical commentary, the letter-treatise, and the written rhetorical sermon. Scholastic theology, on the other hand, is the fruit of the more explicitly scholarly endeavor of faith seeking understanding. It took root in the universities, which emerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and flourished with the advent of Aristotelian philosophy into Europe in the thirteenth century. Its goal is knowledge, understanding, rationality, the demonstration of the reasonableness of Christian faith: believe in order to understand. Its typical genres are *lectio*, *disputatio*, *quaestio*, and *summa*. Vernacular theology also surfaced with considerable vigor in the twelfth century, not from the academic schools of the professional theologians, but more often from those who were barred from entry to university. It flourished not among the scholarly

trained—though there were some exceptions, such as the erudite Master of Paris, Meister Eckhart, who championed it—but among devout souls, formed by prayer and contemplation and informed by a wide reading of the spiritual classics available to them in the vernacular. Women, such as Julian of Norwich, played a particularly significant role in the development of this style of theology. More fluid in style and content, and technically less precise, vernacular theology is not as easily characterized as the monastic and scholastic. It includes visionary experiences and their explanation, hagiography, and poetry.

Clearly, the experiences and the insights of the mystics into the mystery of the Trinity do not come out of nowhere. Each of the mystics—along with the rest of us—is influenced and limited by the creedal statements as well as the images and concepts of God that prevail in his or her milieu and time. Our chosen mystics come to their profound consciousness of the mystery with a strong faith in and conception of it, as intimated in the New Testament and as defined by the church in its creeds and doctrines. They also come with knowledge, in varying depth, of Augustine’s exploration of the mystery of the Trinity in terms of what is now called the psychological analogy, wherein the mystery is understood in terms of the human mind’s operations or faculties. There is, then, no doubting that their revelations and insights are grounded in a prior familiarity with doctrinal formulations as well as iconographic and theological expressions of the mystery. The influence of trinitarian iconography is evident to varying degrees. Teresa and Elizabeth, for example, make reference to particular visual images of the Trinity.

It is hardly surprising that a flourishing of trinitarian mysticism would coincide with a period of sustained attention to matters trinitarian, such as occurred in the centuries following the split between East and West in the eleventh century over the procession of the Holy Spirit. Both the Fourth Lateran General Council in 1215 and the Second General Council of Lyons in 1274 attempted reunion and affirmed the *filioque*.⁶ The Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438 and 1439 made another attempt at reunion and reiterated the double procession of the Spirit as well as affirming the legitimacy of its insertion into the Creed for the sake of clarity.⁷ The feast

6. H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 36th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 850 and 853 (hereafter DS); J. Neusner and J. Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 6th rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Alba House, 1996), 321 and 24 (hereafter ND).

7. DS 1300–1302.

of the Trinity, which is celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost, was eventually proclaimed for inclusion in the Roman Church calendar in 1334. At the same time, the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a remarkable flourishing of trinitarian devotion and trinitarian iconography. The *Gnadenstuhl* iconographic form (Throne of Mercy or Seat of Grace as it is often known), which combines representation of the mystery of the Three with the crucifixion of Christ, proved especially popular at this time. The explosion of images for private devotion that occurred in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries prompted another flourishing of trinitarian iconography, also witnessing to the interconnection between mysticism and the visual arts.⁸

Some Practicalities and Limitations

We have arranged our studies of the chosen mystics in chronological order, though they can be approached in any order. We have also tried not to rely too greatly on a prior knowledge of the tradition of trinitarian theology. We have sought to give sufficient background about the mystics' lives and times to assist the reader in better appreciating the particular insights of each. Each mystic, after all, is grounded in a particular time and place and their context shapes the theological and doctrinal insights that they offer to us. Admittedly, there is the question as to whether a biography is even possible in many cases, with sources tainted and the biographical records, such as they are, often written in the style of hagiography.

In each chapter, then, we have first provided a brief overview of the mystic's life and times, his or her writings, and, to the degree that is possible, the mystical experience or, better, the mystical consciousness on which those writings are based before moving to an exploration of the insights into the mystery of the Trinity that the mystic offers. Our task is to plumb the writings of mystics, not just for their spiritual richness, but for their distinctly theological and doctrinal insights. We have kept footnotes to a minimum and, at each chapter's end, we have provided further sources, both primary and secondary, as well as recommended readings for those readers who wish to pursue the subject more deeply. We have included numerous quotations in the studies, in order to allow the mystics'

8. See, for example, Henk van Os, et al., *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300–1500*, trans. Michael Hoyle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); also Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Perspectives, Prentice Hall Art History, 1996).

own voices to be heard as much as practicable. Throughout, our primary focus is the distinctly doctrinal nature and caliber of their insights into the mystery of the Trinity.

We shall not, in this study, enter into the discussion of the complex issues concerning the phenomenon of mysticism itself. We shall instead adopt Bernard McGinn's notion of mysticism as a special consciousness of God and the ensuing transformation of person that results from immediate or direct encounter with God. We recognize that this immediately and intensely personal encounter with the transcendent reality of God, by its very nature, defies conventional modes of expression, and hence the mystics' strong use of metaphors and figures of speech and the metaphoric complexity and lyrical quality of their mystical writings. We recognize too that a probing of the mystics' writings is consequently more akin to a contemplative *lectio divina* than scholarly exegesis, a rumination rather than a linear analysis. As McGinn explains, comparing their use of language to poetry: "Mystical masterpieces . . . are often close to poetry in the ways in which they concentrate and alter language to achieve their ends . . . [and use] verbal strategies in which language is used not so much informationally as transformationally, that is, not to convey a content but to assist the hearer or reader to hope for or to achieve the same consciousness."⁹

In his discussions of mysticism, McGinn highlights the problems associated with the use of the word *experience* and opts instead for the word *consciousness*, for *consciousness*, he argues, expresses the reality that "mysticism (as the mystics insisted) is more than a matter of unusual sensations, but essentially comprises new ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming centre of life."¹⁰ The particular focus of our probing of the mystics is the new ways of knowing the Trinity that emerge from their heightened consciousnesses of the mystery. It is those new ways of knowing the Trinity that we offer to our readers, that they too will come to a new and deeper understanding of this great mystery. Our hope is that the study will be of assistance to students of trinitarian theology as well as to the interested lay reader in deepening an understanding and appreciation of the mystery of the Trinity.

9. Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), xiv, xvii.

10. Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 2006), xiv. See also McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal," *Spiritus* 8, no. 1 (2008): 44–63.

In conclusion, I wish to express an enormous debt of gratitude to the many writers and commentators on the mystics whose studies have made this study possible. This contribution, by way of synthesis and perspective, would be impossible were it not for the many superb specialist studies already undertaken by many fine scholars in the field. Theirs is the ground-work on which this contribution humbly stands. In particular, I salute Professor Bernard McGinn for the magisterial and monumental contribution that he has made to the study of the Christian mystical tradition.

Anne Hunt
Australian Catholic University
Trinity Sunday 2009

1

WILLIAM OF ST. THIERRY (CA. 1080–1148)



Although relatively unknown to contemporary Christians, William of St. Thierry is one of the great masters of twelfth-century monasticism, a period that came to be known as the golden age of Western monasticism. With strong currents of reform astir, monasticism was at a crossroads. William himself straddles the two great currents of the Western monastic tradition of the period: Benedictine, in the tradition of the renowned abbey of Cluny, and the Cistercian renewal movement, which had taken root at the abbey of Cîteaux in 1098. After spending many years of his life as a Benedictine monk, William, inspired by the reforming zeal of Bernard, abbot of the abbey at Clairvaux, set aside the black habit of the Benedictines to take on the white habit of the Cistercians.

Monk, mystic, and theologian, William was a man of deep faith, piety, and prayer, great learning, and considerable speculative skill. He is famed as a contemporary and friend—and biographer—of the charismatic Mellifluous Doctor, Bernard of Clairvaux, and as a spiritual writer and teacher. His so-called *Golden Epistle*, a letter written to the Carthusian monks at Mont Dieu, was highly esteemed by generations of monks and nuns, of various monastic observances, as an authority on the contemplative life. It continues to be regarded as one of the classics of medieval spirituality.

William himself, however, fell into obscurity soon after his death. Within just a few years of his passing, William's writings were confused with those of Bernard and came to be ascribed to Bernard. William was almost completely forgotten for a few hundred years, known only as Bernard's friend and biographer. Following a revival of interest in William in the twentieth century, William is now out of Bernard's shadow, once again recognized in his own right as a master of the spiritual life, in no way of lesser importance than or a mere reiteration of the thought of the Mellifluous Doctor, but rather of genuine individuality and originality,

creativity, and richness of thought. Indeed, it may well be the case that Bernard made at least some of William's thought his own.

Étienne Gilson writes in glowing terms of William: "William of Saint-Thierry has everything: power of thought, the orator's eloquence, the poet's lyricism, and all the attractiveness of the most ardent and tender piety."¹ Bernard McGinn writes: "William may have been less influential in the later tradition than Bernard and the Victorines, but he yields to no twelfth-century mystic in the depth and sophistication of his theology."² In a succinct summary of his penetrating studies of William's writings, Odo Brooke writes: "The great contribution of William of St. Thierry is to have evolved a theology of the Trinity which is *essentially* mystical and a mystical theology which is *essentially* trinitarian."³ Here indeed lies our particular interest in William: the deeply and distinctly trinitarian character of his mysticism and, at its center, the soul's union with God in and through the person of the Holy Spirit.

William's Life and Times

Although William is now recognized as one of the great lights in the medieval monastic movement, we know very little about the details of his life.⁴ He was born in Liège, a thriving intellectual center, known in the eleventh century as the "Athens of the North," in the last quarter of the twelfth century, a few years before Bernard (b. 1090). The Norman invasion and conquest of England had occurred just a few years earlier in 1066. The first crusade had been waged in 1095, the second in 1145. The monasteries were the repositories and the intellectual hubs of Christian thought, but the era of the schools and universities was about to blossom. New intellectual centers were emerging, and a new humanism was taking root. A new movement in theology was also stirring, and one that would find rich resources for reflection, not only in the liturgy, the Scriptures, and the fathers, as had been the classical monastically fashioned way of approach

1. Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955), 198.

2. Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, vol. 2 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 225.

3. Odo Brooke, *Studies in Monastic Theology*, Cistercian Studies Series 37 (Oxford: Mowbray, 1980), 8. Italics are Brooke's.

4. For a more detailed introduction to William of St. Thierry's life and works, see John Anderson's introduction to *The Enigma of Faith*, Cistercian Fathers Series 9 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1973).

until then, but in philosophy and in new methods that were more obviously scientific and speculative, more scholastic than monastic.

We know next to nothing of William's family, childhood, and education. In his ninth *Meditation*, he thanks God for a happy childhood. He also speaks of a measure of waywardness in his youth: "For by pursuing my desires and my heart's vanities, I lost my youth, and almost embarked on the way of the flesh" (*Meditation* 9).⁵ It is possible, however, that this waywardness is due more to the influence of Augustine's *Confessions* on William's construction of his autobiography than to historical veracity.

Tradition has it that William studied at Reims, a flourishing and respected center of learning since the tenth century. He entered and received the habit at the Benedictine monastery of St. Nicaise in Reims, where the Rule of St. Benedict was observed according to the Cluniac usage, and in a way that was reputedly stricter than most Cluniac houses of the time. By all accounts William was greatly respected for his piety and ability, and, in 1119 or 1120, he was elevated to the abbacy of the monastery of St. Thierry, a few kilometers from Reims. He exercised the responsibilities of abbot for about fifteen years, reputedly with exemplary discipline and spiritual leadership. In spite of the demanding responsibilities of his office, William wrote a number of his treatises at this same time.

At some stage, perhaps as early as in 1118, before becoming abbot of St. Thierry, William visited the newly founded religious house at Clairvaux and met Bernard, the first abbot of the abbey of Clairvaux. Clairvaux was a daughter house of Cîteaux, the center from which the then-flourishing Benedictine reform movement, the Order of Cîteaux, had emerged about twenty years previously. Bernard was a leading light in this Cistercian reform and his reputation was already considerable. William was enthralled by Bernard and by the ideals of Cistercian reform that he epitomized. Indeed William later sought Bernard's approval to come and live at Clairvaux, but Bernard disapproved of William's plan and urged him to stay at St. Thierry and to continue with his duties as abbot and his work in the Benedictine Cluniac reform. In 1134 and 1135, however, after about fifteen years as abbot of St. Thierry,⁶ William resigned his abbatial office

5. See also *Meditation* 4 which gives a more explicit confession. Translations are taken from the editions cited at the end of the chapter.

6. That period has been described as the "golden age of the Abbey of St Thierry." See M. Basil Pennington, "Abbot William, Spiritual Father of Saint Thierry," in *William, Abbot of St. Thierry: An International Colloquium*, trans. Jerry Carfantan, Cistercian Studies Series 94 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 225–39.

and retreated to a life of solitude and simplicity, taking the Cistercian habit—not at Clairvaux where he feared that Bernard, having counseled him against the transfer, might have refused to accept him—at the newly established Cistercian abbey at Signy in the Ardennes in the diocese of Reims. In the event, Bernard expressed no disapproval or displeasure. The two men enjoyed an enduring friendship. William was devoted to Bernard and, perhaps more than anyone else, understood and appreciated Bernard's thought.

Never having enjoyed a robust state of health, in fact of a rather delicate constitution, and now older and infirm, William was exonerated from the Cistercian requirement for manual work, and devoted himself to writing. This was to prove the most fruitful and prolific period of writing of his life. Eleven of his treatises were written at this stage, including his refutation of Peter Abelard, his commentary on the Song of Songs, and his famous *Golden Epistle*.

William died after a brief illness on September 8 in 1147 or 1148.⁷ A few decades later, by way of tribute to him, William's remains were exhumed from the cloister where his body had first been interred and reburied in a wall in the church at Signy. Although never canonized, he is honored as one of the great stars in the sky of the medieval Cistercian movement, a *beatus* in the Cistercian Order.

William lived in a time of profound development and reform in Western monasticism. Benedict of Nursia had written his Rule for Monks around AD 500, and this Rule had exercised a profound influence on monastic life and observance, particularly with the rise of the abbey of Cluny in the tenth century and of the Cluniac family of monasteries under Cluny's authority. Over the course of the years, however, the abbey of Cluny had adopted a moderate or mitigated interpretation of St. Benedict's Rule. Manual labor, an important element in Benedict's vision of monastic life, along with a careful balance of liturgy, sacred reading, and personal prayer, had yielded to a greater emphasis on psalmody and liturgical prayer, and a much expanded liturgy. By the twelfth century, many monasteries were drawing substantial incomes, and their prosperity had brought them considerable power, prestige, and influence. This had contributed to relaxation in observance of the Rule, as well as involvement in temporal affairs of society and the world. Observance in some monasteries had

7. For a translation and brief discussion of the events recounted in the *Vita Antiqua of St. William of St. Thierry* (MS Lat. 11782 of the Bibliothèque Nationale), see David N. Bell, "The Vita Antiqua of William of Saint Thierry," *Cistercian Studies* 11 (1976): 246–55.

slackened considerably. Some had succumbed to lukewarmness; some had slipped even further into carelessness.

The monastery of Cîteaux, near Dijon, was founded in the early twelfth century as a corrective to the mitigation and laxity of Cluny. With enormous zeal and vigor, it heralded a restoration of the spirit of St. Benedict and observance of the authentic letter of the Rule. It championed a return to the manual work that St. Benedict had espoused and a faithful observance of the Rule. It sought to strip away the many customs, embellishments, and additional observances that had become entrenched over the years and that were actually superfluous to and a distraction from the authentic observance of the Rule. The reform movement strove to revitalize the monastic tradition of old by following the Rule, simply and strictly, without compromise or mitigation. At root, it was motivated by a fervor for the original purity of monastic life, a zeal for the pristine ideals of monasticism, and a yearning for the simplicity, silence, and solitude, the austerity and asceticism of monastic life.

Tension inevitably emerged between Cîteaux and Cluny, between the Cistercian Order and the traditional Benedictine monasticism of the Cluniac form. There was thus deep conflict in the Benedictine world of Cluny to which William belonged. While not a member of the Cluniac Order per se, the abbey of St. Nicaise, where William had taken the black habit of the Benedictines, and the abbey of St. Thierry, where he was abbot, had both adopted the mitigated usages of Cluny.

Meanwhile, as monasticism was facing a radical challenge and impetus to reform, new currents were also emerging in theology, currents that would eventually flower in the scholastic theological synthesis that would be the achievement of the thirteenth century. Peter Abelard and his followers were bringing the method of dialectic and a heavy reliance on metaphysics and logic to the task of theology. Concerned to conserve and defend the tradition, William was relentless in his opposition to such novelties that, according to William's assessment, were imperiling the tradition. With a keen eye for error, William was a severe critic of Abelard's theology in particular, denouncing Abelard's errors to the by then powerful Bernard of Clairvaux, and urging Bernard to censure Abelard. At root was the perennial question of the relationship of faith and reason, and the proper application of Anselm's notion of theology as faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) in the exploration of the mysteries of faith, a question that continues to challenge us today.

This issue of faith in relation to reason is especially pertinent in trinitarian theology. Against Peter Abelard, William insisted that the mystery of

the Trinity does not yield to the faculty of human reason, but is rather to be approached by way of loving contemplation. William emphasized the utter transcendence of God, and the sheer incomprehensibility and ineffableness of the mystery of the Trinity. Faith, William insisted, is the key to an understanding of the mystery.

William's Writings

As Bernard McGinn explains, William writes with “a distinctive style—complex, often knotty, capable of passion and precision, though at times bordering on opacity.”⁸ William writes in fluent Latin and, as is the norm for the period, uses the Vulgate Bible.⁹ He was clearly well educated in Scriptures and in the writings of the patristic fathers, including some of the Greek fathers. Contemporary scholarship is unresolved in regard to William's knowledge of Greek and on the level of influence of the Greek fathers in his thought, particularly regarding the notion of the trinitarian image and likeness in the human person. While some argue that William has quite a wide knowledge of Eastern sources, it is much more probable that William knew those sources only through translations and the writings of Latin masters.

William clearly knows Augustine's work well and his writings show the clear influence of Augustine's thought. But William's work is by no means a mere repetition of Augustine's approach and method and is distinctly his own. Indeed, as Odo Brooke has noted in his incisive study of William's work: “the Augustinian images undergo a profound transformation, through William's greater emphasis on the dynamic conception of the ‘image’ as an imprint impelling the soul towards the final ‘resemblance’ of participation in the trinitarian life.”¹⁰ William is also clearly alert to contemporary theological questions of his day and to newly emerging

8. McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 227.

9. The Vulgate Bible is the Latin translation of the Bible attributed to St. Jerome in the late fourth century and later accorded official status by the church.

10. Odo Brooke, “The Trinitarian Aspect of the Ascent of the Soul to God in the Theology of William of St. Thierry,” in *Studies in Monastic Theology*, Cistercian Studies Series 37 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 14. For a discussion of the relationship of Augustine's approach to the mystery of the Trinity and that of William of St. Thierry, see Brooke, “The Trinitarian Aspect,” esp. 19–20, 34; J. M. Déchanet, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, trans. Columba Hart (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006), xl–xlvi; and David N. Bell, *The Image and Likeness: The Augustinian Spirituality of William of St. Thierry* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984).

theological methods, as is well attested, for example, by his vehement refutation of the work of Peter Abelard and of William of Conches.

Currently, eighteen theological and mystical treatises are considered to be the work of William.¹¹ *On Contemplating God* (*De contemplando Deo*) is fashioned along lines of St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *Soliloquies*, and has a sequel, *The Nature and Dignity of Love* (*De natura et dignitate amoris*), in which William presents a comprehensive account of human love enlightened and transformed by God's grace, under the impetus of the Holy Spirit. In *The Mirror of Faith* (*Speculum fidei*) and its companion volume, *The Enigma of Faith*, William expounds a distinctly trinitarian mysticism and theology. The latter is effectively a tract on the Trinity, a rigorous theological exposition of the mystery of the Trinity. *On the Sacrament of the Altar* (*De sacramento altaris*) treats the manner of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. *Meditativae orationes* is a collection of meditations. The *Exposition on the Song of Songs* (*Expositio super Cantica canticorum*) provides William, as for so many other mystics, with the opportunity to express the role of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit in the soul's search for the joy of union with its Lover, God. A biography of Bernard of Clairvaux remained unfinished on William's death.

Without doubt, William's best-known work is *Epistle to the Brothers of Mont Dieu* (*Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei*), or the *Golden Epistle*, as it came to be known. This was written about 1144 when William was at Signy. It is the last of William's spiritual writings. Though never intended for the public eye, this is the work that has captured the most attention and secured William's place for posterity as a master of the spiritual life. It was written for the Carthusian community of monks at the charterhouse at Mont Dieu, following a series of talks that William had given to them while staying with them around 1144. William clearly had particular affection and admiration for the Carthusian monks, who were renowned for their holiness and for their life of personal solitude. Despite explicit references to William's other works in the introduction to the letter, not long after William's death, the letter came to be attributed to Bernard, and was so for about four hundred years hence.

The *Golden Epistle* is a remarkable letter in a number of ways, not least because it witnesses, par excellence, to the golden age of Western monasticism. It is not a theological treatise as such, but rather a kind of apologia for the monastic ideal and a summa of mystical theology. In it, William stresses humility, fidelity, and the constant exercise of prayer in monastic life—the

11. Translations of most of his works are found in the Cistercian Fathers Series, published by Cistercian Publications.

Divine Office and prayers according to the Rule, but also private prayer. Other masters and teachers of the spiritual life, including Bonaventure, Anthony of Padua, Jan van Ruusbroec, Francis de Sales, and Hadewijch refer to it with admiration, albeit thinking it to be the work of Bernard.

In regard to himself, William offers only the scantiest autobiographical comment and does not provide a personal account of his mystical experience. What we can however sense in his writings, perhaps most especially in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, the *Meditations*, *On Contemplating God*, and the *Golden Epistle*, is an indication of the mystical heights that he himself must have experienced in order to be able to write with such warmth, lucidity, and profundity about the contemplative life. His writings evince a profound intuition of union with God and the knowledge that union in love affords. William's writings also evince a richness and sophistication of thought. He is clearly an insightful thinker with a strong capacity for speculative thought. By virtue of his own experience and context, he is more aptly described as a mystical theologian than a speculative theologian.

William's Insights into the Mystery of the Trinity

It is in William's *The Mirror of Faith* and its companion volume, *The Enigma of Faith*, that William most fully expounds his trinitarian theology. Other writings, such as the *Exposition on the Song of Songs* and the *Golden Epistle*, attest more clearly to the mystical experience in which William's thought has its deeply experiential roots. On the other hand, his treatise against Abelard (*Disputatio adversus Petrum Abelardum*) is a counter to the rationalist approach of his contemporary.

In his Prefatory Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu, William explains that he wrote *The Mirror of Faith* and *The Enigma of Faith* for the Carthusian monks as an encouragement to their faith and a consolation in their solitude. *The Mirror of Faith* deals mainly with faith as the means of seeing and knowing God in this life, while *The Enigma of Faith* treats the object of faith, God, Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in a more speculative fashion. William explains: "That work is divided into two books, the first of which, because it is straightforward and easy, I entitled *The Mirror of Faith*: the second, because it will be found to contain a summary of the grounds and the formulations of faith according to the words and the thought of the Catholic Fathers and is a little more obscure, *The Enigma of Faith*" (Prefatory Letter §7, *Golden Epistle*). The titles of the works are inspired by Paul's words in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly [lit. an enigma], but then we will see face to face. Now I know only

in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). This Pauline text is highly significant for William, encapsulating the interrelatedness of seeing and knowing, of vision and understanding that permeates his thinking.

As for many of his medieval contemporaries, William shows a certain predilection for triads. He engages a number of them, including that of the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) and Augustine’s psychological triad of memory, intellect, and love, and its variants, to describe the human person’s progress to union with God. But unlike Augustine, with whose work William is clearly well acquainted, William shows no great interest in detailed exploration of trinitarian analogies. William’s concern is not an explication or even an exploration of the mystery of the Trinity *per se*, and of questions such as how the procession of the Holy Spirit differs from that of the Son, which so vexed Augustine. William writes to refute and correct certain errors of method and approach that he detects in some spheres of theological speculation of his time, most notably in the work of Peter Abelard, and to describe the ascent of the soul to union with God. William understands that the soul’s capacity for ascent to God and entry into trinitarian communion is grounded in the imprint of the Trinity in the human person, an imprint there indelibly from the very beginning. It is this imprint of the Trinity on the soul that constitutes the human person as *imago Dei*, *imago Trinitatis*, and therein lies the possibility of the human person’s attainment of similitude or likeness to the Trinity, *similitudo Trinitatis*, and participation in the innertrinitarian communion.

An understanding of the human person as *imago Dei* lies at the heart of William’s theology. For William, the divine image is really imprinted, like an indelible seal of the divine persons, from the very first moment of creation of the human person, in the faculties of memory, reason, and will. William explains:

When [God] infused the breath of life into the face of, and by infusing created, the new man . . . He established in his, as it were, fortress the power of memory so that he might always remember the powerfulness and goodness of the Creator. Immediately and without any delay, memory of itself begets reason, then both memory and reason from themselves bring forth the will. . . . These three (memory, reason, and will) are one yet effectively three, just as in the supreme Trinity there is one substance and three persons. As in that Trinity the Father is the one who begets, the Son the one begotten, and the Holy Spirit the one who proceeds from both, so reason is begotten

from memory and from both memory and reason proceeds the will.
(Nature and Dignity of Love §3)

William then draws a direct correspondence between the three faculties and the three divine persons, and, moreover, describes each of the divine persons as laying claim to the respective faculties:

So that the rational soul created in man may adhere to God, therefore, the Father claims the memory for himself, the Son the reason, and the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from both, claims the will proceeding from both. *(Nature and Dignity of Love §3)*

It is because of this indestructible imprint of the Trinity that the soul, by its very nature and structure, is naturally inclined to and positively drawn to union with the Trinity. By no means a static *imago*, the soul is impelled, in a distinctly trinitarian dynamic, to ever closer resemblance or similitude to its trinitarian Creator. The ground for the experience of union with God is grounded precisely here in this primordial image, indelibly imprinted from the very first moment of creation.

Sin, on the other hand, causes a disturbance of this likeness, a disruption to the soul's movement toward God. Because of sin, the image of the Trinity in the human person, and thus the human person's capacity to know God, is blighted. William recognizes that faith is the first vital step in restoration of the divine image, as is exemplified in Mary, the Mother of God, and her *fiat* in response to God. Here William understands the restorative, creative, and transformative dynamism of grace. By illuminating the soul's faculties of memory, reason, and will, grace restores the image to its original representation of the trinitarian image and likeness. The restoration of the image into a likeness or resemblance is the human person's perfection, the end for which the human person was created. William explains: "Resemblance to God is the whole of man's perfection. . . . For to this end alone were we created and do we live, to be like God; for we were created in his image" (*Golden Epistle* §259).

A text from the First Letter of John is particularly influential in William's understanding of the soul's ascent to union with God: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2-3). The text provides the basis for William's understanding of the interconnection and reciprocity of vision (i.e., knowledge) and likeness. To see God is to be like God. Correlatively, to be like God (similitude) is to see (and to know) God. Without ever collapsing one

into the other, William recognizes a reciprocity, indeed an equivalence, between knowledge and likeness.

A text from Matthew's gospel is also highly instructive for William: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27). William explains: "as for the Father to know the Son is nothing else but to be what the Son is, and for the Son to know the Father is simply to be what the Father is, . . . and as for the Holy Spirit to know and understand the Father and the Son is simply to be what the Father and Son are, so is it with us . . . to love and to fear God is nothing other than to be of one spirit with him" (*On Contemplating God* §11). Again, William stresses the reciprocity of knowledge and likeness. The greater the likeness, the greater the knowledge. The greater the likeness, the greater also is the union. Here William is particularly mindful of a text from the farewell discourse in John's gospel, which connects knowledge with mutual abiding: "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20).

In *The Mirror of Faith*, William treats the trinity of virtues—faith, hope, and charity—by which one attains union with the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. William understands that it is precisely through this trinity of virtues that one is restored to the image and likeness of the Trinity and thus initiated into the life of the Trinity. In the opening paragraph of *The Mirror of Faith*, William explains:

Among all the saving acts of God, our Salvation, which our God, the God who saves us, has proposed to men to be observed for his salvation, these three, as the Apostle says, remain: Faith, Hope, and Charity. And they are to be observed in a special way by all who are to be saved. For the mind of the faithful soul the Holy Trinity has constituted this trinity to His image and likeness. By it we are renewed in the inner person to the image of him who created us. (*Mirror of Faith* §1)

Indeed, William brings *The Mirror of Faith* to conclusion with a prayer for this trinity of virtues and for union with God, union with the Trinity:

O You whom no one truly seeks and does not find, . . . find us that we may find you! Come within us that we may go to you and live in you, for surely this comes not from the person willing, nor from the person running but from you who have mercy! Inspire us first that we may believe! Strengthen us that we may hope! Call us forth and set us on fire that we may love. May everything of ours be yours "that we may truly be in you," in whom we live and move and have our being. (*Mirror of Faith* §32)

William frequently stresses the necessity of grace in the exercise of the virtues and the transforming power of grace in the restitution of the divine image:

Anyone who truly seeks the Triune God therefore must strive to have the trinity of these powers in himself and must eagerly study to conform himself to their teaching. Consciousness of them is a paradise of delights that enjoys an abundance of graces along with chaste delights of the holy powers. Here man, native to this paradise, converses with God. He often sees Him, he often hears Him speaking, he often speaks with Him. (*Mirror of Faith* §3)

Not only does the human person, restored to the divine image and likeness, enjoy the grace of conversing with God, seeing him, hearing him, speaking with him, but the human person finds him- or herself in the very midst of the divine persons, united to God by that *same love* whereby the Father and Son are united in love *in the very person of the Holy Spirit*:

Such is the astounding generosity of the Creator to the creature; the great grace, the unknowable goodness, the devout confidence of the creature for the Creator, the tender approach, the tenderness of a good conscience, that man somehow finds himself in their midst, in the embrace and kiss of the Father and Son, that is, in the Holy Spirit. And he is united to God by that charity whereby the Father and Son are one. He is made holy in Him who is the holiness of both. (*Mirror of Faith* §32)

For William, the soul's ascent to union with the Trinity occurs, not simply *through the agency of the Holy Spirit*, but actually *in the very person of the Holy Spirit* as bond of union of Father and Son, their kiss, their embrace, their love, the unity and oneness of Father and Son. Alluding to the psalmist's vision of abyss calling to abyss (Ps 42:7), and contrasting the Spirit's role in our human earthly existence and in the Trinity, William insists that it is "absolutely the same Spirit":

This embrace is the Holy Spirit. He is the Communion, the Charity, the Friendship, the Embrace of the Father and of the Son; and he himself is all these things in the love of the Bridegroom and Bride. But on the one hand stands the majesty of consubstantial Nature; on the other, the gift of grace. On the one hand, dignity; on the other, condescension. Nevertheless, it is the same, absolutely the same Spirit. True, this embrace is begun here, to be perfected elsewhere. This deep calls on another deep. (*Song of Songs* §132)

It is the Holy Spirit who effects the restored likeness to God. It is in and through the person of the Holy Spirit, who is, in person, the bond of union of Father and Son, that the human person enters into the very midst of the trinitarian relations and into the communion of the Trinity, “to become not God but what God is.” As William again explains, clearly recognizing the distinction between God and the soul in this state of union:

The soul in its happiness finds itself standing midway in the Embrace and the Kiss of Father and Son. In a manner which exceeds description and thought, the man of God is found worthy to become not God but what God is, that is to say man becomes from grace what God is by nature. (*Golden Epistle* §263)

Throughout his writings, William stresses the particular role of the Holy Spirit as bond of union between Father and Son and bond of union between the human person and God. The Holy Spirit is not simply one *with* the Father and Son, but their very oneness. William recognizes the same mutuality in our love and knowledge of God as between the divine persons in the Trinity.

In contradistinction to any notion that the mystery of God can be approached by way of reason, such as William detected in Abelard’s thought, William insists that the reality and the mystery of God can *only* be grasped by love. He recognizes that love is “the sense of the soul” in regard to the things of God, divine things. Thus William speaks in terms of the “*sensus amoris*.” It is the sense of the soul, akin to a blind person’s sense of touch, by which the human person not only loves God but feels God, senses God, and comes to an understanding of God. William explains:

When it senses things rational, reason goes out to them and once it has returned, the mind is transformed to these realities and understanding occurs. But in those things which pertain to God, the sense of the mind is love. By this it senses whatever it senses of God, according to the spirit of life [*Spiritus vitae*]. And, the spirit of life is the Holy Spirit; by him anyone loves who loves what truly ought to be loved. (*Mirror of Faith* §27)

Here William appeals to an understanding of the knowledge of the senses—that we know what we sense when and because we are transformed in some way into what it is that we sense. In other words, a knower’s knowledge of some object comes about by the formation of—and the mind’s conformation to—a likeness, a “similitude” (*similitudo*), of the object in the mind of the knower. William thus understands and indeed insists that we

know God in and through being transformed into a likeness of God. We note again the interconnection and interpenetration of knowledge and likeness that is so important in William's theology, inspired by 1 John 3:2-3 in which vision and likeness go hand in hand.

William understands that this transformation into the likeness of God occurs by way of the love that is the Holy Spirit. It is by participation in the person of the Holy Spirit, who is the mutual love and union of Father and Son, that we become like God and, in becoming like God, know God. It is through the Holy Spirit that the human person participates in the love and the knowledge that is the trinitarian communion. Our union with God is thus effected in and through the person of the Holy Spirit.

In this way, William, without ever resiling from the sheer transcendence of God, articulates in very explicit trinitarian terms, and indeed distinctly *innertrinitarian* terms, the soul's ascent to union with God and the knowledge of God *in se* that is thus attained, not by way of theological speculation, but by way of love and the *sensus amoris* by which the human person loves, senses, and knows God. It is love, he insists, that grasps the ungraspable and comprehends the incomprehensible:

This process [of transformation into what one senses] happens in a more forceful and more worthy manner when he, the Holy Spirit, who is the substantial will of the Father and the Son, so attaches the will of a person to Himself that the soul, loving God and, by loving, sensing Him, will be unexpectedly and entirely transformed, not into the nature of divinity certainly, but into a kind of blessedness beyond the human form yet short of the divine, in the joy of illuminating grace and the sense of an enlightened conscience. (*Mirror of Faith* §30)

For William, it is therefore the Holy Spirit who is the great master of the spiritual life. It is the Holy Spirit who attracts the memory, enlightens the intellect, and enkindles the heart. It is the Holy Spirit who waits, prompts, teaches, and draws the human person ever more deeply into the mystery of God and lets him or her "see" God. It is in and through the Holy Spirit that our likeness to God is restored and we come to participate in the innertrinitarian communion and thus come to share in the very love and knowledge with which God loves God's self.

Much more than mere appropriation is implied here in William's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit, though in his treatment of appropriation *per se* (in *The Enigma of Faith*) William follows the classical approach. He offers no account of how to reconcile these two approaches. Odo Brooke makes a helpful and thought-provoking observation in this regard:

It should be noticed that the texts treating of appropriation are concerned with another problem from that of the texts on the restoration of resemblance. The texts treating of appropriation are concerned with the attributes of the divine essence in opposition to Abelard's supposed attempt to make the attributes of power, wisdom and love constitutive of the person, whereas the texts treating of resemblance are concerned with our participation in the life of the Holy Ghost, conceived as the mutual unity of the Father and the Son. . . . But the essential point of these texts does not lie in the conception of an action *ad extra*, but in the participation in the life of the Holy Ghost in what William conceived as proper to the Holy Ghost, the mutual unity of the Father and the Son.¹²

Despite the conundrum it raises, in William's theology the role of our sanctification and participation in the mystery of the Trinity is proper to the person of the Holy Spirit. It is important to note that, for William, the Holy Spirit is the bond of *both mutual knowledge and mutual love* that unites Father and Son, not just, as for Augustine, the bond of mutual love. This is well demonstrated in the following passage, in which the inspiration of Matt 11:27 is also clear:

But the recognition which is mutual to the Father and Son is the very unity of both, which is the Holy Spirit. The recognition by which they recognize one another is nothing other than the substance by which they are what they are. Yet in this recognition no one learns to know the Father except the Son and no one learns to know the Son except the Father and him to whom He chooses to reveal Him. These are the Lord's words. The Father and the Son reveal this to certain persons then, to those to whom They will, to those to whom They make it known, that is, to whom They impart the Holy Spirit, who is the common knowing or the common will of both. Those therefore to whom the Father and the Son reveal [Themselves] recognise them as the Father and the Son recognise Themselves, because they have within themselves Their mutual knowing, because they have within themselves the unity of both, and their will or love: all that the Holy Spirit is. (*Mirror of Faith* §31)

For William, the Holy Spirit is not just mutual love but mutual knowledge. The Holy Spirit is, in a sense, *amor-intellectus*, the love that is knowledge and the knowledge that is love. Here is another vital notion in William's theology and another counter to the notions that he detected

12. Brooke, *Studies in Monastic Theology*, 31.

and rejected in Abelard's thought. In the Holy Spirit, and thus in our union with the Holy Spirit, love is understanding. It is not that William collapses the distinction between love and knowledge; it is rather a matter of the interpenetration of love and the knowledge that is born of love and that goes beyond all human understanding. Hence, only reason humbled by love, as William insists,¹³ can fruitfully probe the mysteries of faith.

William would have us understand that, in the soul's loving union with God, reason passes over into love and into an understanding that surpasses the capacity of reason alone. In other words, in the soul's ascent to union with God, love gradually subsumes and transcends reason, and leads the human person to union of spirit (*unitas spiritus*). In this, the highest stage in the ascent of love, we *become* the Holy Spirit, who is, in person, the very unity and oneness, the mutual love and knowledge of Father and Son. In his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, William describes the intimacy of this blissful union in terms of the kiss and embrace of bride and bridegroom, reiterating that "all this is the Holy Spirit":

They are named Bride and Bridegroom, while words are sought that may somehow express in human language the charm and sweetness of this union, which is nothing else than the unity of the Father and the Son of God, their Kiss, their Embrace, their Love, their Goodness and whatever in that supremely simple Unity is common to both. All this is the Holy Spirit—God, Charity, at once Giver and Gift. Upon this bed are exchanged that kiss and that embrace by which the Bride begins to know as she herself is known. And as happens in the kisses of lovers, who by a certain sweet, mutual exchange, impart their spirit each to the other, so the created spirit pours itself out wholly into the Spirit who creates it for this very effusion; and the Creator Spirit infuses himself into it as he wills, and man becomes one spirit with God. (*Song of Songs* §95)

In that state of union, William explains, echoing the Pauline text, 1 Corinthians 13:12, the soul "begins to know as she herself is known." Self-knowledge comes with God-knowledge. Only with God-knowledge does the human person attain authentic knowledge of self.

William's notion of *unitas spiritus* (unity of spirit) is inspired by Paul's words: "But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him"

13. Reason is humbled in the sense that love has priority over reason. William is clearly arguing against the scholastic notion—a dangerous pretension, in William's view—that reason is the greater faculty. Both are necessary in the ascent, William argues, but love has the priority.

(1 Cor 6:17).¹⁴ William explains: “There is yet another likeness . . . It is so close in its resemblance that it is styled not merely a likeness but unity of spirit. It makes man one with God, one spirit, . . . It is called unity of spirit not only because the Holy Spirit brings it about or inclines a man’s spirit to it, but because it is the Holy Spirit himself, the God who is Charity” (*Golden Epistle* §262-63). *Unitas spiritus* means that the love and the knowledge with which God loves and knows God’s self innertrinitarianly is the love and the knowledge with which God loves us and we, God. It is a grace, it is gift, indeed it is the Holy Spirit himself. It is a unity that is the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit, the love of God, may so transform our human love into divine love and our faith into understanding (*intellectus*), that we become one spirit with God. The human soul can then sense God, because its senses, its ways of knowing, have been transformed into the very being they sense.

There is no hint of pantheism in William’s thinking, however. He has no doubts about the distinction between this *unitas spiritus* and the trinitarian mystery of the unity of the divine persons. William stresses that the Holy Spirit’s indwelling in the human person is not to be equated with the Holy Spirit’s indwelling in the Trinity, where Holy Spirit is consubstantially one with Father and Son. The Holy Spirit’s indwelling in the human person is by grace, not by nature as in the Trinity wherein the Holy Spirit is of the same nature and substance as Father and Son. As William explains:

Yet this [presence of the Holy Spirit] is so in one way in the divine substance wherein he himself is consubstantially one with the Father and Son, but in another way in inferior matter. . . . There [in God] the mutual recognition of the Father and Son is unity. Here [in us] it is a likeness of man to God; of it the Apostle John says in his epistle: We will be like to him because we will see him as he is [1 John 3:2]. (*Mirror of Faith* §31)

William continues, describing that blessed state of union with God wherein the human person will see God and be like God:

There, to be like God will be either to see or to recognise him. One will see or recognise him, will see or recognise to the extent that he will be like Him. He will be like Him to the extent that he will see and recognise Him. For to see or to recognise God there is to be like to God and to be like to God is to see or to recognise Him. (*Mirror of Faith* §32)

14. See Jacques Delesalle, “On Being ‘One Single Spirit’ with God in the Works of William of Saint-Thierry,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1998): 19–28.

Here too we see the profound influence in William's thought of those Johannine words that connect knowledge (seeing) with likeness: "we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). But notice that William also reverses the order of seeing and being like God. Where John writes that "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is," William explains that we shall see him, for—and to the extent that—we shall be like him.

Here is the heart of the matter, as William understands it: vision comes through participation. It is participation in the divine life that allows the vision, the sense, the understanding, an understanding that reason unaided can never attain. Hence William's adage, *Amor ipse intellectus est*.¹⁵ Love itself is understanding. There is an understanding that is only accessible by love. As William explains in his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*: "For love of God itself is knowledge of him; unless he is loved, he is not known, and unless he is known, he is not loved. He is known only insofar as he is loved, and he is loved only insofar as he is known" (*Song of Songs* §76). In this state of grace, love and understanding mutually interpenetrate each other, as they do in the very person of the Holy Spirit in the innertrinitarian mystery. The human person then loves and knows, not in a human way, but *in divino modo*, a divine mode of knowledge, that is otherwise utterly beyond our understanding. As William reiterates: "But from the Bride to the Bridegroom, knowledge and love are all the same, for here love itself is understanding" (*Song of Songs* §57). *Amor ipse intellectus est*. William intends neither a tautology nor a reduction nor an identification of understanding and love. Rather, he comprehends that there is an understanding attained by love that is utterly beyond the capacities and boundaries of human reason. It is not just a knowing *about* God but knowing God *in se*.¹⁶

For William, it is only by entry into and participation in the mystery of the Trinity that we come to understand it. That the mystery is beyond rational penetration does not mean that it is beyond experience. Indeed, an understanding is only possible through experience. Hence William's insistence: *Credo ut experiar!* (Believe in order to experience.) Augustine's *Credo ut intelligam* (Believe in order to understand) thus yields, in William's mystical theology, to *Credo ut experiar*. For William, that experience is ultimately the

15. As has been noted by several scholars, the immediate background to William's *Amor ipse intellectus est* is Gregory the Great's *Amore ipse notitia est*.

16. In a similar way, William often speaks of *intellectus amoris*, that higher level of knowledge and understanding than is accessible by reason alone, an interpenetration of knowledge and love, without loss of distinction between the two. See Patrick Ryan, "Sensus Amoris: The Sense of Love in Two Texts of William of Saint Thierry," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2005): 163–72.

experience of the Trinity, the communion of the Father and the Son and their mutual union in reciprocal love and knowledge, the Holy Spirit.

In *The Enigma of Faith*, William, in more speculative style, treats five key themes—(1) vision and knowledge of God; (2) faith in the Trinity; (3) degrees of knowledge; (4) divine names; and (5) contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity—and in the course of the tract treats such matters as the divine subsistent relations, persons, the divine names, and the strategy of appropriation. Fashioned in reaction—and as a corrective—to the rationalist approach that William perceived in Peter Abelard’s *Theologia scholarium*, William is there concerned to develop a methodology by which to speak of the mystery of the Trinity, without exceeding the capacities and limitations of human reason. Reason alone, he again insists, is incapable of coming to a knowledge of God. Two eyes, love and reason, are involved in seeing God, as William explains in the *Nature and Dignity of Love*:

The sight for seeing God, the natural light of the soul therefore, created by the Author of nature, is charity. There are, however, two eyes in this sight, always throbbing by a sort of natural intention to look toward the light that is God: love and reason. When one attempts to look without the other, it does not get far. When together they help one other, they can do much, that is, when they become the single eye. (*Nature and Dignity of Love* §21)¹⁷

William demonstrates considerable reliance on Augustine’s terms and concepts in *The Enigma of Faith*. While he remains ever close to the thought and conceptuality of Augustine, this is by no means mere repetition, however. Distinct differences and developments are evident, most obviously in William’s understanding of the person of the Holy Spirit as the mutual bond of union of Father and Son. He writes:

There, as in the Trinity, which is God, the Father and the Son mutually see one another and their mutual vision consists in their being one and in the fact that the one is what the other is, so those who have been predestined for this and have been taken up into it will see God as he is, and in seeing him as he is they will become like him. And there, as in the Father and the Son, that which is vision is also unity; so in God and man that which is vision will be the likeness that is to come. The Holy Spirit, the unity of the Father and the Son, is himself the love and likeness of God and man. (*Enigma of Faith* §5)

17. Hence William’s notion of “humbled reason.” See also *Song of Songs* §92, and *Golden Epistle* §196.

To see, to know, to participate in the mutual knowledge and love of the Father and Son, this is the soul's ultimate transformation, the perfection of the *similitudo Dei*. And this transformation, which is heaven for us, is achieved in the very person of the Holy Spirit, as William reflects in one of his meditations:

As I see it then our dwelling in you and yours in us is heaven for us. But for you the heaven of heavens is your eternity, where you are what you are in your own self. The Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father; and the bond that unites you, Father and Son, is the Holy Spirit, who comes not as it were from somewhere else to be the link between you, but who exists as such by virtue of his unity of being with you both. It is in the Holy Spirit too, who creates and sets in order the unity that makes us one among ourselves and in you.
(*Meditations* 6, §7)

As William never fails to stress, returning always to his notion of the indelible imprint of the Trinity in the very constitution of the human person: "For to this end alone were we created and do we live, to be like God; for we were created in his image" (*Golden Epistle* §259).

Conclusion

Thomas Merton said of William, "There is not a line of his writing that is not filled with the light and unction of the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who dominates William's insights into the mystery of the Trinity.¹⁹ While he understands the soul's union with God as the action of the whole Trinity, the Holy Spirit stands at center stage in his theology. William understands that our experience of the Trinity, our entry into the trinitarian communion, is grounded in the very person of the Holy Spirit as bond of union, mutual love *and knowledge* of Father and Son, their kiss and embrace, their very oneness; and that too for the human person in union with God. William would have us understand that the very desire to enter into union with God is itself the embrace of the Holy Spirit that carries us into the mystery of the Father and the Son. There is no sense

18. Thomas Merton, "Blessed William of Saint-Thierry: Monk of Signy," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2000): 5.

19. This emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit is all the more interesting, given that William writes at a time when a theology of person of the Holy Spirit and of the Spirit's role and gifts is not particularly well developed and precise, in the way that it would later become in the hands of Thomas Aquinas.

of the dark night, such as emerges so prominently in John of the Cross's understanding, but rather a much more positive process of attracting the memory, illuminating the intellect, and enkindling the will. In the person of the Holy Spirit, directly and immediately at work in us, the human person is inserted into the very midst of the Trinity, so to speak, and there enters into the Trinity's knowledge and love of itself. There too the human person also begins to know as he or she is known.

William engages Augustine's conceptual schema to describe the mystery of the Trinity, albeit with some significant modifications, which attest to the originality, independence, depth, and sophistication of his thought.²⁰ For William, the Holy Spirit is not love as such (as in Augustine's thinking), but the reciprocity of love. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is love *and knowledge*.

Utterly critical to William's theology is the mystery of the human person as created in the image of the Trinity, with the trinitarian image indelibly imprinted on the soul from the moment of creation, impelling it to union with God. In William's theology, the triad of memory, intellect, and will is not just a psychological parallel or image, an illustrative strategy, but a real ontological participation in God, embedded in the very being of the human person. The perfection of the human person lies in the restoration of the image and likeness of the Trinity, effected in and through the person of the Holy Spirit, and thereby participation in the very love and knowledge of the divine persons and entry into the trinitarian communion.

William insists that an understanding of the mystery of the Trinity is only possible through experience, not through the powers of human reason. Hence his dictum, *Credo ut experiar*: Believe in order to experience. Experience in order to love and understand. In love is understanding: *amor ipse intellectus est*. The more we love God, the more we know and understand God. Love is the way of entry into participation in the divine being. It is not so much a matter of an unveiling of the mystery, but a deeper entry into the incomprehensibility of the mystery of unity in Trinity. In that entry into the mystery, love and understanding, similitude (or likeness) and participation (or union) are profoundly and dynamically interconnected. Indeed they interpenetrate each other circumincessively. To love is to know, and with knowledge comes likeness, and with likeness comes

20. It is interesting to note that William rejects the definition of Boethius of the person as individual substance of rational nature (whereas Thomas Aquinas will appropriate it into his trinitarian theology); see *Enigma of Faith* §34. McGinn observes that "William understands the nature of the Spirit as essentially intersubjective . . . and circumincessive" (McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 270–71).

unity of spirit. The greater the participation, the greater the vision, the greater the understanding, the greater the union.

William is rightly described as one of the great masters of trinitarian mysticism, so intrinsically trinitarian is his understanding of the soul's constitution and its journey to union with God. His theology is correspondingly deeply trinitarian, and essentially mystical. Indeed, his is arguably the most profound theology of the Trinity of the twelfth century.

References and Further Reading

Primary Sources

- William of Saint Thierry. *The Mirror of Faith*. Translated by Thomas X. David. Cistercian Fathers Series 15. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979.
- . *The Enigma of Faith*. Translated by John D. Anderson. Cistercian Fathers Series 9. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1973.
- . *On Contemplating God, Prayer, Meditations*. Translated by Penelope Lawson. Cistercian Fathers Series 3. Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977.
- . *The Golden Epistle: A Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu*. Translated by Theodore Berkeley. Cistercian Fathers Series 12. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971.
- . *The Nature and Dignity of Love*. Translated by Thomas X. Davis. Cistercian Fathers Series 30. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981.
- . *Exposition on the Song of Songs*. Translated by Mother Columba Hart. Cistercian Fathers Series 6. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006.
- . *Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans*. Translated by John Baptist Hasbrouck. Cistercian Fathers Series 27. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980.

Secondary Sources

- Bell, David N. *The Image and Likeness: The Augustinian Spirituality of William of St. Thierry*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984.
- Brooke, Odo. *Studies in Monastic Theology*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980.
- McGinn, Bernard. "William of St. Thierry: Spirit-Centered Mysticism." In *The Growth of Mysticism*. Vol. 2, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. 225–74. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- William, Abbot of St. Thierry: An International Colloquium*. Translated by Jerry Carfantan. Cistercian Studies Series 94. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987.