Prayer
Scripture: Song of Solomon 1:2-4a; 7:10-13; Revelation 1:9-11.
Hymn: 449 "Nearer, Still Nearer"

For devout Roman Catholics one of the most treasured expressions of Roman Revival was the appearance of some of the greatest mystical saints of church history. In Spain the greatest of these were Teresa of Avila and her disciple, John of the Cross. The greatest in France were Francis of Sales and Vincent of Paul. There were a number of lesser lights whom the church enrolled among the saints. The Catholics could look to these and say that a Church that could produce such saints could not be completely rotten--it could not be as bad as Protestants claimed it was. Attempting to imitate and follow these saints enabled many to turn their backs on and to forget the religious debates and wars of the period.

The great outburst of mystical piety appeared first in Spain. It was one of those varied expressions of vitality that characterized Spain in the Reformation Period. Just as the Spanish were reaching mountain-like peaks in geographical exploration, empire building, military might, art, and literature, so also in mystical sainthood the Spanish achievements have been marvelled at ever since. This feature of the Spanish Reformation began in the late fifteenth century, climax in the sixteenth century, began to decline in the seventeenth, and had largely faded out by the middle of the eighteenth century. Its rise and decline paralleled other aspects of Spanish greatness.

The mysticism of the Spanish saints was marked by a strong strain of self-renouncing quietism that resulted in the rising of the soul to God in contemplation and voiceless prayer. Its goal was union with God in divine love—an ecstasy of inner revelation. Rigorous ascetic practices were followed as an aid in achieving the mystical exaltation. Although these saints manifested deep insights into the nourishing of the spiritual life they put great emphasis on practical every-day service ministering to the people. The great leaders were members of the Carmelite Order but the movement found expression in all the orders. The souls of thousands of the Spaniards were attracted to this piety. Scores of writers produced a vast literature encouraging the spiritual life.

FORERUNNERS OF THE MYSTICAL SAINTS:

The first outstanding pioneer of the classic era of Spanish mysticism was Francisco García Ximénes de Cisneros (1455-1510), cousin of Cardinal Ximénes who led reform in the Spanish church. Cisneros had reformed and reinvigorated the Benedictine monastery at Montserrat before it was visited by Ignatius Loyola. It was Cisneros' Book of Exercises for the Spiritual Life that the monk gave Ignatius to direct him on his pilgrimage.

Ignatius of Loyola, his Spiritual Exercises, his zealous Jesuits who spread everywhere, and especially the stories of the Jesuit missionaries such as Francis Xavier, prepared the spiritual climate for the Spanish mystical saints.
TERESA OF JESUS OF AVILA (1515-1582):

Teresa of Avila was the third child of an aristocratic but pious family. Her favorite reading was the lives of saints and martyrs. While still a child, she and a brother started out to beg their way to the country of the Moors hoping they would be killed for the sake of Christ. They had just crossed the bridge outside Avila when an uncle overtook them and took them back to their mother. Teresa's mother died when she was fourteen. She was placed in the house of the Augustinian nuns of Avila for her education, but after eighteen months illness forced her to return to her father. For a time she lived in the home of an uncle where she read the Letters of Jerome that led her to determine to adopt the religious life. Her father would not give her his permission, so without his knowledge on November 2, 1535, at the age of twenty, she entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation at Avila, which at the time consisted of 140 nuns. The separation from her father caused her great pain. Finally the father gave his consent for her to become a Carmelite nun at the age of twenty-one. The next year she became very seriously ill; for the remainder of her life she suffered from poor health and recurring paralysis. During her illness she began the practice of mental prayer. She found little joy in life for almost twenty years. She felt that she was a great sinner.

Because of her attachment to worldly relatives she considered herself unworthy of any graces from God. She sought the most spiritual confessors she could find. For a time she was guided by Dominican confessors. These were followed by Jesuits. She was greatly influenced by reading Augustine's Confessions. Her confessors felt that she greatly exaggerated her sins.

In 1554, when she was nearly forty, she went through a conversion experience. Her father had just died. Deeply moved by her loss, as she entered the oratory, she was struck by an image of the wounded Christ. She fell in tears at the feet of the figure. She felt every worldly emotion die within her. She began to experience trances. She began to spend long periods of communion with God that she called the "prayer of quiet." Her confessors ordered her to resist the visions and put her under strict discipline. The more she resisted the more frequent the trances became. She felt herself unworthy of the graces of God and yet experienced periods of rapturous union with God. When she told of her visions many of the people of Avila felt they were the work of the devil. One day she heard a voice, "Thou shalt have no more converse with men, but with angels." The visions came when she was at prayer. In one trance an angel pierced her side with a flaming lance. In another she was shown hell and warned that it would be her destiny if she failed her Lord.

Teresa was greatly troubled by the laxness of the Carmelite nuns. She sought permission to establish a house of nuns who would practice very strictly the original rule of the Carmelites. She was granted permission by her superior to secure a house for four nuns who wanted to follow the strict rule. On August 24, 1562 she opened the convent of Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the Primitive Rule of St. Joseph of Avila. The Discalced Carmelites were the Reformed or Barefoot Nuns—usually not literally barefooted. They usually wore sandals of rope, slept on straw, ate no meat, and lived on alms.

Teresa returned to the Incarnation but when the town and the Calced Carmelites learned of the new house there was great anger and fierce opposition. After six months Teresa was granted permission
to take up residence in the new house. She soon filled up the number of thirteen that she had chosen as the ideal number for the new convent. The next five years were some of the happiest of her life. She guided the spiritual life of her nuns out of her own experiences. In 1565 her superior, Rubeo (Rossi) granted her permission to establish other Discalced convents for nuns and also houses for friars. Against bitter opposition and enduring all the hardships of travel in Spain she founded thirty-two houses. Her disciples established many others. When she met Antonio de Heredia, prior of Medina, and John of the Cross, who wanted to be her disciples, she enlisted their aid in establishing her first house for men (November 28, 1568). For four years the Calced Carmelites sought to completely destroy her work but finally she received the approval of Philip II and the pope. Until near the end, enduring severe pain, she continued to travel, establishing new houses and visiting and encouraging old ones. Old and broken she finally became bedfast, dying October 4, 1582.

Before her death many had come to revere her as a saint. Her canonization came only forty years after her death. She was declared a saint by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 along with Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier.

Teresa's works became favorite devotional manuals and have continued such among those of mystical temper. Early in her work her superior had ordered her to prepare her autobiography, her Life, which many rank second only to Augustine's Confessions. The Life was completed in 1565, but her superiors forbade her to let the nuns read it because of the intimate details. Most influential with those who love devotional manuals have been her Interior Castle and The Way of perfection. Both are manuals to direct the soul in quest for the spiritual life. On one hand she wanted to protect souls from the threat of Protestantism and from the laxness of the Catholics.

The Way of Perfection is instruction in the life of prayer drawn from her own experiences. It was written in the late hours after the day's work among the people was finished. She wanted to teach the love of prayer. There are three essentials to prayer: fraternal love, detachment from created things, and true humility. She sought to guide the soul from vocal prayer to mental prayer or contemplation. Then came a beautiful commentary on The Lord's Prayer, phrase by phrase. She encouraged her daughters that fear and love of God are two castles which the fiercest enemies storm in vain. She promised that if they would live a life of prayer God would protect them and bring them to peace and joy in Jesus Christ in the next world.

JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542-1605):

John of the Cross was the spiritual son of Teresa of Avila—a quarter of a century younger and a devout and devoted follower. John was the son of an aristocrat who had been disinherited for marrying below his station. The father became a poor weaver, dying when John was only a boy. Reared in poverty by his mother, he received his early education in the school for the poor in Medina del Campo. For a time he was apprenticed to an artisan but showed little promise. For six years he worked in the hospital of Medina, ministering to the poorest of the poor. From 1559-63 he studied under the Jesuits in their college at Medina. In 1563 he decided to enter the new house that the Carmelites established in Medina. He took the final vows in 1564. The Carmelites sent him to the University of Salamanca to train for the priesthood. He was ordained
in 1567. Shrinking from serving as a priest he considered joining the Carthusians, a hermit order.

In September, 1567, John met Teresa of Avila who was laboring to restore the strict Carmelite rule. She influenced John to take the vows of the Discalced Carmelites. He began establishing reformed houses for men. He was kidnapped and imprisoned at Medina by the Calced Carmelites (1575-6). He was freed by the papal nuncio, only to be kidnapped and imprisoned in the Calced Priory at Toledo (1577-8). In prison he composed at least a portion of his Spiritual Canticle, his paraphrase and commentary on the Song of Songs. In 1578 he escaped to the convent of the Carmelite nuns in Toledo.

From this point on he travelled extensively establishing houses and founding colleges. He was appointed to many offices. Everywhere he met fierce opposition from the Calced Carmelites. Yet in this busy and troubled life he found time to write. In 1578 he became Vicar of El Calvario. In 1579 he founded a college in Baeza. In 1581 he became Definitor and then Prior of Los Mártires. His last meeting with Teresa was on November 28, 1581. From 1582-8 he served as Prior of Los Mártires, making frequent trips to establish houses, and was busy writing The Ascent of Mount Carmel and The Living Flame, which he composed in fifteen days in 1585. In 1588 he attended the first Chapter-General of the Discalced in Madrid and was elected Definitor and Consiliario. In August 1588 he became Prior of Segovia. In 1591 the Madrid Chapter-General stripped him of his offices and condemned him to be sent to Mexico--his sentence was revoked. He died on December 14, 1591 in Ubeda.

John of the Cross was canonized on December 27, 1726. Pope Pius XI, on August 24, 1926, named him a Doctor of the Church Universal. Bossuet called him the greatest mystical writer the world has known. Thomas Merton asserted that he was the greatest of all mystical theologians. John of the Cross is to mystical theology what Thomas Aquinas is to dogmatic theology.

His Ascent of Mount Carmel is his basic guide to the spiritual life, drawn from his own spiritual experience. With rare and wise insight into the human soul he points out the pitfalls along the way to union with God.

The Dark Night of the Soul is a continuation of the quest for the spiritual life begun in the Ascent of Mount Carmel. The soul must empty itself in order to be filled with God. It must be purified of all earthly dross before it can be united with God. The First Night sets forth the purgation of the sensual part of the soul. The Second Night deals with the purgation of the spiritual part of the soul. The Third concerns the activity of the soul and the Fourth the Passivity of the soul--the Passivity is the "Dark Night." The first three dealing with the active night of sense and spirit prepare for the fourth, the Dark Night. Senses and soul must be purged and purified. Each step becomes more difficult and painful. One does not pass immediately from one step to the next. Usually the soul will remain in one stage even for years. Only a few will ever reach the highest levels. Most remain as children with many imperfections. Man by his own efforts can never completely purge himself on the level of Passivity. God must burn out the imperfections with his dark fire. The soul freed from the world and the self reaches contemplation. John of the Cross only hinted in his work of the soul passing from the Dark Night into the full brightness of union with God.

THE LIVING FLAME was an attempt to picture the end of the spiritual journey. The Spiritual Canticle also is a picture of the union with God.
John also left a number of poems, collections of spiritual maxims, and a number of letters dealing with the spiritual life.

OTHER SPANISH MYSTICS:

There were many lesser lights among the Spanish mystics. Peter of Alcántara, counsellor to Teresa of Avila was later canonized. Francisco de Osuna, a Franciscan left his Third Spiritual Alphabet. Luis de Granada, a Dominican, is remembered for his Sinners' Guide. Juan de los Angeles, a Franciscan, wrote such guides to the spiritual life as Triumphs of the Love of God, Spiritual Strife, Dialogues of the Conquest of the Spiritual and Secret Kingdom of God, and Manual of the Perfect Life.

THE FRENCH MYSTICAL SAINTS

The Catholic Revival came later to France. France was in such turmoil that reform was retarded. The Jesuits did much to kindle reform and revival. At first they met strong opposition from the faculty of the Sorbonne. By the end of the seventeenth century the Jesuits were establishing their own colleges and a university. Between 1606 and 1640 the Jesuits established forty-seven colleges in France. Jesuit preachers attracted large congregations.

Other monastic orders shared in the revival. In the 1570's the Capuchins established houses in France. By 1600 the Cistercians were returning to their original rule. Benedictines began enforcing the decrees of Trent. About 1593 the Congregation of Christian Doctrine was founded at Avignon to emphasize the teaching of the catechism and raising the level of Christian living.

Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629) was a pioneer in the French school of mysticism. He was a foe of the current humanism and influenced by Augustine he stressed the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, complete dependence on God, and the incarnation. He stressed submission to the Word of God and to the Virgin Mary. The Christian must rid himself of all that is the fallen Adam within him and have no other being or life but in Jesus.

Charles de Condren (1588-1641), a disciple of Bérulle, gave himself to a mission of illuminating souls. His followers were devoted to the Child Jesus and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657), a follower of Condren, worked to provide better training for the priests. He inaugurated a number of seminaries.

FRANCIS OF SALES (1567-1622):

The greatest and most influential of the French mystical saints was Francis of Sales. He was the oldest son of an aristocrat Savoyard family. His father intended him for the magistracy and at an early age sent him to the colleges of La Roche and Annecy. From 1583 to 1588 he studied rhetoric and humanities under the Jesuits in the College of Clermont in Paris. He began the study of theology. He became deeply concerned over the question of predestination. He experienced a great freeing of his soul as he knelt before an image of Mary at St. Etienne-des-Grés and consecrated himself to the Virgin Mary. He began the study of law at Padua in 1588 and received his doctorate in 1592. His father had selected a noble heiress for him but he declared his intention of embracing the ecclesiastical life. A bitter struggle with his father followed. When the Bishop of Geneva offered Francis the post of Provost of the Chapter of Geneva the father yielded.
In 1594 Francis volunteered to evangelize Le Chablais where the Calvinists had imposed the Reformed Faith. Risking his life Francis travelled throughout the district preaching and debating Calvinists. He won back many Catholics. At the request of Pope Clement VIII he went to Geneva to interview Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor. From this time on he carried on a written debate with Beza, each hoping to convert the other one.

The Bishop of Geneva, Claude de Granier, chose Francis as his coadjutor. Upon the death of the bishop, Francis became bishop of Geneva (1602). As bishop he put great emphasis on catechetical instruction for young and old. He carefully directed his clergy. He faithfully visited all the parishes. He lived simply but spent great sums caring for the poor. With Jean Frances de Chantal in 1607 he founded the Institute of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin, for girls and widows who wanted to devote themselves to the religious life. He was known for his powerful preaching that converted many of all ranks of life.

Francis of Sales died, December 27, 1622, repeating the motto of his faith, "God's will be done! Jesus, my God and my all!" He was canonized by Alexander VII in 1665 and Pope Pius IX in 1877 declared him a Doctor of the Universal Church. He left a rich heritage of writings including: "Controversies", tracts on the Catholic faith; "Defense of the Standard of the Cross"; "The True Cross", "Of the Crucifix". "The Sign of the Cross", and "The Veneration of the Cross."

Francis of Sales' most widely circulated devotional works were his An Introduction to the Devout Life and his Treatise on the Love of God. The Introduction is a manual on spiritual living for the soul living in the world. Piety is compatible with any state of life. First the soul must free itself from any inclination to or affection for sin. Freed from sin the soul should seek to be united to God by prayer and the sacraments. The soul should devote itself to virtue and must resist all temptation. This manual has been translated into many languages and has been one of the most widely circulated of devotional manuals.

The Treatise on the Love of God reflects the mind and heart of the French saint. In twelve books he seeks to trace the birth of Divine Love in the soul, how it grows to perfection, and how it can decay and be annihilated. True Divine Love expresses itself in benevolence. It conforms to the Divine Will and submits to God's good pleasure.

VINCENT OF PAUL (1576/1580-1660):

Vincent of Paul was known as the friend of the poor and is remembered as one of the greatest benefactors of humanity in all church history. He was the son of a peasant and in his boyhood tended his father's sheep on the slopes of the Pyrenees. He showed such promise as a student that he was sent to Dax for education. He did so well that he was sent to Toulouse for theological studies. He was ordained in 1600. He became a tutor while continuing his studies. In 1605 during a voyage between Marseilles and Narbonne he was captured by Turkish pirates and sold as a slave in Tunis. For two years he served under three different masters, converting the last one, who had apostatized from Christianity to Islam. In 1607 he and the reconverted master escaped to France. He served the papal vice-legate in Avignon for a time and then followed the vice-legate to Rome to continue his studies. He became almoner to
Queen Marguerite of Valois, serving in the little Abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume. Then he was put in charge of the parish of Clichy near Paris. In 1612 he entered the services of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi to educate his children and be spiritual director for Mme. de Gondi. With her assistance he established missions for the peasants on her estates. He was appointed curate of Châtillon-les-Dombes where he converted a number of Protestants and established a conference of charity to assist the poor. In 1617 he was recalled by Gondi to resume the peasant missions. He established another conference for the relief of the poor. A number of priests joined him and carried the missions and conferences to other French cities.

M. de Gondi was general of the galleys of France. Vincent became greatly concerned for the physical and spiritual misery of galley slaves. He so distinguished himself by his ministry to the slaves that Louis XIII appointed him royal almoner of the galleys. He established missions to the galley slaves in Marseilles and Bordeaux that were very successful.

Encouraged and supported by Mme de Gondi, Vincent established missions to the country people that developed into the Congregation of Priests of the Mission, which became one of the great forces in the French church. He learned that the missions to the country people had to be followed up and maintained. Shortage of priests led him to establish seminaries to train priests. He began retreats to inspire and improve the priests. Retreats were lengthened from ten days to fifteen, then twenty days; some retreats were prolonged to one, two and three months. Some were lengthened to two and three years to provide more training for the priests. Retreats frequently grew into seminaries. In 1635 he founded the College des Bons-Enfants as a grand seminary for the study of theology. He established Saint-Lazare for young clerics. Then he established the Seminary of St. Charles. By the time of his death he had established eleven seminaries. By the time of the French Revolution his followers had established and were directing fifty-three upper seminaries and nine lower seminaries.

From 1533 on Vincent held at Saint-Lazare every Tuesday conferences for priests. Over 800 priests and laymen attended these conferences every year.

To help in caring for the poor Vincent established the Daughters of Charity that became Sisters of Charity. This work grew to the point that he established the Ladies of Charity. Women of the highest rank were enlisted to minister to the sick in hospitals and prisons. As many as 200 joined this work and contributed large sums of money.

Vincent founded the Hospice of the Name of Jesus to care for the aged. He established a general hospital that was considered one of the greatest of the century. He established a home for foundlings. Vincent's work spread throughout all the provinces of France.

When the Thirty Years War came Vincent turned his attention to caring for the wounded, the refugees, and the peasants whose homes were destroyed. He founded societies for burying the dead. He provided seed for the peasants to begin new crops. He organized a program of sanitation and distributed soap to promote cleanliness and to prevent plague. He established homes for young women who fled to Paris from the war zone. Special refugee homes were established for victims of war regardless of their country.
When the war called the Fronde broke out in 1649 Vincent sent letters and visited the court to try to restore peace. He sent letters to the pope urging him to intervene for peace. He established soup kitchens to care for the refugees who fled to Paris.

When the Jansenist controversy broke out in France Vincent labored to restore peace by working with Jansenists to keep them in the church. He urged the church authorities to show charity and kindness. He urged all preachers to be moderate in their pulpits so as not to inflame the controversy.

Vincent became greatly involved in ministering to the victims of slavery. He raised large sums of money to ransom slaves. He sent missionaries to slave territory with funds to ease the suffering of slaves. Missionaries from the Congregation of Priests of the Mission spread over the globe.

Vincent's zeal for illuminating souls and ministering to the poor and suffering won great love among the poor and great admiration and respect in high places. He was often summoned to the highest government circles for advice. He lived and dressed very simply and his head was not turned by attention from those in high places. He was completely devoted to his work. Both Richelieu and Mazarin became great admirers and supporters. Richelieu once declared that he would appoint no bishop who had not spent at least three years working under Vincent of Paul. Vincent's works attracted fabulous sums of support. His organizations spread over the world.

Vincent was canonized by Pope Clement XII on June 16, 1737. In 1885 Pope Leo XIII made him patron of the Sisters of Charity.

LESSER FRENCH SAINTS AND REFORMERS:

John Eudes (1601-1680) of the Berullian school of mysticism and devotion held missions for the masses and founded the Congregation of the Good Shepherd to care for fallen women. He battled against immoral books and pictures, blasphemy and duelling.

Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690) encouraged devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort founded the Missionaries of the Company of Mary and recruited priests to hold missions and retreats.

John Baptist de la Salle (1651-1719) labored to improve the educational system of France. He has been called "the father of modern pedagogy. He founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Francis le Clerc du Tremblay (1577-1638), known as Father Joseph, was a nobleman who devoted himself to humility, asceticism, and the life of the spirit. He helped reform Benedictines, Bernardines, Cistercians, and Capuchins. He prepared a manual to encourage spiritual living called An Introduction to the Spiritual Life by an Easy Method of Prayer.