

# LOVE'S IMMENSITY



*Mystics on the Endless Life*



## Saint Paul the Apostle

(c. 5–69)

*Persecutor-turned-martyr and apostle to the gentiles, Saint Paul was also a true visionary, having mystically experienced the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus, and having experienced a vision of, as he would say, “the third heaven.” His mysticism is both subtle and pervasive, if offered matter-of-factly throughout his several epistles to communities of the early church.*

### ∞ *Beyond Knowing*

I'll bet your wits won't let you  
quite believe any of this; it is, however,  
precisely so.

I know a man, a follower of Christ,  
who, some fourteen years ago,  
was lifted clean

to the third heaven—whether this  
occurred in the body or out of it,  
I could not say,

though God knows. And this same man—  
whether in the body or out of it,  
I do not know,

though God surely knows—was lifted  
(hear me!) clean to Paradise, and there  
he heard such words

—so marvelous and grave—that no  
human tongue could repeat them,  
nor think to try.

∞ *Love's Body*

*Lean in!* I was a child, and spoke like one;

My thought? very like a child's.

I gripped my reason with both  
my little fists. It smelled suspiciously of milk.

Now, as a man, I've learned to let it go.

Just now, we squint to see the Image through  
this latent, bleak obscurity. One day, we'll see the Image—  
as Himself—gleaming from each face.

Just now, I puzzle through a range  
of incoherencies; but on that day,  
the scattered fragments will cohere.

In all of this, both now and ever,  
faith and hope and love abide, these

sacred three, but the greatest of these (you surely  
must have guessed) is love.

## Saint Irenaeus (c. 125–c. 210)

*The polemic writings of Irenaeus may have laid the foundations of much Christian theology, especially Orthodox Christology. Born in one of the maritime provinces of Asia Minor and liberally educated in both the Scriptures and Greek philosophy and poetry, he offered a vision that defended the early Church from a good deal of philosophical speculation, in particular those errors imported by Gnosticism. He was particularly moved by the teachings and the example of Saint Polycarp.*

### ∞ *Capable Flesh*

The tender flesh itself  
    will be found one day  
—quite surprisingly—  
    to be capable of receiving,  
and yes, full  
    capable of embracing  
the searing energies of God.  
    Go figure. Fear not.  
For even at its beginning  
    the humble clay received  
God’s art, whereby  
    one part became the eye,  
another the ear, and yet  
    another this impetuous hand.  
Therefore, the flesh  
    is not to be excluded

from the wisdom and the power  
that now and ever animates  
all things. His life-giving  
agency is made perfect,  
we are told, in weakness—  
made perfect in the flesh.

### ∞ *The Human Person*

1.

Well *no!* the body is not itself  
the soul—though, *yes*, apparently  
it may partake of soul in this our  
complicated interim—and you  
probably shouldn't take the soul  
for *life*, say, but here again,  
the soul presumably enjoys  
a share of the essential, animating  
life God gives. For instance, Adam  
“was made a living soul.”

It is by sharing in the *Life that Is*  
that every soul is quickened. Still,  
I see that life and soul are these days  
separate things. Thus it is  
when God gives life, the souls  
which held no previous existence  
*begin* from that moment and obtain  
a permanence, a thereafter perpetual

duration. It is God who wills them, first,  
to be and, thereafter, to continue to become.

2.

Soul and spirit may be your parts,  
but they are not your all. As for the *you*  
entire? A mixture and a gathering: a soul

receiving the Spirit of the Father, joined  
to flesh graven in His image. Lose the clay  
and what you have is not a *spiritual man*

but something more like *bodiless spirit of a man*.  
Still, when Spirit, sweetly blended with a soul, unites  
with God-shaped clay, you find then striding

in unique beauty a spiritual and complete  
man or woman, made to bear, in lush company,  
both the image and the likeness of the God.

## Saint Melito of Sardis

(† c. 190)

*Saint Melito, who lived and served near Smyrna in Asia Minor, is understood to have been an Apostolic Father who, in all likelihood, knew both Saints Polycarp and Irenaeus. He is sometimes called Bishop of Sardis, Bishop of Ittica, and “the Philosopher.” His best-known work is a mystical treatise on Holy Pascha, the central feast of the Church, better known in the West as Easter.*

### ∞ *Pascha, our Passing over into Life*

Finally! The Hebrew Scriptures have been opened  
and the mystery declared:  
how the sheep was sacrificed, and how  
a people were redeemed,  
and Pharaoh wincing, lashed by unsuspected mystery.

Therefore, all-belovéd, apprehend  
the secrets of the Pascha.  
See that they contain both new and old,  
eternal and provisional,  
what passes and what will never pass away,  
mortal and immortal, both.

For the law is old, but the world—have you noticed?—  
is suddenly new; the figure is  
provisional, while grace is everlasting.  
The trembling sheep is mortal,  
but the Lord—unbroken as the lamb, raised up  
by God’s sure hand, is deathless.

## ∞ *Christ Speaks*

*It is I, speaks the Christ, I am he  
who puts Death to death, and stands above  
the fallen enemy, crushes Hades  
to bland chalk, binds the dark powers, and bears  
all humankind up to heavenly peaks.  
Yes, says Christ, I am he.*

*Therefore come, all human families  
ruined by sin, and receive absolution  
of every error. I am your liberation  
and the passage of deliverance.  
I am the throat-cut lamb and sacrifice,  
your ransom paid, your pulse and life, your fire,  
your rescue, resurrection, and your king.  
I gather you in one strong hand,  
and guide you to the heights of paradise,  
where I will show to you your Father.*

## ∞ *How It Was*

The earth trembled; its foundations  
shook like silt; the sun, chagrined,  
fled the scene, and every mundane  
element scattered in retreat. The day  
became the night: for light could not endure  
the image of the Master hanging on a tree.

All creation was astonished, perplexed  
and stammering, *What new mystery is this?*  
*The Judge is judged, and yet He holds his peace;*  
*the Invisible One is utterly exposed, and yet*  
*is not ashamed; the Incomprehensible is grasped,*  
*and will not turn indignant; the Immensity*  
*is circumscribed, and acquiesces; the absolutely*  
*Unattainable suffers, and yet does not avenge;*  
*the Immortal dies, and utters not a word;*  
*the Celestial is pressed into the earthen grave,*  
*and He endures! What new mystery is this?*

The whole creation, I say, was astonished;  
but, when our Lord stood up in Hades—  
trampling death underfoot, subduing  
the strong one, setting every captive free—  
then all creation saw clearly that for its sake  
the Judge was condemned, et cetera.

For our Lord, even when He deigned  
to be born, was condemned in order  
that He might show mercy, was bound  
that He might loose, was seized  
that He might release, suffered  
that He might show compassion, died  
that He might give life, was laid in the grave  
that He might rise, might raise.

## Origen of Alexandria (182–251)

*Origen of Alexandria is beloved as one of the greatest of Christian theologians. As a philosopher, he is perhaps best known for his Neoplatonist treatise On First Principles. An incisive critic of pagan philosophy, he nonetheless adapted its most useful and attractive teachings to further expound the Orthodox Christian faith.*

### ∞ *Of Us All*

*One God and Father of us all, who is  
above all and through all and in all.  
—Ephesians 4:6*

As with any giddy-making Mystery  
you might hope to grip, in part  
to apprehend, you'll have to settle  
for a relatively local image to suggest  
the God's surpassing all-sufficiency.  
The sun, say, by its obvious position,  
is patently *above all* things that crowd  
our blue-green globe, and by its rays  
it can be said to shine *through all*.  
And more: when the power of its light  
has pierced through every depth,  
it is said thereby to be *in all*. In just  
this way, we might surmise—in keeping  
with our spinning apprehensions—  
that its supremacy is underscored

by the words *above all*, and its sufficiency  
for every being in the *through all*,  
and still the coming of the power  
of God made manifest in the *in all*.  
The result, then, is  
that no one is found, ever,  
to be empty, due to our God's  
truly being, and of His being *all in all*.

∞ *All in All*

In this way, (and note) accordingly,  
we might suppose that at the someday  
consummation—what I would call  
the promised restoration of all things—  
those who make their gradual advance,  
as well as those ascending  
will step surprised into that land, into  
the healing action of its elements.  
Here, each will be prepared for all  
immense occasions to which  
nothing further can be added.  
And here, the King of all, Himself,  
will school each blinking creature  
in this the holy enterprise, instructing  
all and reigning *in* them 'til He has  
led them wholly to the Father—who  
you'll find has joined all things to Himself

—that is, until they are made capable  
of receiving God, so that the God  
may ever be to them The All in All.

## Saint Athanasios

(c. 298–373)

*Patriarch of his native Alexandria, Saint Athanasios spent 17 years in exile because his unflinching faith in the divinity of Christ compelled him to refuse and to continue to refute the then-popular Arian heresy, which claimed Christ to be merely a created being. Besides his famous work On the Incarnation, his Life of Saint Antony is also widely admired.*

### ∞ *The Invisible Seen*

When our dull wits had so declined  
as to set us mid the squalor of the merely  
*sensible* creation, the Very God consented  
to become a body of His own, that He  
as one among us might gather our dim senses  
to Himself, and manifest through such  
incommensurate occasion that He  
is not simply man, but also God,  
the Word and Wisdom of the One.

Thereafter, He remained His body, and thus  
allowed Himself to be observed.  
His becoming joined to us performed  
two appalling works in our behalf:

He banished death from these  
our tendered frames, and made of them  
something new and (take note here) renewing.

∞ *The Death of Death*

Put fear aside. Now  
that He has entered  
into death on our behalf,  
all who live  
no longer die  
as men once died.

That ephemeral occasion  
has met its utter end.  
As seeds cast to the earth, we  
will not perish,  
but like those seeds  
shall rise again—the shroud  
of death itself having been  
burst to tatters  
by love's immensity.

## ∞ *His Image Recovered*

So—and yes, I’m asking—what was the God to do?  
What other course—His being God and All—but to renew  
His lately none-too-vivid Image in the aspect of mankind,  
so that, by His Icon thus restored, we dim occasions might  
once more come to know Him? And how should this be done,  
save by the awful advent of the very God Himself, our Lord  
and King and gleaming Liberator Jesus Christ?

Here, beloved numbskulls, is a little picture: You gather,  
one presumes, what must be done when a portrait on a panel  
becomes obscured—maybe even lost—to external stain.  
The artist does not discard the panel, though the subject must return  
to sit for it again, whereupon the likeness is etched once more upon  
the same material. As He tells us in the Gospel, *I came  
to seek and to save that which was lost*—our faces, say.

## ∞ *As a Good Teacher*

He schools us as a canny teacher condescends  
to hunker face to face with his more or less  
ungainly pupils, settling down to their level,  
employing whatever means prove meet. As we  
had turned from *cosmos*—the beauty above, light-laden—  
and sought Him in the muck among created things,  
the God in His great love took to Himself an earthen body;  
or rather, He *became* one—and moved as Man among men,  
meeting our slow senses, as it were, midway.

## ∞ *Scant Offering*

Here, then, our meager alms  
to you who love the Christ.  
These words may give you  
a beginning, though you must  
go on to live their truth  
by performing the Scriptures.  
Any likely apprehension  
of those texts requires first  
an honest life, a limpid soul, and yes,  
a Christ-like virtue well-obtained . . .  
and all this long before the eye  
can glimpse—so far as human nature  
will allow—the truth concerning  
God the Word. I wonder, would

you rush to look upon so much  
as a sunlit morning without first  
rubbing sleep-set grit from your eye?  
And should you wish to see  
a distant country, won't you first  
prepare the journey and then,  
thus girded, make your slogging  
way to it? Just so, anyone desiring  
to know the minds of those  
whose hands have given us  
the Scriptures must first address  
his own life, and so approach  
the saints by imitation of their acts.

## Saint Ephraim of Syria

(† 373)

*Best known for his psalmody and for the penitential prayer bearing his name, Saint Ephraim served as teacher of Christians and counselor to bishops in and around Nisibis, until the year 363, when he and his community were forced to relocate to Edessa, where the saint continued to serve the people and his bishop until his death ten years later.*

### *∞ The Prayer of Saint Ephraim*

O Lord and Master of my life,  
remove from me this languid spirit,  
this grim demeanor, this petty

lust for power, and all this empty talk.  
Endow Thy servant, instead,  
with a chaste spirit, a humble  
heart, longsuffering gentleness,  
and genuine, unselfish love.

Yes, O Lord and King, grant  
that I may confront my own offenses,  
and remember not to judge my brother.  
For You are—always and forever—blessed.

❧ *Due Praise*

Glory to You, Only Lover of mankind!  
Glory to You, O Merciful!  
Glory to You, O Longsuffering!  
Glory to You, who forgive every error!  
Glory to You, who descended to save our souls!  
Glory to You, made flesh in the Virgin's womb!  
Glory to You, who were bound!  
Glory to You, who were torn!  
Glory to you, who were crucified!  
Glory to you, who were buried!  
Glory to you, who did rise!  
Glory to you, who were proclaimed!  
Glory to you, who were believed!  
Glory to you, who were taken up!  
Glory to you, who are gloriously enthroned

at the Father's right hand, soon to return  
with the glory of the Father and the holy Angels  
to measure every soul that has reviled  
Your holy sufferings.

In that fearful hour,  
when the powers of heaven will be shaken;  
when Angels, Archangels, Cherubim, and Seraphim  
will arrive together with fear and trembling  
before Your glory; when the foundations  
of creation will shudder, and everything  
that has breath will tremble at Your great,  
unendurable glory.

In that hour, Your hand will cover me  
as a great protecting wing, and my soul  
will be rescued from the fire, the gnashing  
teeth, the swirling chaos without light,  
the endless weeping,  
so that, blessing You, I may say,  
*Glory to the One who sank to save the sinking sinner.*

∞ *Fountains of Blessing*

Two trees the God was pleased  
to place in Paradise—the lace-leafed  
Tree of Life and the generously  
overreaching Tree of Wisdom—as a pair  
of blessed fountains and the source  
of every good. By means of these  
the pilgrim is persuaded to become  
the very likeness of God, endowed  
with life that does not end,  
with wisdom that does not err.

If you, even in your condition, would partake  
of the future Kingdom, first pursue  
the Sovereign's favor *here*. In keeping  
with the measure by which you choose  
to honor Him, He is sure to honor you.  
How you serve just now is how that land  
will serve you then. Give Him all  
your soul that He will see you now  
and ever worthy of a saint's esteem.

If you were to ask *How may I acquire  
His benevolence?* try this: Bring Him  
gold and silver through the needy.  
If you're short on cash, bring Him  
faith and love and temperance,  
bring Him calm, and kindness, most