

Chapter 4

Meeting God in Love

To Get Us Started

How We Encounter the Holy One

To meet the Holy is to step into mystery. God is not a puzzle to be solved or a formula to master, but a Presence beyond all our categories. We speak of God as Holy Mystery¹ because God is infinite, always greater than our thoughts, yet closer than our own breath. This encounter leaves us humbled and standing in awe before the One who cannot be grasped but who freely gives God's own self to us.

Yet this mystery is not cold or distant—it is Love. In Jesus Christ, we discover that the essence of God's mystery is compassion, mercy, and self-giving. The Holy comes near, not to terrify, but to heal and embrace. To know God as Love is to realize that every human life is held in tenderness, and that love is the deepest truth of the universe.

In meeting this God, something within us must change. The prophets speak of God giving us a new heart—a heart of flesh instead of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). To receive a new heart is to let God soften what has grown hard, to awaken compassion where indifference has taken root, and to shape us for a life of mercy, forgiveness, and courage. This renewal is not abstract; it touches how we live and how we treat others.

To meet the Holy, then, is to live in wonder before mystery, to rest in love, to be reshaped with a new heart, and to discover that every part of life shimmers with God's

Presence. It is to live awake to grace, where the ordinary is transfigured and the entire world becomes holy ground.

As We Begin

A quick first taste of how Holy Mystery touches our lives:

Holy Mystery

O Holy Mystery, vast and near,
your Presence whispers, calm and clear.
In Love you shaped both night and day.
In Christ you showed the living way.

Now Spirit flame within our soul,
you heal, you guide, you make us whole.
Forever dwelling, ever true,
our hearts are open, God, for you.

A Meditation

Speaking of God

We often refer to the Holy One as “God.” I grew up using that name for the Holy One, but I also know that the very word we use: “God,” carries with it an image of an ancient male deity sitting somewhere beyond the world. And as Karen Kilby wisely suggested, uttering the familiar name “God” tends to over-simplify the mystery we find there.

In this text, therefore, I use the name “God” interchangeably with “Holy One” or simply, “the Holy,” and I frequently use the name that Karl Rahner SJ preferred: “Holy Mystery.”

Holy Mystery of Love

Repeating this point for emphasis, Rahner taught that the Holy One—God, if you will—is ultimately unknowable, beyond the grasp of human language or definition. Our truest response to God’s work is awe and reverence: awe before the vastness of the universe, reverence before the holiness that touches our lives. God, for Rahner, is always present, always drawing us nearer, yet never fully contained or comprehended.

God is not encountered as a riddle to solve or a theorem to prove, but as the living reality of love, truth, and freedom within daily existence. Thus, we hold together two essential truths: the Holy is transcendent—beyond human understanding—and at the same time immanent—as close as our own breath.

Elizabeth Johnson also helps us grasp these ideas. “The living God,” she wrote, “is ineffable holy mystery beyond all telling: beyond words, beyond concepts, beyond categories. At the same time, this ineffable mystery is the gracious One who is near to the world, dwelling in its midst.”²

A Brief Pause

Let us pause again for a bit of poetry to help us grasp what is ineffable—those things that are too great, deep, or sacred to be expressed in words—beyond human language or description.

Prayer to Holy Mystery

O Holy Mystery,
Unfathomable Depth, beyond all words and names,
You are the horizon of my longing,
the silence that surrounds every answer,
the light no darkness can grasp.

And yet,
You are nearer to me than my breath,
woven into the very ground of my being,
the quiet warmth that stirs when I love,
the courage that rises when I hope,
the grace that sustains me when I fail.

You remain forever beyond my grasp,
and yet you dwell within the ordinary moments—
in laughter shared, in tears shed,
in the bread of daily life,
and in the mystery of Christ among us.

Keep me faithful, O God,
to walk humbly in awe of your transcendence
and joyfully in the intimacy of your Presence.
Let my life be a dwelling place of your love,
so that in me, others might sense
the radiance of Holy Mystery—
at once hidden and revealed,
forever beyond, forever within.

A Meditation

Holy & Gracious Mystery

This new vocabulary with which we are speaking of God is meant, among other elements, to help us move away from an image of God as some male deity, living beyond the clouds, a bearded old man from medieval art. When we call God by the name Holy Mystery, we acknowledge that God cannot be reduced to our concepts or images as we saw above.

This safeguards faith from becoming too small, too familiar, or too easily manipulated. God remains greater than our words, our doctrines, and even our imagination.

It also affirms God's nearness. Holy Mystery is not absence but Presence. The very Mystery we cannot grasp is the One who dwells within us and among us. Seeing God this way helps us recognize Divine Presence in the ordinary: in silence, in creation, in relationships, in conscience, and in daily life.

It also helps to deepen our prayer. If God is Holy Mystery, then prayer is not about "explaining" or "bargaining"—whether in the cosmic sense of atonement or in the personal sense of daily needs. Instead, prayer becomes an experience of entering into awe, silence, and surrender. This view invites people to bring their whole selves—questions, doubts, joys, and sorrows—into prayer, knowing God is always beyond yet always near.

And it also expands our hope, and this is a very important element in modern life. To believe in Holy Mystery is to trust that God is never exhausted by our understanding and never finished with creation. This keeps faith alive, hopeful, and open-ended. It also reminds us that salvation is not just a past event but an ongoing gift of God's self-communication, drawing us deeper into love.

Our only response to this remarkable Presence is reverence as we gaze upon the Holy One.

Holy and Gracious

Expanding on the name of Holy Mystery a little, the Earth is filled with generous gifts that we believe come to us from Holy Mystery. Speaking frankly, we don't fully

understand the source of life, the genius within each cell of our bodies, our relationships with plants and animals, or the unfathomable universe beyond us. Even though science helps us grapple with elements of these things, there still remains the unknown.

And when we observe the grandeur of the mountains, seas, forests, and meadows, when we consider the gifts of food and drink, when we ponder the origin of that massive universe around us, or when we experience the self-giving love of our partners and mates—we are left speechless.

Speechless

Literally, we have no words to adequately describe these gifts, even if scientific explanations for them abound. A powerful and transcendent energy or force fills our hearts when we watch the sun setting or the moon rising, the waves washing to shore, a rose blooming in our garden, or a newborn child lying at its mother's breast. Poetry can help us express our experience of these experiences, but mainly we are left with silent awe, profound reverence, and deep gratitude.

Such rich gifts are given freely to everyone from a truly mysterious and gracious source. Hence, I prefer to speak of God as Holy & Gracious Mystery. And quite honestly, I usually whisper this name. It's that sacred.

A Meditation

God is Love

In Islam, two of the most common names for God are *Ar-Rahman* (the Most Merciful One) and *Ar-Rahim* (the Most Compassionate One). God is described as loving (*Al-Wadud*)

in the Qur'an. God's mercy and love toward humanity are central themes.

In Judaism, God is loving and steadfast in mercy (*chesed* in Hebrew). Throughout history, God has made and kept a covenant with Israel and offered the Israelites mercy and compassion. There is no single statement in Judaism that God is love, but in the Psalms, prayers, and teachings of the faith, God's love is always emphasized.

Christianity states most clearly that God is love in 1 John 4:8. Beyond that, Jesus speaks of love as the way to follow him, calling for unconditional love of neighbor, friend, and even of enemies. "I give you a new commandment," Jesus taught in John 13:34, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." It is the hallmark of faith that the followers of Jesus would be known for their love of one another.

And beyond these three traditions, mystics and spiritual people have often described God as the force of love that holds the universe together, as we see in Colossians 1:17.

A New Heart

Deep within us, we believe, the Holy One offers us a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:26). As we just observed, we behold Holy Mystery as the Author of our very being. And likewise, deep within our consciences we detect a truth that we have laid on ourselves, but a truth that we must follow if we wish to be authentic. We have in our hearts a truth carved into our very being by the Holy One. It is the truth about who we are and who we are meant to become.

"I will put my law within [you]," God promised. "I will write it on [your] hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). Our conscience is

our most secret core and our sanctuary. There we are alone with the Holy One whose voice echoes (figuratively speaking) in our depths.³

*Please pause here for **Theological Reflection***

- If God is not distant but Holy Mystery dwelling within and among us as love, how does that change the way you see those who are overlooked, abandoned, or left behind?
- Jesus revealed God's love most clearly in his care for the poor, the sick, and the outcast. In what concrete ways might your life — and your community — embody that same love today?
- If knowing God means living with love, how do we discern the difference between love that is merely sentimental and love that is honest, sacrificial, and transformative for the world?

Pastoral Implications

In Our Personal Lives

- When we speak of God as Holy Mystery in our personal lives, we begin to see that every moment can be holy. The Holy is not confined to church walls or rituals but is present in work, relationships, leisure, and the ordinary tasks of daily life.
- This awareness calls us to live authentically, with integrity, and to allow our faith to shape decisions and actions in every setting.

In the Domestic Church

- In the home—the domestic church—this same vision transforms family life. When we recognize that the Holy is near and that Mystery is gracious, our households become

spaces where prayer, gratitude, and service flow naturally into daily rhythms.

- Family meals, chores, celebrations, and even struggles can be honored as sacred encounters.
- Parents teach children not only to pray at church but to see God at the dinner table, in moments of forgiveness, and in the welcome offered to guests and neighbors.
- In this way, homes themselves become small sanctuaries, where love, hospitality, and attentiveness to God's Presence are woven into daily living.

In the Parish or Congregation

- At the level of the faith community, speaking of God as Holy Mystery reshapes how the community understands its mission. Liturgy and sacraments are not ends in themselves but encounters that connect directly to the living of faith in the world.
- Homilies, catechesis, and parish formation programs all emphasize that the God we worship on Sunday is the same God who calls us to justice, compassion, and hope on Monday.

In Conclusion

We close now in a final moment of prayer with Holy Mystery:

Prayer When Meeting the Holy

O Holy Mystery, beyond my knowing,
yet nearer than my breath,
You come to me as Love,
gentle and strong,
embracing all that I am.

Take my heart of stone, O Lord,
and make it new—
a heart of flesh, alive with mercy,
beating with your compassion.

Open my eyes to see
the sacred in the everyday:
in garden soil and busy streets,
in work, in rest, in broken bread.

Let all of life shine with your Presence,
where the ordinary is made holy,
and love is the song of my days.

¹ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 122. “Whether [we are] consciously aware of it or not, whether [we are] open to this truth or suppress it, [our] whole spiritual and intellectual existence is orientated towards a holy Mystery which is the basis of [our] being” (inclusive language is mine).

² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: the Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 43.

³ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1776. See the note above.