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## *Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Mysticism*

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

My father loved to read.

I remember him reading in his chair in our den when I would come down for breakfast in the morning. I remember him reading in his chair on the porch at the beach when we got up from our naps in the afternoon. And, I remember the shelves of books that lined the walls of his office at the church.

At the end of his life, though, he had only a handful of books in his study. Gone were the books on ethics, philosophy, and systematic theology. Gone were the books on history, politics, and church doctrine.

He kept only a couple of his Bible commentaries, his favorite spiritual writings, and a prayer book held together by rubber bands.

Karl Rahner, the eminent twentieth century Jesuit theologian, famously said, "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all."

He meant that the future of Christianity depends on the followers of Christ having genuine experiences of God.

Thomas Aquinas, the great thirteenth century Dominican scholar, said something similar at the end of his life. He unexpectedly stopped writing his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologiae*, because he had seen a vision that made his writings seem to him like so much straw.

I don't think that my father or either of these two great theologians concluded that thinking about God was not important. We need reason to interpret our experiences just as we need our experiences to interpret reason.

I think they were saying that the point of faith is not to know about God, but to be in relationship with God.

I don't think my father regretted reading any of the books that he read. But, reading was only part of his spiritual discipline. I also remember him praying, taking communion, making his confession and hearing the confessions of others, and serving those in need.

The Christian of the future will undoubtedly be a mystic. But, she will also be able to make sense of her experiences, incorporate them into her life, and use them to serve others.

Faith is not just about visions, voices, or other extraordinary experiences. It's about being aware of the God that dwells within you and being totally available to the neighbor that stands in front of you.

So, let the books on your bedside table pile up to embarrassing heights. But, make sure your prayer book is on top!

Your affectionate uncle,  
Ames

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