Gregory Collins OSB
*Meeting Christ in his Mysteries:*
*A Benedictine vision of the spiritual life*
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Gregory Collins is a monk of Glenstal Abbey in Ireland, and a former director of the Monastic Institute at the Benedictine University of Sant'Anselmo, Rome. His aim, in this marvellous book, is to help Christians to appropriate the heart of our faith, and supremely the transforming mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, through liturgy, personal prayer, and a deeper understanding of, and participation in, the sacramental life of the Church. Though firmly (yet not uncritically) within the Roman Catholic monastic tradition (he acknowledges in particular his indebtedness to two great twentieth-century Benedictine theologians, Columba Marmion and Odo Casel, describing the latter as "one of the greatest Christian thinkers of all time"), he draws inspiration from a vast range of sources, as his extended notes and bibliography show. He is also profoundly and generously ecumenical in his thinking, frequently quoting Barth in particular, but drawing even more extensively on Orthodox theology, liturgy and spirituality, from St Gregory of Nyssa to Bulgakov and Zizioulas. Like Olivier Clément in his Roots of Christian Mysticism, Collins taps the deepest wellsprings of Christian truth and life and offers them to us in a profound but accessible way.

What Collins gives us is a theological vision to be lived and prayed, not just believed. Doctrines are constantly pressed into service in Christian life: thus he says that reading the Bible demands "a kind of kenosis, an emptying out of one's own plans, desires and ideas so as to become free and open to God's Word" (p70). It is, for him, no coincidence that the recovery (largely thanks to von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr) of the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell took place in the face of the horrendous evils that overshadowed the twentieth century. The ascension of Christ is "God's pledge and promise that the material world he created and loves so much is destined, not for dissolution and disappearance, but for transfiguration" (p151).

The book is full of wisdom: "there is nothing selfish about...sustained personal prayer, for it is really a kind of evangelization of the self" (p123). And Jesus' threefold interrogation of St Peter in John 21 reveals that Christ"is especially present when we are oppressed by the sense of our own unworthiness or failure. With infinite tenderness Jesus draws Peter out of his guilty self-obsession, making him focus not on what Peter imagines he wants or needs and not allowing him to sink back into the oblivion of immersion in the mere business of daily existence" (p147). If you long to see the "mere business of daily existence" transformed by a fresh encounter with the heart of what it means to be a Christian, you could not do better than to read this book.

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