

7. Finally, despite detailed preparation, contemplation can only be accomplished (71) **if it is the Will and desire of God** to provide such a great gift! (34 and 71). Further, this gift may, if God wills it, even be given to those who have been lifelong sinners (29 and 34).

### Spiritual Insights of the Book

1. The author stresses the great importance of **humility** (2, 12, 14, 51) but especially when he defines it as **“Nothing else but a true knowledge and awareness of yourself as you really are”** and concludes: **“Surely, whoever truly saw and felt himself as he is would truly be humble”** (13).
2. He states that there are two causes of humility, one a recognition of our wretched and weak state (imperfect humility) and the other of the super-abundant love and grace of God (perfect humility). However, perfect humility can not be gained without the former which must, in any case, never be abandoned (14).
3. Perfect virtue is an ordered deliberate affection directed to God **for his own sake**. If anyone has the virtues of love and humility then (s)he has all, because all the others are subsumed in these (12).
4. Sometimes God gives people the feeling that grace has been withdrawn. This can be because of pride or potential pride, or because God wants grace to grow and be more appreciated when it is rediscovered. It is also God ‘s sign that he is calling a person to be a contemplative if the urge and ability to contemplate returns suddenly, without any action on the part of the individual (75). The author stresses that it is not what you are or have been that God looks at in his mercy but what **you would be**, and quotes both St. Gregory **“All holy desires grow by delays, and if they fade because of these delays they were never holy desires”** and St. Augustine **“The life of a Christian consists of nothing but holy desires”**.



## Our Catholic Faith Prayer and Spirituality 2010-2011

19. The Cloud of Unknowing  
- A Classic of English Mysticism



1. Do you think mystics are correct in placing meditation and contemplation above works of mercy and charity?
2. Is it correct to say that humility is awareness of our nothingness before God?
3. Can lifelong sinners really accomplish contemplation, which is nothing less than union with God?

## The Book and Author

The name of the author is not known, but he lived in the 14th century and was part of the prevalent English mystical tradition in that period that included Richard Rolle, Mother Julian of Norwich and Walter Hilton. The Book is written in 75 short (some very short) chapters - these chapter numbers are referred to in brackets below.

What we are able to discern from the book is that he was a priest (55) advising a young disciple (4) about what he saw as the epitome of spiritual life, namely **contemplation** or union with God. He acknowledges readily that what he describes may not suit his disciple, nor indeed anyone else his disciple chooses to share it with (74). Nevertheless it is a brilliant work explaining lucidly the nature of contemplation 200 years before St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. However, it is not original in its basic content but follows the tradition of the 6th century Syrian monk, Dionysius who famously said “**the most God-like knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing**” (70) (hence the title).



## Summarising the Essence of the Book

There is much wisdom in the book covering the spiritual life, but the main priority here is to provide a summary of the author's views on contemplation and the path he recommends.

1. The spiritual life has 4 stages, the first 3 starting and ending in this life, the 4th might start here but reaches fulfilment only after death: (a) the **common life** of a Christian, (b) the **special life** where a person is drawn especially close to God, (c) the **singular life** where a person is preoccupied with God, and (d) the **perfect life** with God (1). But these stages can better be distinguished as Active or Contemplative.
2. The **Active Life** has 2 parts, the **lower part** consists of acts of

mercy and charity and is, as it were, exterior to a person, while the **higher part** is interior, being meditative and educative about Jesus. This part is also the **lower level** of the contemplative life. The **higher part** of the contemplative life is caught up in darkness, in a **Cloud of Unknowing**, blindly seeking for God and him alone (8). The true contemplative must love and praise God **for himself** and not for what can be got out of him (3) and not even in thanks for the good things God has done for you (5). This is illustrated in the story of Martha and Mary, and Mary chose the better part (21) (Lk.10).



3. Before even getting to the Cloud of Unknowing a person must put a **Cloud of Forgetting** between himself and all he knows. This is the author's way of saying that only God must preoccupy the mind, and a person is so much further from God if anything else comes to their mind (5). Yet, paradoxically, no-one can hope to achieve contemplation without **prior preparation** - a deep knowledge of Jesus' salvific life, and of meditative practices (7) or, as described elsewhere, scripture, prayer and meditation (35).
4. Even if a person is able to put aside all thoughts of people and knowledge, there is a further hurdle to overcome, that of thinking of **self**. To leave self is to enter the **Cloud of Unknowing** (4).
5. But a person can not really get to know God by thinking about him because God as Himself can not be thought - he can not be found through study or by the intellect. He can **only be found by love** (4 and 6).
6. There are ways to **assist contemplation**, to help leave self and concentrate on God. The author recommends the repetition of **short** words and phrases e.g. God, because these can more easily be prayed with a genuinely loving heart guided by the Holy Spirit (38).

