

Question: How do we get from the initial experience of God (or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, or one's "Higher Power") to an institution?

Answer: Inevitably

Br. David Steindl-Rast, in **The Mystical Core of Organized Religion**, writes:

“Many of us experience a sense of communion with Ultimate Reality once in a while. In our best, most alive moments, we feel somehow one with that fundamental whatever-it-is that keeps us all going. Even psychological research suggests that the experience of communion with Ultimate Reality is nearly universal among humans. So we find ourselves officially recognized as bona fide mystics.

A mystic is simply one who has had an actual inner experience of God, and lives from that experience.



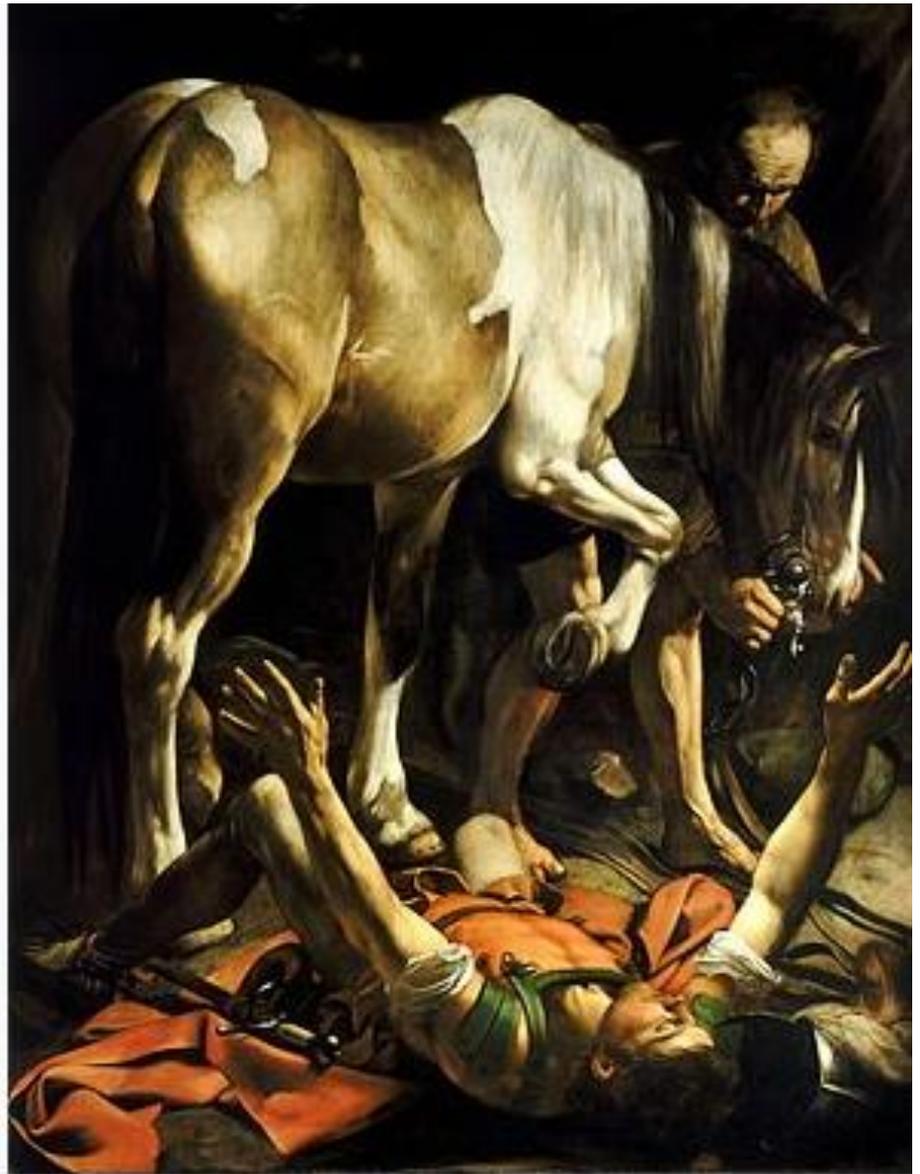








Conversion of St. Paul



Artist

Caravaggio

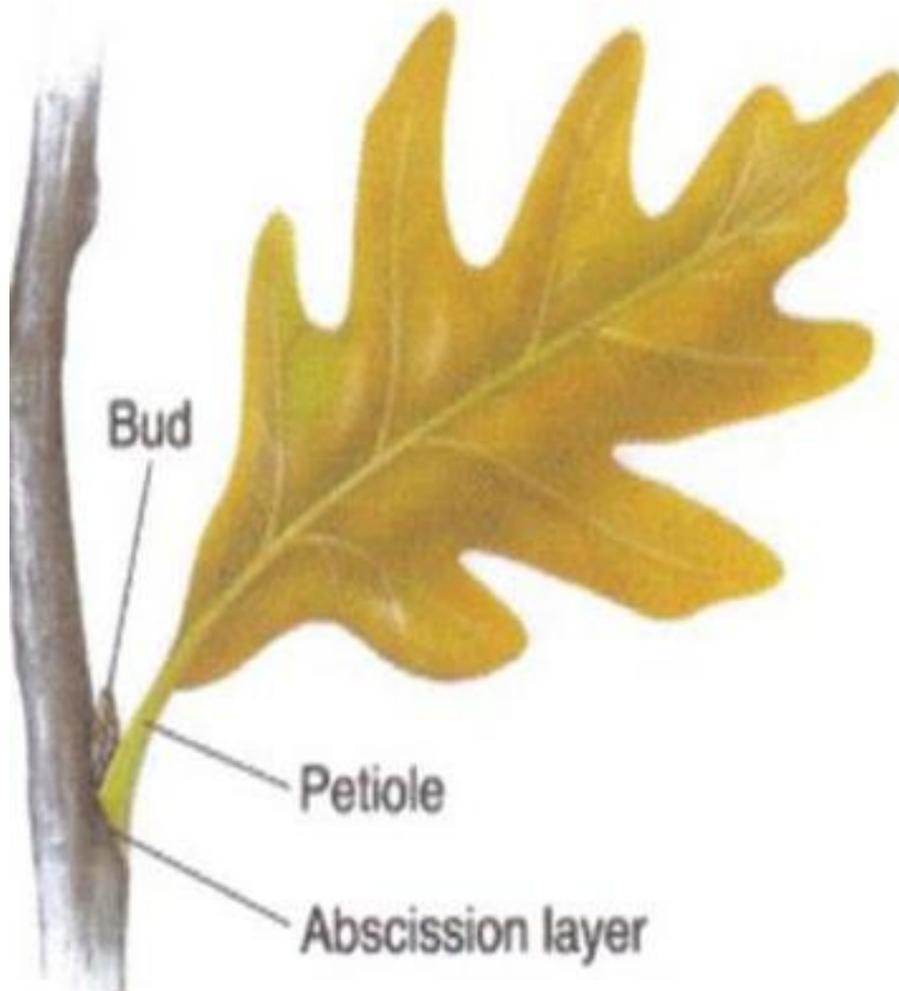
Year

1601

“We need religious institutions. If they weren't there, we would create them. Life creates structures. Think of the ingenious constructions life invents to protect its seeds, of all those husks and hulls and pods, the shucks and burrs and capsules found in an autumn hedgerow. Come spring, the new life within cracks these containers (even walnut shells!) and bursts forth. Crust, rind, and chaff split open and are discarded.



Leaf Abscission



- Deciduous plants undergo changes in preparation for winter dormancy
- *Photosynthetic pathways in leaves shut down*
- An abscission layer of cells **forms at the petiole to seal the leaf off from the rest of the plant**
- Eventually, the leaf falls off.



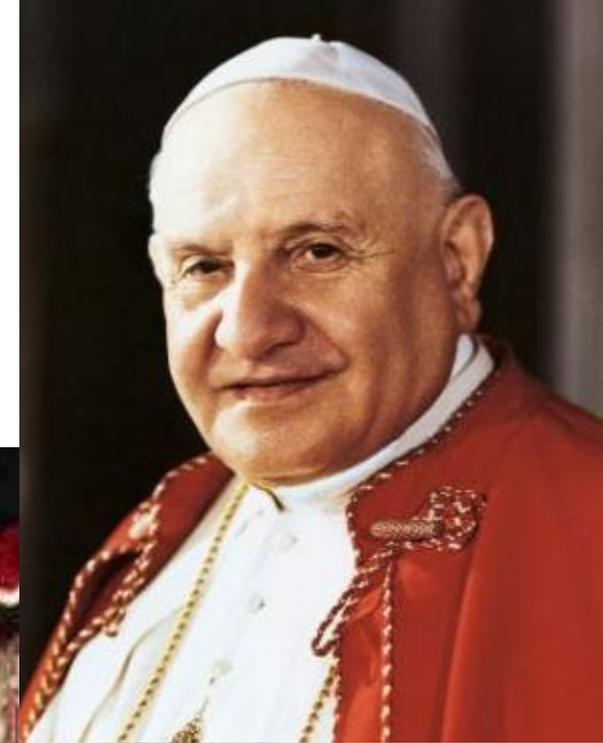
“Our social structures, however, have a tendency to perpetuate themselves. Religious institutions are less likely than seed pods to yield to the new life stirring within. And although life (over and over again) creates structures, structures do not create life.

“Those who are closest to the life that created the structures will have the greatest respect for them; they will also be the first ones, however, to demand that structures that no longer support but encumber life must be changed. Those closest to the mystical core of religion will often be uncomfortable agitators within the system. How genuine they are will show itself by their compassionate understanding for those whom they must oppose; after all, mystics come from a realm where ‘we’ and ‘they’ are one.

“In come cases, officials of institutional religion are themselves mystics, as was true of Pope John XXIII. These are the men and women who sense when the time has come for the structures to yield to life. They can distinguish between faithfulness to life and faithfulness to the structures that life has created in the past, and they get their priorities right.

“One of the great surprises is that the fire of mysticism can melt even the rigor mortis of dogmatism, legalism, and ritualism. By the glance or the touch of those whose hearts are burning, doctrine, ethics, and ritual come aglow with the truth, goodness, and beauty of the original fire.

Pope John XXIII



Pope
Francis



“The dead letter comes alive, breathing freedom. ‘God's writing engraved on the tablets’ is what the uninitiated read in Exodus 32:16. But only the consonants are written in the Hebrew text: (*chrth*). Mystics who happen to be rabbis look at this word and say: Don't read *charath* (engraved); read *cheruth* (freedom)! God's writing is not ‘engraved’; it is freedom!

“Saying more than she realized, a schoolgirl wrote, ‘Many dead animals of the past changed into fossils while others preferred to be oil.’ That's what mystics prefer. Alive or dead, they keep religion afire.

“The question we need to tackle is this: How does one get from mystic experience to an established religion? My one-word answer is: inevitably. What makes the process inevitable is that we do with our mystical experience what we do with every experience, that is, we try to understand it; we opt for or against it; we express our feelings with regard to it. Do this with your mystical experience and you have all the makings of a religion. This can be shown.

“Moment by moment, as we experience this and that, our intellect keeps step; it interprets what we perceive. This is especially true when we have one of those deeply meaningful moments: our intellect swoops down upon that mystical experience and starts interpreting it. Religious doctrine begins at this point. There is no religion in the world that doesn't have its doctrine. And there is no religious doctrine that could not ultimately be traced back to its roots in mystical experience – that is, if one had time and patience enough, for those roots can be mighty long and entangled.

“As long as all goes well with a religion, then doctrine, ethics, and ritual work like an irrigation system, bringing ever fresh water from the source of mysticism into daily life. Religions differ from each other, as irrigation systems do.

“There are objective differences: some systems are simply more efficient. But subjective preferences are also important. You tend to like the system you are used to;

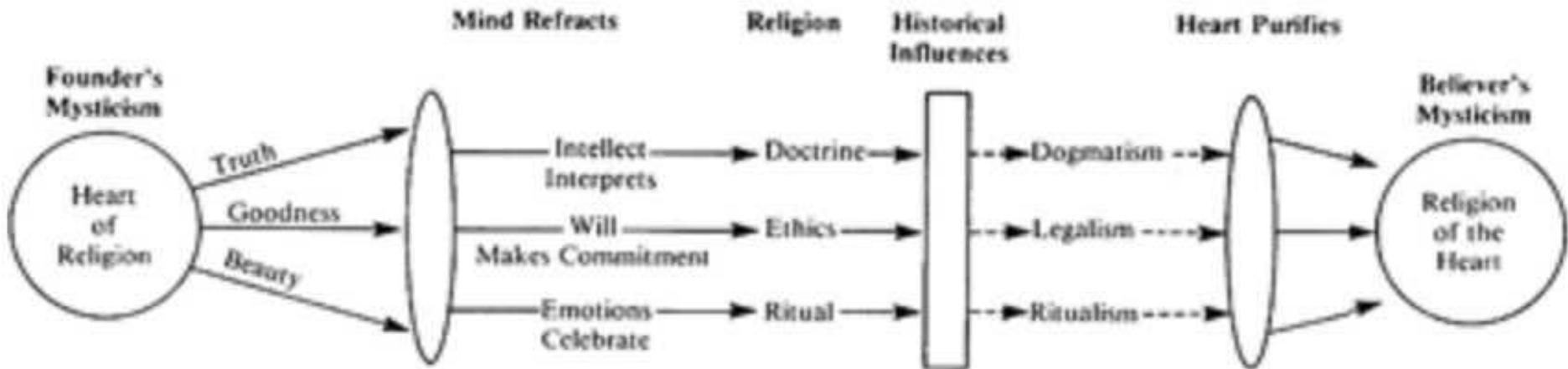


“...your familiarity with it makes it more effective for you, no matter what other models may be on the market. Time has an influence on the system: the pipes tend to get rusty and start to leak, or they get clogged up. The flow from the source slows down to a trickle.

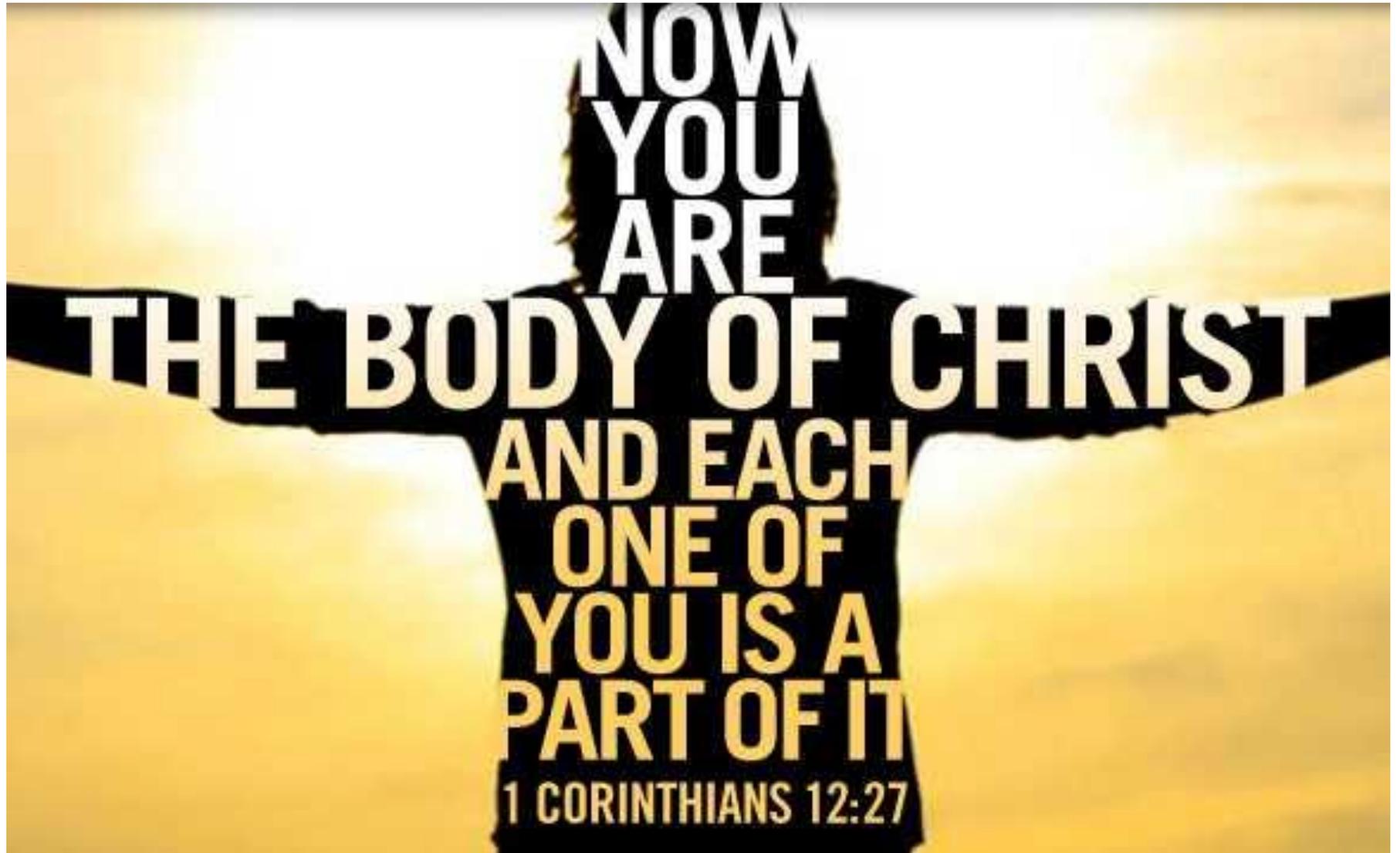
“Fortunately, I have not yet come across a religion where the system didn't work at all. Unfortunately, however, deterioration begins on the day the system is installed. At first, doctrine is simply the interpretation of mystical reality; it flows from it and leads back to it. But then the intellect begins to interpret that interpretation. Commentaries on commentaries are piled on top of the original doctrine. With every new interpretation of the previous one, we move farther away from the experiential source. Live doctrine fossilizes into dogmatism.”

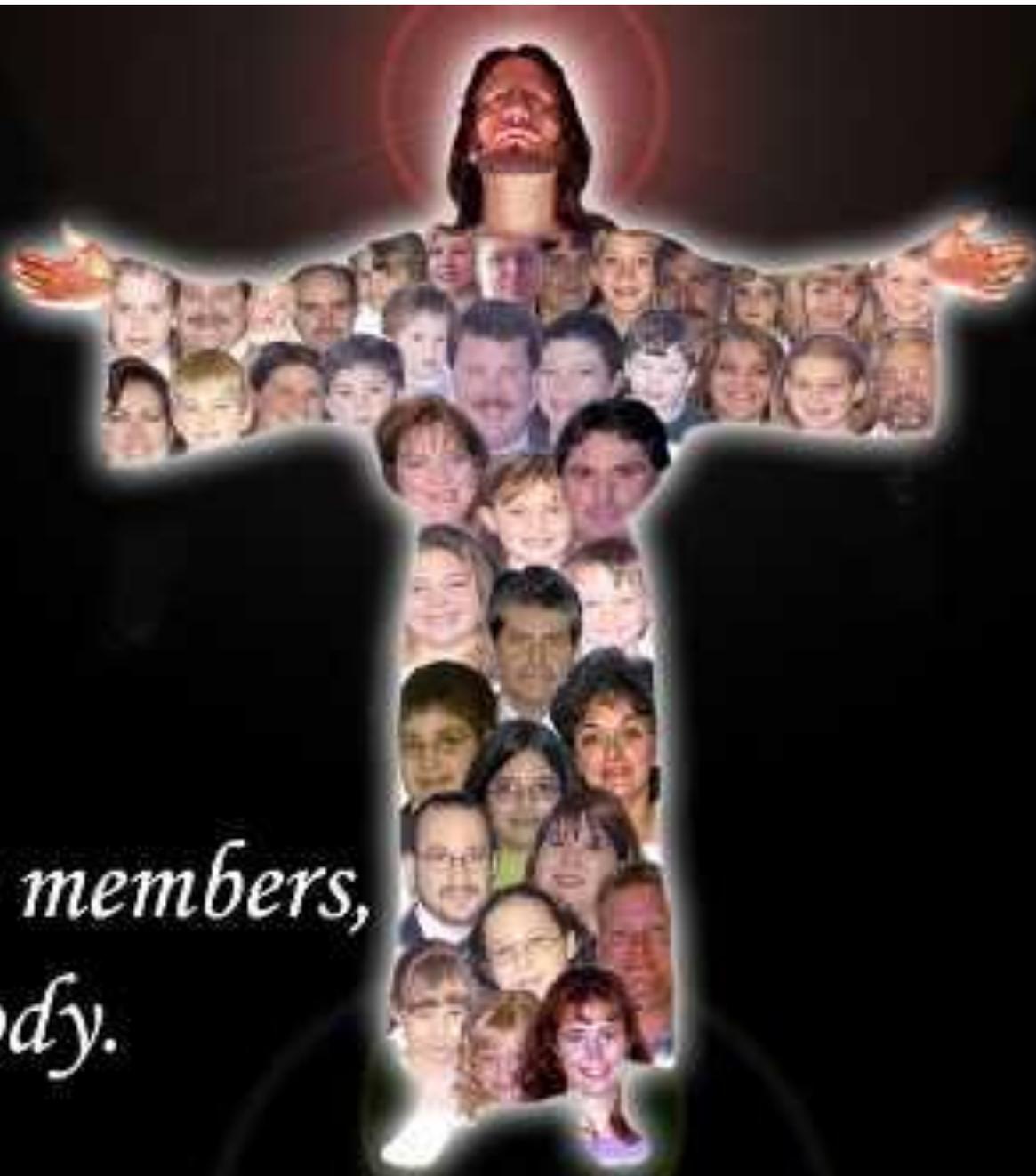
Structure as Container

FIGURE 1. The movement from founder's mysticism to believer's mysticism.



St. Paul uses speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ. This is a very organic image.





*Many members,
one body.*

There is a difference between the “institutional church,” which is the outward structure, dogma, rituals, etc. and the Church as the living, organic Body of Christ. The former is the protective shell, as David Steindl-Rast described; the latter is alive, a living Body comprising many members, just as our human body comprises many parts.