Bernard McGinn defines mysticism briefly as “the consciousness of God’s presence in a deeper and more immediate way” (McGinn 1998, xi), to which one might add only that in the course of the experience the mystic becomes unaware of anything other than the presence of God. Afterward, the mystic frequently struggles to find words or images adequate to express the experience. Rigorous spiritual discipline—the practice of spiritual exercises, chastity, fasting and abstinence, vigils and self-denial, and, in the monastic life, obedience to a superior, celibacy, and the renunciation of possessions—constitutes a preparation for mystical experiences but does not in itself constitute mysticism or necessarily produce mystical experiences.

Francis lived at the beginning of what McGinn has called “the flowering of mysticism.” McGinn has described the period from 1200 to 1350 as “arguably the richest era for the production of mystical literature in the whole of Christianity” (McGinn 1998, x). At once we find ourselves confronted by a number of problems in studying Francis’s mystical experiences, which were not at all characteristic of the mainstream mystic tradition that preceded him, whether in the Greek East or the Latin West (Cousins 1983, 164). He was in this respect as in others a radical innovator.

In the first place, as Steven T. Katz observes, mystical experience is shaped by the ideas and presuppositions the mystic brings to that experience (Katz 1983, 4). I said in chapter 5 that all poets write within or in relation to a tradition. One could equally well
say that mystics also pray and contemplate within a tradition. Christian mystics bring to their mystical experiences certain ideas, presuppositions, and deeply held convictions about the nature of God and the redemptive action of Jesus Christ in his incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. As a result, they have a specifically Christian mystical experience. The nature of their ideas, presuppositions, and convictions will be conditioned by the historic and social context, within which they live, believe, worship, and pray. As far as is possible, we need to understand as far as we can the intellectual and spiritual formation of the mystics we study. Our first problem is that Francis was not particularly well educated and there is much we do not know about his education and his spiritual formation. He made no formal study of theology and his spirituality must have been formed by attendance at Mass, listening to Bible readings and sermons there, by private prayer and meditation, by confession and advice given by his confessor, and perhaps by listening to itinerant preachers. Initially at any rate, his understanding of the Bible readings he heard was necessarily restricted by his limited knowledge of Latin. We know, for example, that a gospel reading at Mass played a crucial part in his growing understanding of his vocation. Thomas of Celano relates in his first life of Francis that “in the third year of his conversion,”

one day the gospel was being read in that church [Santa Maria della Porziuncola] about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach. The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the priest after celebrating the solemnities of the Mass, to explain the gospel to him. The priest explained it all to him thoroughly line by line. When he heard that Christ’s disciples should not possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics, but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance, the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God. “This is what I want,” he said, “this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart” (I, 201–2).

On this occasion, which took place on either October 12, 1208, or February 24, 1209 (Le Goff 2004, 31), Francis is described as