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Transcript of
What the Outsider Sees:
Teresa of Avila and the Contemplative Vision
14th Annual Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality
presented by
Rt. Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams
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Dr. Williams:

Good morning. It's a real delight and privilege to be here. I want to thank the Institute of Carmelite Studies and Boston College and all of you, who've given up a sunny Saturday morning to come and reflect a little bit on the life of the Spirit and the life of the Kingdom of God.

I was speaking the truth when I said that the work I did on Teresa all those years ago was, for me, the most nourishing and fulfilling bit of research I think I've ever done. The reading of Teresa and other Carmelite giants has continued to be a major part of my own exploration of the life of the Spirit and the life of discipleship.

But this morning, I want to approach Teresa from what may be a slightly unfamiliar angle to some of you. I want to come at some of the major themes in Teresa's thinking and practice by looking at the way in which she uses the Bible, and especially the way in which she uses the Gospels, because I believe that she uses the Gospel texts in a very distinctive fashion, and that looking at the way in which she does deploy and quote these texts tells us some rather new and perhaps unexpected things about her understanding of the life of prayer and contemplation.

But to begin at the beginning, we have to recognize that for a sixteenth century nun, access to the text of the Bible would have been restricted for the most part to what was available in liturgical books. Nuns were not professional commentators on Scripture, and only professional commentators—those involved in university teaching or canonical formation—only those would really have used regularly and had access to full texts of the Bible.

We tend, don't we, to assume that right throughout Christian history, everybody must really have had a Bible in their pocket. And when you look at the quantity of scrolls necessary to make up a complete Bible in, let's say, the fifth or the sixth century, or the quantity of manuscripts in the thirteenth, you realize that those pockets would have had to be very large indeed.

So Teresa, like most religious sisters of her day, and like most lay people of her day, would have known the Bible primarily as a book quoted in worship. The contrast can be underlined if you look at Teresa's way of quoting or referring to the Bible alongside that of, let's say, St. John of the Cross. St. John, for example, uses a very wide variety of books from Hebrew Scripture, and he'll quote them word for word.

Another writer of the period, the Franciscan mystic Francisco de Osuna, again like John, quotes very extensively from the Old as well as the New Testament. Although he doesn't have quite as many

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word-for-word quotes as St. John of the Cross, you can see that this is somebody who is used to using a full text of the Bible.

In contrast, if we look at Teresa, when she refers to texts from Hebrew Scripture from the Old Testament, they're usually paraphrased, and they come from a relatively narrow range of books. She will, of course, quote the Psalms endlessly, as you'd expect, because she was singing them every day. She quotes the Song of Songs—again for fairly obvious reasons. It's a major text for anyone living the contemplative life.

But apart from these, the majority of references are either to quite well known incidents, like the burning bush in Exodus or the crossing of the Red Sea or events in the life of the prophet Elijah. And then there's a scattering of texts from the prophets, especially Isaiah and Ezekiel. She mentions Job a few times, which is interesting, because it's one of the texts that St. John of the Cross really likes to quote. But again, she tends to refer in general terms rather than quote exact words. There's, I think, only one actual quotation from Job in her work. All of that is just what we would expect from somebody who hasn't got access to a complete Bible, let alone a Bible in the vernacular, in Spanish. She's used to picking up phrases from liturgical and devotional or homiletic contexts.

Now, that liturgical background to the use of texts also makes sense of the way in which she quotes the New Testament and especially the Gospels. It shouldn't surprise us that there are no direct quotations from St. Mark's Gospel in Teresa, because of course, St. Mark's Gospel is almost invisible in liturgical use in the pre-modern period. Everybody assumes it's an abridged version of St. Matthew, and therefore you quote St. Matthew rather than St. Mark.

So the texts she uses tend to be from Matthew, Luke, and John. She doesn't derive anything from a Gospel that doesn't have a liturgical presence. But she does cite texts from the Gospels. It's very interesting to see exactly which texts she uses most often and what picture they help to form of her own sense of where she saw herself and the vocation of her sisters in the framework of the Gospel stories.

I think that to understand Teresa fully, we need to see her as, in the very strictest sense, an evangelical theologian—that is, a theologian of the Gospel, whose sense of her calling and that of her sisters is shaped again and again and again by the narrative of the Gospel. It'll be clear, I think, in what I say, that she has very strong preferences in her habits of quotation, and these map out a distinctive theology of the contemplative vocation and, more implicitly, a theology of the Church itself.

For reasons that I hope will become clear, she likes to use the parables and the narratives of St. Luke's Gospel in a very particular way. But in strict quantitative terms, it's St. Matthew that she most often quotes. St. Matthew is quoted over 50 times in her autobiography, *The Way of Perfection*, and *The Interior Castle*. The Gospel of John is quoted over 20 times in *The Interior Castle* but appears a good deal less frequently in *The Way of Perfection*, just 11 times, and six times in her autobiography. Sorry about all these statistics—just to prove I have read the texts and looked at the notes.

As we shall see, the quotations and allusions to the Gospel fall into what I'll call clusters—groups of texts which are associated in Teresa's mind. These clusters of texts give us our best clue as to how she's seeking to deploy Gospel quotation and allusion. So I'm not going to try and give a complete catalog of all her quotations from the Gospels, you'll be glad to hear, but just to pick out the most frequent and telling concentrations of reference to the Gospels.

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But before that, let's step back for a moment and look at the context in which she's writing. Here I turn particularly to what, to me, is one of the most endlessly fascinating of her works, *The Way of Perfection*. She's writing that in the wake of some determinations by the Inquisition in 1559, when the reading of spiritual texts in Spanish was restricted in a draconian way. The challenge that resulted for a community of lay women unversed in Latin was a very serious one. If you're trying to form an intelligent and prayerful community without books available in the language people actually speak and read, you have a problem.

Teresa, while clearly seething about this prohibition, attempts to be polite about it. One of the great delights about *The Way of Perfection* is that we do have her first manuscript with the comments of the Inquisition in the margin, and we know some of the passages that she was obliged to rewrite a little bit more tactfully. Tact was something that Teresa had uneven achievements in.

But she speaks, in *The Way of Perfection*, quite movingly about the books that cannot be taken away, and in that reference implicitly lamenting the way in which communities are deprived of theological and spiritual sustenance. In that reference, she wants to say that there are texts everybody knows—not least the Our Father and the Hail Mary—which in one sense will give you all you need to know. But in addition to those basic prayers, which everybody knows, there are also the Gospel readings, which everybody hears. So, she says, as if making a dutiful curtsy to the Inquisition, of course books can be very dangerous and distracting, Father. But the text of the Gospels and the text of the familiar prayers, properly understood, will lead you to recollection and interior prayer.

So the Inquisition may have banned books on prayer in Spanish, but don't panic. We still have the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary and the Gospels we hear at Mass—and, as a matter of fact, properly understood these will give you the wisdom you need. Not, of course, that she is claiming to write a commentary on these prayers or on these texts. God forbid that she should set herself up as a teacher, because that's a role restricted to ordained males.

As she tells us at some length in *The Way of Perfection*, she doesn't in the least want to be teaching anybody anything. The fact that she is producing quite substantial work of biblical commentary while protesting eloquently all the time that she's doing no such thing is very typical of the way in which she handles the very, very delicate situation in which she finds herself. All she wants to do, she says, is to persuade her sisters to go forward in the way of prayer, whatever risks there may seem to be, because, in her view, the life of the sisters in her communities is a necessary witness and an act of reparation in an age of violent religious conflict—an age, as she sees it, where sacramental life and devotion are being very widely rejected by the emerging churches of the Reformation—by Lutherans, as she characterizes them all, with a fine indiscriminate hostility.

But the point is that the contemplative life needs to be lived in the Church at a time of conflict. How do we respond to what she calls a world in flames, a world of deep religious conflict? How do we, as proper Gospel Christians, respond? The answer is by contemplation and poverty. Without over-egging the pudding, it's very interesting to ask ourselves how we think we ought to respond to a world in flames and an age of spiraling religious conflict, but that's perhaps for later on.

If you need the contemplative life in the Church, you need resources which will enable it to be lived with intelligence and integrity. So quite a lot of *The Way of Perfection* is in fact to do with the Our Father, which she describes as an evangelical prayer—not just, that is, a prayer found in the Gospels, but a prayer that sums up the Gospel vision itself. Her aim, in *The Way of Perfection*, is to clarify the ground and the trajectory of contemplative prayer with reference to nothing but what the layperson might know or hear or read. This results in what she calls, in her autobiography, “a living book,”

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where Christ speaks directly. The evangelical life of the person growing in prayer and poverty itself becomes a text, communicating to the world God's promise and purpose at a time when, as she spells out at the beginning of *The Way of Perfection*, the world is racked by religious confusion and rebellion.

So that's the context. Books have been taken away. A living book has to be constructed through the life of the Teresian community—a living book which is informed by the prayer and the narrative of the Gospels. As we turn to look at the details of how she uses the Gospels, I think it's crucially important to see that that is the framework in which she's working.

Let's turn to her actual quotations. I've already noted that St. Matthew is the most frequent source for Gospel citations. Only in *The Interior Castle* do quotations from St. John outnumber those from St. Matthew. In *The Way of Perfection*, Matthew's Gospel is quoted, all together, 22 times, and the most pronounced cluster or concentration of references here is the Sermon on the Mount. For example, we find her quoting Jesus's commendation of prayer in solitude—when you pray, go into your inner chamber. Even more frequently, you'll find her discussing the phrases of the Lord's Prayer as it's set out in St. Matthew.

Elsewhere—in the autobiography, for example—we find her quoting Matthew 11: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened." She quotes that in her *Soliloquies* as well, and she may be quoting or half-quoting it at another point in *The Way of Perfection*.

She quotes Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." She quotes that twice in *The Way of Perfection* to alert us to what is implied when we pray, "Thy will be done." In other words, if we pray to God, "Thy will be done," we'd better be ready for the fact that if God answers that prayer, that will may be deeply painful, as it was for Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Which is why also she quotes a couple of times the story of James and John asking to be enthroned alongside Jesus in his kingdom, and Jesus's reply, "You do not know what you are asking."

Once again, she's reminding her sisters that if we pray for a throne in the Kingdom, we pray for the will of God to be done, we are implicitly committing ourselves to the Way of the Cross. And if we don't count the cost of what we pray for, well, we have only ourselves to blame. She also quotes Jesus's injunction to the disciples in Gethsemane, "Pray that you are not led to the time of trial," to temptation.

So those are the clusters—the concentrations of quotation from Matthew in her texts—the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, the warnings against praying without knowing what you're praying for. And when she discusses the phrases of the Lord's Prayer, she is able to set out in some detail the rationale for some very important aspects of the life of her communities. These chapters in *The Way of Perfection* are, to my mind, among the freshest, most entertaining, and most challenging that she ever wrote.

The communities she is seeking to create are communities which are held together simply by kinship with Christ and friendship with Christ—kinship with Christ and friendship with Christ. These are, therefore, communities which must disregard all considerations of social or ethnic status. What holds us together is that we are adopted sisters and brothers of the eternal Son.

She will quote from Matthew 11 Christ's invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary," to underline the absolute priority of Christ's invitation in creating Christian community. We don't create Christian community by clubbing together. Christian community is not like-minded people who have decided to

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associate together because they like one another. Nor is the Christian community just a religious reflection of the society around—a religious reflection of a society that is deeply socially divided and racially anxious.

It's a point which I've elaborated elsewhere, and I won't spend too much time on it now, but let me just add in brackets, it is crucial, in reading *The Way of Perfection*, to remember Teresa's Jewish family. She was two generations away from a practicing Jewish environment. Her grandfather had been before the court of the Inquisition in Toledo in 1485. And it's quite clear that her father's application for a patent of nobility in Avila had been held up because of perfectly true allegations about his racial origins. I don't believe Teresa could have been ignorant of that. So when she writes passionately and eloquently, as she does, about the folly of racial and family distinction being imported into the Church, it's not an academic question for her.

When she writes about the Our Father, she is writing about a kind of community which the Lord's Prayer articulates, the community in which our status, our common kinship as adopted brothers and sisters of Christ is the decisive fact. Some of the same themes recur in her use of texts from St. John's Gospel, as well. The most notable concentrations of reference, where St. John's Gospel is concerned—apart from allusions to the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, to which I'll come back later—her most notable concentrations of reference are to chapters 14, 17, and 20 of St. John.

She quotes often the many rooms or many dwelling places that Jesus speaks of. And she writes about those verses which touch on Jesus as the way to the Father and on the Father as being seen in Jesus. There are four references to John 17 and the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and their indwelling in the community of the faithful.

What Teresa builds up in her use both of Matthew and John is this image of the Church in general and the contemplative community in particular as held together by Christ's presence—Christ, who gives to us uniformly, indiscriminately, the grace of belonging with him as a daughter or son of the eternal Father. That indwelling of Trinitarian life in us is understood as something which we discover more and more as we journey towards the center of ourselves, where the Son and the Father encounter one another in our hearts. That's a theme which comes up in one of her spiritual testimonies with very particular force.

In short, the quotations of St. Matthew and St. John by Teresa are predominantly to do with emphasizing that the relation between Christ and the Father, as it's shown and acted out in the Gospel narrative, is the form of our own relationship to Christ's father—and that this implies both the risk of following in the Way of the Cross and the radical spiritual and communal egalitarianism of a community that's united simply by the invitation of Christ to be with him.

There, I think, is one central theme in Teresa's use of the Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount, the Our Father, the great texts from the Farewell Discourses in John's Gospel—all of those are very clear about the identity of the Church as that kinship group united as sisters and brothers of the eternal Son or the eternal Father, with the implication that carries that familiar forms of honor and status in the society of her day have to be set aside within the community.

But I want now to turn to Teresa's use of St. Luke's Gospel, because there's a noticeable shift of focus here, though the same themes are underlined. The frequency of material from St. Luke is not far short of her use of Matthew. In fact, in *The Interior Castle*, St. Luke is slightly more often quoted than

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Matthew—16 as opposed to 15 times. But her usage is strongly focused here on specific narratives, including parables, rather than teaching passages.

It's also worth noting that her quotations from St. Luke have very, very limited overlap with the quotations you find from St. Luke in St. John of the Cross or Osuna. Osuna, for example, never refers to the Mary and Martha story, which is one of Teresa's favorites, nor to the conversation of Jesus with Simon the Pharisee, when the sinful woman anoints Jesus's feet, although Osuna does quote some of the parables of Luke—the Prodigal Son and the Pharisee and the Publican.

But the narratives that Teresa likes to quote most often are regularly about Jesus's relation to women followers and about God's acceptance of sinners. So the Mary and Martha story from Luke 10 is, not surprisingly, the most frequently quoted of her Lucan texts. It's quoted seven times by her in her major works— four times in *The Way of Perfection*, twice in *The Interior Castle*, once in the *Soliloquies*—and closely following this, the story of the sinful woman who anoints Jesus's feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee, from Luke chapter 7. That has five references—two in *The Way of Perfection* and three in *The Interior Castle*. She also mentions the Prodigal Son and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. She mentions the woman who touches the hem of Jesus's garment and the repentant thief on the Cross. She twice mentions Luke 22: 15, Jesus at the Last Supper saying "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you."

But you'll see how much concentration there is on that group of stories about Jesus and women followers or women friends, so that one of the governing themes here in the array of Lucan texts that Teresa quotes is Jesus's welcome of and passion for not only the sinner, but particularly the sinful woman.

Let's look at the subtext of her quotations a little bit. It's an obvious enough point about Teresa's rhetoric, as I've said, that she has got to insist that she's not trying to teach about the life of prayer, being a woman and therefore unqualified to do so. But she can't resist, in *The Way of Perfection*, reminding her readers that, "Christ found as much love and more faith in women as opposed to men." And she says, rather acidly, that "every virtue in women seems to be automatically suspected by men."

"In this world," she says, "women are intimidated"—it's an interesting word for her to use—women are intimidated, "but they may still pray that God will allow them to receive the good things merited by the prayers of the Virgin, recalling that Christ invariably met women with compassion." Again, you won't be surprised to know that the inquisitors had a few notes in the margins here, including a wonderful line, which simply says "she appears to be criticizing the holy Inquisition."

But behind Teresa's exegesis of these specific passages lies this conviction: that the status accorded in her own day to women, especially women contemplatives, is at odds with the Gospel record in essential respects, so she's especially concerned to make use of Gospel texts which make that point. Luke is uniquely well provided with texts like this, but it's not surprising that she uses the Samaritan woman from John chapter 4 in much the same way, referring to her three times in *The Way of Perfection*, once in *The Interior Castle*.

There's another little Teresian fragment which is much to the point here. This is the text called the "Búscate en Mí," where she had circulated to some of her clerical acquaintances the words which she had heard in prayer, "Seek yourself in me," and asked her friends for their comments. She then commented on their comments. So we have her satirical and rather irreverent responses to the remarks made by a number of her friends and colleagues in the clergy, including St. John of the Cross.

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In her response to John of the Cross, she implicitly reproaches John of the Cross for implying that no one can approach Christ without prior self-emptying and purification. Listen to what she says about this. “The Magdalene was not dead to the world when she found Christ, nor was the Samaritan woman or the Canaanite woman.” The Canaanite woman—the Syrophenician woman who challenges Jesus when he says that you can’t take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs—is indirectly referred to elsewhere in Teresa’s work, in the *Foundations*, in fact—that doesn’t appear elsewhere.

The Magdalene was not dead to the world when she found him, nor the Samaritan woman or the Canaanite woman. Jesus, in other words, regards women without the suspicion that is regularly shown by the sons of Adam. So, as she says in response to John of the Cross, what he says is doubtless all very well if you’re doing the spiritual exercises, but not everybody is. And Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman and the others were not doing the spiritual exercises and yet found—sought and found Jesus.

So, the theme of Jesus’s access—Jesus’s radical availability to women in the Gospels—is being very strongly foregrounded by Teresa in that text, in the “Búscate en Mí”—but also in her use of Lucan text in her other writings. And just to reinforce that, she’s fascinated by the fact that at least twice in St. Luke’s Gospel, we see Jesus defending women who come to him on that basis. That’s one of the more distinctive arguments in Teresa’s work.

Now, of course, like practically all her Catholic contemporaries, Teresa assumes that the sinful woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee is identical with Mary of Bethany, Martha’s sister, and also with Mary Magdalene. She takes for granted the medieval rolling up together of all those figures in the one legendary figure of Magdalene. But that enables her to present a figure whose relation to Jesus is repeatedly characterized by risk or scandal from which Jesus protects her.

In chapter 15 of *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa discusses how her sisters should react to criticism and blame. And she praised Christ’s defense of Magdalene, both from Simon the Pharisee and from her sister Martha. When the woman washes his feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus steps in to defend her against reproach. When Martha complains about Mary sitting at Jesus’s feet, Jesus once again steps in to defend her from reproach.

Now, at first sight this is simply about dealing with unmerited criticism as an individual. It’s about how to handle others being unkind about you in community. But when the theme recurs a bit later in *The Way of Perfection*, chapter 17, the emphasis has shifted a bit. You see, in the Mary and Martha story, Mary is being criticized for being a contemplative. So what’s the contemplative to do now? The contemplative must be silent, waiting for Jesus to defend her.

Characteristically, Teresa adds that it won’t do for the contemplative to look down on people who are performing necessary practical tasks. There are diverse callings at diverse moments, depending on the divine will. Jesus will step in to defend the contemplative Mary, but that does not mean that the contemplative Mary has any justification for looking down on the active Martha.

In her treatment of the sinful woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee, Teresa, in book seven of *The Interior Castle*, imagines in a very moving passage—very vivid passage—imagines Mary Magdalene abandoning her dignity and her social status to go and perform a menial task for Jesus, washing his feet.

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She lives through a very public change of behavior. Not only behavior—again, a typical little bit of Teresian vividness—behavior and dress and everything else, says Teresa, so that her contemplative life—Magdalene’s contemplative life—is grounded in the visible sacrifice of reputation and dignity that takes her to the feet of the Lord in action and in contemplation. Mary Magdalene sacrifices her status and her dignity to go, first of all, to wash Jesus’s feet and then to sit at Jesus’s feet and listen to him. That sacrifice of dignity and status and safety also prepares her for the terrible suffering of being a witness of Christ’s crucifixion.

Teresa promises her sisters that Jesus will answer for them, as he did for the Magdalene, when the intensity of spiritual longing brings about extreme conditions or behaviors. All of this suggests that the discussion in *The Way of Perfection* isn’t only about how sisters cope with reproach of individual faults in the course of the common life. It’s about the sense that the contemplative life is itself, in some way, scandalous.

That’s a significant complex of ideas in *The Way of Perfection*. Teresa began that work, as I’ve said, by articulating the insecurity of her own position. She’s a woman who is obliged by circumstance to provide some kind of spiritual formation for contemplatives who don’t know any Latin, and who are, in any case, regarded as incapable of contemplation because they’re women.

The modern idea that there’s something more intrinsically contemplative about the feminine than the masculine would have shocked the Middle Ages. Women are less capable of contemplation because women are less intellectual. So a woman claiming the right, the freedom, to engage in mental prayer, interior prayer, contemplation, that woman is dangerous.

As she says, what is otherwise good is suspect in a woman. The contemplative calling is a good thing, but it’s dangerous for a woman, and thus it’s dangerous for the Church as a whole. The female contemplative, if I can use the modern jargon, becomes a transgressive figure, somebody who is deeply scandalous and problematic, who is crossing boundaries. She’s rebelling against her role and her status, or her lack of status.

Remember that in her environment, the role of the female religious house was often closely bound to a set of concerns about status. The convent which Teresa initially joined in Avila was a very typical convent of its day—a convent, that is, in which sisters from a wealthier background could come in with their own servants and were allowed special privileges. Members of their family could live in the convent precincts.

The convent was part of a very sophisticated, complicated system whereby, as you might say, there was a contract between the community and the wider society. The convent provided a dignified and respectable home for unmarried women. In return for the patronage that wealthy families bestowed on the convent, of course prayer would be offered and Masses would be said by the convent. That was the contract.

Teresa is quite surprisingly articulate in her hostility to all of that, not only her dismissal of the ideas of status and family honor being reproduced in the community, but also in her unease about the whole notion of patronage and contract. She doesn’t want her convents to be the recipients of major civic or aristocratic patronage. She doesn’t want convent churches cluttered up with coats of arms and official tombs and monuments. She wants small houses, small chapels, poverty. She wants the sisters to live by basic charity and the work of their hands.

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That's why, of course, in many of the towns where she attempted to start Carmelite convents, there was deep local unease. These communities would be outside the contract. They would not be the sort of convent you were used to. And because of their poverty, they could end up being a drain on civic resources. They were not protected by the patronage of the great families, not that Teresa was entirely averse to summoning great families and great personages to her aid. She was never anything but a realist. But she is very concerned that the convents be, so to speak, taken out of that particular circulation of the patron-client relationship. And so the institution—the old convent institution, which offered a clear contract to its environment in terms of intercession, public recognition of patronage, reinforcement of family solidarity and dignity and all the rest of it—that was something she wasn't interested in.

Her ideal for monastic reform, her ideal for the character of the community, and her ideal for a woman contemplative as a person praying, all of these are suspect and difficult in her own context. She's living, remember, in an age when a distinctive theology of a contemplative vocation for women is, if not entirely absent, at least very problematic in the Church. She's living in an environment where there's intense suspicion directed towards anybody who might be thought of as an unauthorized religious teacher, a context where the spiritual expectations of a woman religious would be pretty modest.

Claims about a calling to interior prayer, mental prayer, contemplation—these would have had about them an unacceptable flavor of appealing to something outside the hierarchical system. And a community that, like Teresa's, refused these contracts of local usefulness and threatened to be a financial burden, on top of all the other ambivalent features—these communities were going to be a problem.

That's fairly familiar as a characterization of what Teresa faced. But what makes her so theologically interesting in this context is what she does with the common authorized currency of liturgical prayer and biblical narrative in order to create a rationale both for the contemplative calling, as such, and for her own particular version of it as involving certain standards of simplicity and financial semi-independence. She is constructing just the theology of the contemplative calling that seemed to be discouraged in much of the teaching of her day.

So to draw together a few themes from what I've been discussing, she's laid her general foundations in her meditations on the Our Father and related texts from St. Matthew, where, as we've seen, she elaborates her conviction about how kinship with Christ relativizes all other kinship and family claims. She's emphasized the priority of Christ's calling and invitation, and she's insisted on the costliness of following this call.

That set of themes is refined in her use of St. John's Gospel, especially the farewell discourses. Here, the emphasis is on the abiding presence within the contemplative of the Trinitarian life and the reality of the promised indwelling of Christ, with a recognition also of the need for the soul to advance through a series of dwelling places—the rooms of the interior castle—and of the diversity of routes by which the soul moves towards God.

But then, when Teresa turns to her material from St. Luke, this is given a further and potentially rather radical refinement. Her general affirmation of diversities of calling turns into an affirmation of diversities that'll appear rather difficult to some authorities, specifically, the calling of women to be both contemplative and active in the way they were meant to be in the reformed Carmels she was founding. That is seen as grounded in Jesus's own affirmation of women who resisted convention in

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order to be in direct contact with him, both in practical service and in contemplative listening, both in poverty and menial work, and in silence and dependence.

In a famous passage in chapter 27 of *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa speaks of the college of Christ, where St. Peter, being a fisherman, had more authority than St. Bartholomew, who was a king's son. I bet you didn't know St. Bartholomew was a king's son, but everybody knew it in the Middle Ages. When she says that, she is underlining the fact that the original apostolic community represented precisely a refusal of preexisting kinship and status patterns. So when contemporary women embark on journeys that appear just as scandalous as that of Mary Magdalene to the house of Simon the Pharisee, we have to see it in the context of that primitive ideal—the college of Christ. The Carmelite calling, in a word, may be suspect in the eyes of the current ecclesiastical world, but its advocate and defender is Jesus himself.

This means that contemplation, especially in its Teresian manifestation, accompanied by poverty and by this repudiation of what I call the contract model around religious life—contemplation becomes a place of deep otherness, deep strangeness in regard to the social order and to the conventional order of the Church.

It's even more confusing for the critic, to the extent that Teresa refuses to settle with a clear traditional hierarchy of contemplative and active. What she has to say about this is sometimes unclear. But what's plain is her unease with any typology that re-inscribes in the community a difference between a high and low status, this time on the grounds of contemplation or action. If you're trying to create a religious community in which status doesn't matter, then there's not much point in saying that in that community, contemplatives have high status and actives have low status. She's walking something of a tightrope when she talks about this. Yes, of course contemplation is what it's all about. But don't imagine that that means, if you're not receiving rich contemplative gifts at any moment, you're somehow failing or you're somehow at the bottom of the heap.

So she asks, is it then an offense against humility to hope that you'll be given contemplative gifts? No, because you can hope for gifts. That's what it's about. It would be a problem if you set out to become a Contemplative, capital C, by your human excellence or if you thought that you were doing really very well at contemplation and so could reasonably look down on your active sisters. It doesn't mean everybody in the house has to be in the seventh heaven all the time. Otherwise, as Teresa very typically says, nobody does the washing up. Not because all in this house practice prayer must all be contemplatives, she says. That's impossible.

The point is the life as a whole, the life of the community as a whole. The rationale of all of this community life is nurturing a proper response to contemplative gifts from God. And one proper response to contemplative gifts from God in other people is to accept that they're not for you at this particular moment and that that's not the end of the world.

Again, it's a proper response to assume that if you're not getting contemplative gifts, it just might be because you're not really praying for them. Equally, you shouldn't conclude that you're therefore fixed in inferiority. God needs all sorts of service. Sometimes he needs you to be contemplative. Sometimes he needs you to be active. Don't panic. Don't assume that a new kind of hierarchy or grading system has emerged. If the gifts of mental prayer are not forthcoming for you, don't despair. Take it for granted that the Lord is working with you in the way best suited to you at that particular moment.

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And again, very typically, she says, “I don’t say we shouldn’t try.” Contemplation is what we can rightly pray for, it seems. And it seems to be given when we’re detached from any issues or status or success around it. It’s one of those wonderfully catch-22 situations really, where the only way of being absolutely sure of opening yourself up to the contemplative gifts of God is never to give it a second thought. So we have to try very, very hard not to think about it.

The point there is that the entire scheme of community life, as Teresa sees it, is designed to pave the way for contemplative union. The whole ethos and atmosphere of the house is oriented to contemplative union with God. But it’s also designed to make sense of the absence or the delay of contemplative gifts in the light of a strong belief in the dignity of any and every task performed at the convent for the service of Christ.

Our individual spiritual growth is woven into the complex of tasks that makes the community work. And one of the central paradoxes of this is the implied notion that active service is justified by what it makes possible for the contemplative. The usefulness of action is creating the ambience in which the useless loving contemplation of God and Christ may flourish in me or in my neighbor. Action is useful insofar as it allows uselessness.

The disciplined life of the convent isn’t useful because it guarantees prayerful support for kindred or city, but because it creates the environment in which something that is an end in itself—something that’s not useful in terms of anything but itself—is made more attainable, at least for some. Precisely by withdrawing attention and attachment from the various kinds of social solidarity available outside the community—family relationship, status, patronage—the community’s discipline nurtures contemplation in a context that is, in important respects, spiritually and practically egalitarian. Everyone takes their turn.

And so the awkward and embarrassing otherness of the female contemplative challenging conventions and boundaries comes to be a sign of the deeper unsettling otherness of the contemplative life itself—the refusal of the contemplative life to be instrumentalized in the service of a divided social order. Teresa’s typology ingeniously brings together the scandal of Mary Magdalene as a displaced gentlewoman abandoning her family and the walls of her household to go in search of Jesus and the scandal of her listening to Jesus in contemplative silence.

In the Seventh Mansion, she writes about Mary Magdalene, “Do you think it would be a small mortification for a woman of nobility like her to wander through these streets, and perhaps wandering alone because her fervent love had made her unconscious of what she was doing, and then enter a house she had never entered before and then suffer the criticism of a Pharisee and the many other things she must have suffered? Do you think it would be a small mortification for a woman of nobility?” There are the words of a woman of nobility who had, in a sense, walked the streets in search of Christ.

She goes on, “If, nowadays, there is so much gossip against persons who are not so notorious as Mary Magdalene, what would have been said then? Mary Magdalene’s humiliation as a transgressive woman is part of her preparation for contemplative silence, a suffering that detaches the soul from obsession with its own solidity and status.”

Notice that Teresa suggests that Mary Magdalene’s intense love makes her unconscious of what she’s doing. It’s not a casual point. If a woman causes scandal by adopting a religious life on Teresa’s model, it’s because she’s overwhelmed by the divine imperative. Just as elsewhere, Teresa wants to stress that her actions are not a deliberate campaign against ecclesiastical discipline. They’re just a

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response to the initiative of Christ. That imagery of wandering through the streets—well, it's imagery familiar from the language of the Song of Songs, chapter 3, "I will get up now, and go about the city, through its streets and squares, I will search for the one my heart loves"—a text used in the liturgy for St. Mary Magdalene's feast.

Teresa's use of that biblical echo—the image of the Magdalene wandering through the streets—of course, tacitly, it recognizes the gravity of the scandal. Mary Magdalene may be a repentant prostitute, but in this respect, at least, she continues in her old habits, wandering the streets. Only Christ's welcoming gesture and words will establish that she is now a transformed sinner. Her behavior is ambiguous.

Teresa is being very bold here. She's anticipating the most destructive criticism possible and turning the flank. What's the worst you could say about gentlewomen abandoning their status, giving up the social contract around religious life, and claiming the right to be contemplatives? What's the worst you could say? That they're a kind of spiritual prostitute, a spiritual unrepentant Magdalene. Well, say it, says Teresa, in effect. Say it, and then listen to what Christ says in response.

For her sisters, clarity about the reputational risk of this life is essential. She deliberately underlines it. If the search for God in the reformed Carmel is going to be compared by critics to the humiliation of prostitution, that's all part of the preparation for the ultimate displacing of the self that occurs in interior prayer.

Teresa's biblical models and her Gospel stories here allow her to make some very strong points about contemplation, not just for women, but for all believers. From the point of view of ordinary social exchange and the mutual securing of status and power, contemplation will sooner or later look like a dangerous and suspect affair. And when the socially constrained figure of a woman is involved, especially a woman of good family, the otherness and unsettling character of contemplation is particularly marked.

For men, the issues of exposure and scandal are not the same. Teresa's response to John of the Cross about access to Jesus has so strong a gendered character that it's as if she's saying there's something about the contemplative calling which only women—and particularly women who are or have made themselves marginal to their inherited systems and structures—can demonstrate. Not because, as I've said, of some essentialist notion of the female as more naturally contemplative, but because of the issues of status and danger that arise where female contemplatives are concerned in her context.

She's not constructing deliberately a general theology of the standing of the contemplative in the Church, but she is unmistakably constructing a foundation for such a theology, if only by the close link she makes between the contemplative community repudiating honor and status as a social marker and the possibility of growth towards union with God.

For the further stages of the journey of the interior castle to happen, what we need is a dissolution of secure, enclosed images of identity over against God. To embark on the more serious and demanding stages of the contemplative life requires precisely a letting go of status, identity, safety, and so on. So the rupture with a society that's obsessed with managing and negotiating images of identity and status is a beginning for that deeper rupture in the self, which opens up the possibility of union with God. That's a scheme that leads us to recognize that the contemplative, as such, is always other, strange. Not in the sense of superiority on some imagined scale, but representing the novelty of the society that Christ creates, the college of the apostles.

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To conclude, as a reader of the Gospels, Teresa is in search of material that'll provide a theological account of this novelty—the new creation, the new society, the college of Christ—and also material that'll provide a narrative and imaginative rationale for the disruption that response to the contemplative calling entails, most dramatically through the figures to which she returns so many times, the problematic and challenging female figures who approach Jesus and are welcomed.

Part of her theological legacy here is in this subtle use of such figures to suggest an ecclesiology as well as a theology of the contemplative calling. The Catholic Church is primitively a community in which kinship with Christ is the supreme defining category, so that any other natural distinction of race, family, or gender is put in question. And the contemplative life is at the heart of the unremitting task of reminding the Church to be what it is in relation to Christ's invitation, because it's a life that requires the most fundamental loss of self-based solidity or security.

It's clear that for Teresa, contemplative life in poverty, outside the familiar forms of the patronage system, is being highlighted as one of those things that most clearly reminds the church of its very identity as the kindred of Jesus. The contemplative calling in the church makes the church other to its habitual, routine self. It recalls the basic otherness of the church to fallen creation, especially status-ridden society. And the living out of all this by women under the Teresian discipline makes this particularly clear.

If that radical vision doesn't inform the understanding of the contemplative calling wherever it's responded to, contemplation will be in danger of becoming a search for just the wrong sort of interiority and just the wrong sort of achievement. Take this out of the context where contemplation is bound up with the deep otherness of the church in respect of status and hierarchy—take it out of that context—and either contemplation is a matter of spiritual attainment, or it's a matter of burrowing into a private world. Connect it with the Gospel vision of the college of Christ, and contemplation and active transformation of the world seem to come far more closely and interestingly together.

Teresa clearly finds it impossible to separate out her theology of contemplation from her theology—her implied theology—of the Church, even though I doubt whether she would have wanted to use such terms about her own thought. But for her, the priority of Christ's invitation is what creates both the new community of grace and the new decentered subject that emerges in the long process of contemplative maturation. It would be worse than eccentric to separate them. And a proper evangelical understanding of both is needed, now as then, to prevent the theology of interior prayer from becoming indulgent and sentimental and the theology of transfigured community from becoming activist and self-reliant. It's a legacy worth pondering, I believe, on this 500th anniversary of Mother Teresa's birth. Thank you.