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Annual Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality

presented by

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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

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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.

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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 Sermons 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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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. 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' 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' 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' 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' 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' 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

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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 Lucean 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' feet and then to sit at Jesus' 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,



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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.

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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, in words.

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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 humill05n.7(p)2.3(a)7(r)6ared bf tT*19.73(c)7(h

