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The Jesus Mysticism of Teresa of Avila

Its Importance for Theology and Contemporary Spirituality

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In October 2015 the Catholic Church celebrated the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Teresa of Avila, mystic and Doctor of the Church. As the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA celebrates the scholarly careers of two major figures in the academic discipline of spirituality – Judith Berling, an eminent scholar of Asian religion and spirituality and Arthur Holder, a renowned scholar in Christian spirituality – it seems appropriate to honor them with a study of this remarkable 16th century woman mystic. I dedicate this article to them with admiration and deep appreciation for their contribution to our field and their friendship over these past decades.

Introduction

This study arises from a convergence of several biblical, theological, and spirituality issues that I have been concerned about for several years. In no particular order, these concerns are the following: the nature of spiritual, and especially mystical, experience and its expression; revelation and its relation to Scripture, hermeneutics, and theopoetics; the bodily Resurrection of Jesus and the role of the Risen Jesus in the life of the believer; and, most recently, what strikes me as a

highly questionable “drift” in the area of Christian spirituality, both academically and practically, toward substituting some, often quite vague, notion of the “cosmic Christ” for the real personal risen human being, Jesus. Jesus is deemed by some of our contemporaries to be too limited – in historical time and place, by ethnicity and gender, by personal life experience, in evolutionary location, and so on – to carry the soteriological “weight” traditionally assigned to him. Can a single Jewish male human being, they ask, who lived a short life in a particular time and place and who died a real human death, be realistically regarded by modern people as the unique and universal Savior of the world; as the subject and object of a personal relationship with the Christian believer in all times and places including our own; as central focus and norm of Christian theology; in short, as the unique center of Christian faith and life with universal significance for humankind?

All of these issues converge, explicitly or implicitly, in the theological writings of Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun born in 1515 in Avila, Spain, who died in 1582, was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1622, and declared a Doctor of the Universal Church – the first woman to be so honored – in 1970. So, I want to interrogate her writing on these subjects, in particular her most highly developed theological work, *The Interior Castle*, completed in 1577, when Teresa was 62 years old – 40 years into her life as a Religious, 17 years after her most important mystical experience upon which this book pivots, and 5 years from her death. I will be concerned especially with the Sixth of the Seven Mansions of the interior life which Teresa describes in this classic work of mystical theology, and particularly with chapters 7-10 of the Sixth Mansions.

As a woman in 16th century Spain Teresa of Avila had little formal education and no academic training in theology. There is evidence in her writings, however, of her assiduous reading of the Bible and of her hearing and reciting it in the Divine Office she prayed daily. She

also read and heard passages from classical spiritual and theological texts which were readings in the Office. She studied the works of certain contemporary spiritual writers and some of the classics of spirituality, to which she refers. She listened avidly to the sermons preached in her convent or places where she traveled. And she consulted frequently with confessors, spiritual directors, and those she called "learned men", i.e. theologians, as well as "persons of spiritual experience" living in or visiting the area around her convent in Avila in that period of intense spiritual ferment and mystical controversy which was 16th century Spain. And she clearly knew, whether from reading, preaching, or personal instruction by her advisors, something of the theology of such giants as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. But none of these, or all of them together, can adequately account for the extraordinary theological content of Teresa's writing, especially her masterpiece, *The Interior Castle*. So the question is, "Where did she get the doctrine we find in her works, especially her teaching on the nature and experience of prayer from its beginnings through the highest stages of the mystical life?" And "How did she develop the remarkable literary forms through which she makes her doctrine available to her readers?" These two questions bring us to the primary concerns of this essay, the revelatory character of Teresa's mystical experience and the theopoetic character of her writing.

Before getting into these questions I want to address an important preliminary question: why, given the volume of learned writing on these topics by twenty centuries of professional theologians, should we listen to Teresa of Avila, a 16th century cloistered nun without formal theological credentials? There are at least two important reasons: first, she is a Doctor of the Universal Church; second, she was, and is, by biblical standards, a prophet in the Church.

A Doctor of the Church – and there are only 37 as compared with the countless canonized martyrs, confessors, and other categories of

saints – is someone declared such on the basis of two criteria: outstanding holiness of life and eminent doctrine expressed in a significant body of writings. The person is declared a Doctor by the authoritative (though not *de fide*) declaration by an ecumenical council or the Pope. (In fact, all 37 have been declared doctors by the Pope, not by a Council.) Though the conferring of the title "doctor" is not an assertion that there are no errors of any kind anywhere in the person's writings, there obviously are no significant or systemic *doctrinal* errors.[1]

Thus, the teaching of a Doctor of the Church is proposed to the whole Church not simply to his or her compatriots or contemporaries, and not merely as interesting or edifying for those attracted to it, but as a powerful, original, singularly articulate presentation of the faith itself or some aspect of it. The conferral of the title of Doctor of the Church on Teresa of Avila was a formal declaration that her writings on Christian spirituality are regarded as a doctrinal gift meant for the whole Church, and thus eminently worthy of our study. While there are many canonized saints and respected theologians in the Church's history Doctors of the Church are recognized for the singular conjunction of extraordinary holiness with extraordinary theological brilliance. So, in a certain sense, the Doctors of the Church could be considered the models for scholars of religion in every age, such as the two who are honored by this special issue of the *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology*, who aspire not only to faithfully transmit the tradition but to enhance it, and not only to teach but to live what they teach.

The second reason for studying Teresa of Avila, namely, the prophetic character of her ministry, is propounded by the Carmelite, Kieran Kavanaugh, certainly one of the best Teresian scholars of the 20th century, in his commentary on chapter 8 of the Sixth Mansions of

[1] The declaration, made by Pope Paul VI on September 27, 1970: "Therefore, in complete certainty and after mature deliberation, with the fullness of the Apostolic authority, we proclaim Saint Teresa of Jesus, virgin from Ávila, Doctor of the Universal Church."

the *Interior Castle*.[2] In this chapter [*IC* 6, 8, 1; also described in *Life* 27] Teresa describes what she calls an "intellectual vision" of Christ which took place in 1560 when Teresa was 45 years old. Kavanaugh claims, and I think he is, from a biblical point of view, quite correct, that this experience of the glorified Christ was, in Teresa's life, analogous to the theophany of Moses at the Burning Bush or the christophany of Paul on the Road to Damascus, that is, it was a divine vocation to prophetic ministry among the People of God. The great prophets of both testaments were called, commissioned, and sent to their people precisely as *prophets* by means of a revelatory inaugural experience, usually involving either or both "seeing" and "hearing" of some sort.

Jesus, as is recounted in the gospel narratives of his baptism in the Jordan (see Mt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk:21-22), is the primary example of this vocational phenomenon, and Jesus interprets his own prophetic call in the synagogue scene recounted in Luke 4:16-30 in which he assimilates himself to the prophet Isaiah (see Is. 61:11-2) who proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me...to proclaim good news to the poor...." Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea and others in the Old Testament and then Mary Magdalene, Paul and others in the New Testament testify to their inaugural prophetic experience which is simultaneously vocation to and commissioning for public ministry of the Word and personal enlightenment about the content of the message entrusted to them. The inaugural vision/experience that creates the prophet's identity and launches his or her ministry is some kind of mystical experience described as seeing, hearing, or feeling. And we will spend some time reflecting on what such an experience involves. But the important thing

[2] Unless otherwise noted the English language texts of Teresa's writings referred to in this article are those by Kieran Kavanaugh. His translations, commentaries, and notes are available in multiple publications but the ones to which I will refer will be *St. Teresa of Avila, The Interior Castle*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2010) and *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila,* vol. I: The Book of Her Life; Spiritual Testimonies; Soliloquies, 2nd ed., trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987).

here is to recognize the pattern of prophetic vocation in the life of Teresa as a warrant of the authority she claims, her later readers recognize, and the Church acknowledges for her teaching on the spiritual life which, as Kavanaugh says, is, in essence, Christological.

Kavanaugh bases his claim that Teresa's mystical experience in 1560 was a genuine prophetic inaugural vision on his interpretation of the historical facts of her life. Prior to this event, he says, there "was still nothing of the prophet, or the doctor, or the foundress" [*IC,* p. 345][3] i n Teresa's life. She was certainly deeply immersed in her own spiritual life, in practicing and trying to understand her prayer, in increasing fidelity, both outer and inner, to her vocation to solitude and silence. But after the experiences of 1560 she became a ministerial dynamo. She produced her large body of spiritual writing,[4] and made all of her 17 foundations of the Carmelite Reform.[5] In other words, from 1560 on she begins to function prophetically in the public sphere as apostle and teacher. (A fascinating theme in Teresa's writing, which cannot be followed up in this article, is her ongoing reflection on the classical trope of the relation between Mary and Martha as a biblical treatment of the relationship between contemplative prayer and prophetic ministry, which are progressively integrated in the mature Teresa as they so clearly are in the life of Jesus).

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[3] References to Teresa's text itself are by Mansion, Chapter, and Paragraph and those to Kavanaugh's commentary by page number in the volume.

[4] Teresa's writings include her spiritual autobiography (*The Book of Her Life*); 2 treatises on the spiritual life (*The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*); the historical record of the foundations (*The Book of the Foundations*); 4 personal spiritual treatises (*Meditations on the Song of Songs, Spiritual Testimonies, Soliloquies, Poems); Letters;* and *Guidelines for the Visitations of the Convents* of the Reform.

[5] A new book specifically on Teresa's 17 foundations of monasteries of the Reform was published in English during the year of her 500th anniversary (2015): *The Divine Adventure: St. Teresa of Avila's Journeys and Foundations* by Tomás Álvarez and Fernando Domingo, with Introduction by Kieran Kavanaugh and Translation by Christopher O'Mahoney, with additional translation and adaptation by Patricia Lynn Morrison (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2015). The original was published in Spanish in 2012.

This critical turning point in Teresa's life, beginning with her mystical experience in 1560, was expressed in her vow to "do always the more perfect thing" which, in someone not moved and sustained by such a call, would have been a classic recipe for spiritual shipwreck in the churning waters of scrupulosity and pusillanimity, a vice Teresa particularly abhorred. Perhaps most beautifully symbolic of Teresa's complete possession by Christ as a prophet among the People of God was her changing of her name at this point from Teresa de Ahumada, drawing her dignity and worth from her human origins, to Teresa of Jesus, who was now the center and driving force of her identity, mission, and ministry.

So, to sum up, why we should listen to Teresa of Avila on such important questions as the reality and nature of spiritual experience; revelation; the bodily Resurrection of Jesus; his real presence in the life of the believer and his universal salvific significance: first, because the Church, by declaring Teresa a Doctor of the Church, authoritatively proposes her teaching to all believers as pre-eminently worth studying; second, because the evident characteristics of the genuine prophetic vocation as it is presented in Scripture mark Teresa's life and teaching as "from God" and "intended for God's people."

In light of this, we turn to our major concern: Teresa's teaching as a resource for reflection on major theological and religious questions of our own day. I will discuss Teresa's mature synthesis on mystical experience under three rubrics: first, the *nature* and *mode* of Teresa's experience of Jesus which I will suggest is objective revelation mediated primarily by visions and locutions; second, the *content* of her revelatory experience which is Jesus, bodily risen, within the mystery of the Trinity; third, the unique *expression* of these experiences in her writings which I will suggest is best understood not as systematic or speculative theology but as theopoiesis. This synthetic treatment will, I

hope, shed some light on the contemporary issues I have raised and others related to them.

The Nature and Mode of Teresa's Mystical Experience of Jesus: Revelation mediated by Visions and Locutions

Revelation, or God's self-manifestation to and engagement with rational creatures, is the source and the content of our faith. Thus revelation is the foundational category of all theology. Unless God makes Godself known to humans we simply have no access to God. Unlike the created phenomena in our world, material or spiritual, God as ultimate mystery from and in which all created being exists, is not a being in the series of beings of which we are a part and thus God is not subject to our investigations, no matter how sophisticated or subtle our methods. This is why we call faith, the ability to perceive and respond to God in some way, a "gift". Strictly speaking, it is God who is the not only the giver but the Gift as Jesus said to the Samaritan Woman: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is who speaks to you...." (see Jn. 4:10). But we humans cannot make revelation "happen."

Teresa experienced God directly and desired to communicate that experience. However she was very aware that humans are easily mistaken even in very ordinary and terrestrial matters and so much more likely to be deceived in regard to things completely beyond our ordinary sensible and intellectual capacities. And her culture, both secular and especially ecclesiastical, insisted vehemently that women, because of their intrinsically inferior nature, were especially prone to hysteria and self- deception, above all in the area of religion. Consequently, Teresa had an almost inordinate fear that, even though her spiritual experiences were powerfully self-authenticating, she could be mistaken. Although she did not assume that everything that passed through her head was divine revelation, and gave lip service to the cultural caveats about the "weaker sex" and its propensity for delusion,

Teresa, was actually quite discerning about this matter. In her writing she identifies three possible sources of what appear to be what she calls “spiritual experiences.” Only one of these sources, Teresa believed, was to be trusted.

First, there is psychological pathology, conditions we would call hysteria, depression, and so on, and which she often attributes to or even equates with over-activity of the “imagination” by which she meant fantasy. Such *psychological imbalances* give rise to hallucinations, psychosomatic illnesses, melancholy, trances and so on to which she feared she, like most “weak women”, could be particularly susceptible. Second, unusual religious experiences can be the work of the *devil* who was patently real to Teresa in a way we moderns can find a bit disconcerting. Or, third, spiritual experiences can come *from God* who can manifest Godself to the soul in very direct and sometimes extraordinary ways.

In her consultations with theologians and spiritually experienced persons, and by her own gradually developed gift of discernment under the influence of God’s inner teaching, Teresa developed a whole system of criteria for discerning the authenticity and proper interpretation of spiritual experiences. She was quite astute in her ability to recognize psychological pathology and had some remarkably modern practical suggestions for superiors in the treatment of such: they should moderate the person’s physical austerities especially in regard to food and sleep, provide deliberate distraction by assigning absorbing work or moderate relaxation, and generally not make the fuss hysterics, hypochondriacs, and narcissists crave over their supposed mystical experiences. Teresa, herself, was embarrassed and fearful when her spiritual experiences had physical reverberations which were publicly visible. However, she was adamant in her conviction that her mystical experience, while it sometimes *caused* psychological and physical symptoms such as deep fear, guilt, or anxiety -- and we might guess a

certain amount of psychosomatic illness, especially headaches, nausea, and such -- as well as genuine ecstasies and raptures, was *not caused by* psychological imbalance. Her oft-repeated insistence that she had such a weak imagination that she could not even engage in ordinary discursive meditation, much less dream up visions, was perhaps, at least in part, self-defense against the notion that her religious experience was due to an over-active fantasy life.

Handling diabolical influence called for much greater subtlety. Teresa was a 16th c. woman living with one foot in the medieval three-tiered universe whose deepest tier, Hell, was populated by legions of evil spirits under the command of God's arch-enemy, Satan. Her other foot was in the emerging modern world of experimental science and philosophical enlightenment, which gave Teresa an extraordinary avidity for and confidence in theologically sound teaching. But in any case, she had to learn to recognize the Devil's fingerprints if she were not to live in constant crippling spiritual fear and incessant self-doubt.

As in relation to psychological illusions, Teresa developed a quite sophisticated system of criteria for discernment of diabolical influence. For example, anything that seemed to contradict Scripture or explicit Church teaching was highly (though not apodictically), suspect. Anything that had negative moral effects, e.g., that did not conduce to humility and charity or, worse, led to spiritual complacency or over-confidence, that produced distraction or led to dissipation, that decreased fear of and reverence toward God, that produced tepidity, lack of generosity, over-attachment to persons or objects, and so on was definitely not to be trusted no matter how pious the causes might appear.

On the other hand, Teresa was convinced that the devil's ability to mimic God's action in her life was extremely limited. If what she experienced had good spiritual effects manifested in a deeper desire for prayer, greater generosity, deeper humility, a more steady practice of

virtue she felt fairly certain that the Devil could not be the cause. Not only could an evil cause not produce genuinely good effects but Teresa had enough respect for the Devil to doubt that he was into self-defeating behavior. Even if he could, Satan would not lead her deeper into the love of God.

The third possible cause of spiritual experience is God's direct self-revelatory action in the life of the person. Difficult as this is for many moderns to process, Teresa maintained that she received her doctrine basically from her experience, that is, her immediate, personal encounter with Jesus within the mystery of the triune God. She usually speaks of the context of this revelatory encounter as "prayer" but it was actually not restricted to times of formal prayer. Rather it suffused her active and community life as well, especially as her Jesus-consciousness became more and more continuous and all-embracing.

Teresa was often upset by these divine communications, concerned about how she could know whether they were real, were from God, meant what she thought they meant, and so on. She was almost driven by the need to confide, consult about, and appropriate her experience, both by conversation with people she felt knew (or at least should know) more than she about such matters, and in her extensive writings in which she struggles to articulate her experience. Teresa's extraordinary literary output, in a variety of forms, is as much self-exploration and self-appropriation as instruction for others.

All of the above works to the advantage of Teresa's readers. No one of any spiritual maturity, reading Teresa of Avila, can conclude that she was a religious neurotic, or even a gullible or unstable "weak woman" with too much time on her hands. Reading her seriously leads to a very sober judgment that, whatever we are to make of it, what Teresa said she experienced she actually experienced. And what she was experiencing, when we examine it, as it were, "from the outside" through her texts, must, in my judgment, be called revelation in the strict

theological sense of the term. In naming her a Doctor, the Church proposes that this revelation is meant not just for her but for the whole Church. But before examining the content of these experiences, we must ask what leads to the judgment that these experiences are, in fact, revelation, divine self-communication.

Teresa claims that by means of these experiences, which she describes often (but not always) in the sense language of sound, sight, and feeling, i.e. visions, locutions, and touches, God himself revealed to her deep and completely certain knowledge of Godself as a Trinity of Persons in ineffable oneness of being, and of Jesus Christ in his humanity and divinity, as well as profound knowledge of herself, human nature, sin, the Church, the meaning of Scripture, and more. Several

features of Teresa's witness allow us to judge that they express not personal reflection or piety, not constructive imagination much less pure fantasy, not speculative theological knowledge derived from reading, hearing sermons, discussion with her confidants or any other publicly available source, but actual direct revelation of God to her spirit. There are several such features, but I will signal two complementary ones which may be the most important and that I think are adequate to establish the character of the experiences: from the "divine side," *objectivity*; from the subjective, i.e., Teresa's side, *passivity.*

First, Teresa's mystical experience was characterized by its objectivity. Teresa knows she could not have anticipated nor could she have "thought up" what she is hearing or seeing or feeling because of the startling originality of the content. (If Teresa were alive today she might find singularly apt the colloquial claim, "I couldn't make this stuff up!") Revelatory experience, she insists, is not something she works herself up to or laboriously constructs. Indeed, she claims that such imaginative construction can be recognized by the fact that it leads to emotional fatigue and intellectual flatness which does not improve one's life or one's theology whereas genuine revelatory experience

invigorates, inflames, enlivens, and emboldens the recipient. Very often Teresa's mystical experience came upon her when she was not even thinking about the subject in question or not in circumstances that allowed her to deal with it as she would have desired. In fact, she says she is so lacking in what she calls "imagination" that she can not discursively create even the material for her meditations much less come up with the extraordinarily original content of the visions and locutions that she receives.

Revelation, as Scripture abundantly testifies, does not arise within a person's ordinary experience. It "happens to" the person, e.g, to Moses at the burning bush, to the prophets in their inaugural visions, to Mary at the Annunciation, to Jesus at the Transfiguration, to Paul on the Damascus road, to Peter in his vision at Joppa. Teresa says she "heard" or "saw" or "felt" something that she was not previously thinking about, expecting or hoping for, meditating on, or even capable of understanding immediately. She does not describe her experiences in philosophical, theological, or devotional categories or language but in experiential ones, indeed, often in bodily ones.

It is helpful for moderns, in reading Teresa, to realize that she was relying, for her understanding and expression of her experience, on the faculty psychology and epistemology of her time. Basically, that theory proposed that if we can exercise a certain activity, e.g., seeing or hearing, we must have a faculty or power for such activity, e.g., sight or audition, and these faculties are seated in physical organs, e.g., seeing in the eyes and hearing in the ears, which are attuned to particular objects, e.g., color and sounds. Teresa was also familiar with the theory of "spiritual senses" which goes back to the Fathers of the Church.[6] According to this theory, we have interior senses, spiritual

[6] An excellent contemporary resource on the history and theology of the theory of the "spiritual senses" is *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, edited by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For a fine treatment of the functioning and significance of the spiritual senses in the life of the faithful, see Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America

sight and spiritual hearing and so on, that are analogous to our physical senses but by which we perceive spiritual realities, i.e., revelation, not accessible to ordinary sensation.

Teresa describes her "auditory" mystical experiences, that is, *locutions* as something akin to infused knowledge. God puts something into her mind that she did not know, that she could not have thought up, such as God's identity as absolute Truth, and she understands with a clarity and unshakable conviction that could not be derived from discursive reasoning. At other times she "hears" a word that effects what it says, e.g., Jesus saying to her "Peace be with you" which instantly replaces her deep anxiety with profound, lasting calm and certitude which is immune to disturbance by external events of any kind (see, e.g., *IC* 6,3).

But most interesting for our purposes are Teresa's visions. She says there are three kinds of visions: bodily or corporeal, imaginative, and intellectual. Teresa says she never experienced bodily visions. Even when her visions made her aware of Jesus' presence in his glorified bodily humanity and she was able to perceive him right next to her, at her side, she says she did not see anything with either her bodily or spiritual eyes.

Intellectual visions, such as her vision of the Trinity, are much like locutions in that they communicate interior knowledge, cause deep insight, unshakable certitude, profound peace rooted in irrefutable truth, and are often accompanied by a sense of light, beauty, clarity and so on.

Imaginative visions, which in my opinion are the most interesting in Teresa's accounts, are more closely related to the faculty of sight. They bear specifically on the corporeality, the bodiliness of what she is "seeing," sometimes the saints or other persons living or dead, but most remarkably Jesus himself in his divine humanity. Teresa believed these

2009).

imaginative visions of Jesus were even superior in a way to intellectual visions because they enabled her to experience Jesus in his humanity by means of her humanity. As she says, they are more suited to our human condition. These visions led to her definitive repudiation of the arguments of some of the neo-Platonic theologians of her day that as one progresses in the life of prayer one should leave behind all material things including the humanity of Jesus and ascend to the purely spiritual. Teresa maintained, largely on the basis of her imaginative visions, that Jesus never "drops" or abandons or supersedes his humanity. The divinity does not swallow up the humanity even when the glorified humanity shines, as it were, with the divinity of the Word, as it did in his Transfiguration or his post-Easter appearances (see esp. *IC* 6, 7).

Teresa compares her mystical experiences of Jesus to that of Saul on the Road to Damascus when he had a revelatory experience of the Risen Jesus that those with him did not share fully share (see Acts 9:3-7 where Paul hears and sees but his companions heard but did not see; Acts 22:6-9 where Paul sees the light and hears the voice but his companions see the light but do not understand the voice) or to the Easter Christophanies in the Resurrection narratives like Mary Magdalene's encounter with the Risen Lord in the Garden of the Tomb or the recognition of Jesus in the "burning of their hearts" and the "breaking of the bread" by the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus. The recipients of these visions of the glorified Lord could only testify, "We have seen the Lord and this is what he said." We have seen and heard. Teresa's experiences, like these Resurrection Christophanies, are not bizarre or fantastic, but they are totally original and unusual. Something had entered Teresa's experience, somewhat like Jesus' entrance into the locked upper room on Easter evening, and even as she assents to it she knows it did not come from her and she is not in control of it. Like Mary Magdalene in the garden, Teresa "recognizes" Jesus in his self-

revelation to her but could not have anticipated his appearance, much less caused it. Nor is she able to say what he looks like. The vision is in no sense constructed but simply given. In other words, the experiences are self-authenticating as when one sees a flash of lightning, or hears a crashing noise, or feels something touch one's skin and knows that whatever it is is *real* and *there* but one cannot account for it, alter it, or refuse it.

The objectivity of the experiences corresponds, on the subjective side, to the passivity of the experiencer. Teresa says she could not resist the experiences even when, in obedience to her timorous confessors, she tried to (see *IC* 6, 6, esp. 2). They come upon her and take over her perceptive capacity. She experiences what is given. Just as she cannot cause the experiences, so she cannot halt them or refuse them or manipulate them.

Such language of objectivity-passivity, of something occurring like a thunder storm out of a cloudless summer sky, over which one has no control but cannot not be affected by if one is in the midst of it, is the language of revelation. It is, as we have seen, the language of Moses, of Mary at the Annunciation, of Mary Magdalene and the Emmaus disciples, of Peter at Joppa. And Teresa testifies to the revelatory character of her experience repeatedly in her autobiographical writings such as her *Life* and in the *Soliloquies* and the *Spiritual Testimonies* as she does in her more discursive and analytical descriptions and analyses in *The Interior Castle.*

Although she calls the seeing experiences "visions" and the hearing experiences "locutions," she cannot describe what she saw or heard or felt in the ordinary vocabulary of physical sensation. In fact, she denied that she actually saw or heard anything when she felt that her interlocutor was using sense language in a physical sense. When her confessor at one point asked her what Jesus, whom she said she "saw," looked like she replied she did not know, that she did not see any

face. She simply knew that it was the One who had previously spoken to her and that she was not imagining him (*IC* 6.8.3). She speaks of brightness, brilliance, extraordinary "whiteness," and especially of his overwhelming, unbelievable beauty. She recognizes Jesus as his own bodily self, as did the disciples in the upper room on Easter night who "rejoiced at seeing the Lord" (see Jn. 20:20) and she knows that he is present at her right side (see, e.g., *IC* 6, 8, 3), but she says that she saw him neither with her bodily nor with her spiritual eyes.

Furthermore, Teresa speaks of "seeing" the three persons of the Trinity in their distinctiveness and oneness and knowing which Person was speaking but immediately denies that these sights and sounds were perceived with either her physical or spiritual senses. And when she talks about locutions or auditory revelations she gives signs of their authenticity that are not physically audible such as that they could not have been thought up, are powerful and effect what they express, remain in the memory for a long time, cannot be doubted. These locutions generate deep and invulnerable peace, certitude, and stability. But again she cannot describe the experience in terms of physicality. Jesus' voice is beautiful, powerful, effective, indubitable, unforgettable. But it is not describable in physical terms and, as in the case of Paul's companions on the road to Damascus, could not be heard by anyone present except the one to whom Jesus spoke.

These reciprocal features of Teresa's mystical experience, objectivity and passivity, combined of course with the subject matter or content of what she came to know through these experiences, which is our next topic, characterize her experience as truly revelatory.

The Content of Teresa's Mystical Experience: The Risen Jesus in the Mystery of the Trinity

Teresa's mystical experience encompassed a wide range of subjects. But at the heart of her mystical life was her experience of the Risen Jesus as the mediator of the trinitarian God in and to creation

whose personal focus is the human race and it is this content on which I now want to concentrate. If Teresa's experience can be accurately categorized as revelation, what is revealed?

In chapters 7 and 8 of the Sixth Mansions of the *Interior Castle* Teresa provides what Kieran Kavanaugh calls a kind of Christological diptych which communicates to her reader the very heart and soul of her mystical experience. Teresa describes and analyzes what she calls her intellectual vision of the Risen Jesus as the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity incarnate. (Later, in the Seventh Mansions, she describes actually "seeing" the Trinity, the mystery of the Godhead, ineffably one in being and yet three-personed, and that the second person only is the divine human whom she recognizes as the Risen Jesus.)

After the Christological diptych of chapters 7 and 8, she describes in chapter 9 her experience of Jesus himself in an imaginative vision, better suited she claims for communicating his humanity, in which she is able to "see" him and "hear" him in a way very comparable to the Damascus Road Christophany to Paul.

Together these two experiences, the intellectual vision of the Trinity (see *IC* 7, 1, 2) in which the second person is the Word Incarnate who is Jesus, and the intellectual and imaginative visions in which Jesus in his divine humanity mediates the mystery of the triune God to the human person, reveal to Teresa the mystery of mysteries which is at the heart of, indeed constitutes, the salvific reality of the Christian life, namely, the participation in the divine life that is communicated to the believer in and by Jesus.

I want, first, to concentrate on the content of Teresa's Trinitarian and Christological experience. But we will turn, shortly to the expression in theopoetic construction of this experience. At that point, and to relate the two aspects (mystical experience and theopoetic

expression) I will evoke a comparison that I want to propose here by way of preparation:

Let us imagine a party, an evening soirée, going on in a mansion situated a short distance from the brow of a cliff overlooking the ocean. During the festivities one member of the group slips out to the cliff's edge and is caught up in a profound experience in which she "sees" the inner structure of the universe she is contemplating in the finite reality of the scene before her. In sky, ocean, stars, moon, darkness, roaring surf, — all physically sensible – she actually "sees" the moving relationship among the seemingly stationary stars, "sees" gravity at work holding and ordering the whole, "sees" not just the waves crashing on the shore but the mysterious tide itself which is moving the whole ocean and the powerful attraction of the moon creating that tide. She "hears", not just imagines, but actually hears the singing of the spheres, the music of the endless silence of space itself. She "sees" and "hears" the inner structure and functioning of the entire universe not as something separate from and other than the physical world before her, the sky and stars, the water and waves, the silence and sound and the very vastness itself, but precisely as the inner being of all the phenomena we usually see when we look at the oceanscape.

She comes back into the party and tries to communicate what she experienced and the other guests go out to the brow of the cliff hoping to share her experience. What they see is a very beautiful scene. Some have some imaginative inkling, even a kind of intuition, of what she has described even though they do not really see or hear it. Most try to imagine it and actually seem to see something unusual about what is before them, something they have not seen before. But virtually no one sees what the seer saw and described even though they vaguely realize that she is bearing witness to something that is more "there" than ordinary experience reveals and that could well be true. If the seer at some point finds a somewhat adequate way to express what

she experienced it will probably be a poem which could only be written by the one who experienced it and can give rise in some readers to something akin to the original revelation. She is most unlikely to write a scientific paper on the subject, try to photograph what she saw, or try to convince someone by argument that it really happened. But she will adamantly deny that she dreamed it up, fantasized it, or invented it.

The people to whom the seer bore witness will have to make judgments about two things. One is about the seer: is she delusional, a harmless romantic, a hysteric, an artist, or a genuine visionary of some kind bearing witness to reality beyond normal perception? The other judgment they have to make is about what she claims to have seen: was it a delusion, or a psychologized version of what she has read about the cosmos as expanding universe and that she has projected onto an admittedly awe-inspiring natural vista? Was what she claimed to have seen not there at all? Was she hallucinating? Or, has she, indeed, seen what is really there but not visible to most people?

These are the very questions that have echoed down through 2000 years about the Easter Christophanies upon which millions of people have based their Christian faith commitment, millions of pages of scholarly ink has been spilled, and billions of words spoken at biblical and theological conventions, while many people have decided that the whole idea of the bodily Resurrection of Jesus is simply too good to be true. Teresa's Jesus mysticism, in other words, is very akin to the revelatory experiences of the Risen Jesus that are the foundation of Christian faith.

Teresa, in her pivotal Christological visions saw and heard (she speaks of visions and locutions) the inner being and life of God. That is why the Inquisition decided to examine her writings and why some of her staunchest theological supporters tried to tone down her text before the Inquisition saw it. (See Kavanaugh, pp. 398-399, commenting on *IC* 7, 1). No one of her time with any theological training, or even minimal

Christian catechesis, doubted that God exists, is triune, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth who rose from the dead, and so on, any more than the party guests in our example doubt that gravity controls the movement and relation of physical bodies, that the stars and planets are in motion, that the moon controls the tides and so on. What the non-mystics in any age often doubt is that anyone can have seen the inner structure and functioning of these divine realities – Trinity, Incarnation, Creation, and so on – and be in a position to testify to what she or he has seen, especially if it does not match up, point for point, with what is thought to be known from more controllable sources such as science, philosophy, or theology.

Non-mystics have questions, in other words, about the seer and about the seen. When someone claims to have experienced what other people might believe exists but to which they have no direct access, those other people often become fearful. Some will simply brand the testimony unverifiable, thereby rendering the discussion moot. But some, especially religious authorities who are not themselves mystics, know that knowledge is power and if they do not know where the knowledge of another is coming from they do not know the extent or character of that person's power and they have no control over it. it. What cannot be verified, tested, or controlled is always vaguely dangerous, unsettling, even frightening to those, especially those in authority, who have no personal access to such experience. Seers in any sphere, whether they are transported by artistic beauty, overwhelmed by the mysteries of the physical cosmos, engaging the depths of the unconscious through dreams, or participating in the inner life of God in prayer, are people apart. In every age they have been a threat to some of the authorities, especially religious ones. The Catholic Inquisition, which was especially active in Teresa's time and always fearful of what exceeded the reach of its control, was a source of

continual threat during Teresa's lifetime and remained so right through to the time of her canonization in 1622.

But Teresa was bearing witness to what she had experienced which, upon examination, was in no way contradictory to what theology had more or less explicated using the philosophical categories of Plato, Aristotle, and the Neo-Platonists. But Teresa's testimony went beyond even the best theological explications precisely in its experiential character. Teresa the writer, as we will see in a moment, was an artist in relation to the theologian as scientist. She was the one who "knows" by personal experience in relation to the one who knows by observation, experiment, or reasoning. Her writing does not contradict the "learned men" of the schools, but complements, that is, augments or completes them. And if Teresa completes them, it is clear that the theologians do not have the whole picture. Mundane society always wants to believe that artists are dispensable while scientists and technicians are necessary, that the beautiful is decorative while the logical is substantial. It may well be – and the mystics are prime examples of the possibility – the other way around.

This brings us to the all-important question: what did Teresa actually experience? She tells us that she saw God in God's triune being, each of the three Persons distinct in a oneness of being utterly beyond expression. And, most importantly for us, in my opinion, she saw that Jesus was not simply a messenger, a human being sent by God who lived in a particular time and place, who died, and left behind a moral message about how to live in such a way as to merit a share in God's life after death. She understood that in the Word, the second Person of the Trinity, God had created all things from all eternity (see John 1:1-5). As the Prologue of John's Gospel says, in him, the Word, all things were made. And, at a moment in time, that divine Word became human, took up his abode in his own creation. So, the Word-made-human is *in* all things, forever, as they are all in him. That human

being, Jesus, because he was human, could and did die; but because he was the Word incarnate he did not cease to be. The Incarnation was never interrupted much less cancelled as Jesus passed through the ultimate human experience, through the portal of mortality, into eternal life. The Word Incarnate rose from the dead and the Risen Jesus, after assuring his disciples by visionary experience, by Christophany, that he was indeed alive, disappeared from their fleshly sight to take up his abode in God and in them. Teresa's language about her visions is redolent of the Last Discourses in John's Gospel where the mystery of the mutual indwelling of Jesus and his disciples is rooted in the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son in and through the Spirit.

Most human beings do not experience directly, that is, by way of a Christophany, the bodily Risen Jesus. They experience him in the signs of the community, in Scripture, sacraments, prayer, ministry and so on. As most people experience the universe through the manifestations of the laws of nature in the physical world and so do not doubt that there is a universe but do not see the inner structure and working of that universe, so most believers experience the real presence and action of God in Jesus in their life in the Christian community. And just as the scientists mediate, by means of their explanations and models and diagrams, the inner structure and functioning of the universe so that it is rationally comprehensible to the non-scientists, so the theologians mediate the realities of God present and active in the Risen Jesus in rationally comprehensible formulations to the non-theologians.

But just as there are some people -- we call them artists -- who have some kind of immediate experience of the inner reality of the universe not accessible either to ordinary people or to the scientists, so there are people – we call them mystics – who have some kind of immediate experience of the inner reality of God not accessible either to ordinary people or to the theologians. Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi, back to the evangelist

John and the apostle Paul who were the earliest mystics of the Christian tradition, and down to the contemporary mystics like Thomas Merton, *are* these experiencers of Christian revelation embodied in the Risen Christ.[7] They bear witness to their experience and through that experience to the reality of what most believers hold by faith and understand by theology.

The conclusion I want to draw from this exploration is that the mystics are not interesting oddities who are decorative and even fascinating but non-essential to the Christian story, any more than are artists in a culture. Religious mystics are essential to the Church's faith life and to its theological enterprise, just as artists are essential to humanity's historical life, both personal and political, because there is a dimension of our faith life, as there is a dimension of our cultural life, that cannot be accessed nor made available by those powers and processes which we control, such as syllogistic reasoning, experiment, argument, and so on. The mystics do not prove anything. They do not prove the existence of God, the reality and salvific power of Jesus, the ultimate triumph of good over evil. They do not explain anything, the meaning or value of suffering, or how a good God can allow such. They bear witness to the existential truth which underlies all experience and gives ultimate meaning to everything else.

The particular importance of Teresa of Avila's mystical experience for our time is that the Incarnation is the dimension of Christian faith and life that is most problematic, most "incredible" for many contemporary believers. What Teresa saw and heard, what she bears witness to in her writing, is that the Incarnation is not a stage of human religious history or cosmic evolution which ended with Jesus' death. Jesus is not one savior figure in a pantheon of such figures. Nor is Christ a myth spun out of a first century historical person named Jesus by the human

[7] A remarkable contemporary exploration of the Christ mysticism of Thomas Merton is Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

architects of the Christian edifice. Teresa testifies, on the basis of her experience of him, that Jesus, in the full integrity of his transcendent and glorified humanity, including his pre-Easter historical career, his Risen actuality, and his Eucharistic presence, is real, alive, present, and active in the personal life of the believer in every age and in the cosmos in every time and place of human and extra-human existence. The Incarnation is an ever expanding reality but it is never separated from nor can it transcend or dispense with that personal human being in which it ever and always "happens." As the remarkable Brazilian philosopher Rubem Alves put it, we do not ask if a Beethoven sonata "really happened." It happens every time it is played.[8] And so it is with Jesus.

Theology cannot reason to this even if it can help explain how it is possible and credible and what it means. The direct experience of the mystics is not a dispensable decoration in relation to the reasoning of the theologians. It is necessary to assure us that there is indeed something *for* theology *to* explain. If there is no Jesus, alive and present and active in the "now", there is no basis for Christianity as a living religion and no root of a cosmic Christ, however understood. Teresa says, "I saw Him; I heard Him; He is alive." And then she adds, if I may put words in her mouth, "I leave it to the theologians to explain this and will agree to whatever formulations they come up with or the Church teaches. That is their job, to explain the "how". But Jesus himself has assured me of the "that" and the "what." I cannot doubt what I have experienced and will not make 'the fig' (a dismissive gesture she was ordered by a confessor to make), literally or figuratively, no matter who commands it, toward any representation of the One who has revealed himself to me and whom my heart loves."

I want now, finally, to make the connection between what Teresa experienced and what she produced in her writing which mediates that

[8] See Rubem A. Alves' Edward Cadbury Lectures published as *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SCM Press, 1990).

experience to the Church, that is, the connection between the mystic and the prophet.

The Expression of Teresa's Mystical Experience of Jesus: Theopoesis

Let me recall the example I evoked earlier, of the person who leaves the "party" of ordinary reality to contemplate the phenomenal world in its immensity and mystery and is suddenly transported by an ecstatic revelatory experience of the inner reality of the cosmos by a vision of what cannot be "seen" with the bodily eyes, and the hearing of the music of the singing spheres that cannot be "heard" with the bodily ears. When the seer tries to communicate what she has experienced, what she now deeply and irrefutably knows not just with her rational mind but with her whole being, she can only point toward the reality that, to the others at the party, remains largely if not completely opaque.

This is the experience of artists, of those people among us who are in some way sensitive to a dimension of reality that remains largely imperceptible to most people. The artists see and hear, in the mundane reality we all encounter, a glory, a beauty, a symmetry, a mystery, indeed a truth which remains experientially inaccessible to most people. But the experience itself is insufficient to make them artists. It is the fact that they have also the talent, the capacity to express what they have experienced in an embodiment worthy, at least to some extent, of the magnificence they have perceived. That expression, whether in poetry, painting, dance, architecture, which we call a "work of art" is what makes the seer an artist, the mystic a prophet. In other words, it is not just the heightened capacity for experiencing the transcendent in the ordinary but the extraordinary capacity to shape the experience in aesthetic form so that the transcendent can be "seen" – as it were second hand – by those who participate in the work of art. And the work of art is not simply a transcription or a mirroring of the seer's

experience. Rather, the personality and sensibility of the artist shapes the experience just as the experience shapes the artist. It is the experience that possesses the artist and drives her or him to paint, sing, compose, build, or dance. The symbiosis between the transcendent "given" in the experience and the aesthetic "expression" in creativity that produces the work of art can give rise, in the receptive perceivers, to the ever new, ever personal, appreciation that creates the community between the artist and those who respond to her or his work, and among those who are formed by the work.

Often what the artist experiences cannot be brought forth in the grammar and syntax of the ordinary or the daily. The representational painter or the classical composer or choreographer or the realistic photographer are certainly valuable shapers of cultural experience. But sometimes the artist must invent a whole new idiom to shape and express the experience. And then we have an abstract painter like Rothko, or the modern composer like Ravel, or the choreographer like Paul Taylor, or a poet like Gerard Manley Hopkins in his sprung rhythm, artists who break out of the expressive boundaries of their times. In some cases, artistic creation achieves sublimity precisely by its embodiment in the classical forms and in other cases it is by going beyond the boundaries of such forms that the truth embodied in the artistic production beckons and lures the spirit beyond its familiar bounds.

The writings of many of the saints could be seen as transcendence within the established forms. Their writing illuminates, often in highly original ways, the truth and beauty in the tradition. One might say this of much of the writing of some of the best theologians in the history of the Church But the writing of some of the mystics transcends the boundaries of the known and leaves the reader struggling not with the superb presentation and explication of the familiar but with an unfamiliarity that shocks, confounds, or astounds.

Someone like Julian of Norwich or the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* or Meister Eckhart (and, I think, Teresa) might fall into this category. It is not surprising that so many of the greatest mystics in the Christian tradition ran afoul of the Church's doctrinal authority. Just as the French "Impressionists" had a hard time explaining their work to the realists and romantics of their day, and Hopkins's sprung rhythm was incomprehensible to many, so Meister Eckhart was not able to successfully defend his mystical writings to the Inquisition. and some of Teresa's greatest admirers tried to "tone down" her writing before it was examined by the same body.

What I am suggesting in this article is that some of the writing of Teresa of Avila, especially about her post-1560 experiences, falls into the category of the theo-poetic rather than the theo-logic. In other words, she was not constructing philosophically based interpretations of the faith or using the devotional or even theological categories of her day, but using essentially aesthetic or theopoetic language to articulate what she had actually experienced of God. Like the dancer or the painter or the poet or the playwright she constructs, by her theopoetic creation, a space for the encounter with God rather than an argument for or explanation of God or God's communications. As theology is the product of vigorous intellectual activity, theopoesis is the product primarily of imaginative activity. The poet is constructing a dwelling place for the beautiful., or even better, a mediation of the beautiful. Wisdom is building her house, setting her table, mixing her wine and calling out to those who pass by to come in, to sit down, and to delight in the beauty which mediates truth as lovable (cf. Proverbs 9:1-11).

Theopoetics, which is what I believe is the proper category for Teresa's writing, is not anti-intellectual but it is first and foremost a work of the imagination in the strong sense of that word. The philosopher Ray Hart says that imagination is the cognitive mode of the will.[9] Or we

[9] See the remarkable study of the religious imagination in Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished*

might say imagination is the power by which we construct the world as aesthetically, rather than logically, coherent. *The* theopoet of God is Jesus and it is not surprising, therefore, that he did virtually all his teaching about God and the things of God, not through the literal language his disciples so desired, but through figurative language, through similes, allegories, metaphors and other forms of imaginative discourse that are gathered together under the rubric of "parables."[10] His disciples asked him why he always taught in parables rather than speaking plainly and Jesus said so that those who think they see will be confounded and those who know they cannot see will be enlightened (see Mt. 13:1-17 in light of Ps. 78:1-2).

Teresa said often that she had a poor imagination. Even though she knew from her reading and the instruction of the theologians of the day that the first stage of the life of prayer should be discursive meditation by means of which the materials for more advanced prayer are laid in, she says she was never able to meditate because her imagination was unable to produce the appropriate images. Actually, Teresa seems not to have understood the ambiguity of the word "imagination" which we use for both the *imaginary* (which Teresa really had no taste or ability for) and the *imaginative* at which she excelled. Teresa could not do the kind of imagining that was characteristic of many of the schools of methodical prayer that developed in the time of the Scientific Revolution in which she lived. She could not create or call up imaginary scenes, or develop imaginary narratives, or insert herself as an imaginary participant in such scenes or narratives, even those based on scripture (see, esp. *IC* 6, 7).

Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation (New York: Seabury, 1979).

[10] Probably no one in our era has explained this better than Amos Niven Wilder. See his two books on the subject: *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964, re-issued in 1976) and *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scripture,* edited with a preface, by James Breech (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

But Teresa spontaneously developed extraordinary imaginative hermeneutical devices to evoke spiritual experience such as her elaborate and exquisite allegory of the soul's development from the fat, ugly silkworm who spins and enters the cocoon of the prayer of union only to emerge much later to risen life as the beautiful white butterfly. Her prolonged simile of the four waters of prayer by which she explained the inverse ratio between human effort and divine grace as a person advances in the spiritual life is a brilliant work of imagination. One of her most supple and sophisticated exercises of theopoetic imagination is her great work which we have been examining, *The Interior Castle.* And, as Kieran Kavanaugh remarks, she was well ahead of her time in her effortless imaginative "flip" of the castle image toward the end of the work. The interior castle was, originally, the soul of the individual with its many rooms, hallways, antechambers, stairways, passages, and dungeons and its plethora of creatures, helpful and noxious, with God hidden and waiting for His beloved in the innermost chamber of the soul. But quite suddenly in the tenth chapter of the Sixth Mansion (*IC* 6, 10, 6) she literally turns the image inside out and says the castle is God in whom all things, good and evil alike, live and move and have their being. The soul is among the inhabitants of the cosmic God-castle rather than the castle in which God dwells. As Kavanaugh points out, Teresa here effortlessly anticipates, through imagination, the development beyond the impasse between theism (God and the world outside each other) and pantheism (world and God identified with each other) to panentheisim, the mysterious mutual indwelling of God and the soul which Jesus speaks of in the Last Discourses, especially John 14-17, and of the Creator in all creation evoked by the Johannine Prologue. Teresa thereby imaginatively handles the theological conundrum of the compatibility of an all-powerful God with the existence of real evil.

My personal favorite among Teresa's theopoetic constructions is her imaginative explanation of the difference between spiritual betrothal and the final stage of consummated love, the spiritual marriage. She says the betrothal is like two candles whose flames are brought together to become one flame. But the two can be re-separated and each candle will burn with its own flame from its own wick. But spiritual marriage is like a drop of water falling into the sea. No future separation is even imaginable. The oneness is total. The drop has become the sea. (See *IC* 7, 2, 4).

In short, far from having a theological or spiritual impediment in the form of a weak imagination Teresa's theopoetic imagination is so dynamic and fertile that she simply has no use for the imaginary, however spiritually useful it is for most people.

Conclusion

Let me briefly summarize this exploration of the contribution of Teresa of Avila's Jesus mysticism to contemporary theology, both as content and as process. As I mentioned at the outset, there is a complex of contemporary theological issues that are mutually exacerbating and that are of supreme practical importance for Christian faith and life today: the nature and reality of spiritual experience; the possibility and reality of revelation; the bodily Resurrection of Jesus; and the problem of the presence and role of Jesus in his humanity for the contemporary Christian in the context of planetary evolution toward the fullness of the cosmic Christ.

I have tried to address these questions, not individually and serially but globally, through an examination of Teresa of Avila's contribution under three headings: the nature of her mystical experience as revelation proposed to the whole Church by her recognition as a Doctor of the Church; the content and mode of her mystical experience which is the Risen Jesus in the mystery of the Trinity revealed in her visions and locutions, as essentially aesthetic-personal and objective

rather than either purely rational or merely devotional; and the resulting theopoesis or imaginative-aesthetic construction of her experience which she offers to her readers, especially in *The Interior Castle*, as an experiential hermeneutical dwelling place for the unfolding of their own spiritual lives.

When all is said and done, Teresa of Avila appears in the Church with the words of Paul of the Damascus road on her lips, inviting us to share her experience: "I live now not I but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

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