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Mystic in the City: The Mystic Archetype as Examined In *La mística ciudad de Dios*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
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by

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by

Stephen Richard Watson

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This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Emilee, for her patience and strength, my daughter, Alanna, for bringing me joy and hope in the darkest of times, my parents, Derrin and Julene, for inculcating a love of education which brought me to this point and my Heavenly Father for the strength to carry through to the end.

VITA OF STEPHEN RICHARD WATSON
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ABSTRACT

Mystic in the City: The Mystic Archetype As Examined In *La mística ciudad de Dios*

by

Stephen Watson

This paper examines the literary archetype of the mystic as understood and elaborated upon in religious literature at the twilight of the Spanish Golden Age. It then applies that archetype to the character of the Virgin Mary as she appears in Sor María de Agreda's *La mística ciudad de Dios*.

The first task is to define the mystic archetype as understood in the literary and religious traditions of the period. To accomplish this, we principally examine the writings of Santa Teresa de Jesús with a specific emphasis on *El castillo interior*. She was, herself, a noted mystic and wrote extensively about the mystic experience. Her writings heavily influenced those who came after her, including Sor María de Agreda, which is why her writings are used to construct our theoretical framework. Through her writings, the evolution of the mystic, the gradual metamorphosis from earnest disciple to the heights of metaphysical rapture, is made clear. In the pattern laid down by Santa Teresa, each step along the mystic journey serves to prepare the mystic for that which follows. This theme of stepwise preparation is a critical underpinning to the concept of the mystic as understood by Santa Teresa and her contemporaries.

With this understanding in place, attention is then turned to the life of Sor María de Agreda and her own mystic experience. From a rigorously devout childhood and early exposure to mysticism in her own home, we witness her progression into a mature seeker of God's divine influence. We examine the ways in which of her own lived experience either fulfills or defies the expectations of the mystic as laid down by tradition. We also analyze her exploration of the mystic archetype in some of her lesser-known writings. Her *Escala espiritual*, for example, is an instructional guide for those seeking mystic enlightenment.

Finally, our attention turns to *La mística ciudad de Dios*. While Sor María claims that the work is, itself, the result of an extended visionary experience, the character of the Virgin Mary as presented in the work is also an exemplar of the mystic archetype. While Mary receives grand visions while still within her mother's womb, she nonetheless grows and evolves in her relationship with the divine in a manner resembling the traditional mystic progression.

I. Introduction

As she lit the flame and watched as her greatest work burned before her, María de Agreda¹ was obedient to the orders of her superiors and humble in accepting their will, as she had been from the beginning of her life. Yet, as she states, the creation of the work had been an act of obedience and humility as well. Thus it was that, like a phoenix rising from the literal ashes of her work, she would undertake the task of writing *La mística ciudad de Dios: milagro de su omnipotencia y abismo de la gracia* a second time. Though it was published, it was years after her death and was shortly followed by an order to place it on the index of prohibited books.

Why study María de Agreda, a comparatively unknown nun who never left her home town? Why *La mística ciudad de Dios*, a work which both literally and figuratively came under fire in its day? Why now, in a time so far removed from Spain's Golden Age in which the work was written? Perhaps most puzzling of all, why would a non-Hispanic, non-female, non-Catholic academic find interest and relevance in this work written by an Hispanic nun? This chapter will address these questions while also providing a brief summary of the theory by which this work will be approached.

While María de Agreda herself has recently received a great deal of attention in the form of biographical studies and examinations of her correspondence with King Philip IV, very few studies have been made of this work specifically in the last 20 years. Those which have been made tend to be of lower quality than one might expect. There are a few items

¹ Grammatically speaking, Agreda should begin with an accent mark over the initial A. Modern scholarship, however, appears to have elected to leave it off. This paper will follow the trend of current scholarship.

which stand out and deserve special recognition, either due to their quality or the lack of same.

The book which comes up most quickly and most often in an English search for studies of the work is one which is confusingly titled: *La mística ciudad de Dios (1670): Sor María de Jesús de Agreda*. On the cover of the slim blue book, this title is followed, in smaller print, by the description: *Study and Edition by Rev. Augustine M. Esposito*.

Numerous libraries have stocked this item believing that they have a complete edition of the original work, the first reason for which I believe it deserves special mention so as not to confuse the reader. Contrary to the subtitle, as one frustrated reviewer, Susan Paun de García of Denison University, puts it, “The reader is left profoundly puzzled by this book. Not only is there no edition of the *Mística ciudad de Dios* [...] neither is there a study. [...] It is a work of praise, not of scholarship.” (“Hispanófila”, 89) While it provides an interesting perspective on the work and may serve to find important passages for study, the book lacks the gravitas one would expect of something calling itself a study.

Turning from the ugly to the good, the prevailing study of Sor María’s spiritual writings is that written by Clark A. Colahan, *The Visions of Sor María de Agreda: Writing Knowledge and Power*. This work, written in 1994, is an excellent resource for studying both the life and spirituality of Sor María. It is inescapable in any serious study of her spiritual works and is cited by virtually every Agredan scholar today. There are several important elements which set this work apart. Firstly, as Colahan states near the beginning of the book, the majority of biographical information given about María de Agreda in most sources is based upon the same historical source and, as such, is mostly identical. As a result, while he presents essential elements of that biography, he seeks out other sources unique to his work.

In addition, he includes significant writings by Sor María which are difficult to find so much as reference to elsewhere, including several early works which may be considered mystical in nature. With a clear English translation and extensive commentary on these works, as well as on the conditions under which she wrote, Colahan provides an invaluable resource for an investigation of the mystic writings of Sor María.

On the subject of translation, the English edition of *The Mystical City of God*, presented by Tan Publishing and translated by Fiscar Marison, appears to be the standard for English-language study of the work. This translation, however, leaves a great deal to be desired, restructuring the grammar and syntax in a work of interpretation and attempted clarification which is, at times, confusing or, at its worst, directly misleading. In cases where the present study touches on those parts of the text in which the English translation is particularly egregious, the error will be noted and explained.

In approaching this study, it is important to define what it does and does not include. Occupying as it does an interstitial space between religious studies and Spanish literature, it should be emphasized that the focus here is on literary aspects of the works studied. While one can certainly use the literature as a means of studying the religion, the objective of this paper is to study the literature through the lens of religious mysticism and faith. While the philosophy behind mysticism, the social construct of religion and how it is reflected in the works discussed and a broader discussion of the theory and function of meditation as a whole are worthwhile topics of investigation related to these writings, attempting to include them here would only muddy the literary focus. In brief, this is a study of the literature of mysticism.

Specifically, our research will focus on the analysis of an early 17th century work, *La mística ciudad de Dios* (The Mystical City of God), written by a Spanish nun, Sor María de

Ágreda (2 April 1602 – 24 May 1665). Herein, major religious concepts – most specifically, Santa Teresa’s examination of the mystic experience – will be applied to a literary question. As such, this work will not attempt to grapple with the question of the validity of the mystic experience itself, nor the supposed source of the “revelations” received by the mystics. Whether taken at face value as divine, questioned as apocryphal, viewed as a means by which otherwise subaltern religious figures find a voice within their sphere of influence or dismissed as hallucinations, our focus will be to analyze the literary tradition established by the mystics and its intertextual implications in other writings.

Any work of literature must be understood within the context of the traditions it either follows or defies and there is, within the Spanish Golden Age, a distinct literary tradition closely related to the pattern defined by the Mystic Archetype as explored by authors whose writings continue to be relevant to the mystic question today, including San Juan de la Cruz, Francisco de Osuna, Santa Teresa de Ávila, San Juan de Ávila, Fray Luis de León and others. In Christianity, the mystic experience² is steeped in biblical literature and its central characters for obvious reasons. This literature, naturally, holds Jesus of Nazareth as its most important figure. Within the Catholic Church, this sacred space is also the dwelling place of saints, angels and, on par in importance with Jesus Himself, the Virgin Mary. While each age and every nation within Christendom has had its own particular means of expressing the mystics’ crossing over into this sacred space, the Spanish Golden Age is rich with literature both of and by mystics.

This Mystic Archetype may be embodied by someone who has an extrasensory – or, as Nelson put it in *Mysticism and the Problems of Mystical Literature*, “supersensory” (2) –

² For further information on mysticism and its impact in Spanish literature, see Giles, Hatzfeld, Sáinz

experience which places him/her in touch with some presence or experience beyond our mortal realm and our physical perception. The mystic is, of necessity, one who bridges the gap between the sacred and the profane, as explored in Eliade's concept of the *Eternal Return*. Ancient cultures and religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism each have a form of mysticism and, in turn, certain central mystics, important figures who claim to have received such a mystical experience. The central figures of these faiths establish and propagate this archetype of the mystic which carries on to our day, each manifesting itself in the literatures of their respective cultures.

This Mystic Archetype has been variously defined and examined throughout the centuries within these expressions of literature, and this examination is hardly limited to religious endeavors. From a modern perspective, it has been said, "Mysticism has its origin in that which is the raw material of all religion, and perhaps of all philosophy and art as well, namely, the dim consciousness of the beyond, which is part of our nature as human beings." (Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 5)

It is only natural, then, that many of those who have dedicated their lives to philosophical or religious contemplation would have to come to terms, in one way or another, with the mystic experience, even if grappling with this subject results in outright rejection of the spiritual. The conscious choice to abandon such concepts may be seen as a result of a confrontation with the mystic question.

One of the foremost expositions on the mystic subject within Christian theology is found in *El castillo interior (The Inner Castle)*, written by Santa Teresa in 1577³. Within this work, she outlines a process through which a mystic gains enlightenment and contact with the

³ For more about Santa Teresa's life, works and circumstances, see Efen, Laguardia, Rhodes, Rudder, Swietlicki, Valverde, Viguera, Weber and others.

divine. As will be explained and explored in more detail in this paper, this process is one of progress and evolution, a gradual transition from the profane to the divine. This concept of progression will be a central theme of the present study. As elaborated upon by Underhill, Petroff, and others, this process is by no means unique to the mystics of the Spanish Golden Age. Indeed, it spans centuries and continents, cultures and faiths, each of which share essential characteristics. Whether viewed as a genuine spiritual progression or as a literary tradition related to the mystic archetype, this shared experience exemplified by Santa Teresa's writings can be used as a baseline for the understanding of the mystic archetype as experienced in Golden Age Spain.

Sor María de Agreda was deeply impacted by Santa Teresa's work. Her experience, involving grand visions of the earth, bilocation to other continents and direct confrontations with Satan, is remarkable in its variety and scope. Nonetheless, as can be seen through her writings, she mostly follows the essential process outlined by Santa Teresa.

Sor María, among her famed mystical experiences, claims to have received a lengthy visitation from the Virgin Mary, one whose text covers multiple thick volumes. The principal claim of *La mística ciudad de Dios* is to be an autobiography of the Virgin, dictated directly from her post-mortal lips to Sor María's pen. After an introductory statement regarding the process through which the vision was purportedly received, Mary and María begin from the creation of the world (in which the Virgin states that she was a participant) to give a detailed account of the existence of the Virgin Mary. The use here of the term "existence" rather than "life" is an important distinction. As María de Ágreda states in the beginning of the work:

Toda esta Vida santísima, para mayor claridad, se reduce a tres partes o libros: el primero será de lo que pertenece y toca a los quince años primeros de la Reina del cielo, [...] la segunda parte comprende el misterio de la Encarnación, toda la vida de

Cristo Nuestro Señor, su Pasión, Muerte y Ascensión a los Cielos, que fue lo que vivió la divina Reina con su Hijo Santísimo, y lo que hizo en este tiempo; la tercera parte será lo restante de esta vida de la Madre de la gracia, después que se quedó sola sin Cristo nuestro Redentor en el mundo, hasta que llegó la hora de su feliz tránsito, asunción y coronación en los cielos (Vol. 1, Cap 1, 18)

This tripartite⁴ structure encompasses not only her mortal life from birth to death but begins even prior to the moment of her conception and extends into the afterlife, following the trinitarian division expressed throughout hagiographic literature. Additionally, it goes far beyond what is contained in canonized scripture about the Virgin Mary but extends even further than is stated in this introduction, in that the first several chapters deal with the nature of God, the war in heaven between God and Lucifer, and the creation of the world and the fall of mankind, thus reaching far beyond the limits of a simple Marian biography.

It is in part for this very reason that *Mística ciudad* became such a controversial work, dividing the country into Agredists and Anti-Agredists. As Colahan points out, a ban against preaching or even discussing the work was issued and members of the Church were excommunicated for disobeying that ban. “In France, oaths were taken to defend the Virgin’s honor, and there was brawling in the streets on her account.” (*Writing*, 2) It affirms much relating to her life which would not be readily accepted by the stricter members of the Catholic Church. Again quoting from Colahan,

“An assembly convoked by the Sorbonne in 1696 foreshadowed *The Mystical City of God*’s reception by the intellectual world. A minority of the scholars were not averse to the fervent Marian devotion of the time and voted to accept the work as free of theological errors and probably the result of authentic supernatural inspiration. The majority, however, [...] rejected the work as patently deluded and possibly a fraudulent attempt by the Franciscan order in Spain to build a case for the much-debated theological hypothesis of the Immaculate Conception [...] The indignant response of other universities, including many in Spain, was not long in coming.” (*Writing*, 2)

⁴ While the original work was contained in three volumes, citations given here will follow the four-volume division used in many modern editions, including the English translation from Tan Publishing.

This work reveals much, both of the evolving position of the mystic in Sor María's day and the author's experience. Much of her own example of mystic progression enters into the work.

Sor María claimed that this account was, in fact, an autobiography directly spoken to her by the mouth of the Virgin in an angelic visitation. This placed her and her writing under very close scrutiny by her superiors within the church hierarchy and made her a polemic and, to some, a dangerous figure within Catholic ideology. The idea that she had received direct contact from the Virgin had the potential to convert her into a prophetic figure, making her a threat to the earthly authorities in the church. Firstly, the Catholic Church has always warned against "private" revelation or interpretation of scripture, something which clearly applies to *Mystical City*. Secondly, her position as a woman, normally subaltern in a rigidly patriarchal society, represented a significant threat to the status quo.

Regarding the mystic experience, Nelson points out that "rigidly pious laymen, and clerics who should know better, have frequently identified it with a dislike for ecclesiastical authority – as a kind of spiritual anarchy – and mystics, consequently, have a long record of trouble with their institutional superiors." (1-2) In the case of María de Ágreda⁵, her writings drew the attention of the Inquisition on multiple occasions⁶ and the writings themselves – particularly *Mystical City* – have been on and off the *Index librorum prohibitorum* (List of Prohibited Books) and, even today, are subject to debate within the Catholic church as some debate whether the writings conflict with established church doctrine.

⁵ For more on María de Ágreda, her history and her work, see Arenal, Augustinius, Bringas, Fabo, Fedewa, Kendrick, Martínez, Moñux, Pérez, Seco, Vallbona

⁶ These principally centered on her claims of bilocation to the Americas and her intimate correspondence with Rey Felipe IV

To understand what that implies, the Index first came into being in 1559 as a direct product of the Counter-Reformation and served as a means of censoring those works deemed to be heretical by the Catholic Church. This list included not only books with directly religious themes but also scientific works whose theories appeared to contradict established church doctrine. Having one's work included on this list often came with severe consequences for the author. One of the best-known examples, Galileo Galilei's theories on heliocentrism earned him a place on the Index. When he defended his views in defiance of the Catholic Church, he was tried by the Inquisition and spent the rest of his life a prisoner. Giordano Bruno, both a scientist and a religious theorist, had his entire life's work placed on the Index and was burned at the stake for heresy. In Spain⁷, many other religious writers such as Fray Luis de León and Santa Teresa herself had encounters with the inquisition due to their writings. Thus, great was the risk being undertaken by mystics whose writings could possibly be (and often were) seen as heretical.

The Mystical City contains significant detail, both through example and through discussion, of the mystic experience, as will be explored further in the larger discussion of the text. In a study of mysticism in the Spanish Golden Age, it is crucial to understand their perception of the Virgin. Given the controversial nature of the *Mystical City*, why pay attention to this work in particular to understand the mystic vision (with both meanings that word implies) of Mary? This study proposes that the *Mystical City* occupies a relevant role within the mystic tradition of Spain and requires an analysis and recognition that has not yet been fully supplied by critics. Additionally, the work reflects the relevance of the female experience with the mystic tradition, and sheds light on the role performed by cloistered nuns

⁷ For more on the impact of the Church in Spain and its literature, see Villoslada

in the Catholic Reformation working within what may well be the only space available to them for independence and creativity.

Within this general frame, the figure of Mary was exalted as a female counterpart of Christ that served as a main principal model for women. As such, she could be employed as an ideological weapon that reflected the doctrinal debate between Catholicism and Protestantism at the time. The title itself refers to the Virgin Mary as “Mystical”. For a female mystic seeking to defend herself and, by extension, the experience of other female mystics, the establishment of the Virgin Mary within the mystic tradition, both as a participant in it and as a guide along the path to mystic enlightenment, would provide a measure of defense against the suspicion of the Inquisition.

While men, mystics or not, also faced close scrutiny and the threat of severe punishment under the inquisition, it is vital to understand that women were significantly more suspect than men within the patriarchal system of the Catholic Church. As both Teresa and María acknowledge in their writings, the church had long held the view expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.” Following this mandate, it was strictly maintained by ecclesiastical tradition that women should remain silent both in tongue and in pen in the church. The mystic experience as a whole could function here as a means by which the otherwise subaltern female mystic could take hold of a personal identity and validity by claiming to be expressing not her own thoughts but those given to her by a higher authority, attempting to overcome to some extent the prohibitions against their speaking or writing.

As the search for the female perspective accelerates in the present day, the writings of a woman whose writings served to empower women (both in her own time and for future

generations) against a patriarchal church, one which Colahan refers to as “increasingly codified and institutionalized” in the time of Sor María, is a vital landmark. While her correspondence with King Philip IV was certainly a sign of feminine influence and power in historical events, her spiritual writings also served as “an acceptable avenue of personal access to the spiritual power at the heart of Christianity.” Colahan continues, “Catholics found emotional sanctuary in both Mary and mysticism. Especially for Catholic women, living within a religion overwhelmingly dominated by men, what could have been more natural than turning for solace and inspiration not to a rigid institution ruled by severe padres, but instead to an inner world warmed by an understanding and all-powerful mother?”

(*Writing*, 3)

To summarize, this study will begin by examining the mystic tradition as it would have been understood in 17th century Spain, principally through the lens of the writings of Santa Teresa. Attention will then be turned to Sor María de Agreda in her historical context to better understand her personal mystic journey. Finally, I will focus on *Mística ciudad* itself and how the mystic archetype is revealed and elaborated upon in the character of the Virgin Mary in that work.

What is it that drew me to study this work? I find myself in a unique position among my fellow academics regarding this work and, as such, have an uncommon perspective.

Colahan points out that “much of the bibliography on Sor María has been produced either by [those] with an unshakable pride in [her] or by historians of a thoroughgoing skepticism.”

(*Writing*, 5) As a man of religious faith, I lack the hostile sentiment of the atheist who would dismiss this work out of hand as hallucinations brought on by self-inflicted deprivation. The ability to accept the possibility – not the surety but the possibility – of these claims as true is

necessary in order to appreciate the “social context” of the mystic as that is how the mystics’ claims were considered by many at the time.

On the other hand, as a non-Catholic, I am not bound to the specific dogmas which surround this work nor the teachings therein within the Catholic church. As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (AKA Mormon), a faith which holds as a central tenet the idea that revelation from God to those who earnestly seek Him – the mystic process – is ongoing and one in which any earnest seeker may participate, I approach this work – and the idea of mysticism in general – with greater neutrality towards the idea that the work itself may be divinely inspired, a work of fiction or hallucinatory imaginings. Being intimately familiar with certain tropes common to those who claim contact with the divine, be they prophets, mystics or other visionaries, I was fascinated by the apparent aberration in that pattern exhibited by María de Agreda, a concept to be discussed in further detail herein.

Also, with regard to the subject of the Virgin Mary in particular, while she is held in high esteem by Latter-Day Saints, she is not venerated as the modern Catholic Church preaches, just as it was not an officially accepted and sanctioned teaching of the Catholic Church in the time of Sor María. On the other hand, much of her writing in *Mística ciudad* is, in fact, more in accordance with LDS doctrine than that of the Catholic Church – particularly the Church as it existed within her time. For example, the concept of the pre-mortal existence of human souls, while certainly not a concept found in accepted Catholic doctrine and dogma, fits well with certain central tenets of the LDS church. With that in mind, this work can be both fascinating and enlightening for an LDS reader.

As Schneiderman points out, “mysticism is different from the attitude of ritual devotion, which stubbornly refuses to repudiate its Adamic nature. The mystic dares to cast off his ego, and along with it, the expectations of others. In this way he replaces the tyranny

of the self and of others by the absolute freedom of his surrender to holiness.” (92) In my position, I believe myself uniquely qualified to “cast off [my] ego [...] replace the tyranny of the self and of others” and surrender myself to the work at hand.

In brief, I believe that I have less of an axe to grind than many who have studied and currently study this work. I neither seek to prove its falseness nor praise its truth. Just as the present work stands in an interstitial space betwixt the studies of literature and religion, I stand in an interstitial space with regard to belief in or rejection of the work. I can accept either possibility and move on with the study of the work itself without as much interference of personal bias, or, if nothing else, a different bias than many of my fellow academics.

As I approach the end of this writing process, circumstances in my life have changed such that I find my relationship with the divine evolving in similar manner to those of the mystics, albeit only the earliest, purgative stages. As my daughter battles against brain cancer, I find myself seeking more earnestly than ever before the comfort and reassurance of the hand of God in my life. While I have feared for my own life as I stared down the barrel of a gun as a missionary in Guatemala, there can be no greater trial of faith as a father than seeing your child suffer and knowing there is tremendous risk of losing her.

Hence, I would like to end this introduction by expressing my thanks to all those who have supported us in this trying time. Many thanks go to my dissertation advisor and committee for their patience and guidance. Thanks to the family, friends and even strangers who have offered us support ranging from thoughts and prayers to hugs and gifts. Every gesture is meaningful and appreciated. Thanks to my wife who has stood strong by my daughter in the hospital for these past months, as she has been a strength to me for the last twelve years. Finally, thanks to my Father in heaven for the comfort and council He has spoken to our hearts.

II. The Mystic Archetype

To begin answering the central question of this work, one must first elaborate more clearly on what defines a mystic, particularly within Catholic ideology. Towards this end, the work of Santa Teresa will be used to examine more closely the mystic phenomenon and what elements are fundamental to the path of mystical enlightenment. Why Santa Teresa, one may ask, rather than any one of any number of others who have elaborated on the topic before and since. The reasons are twofold.

First and perhaps most importantly, her direct influence on the writings of Sor María and her contemporaries. Her work became quite popularly read among the pious following her death, to the point that many leaders within the Catholic church have greatly honored her role as a teacher of those who followed. In the time of Sor María, Fray Francisco Boyl stated, “que muy poco se sabía de Dios antes que la Iglesia naciese, y poquísimo antes que hubiese Teresa” (*Cultura*, 18) Pope Paul VI, upon naming her the first female Doctor of the Church on September 27, 1970, conferred on her the honorific title of “Teacher of Prayer” (St. Teresa's Teaching on the Grades of Prayer). Pope John Paul II, on November 9, 1981 (qtd. in Aumann), elaborated further on this sentiment when he stated:

Teresa considered that her vocation and her mission was prayer in the Church and with the Church, which is a praying community moved by the Holy Spirit to adore the Father in and with Jesus "in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:23). . . . Saint Teresa considered the life of prayer to be the greatest manifestation of the theological life of the faithful who, believing in the love of God, free themselves from everything to attain the full presence of that love. (*Teaching*)

Second is her similarity to Sor María. Both women bent the ear of kings and magistrates while speaking out against corruption and immorality. Both suffered tremendously in both body and soul within the confines of the monastery, overcoming severe

illness and pain. Most importantly, both were mystics. Just as *Mística ciudad* is written as having been received through mystic channels and deals with a mystic figure, many of the writings of Santa Teresa contain images claimed to be taken directly from revelatory manifestations. Neither of these women were simply theologians speaking of theory with the guarded skepticism required when confronting what was deemed “private revelation.” Rather, they spoke directly of their own experience with spiritual passion, calling upon God as their authority for writing rather than citing the learned men of the patriarchal society from which they emerged.

Before direct analysis of the work of Santa Teresa herself, one must begin by examining those writings and ideas which were part of the religious and literary tradition from which she emerged. Writings dating at least as far back as Evagrius Ponticus’s *De oratione* in the 4th century established a three-fold order of prayer, consisting of the Purgative Prayer or Prayer of the Lips, the Illuminative Prayer or Prayer of the Mind, and the Unitive Prayer or Prayer of the Heart.

The first level of prayer, the Purgative Prayer, is designed to cleanse the spirit from external influences, including those of the body itself. At its heart, it is a quest for self-mastery, for discipline over sin or what Paul referred to as “the deeds of the flesh” (Rom. 8:13). For many Christians, this involved “mortification” of the body, including what today would be viewed as self-abusive practices such as self-flagellation and extreme fasting, both as a form of penance for sin and distancing the needs of the spirit from the needs of the physical body. This extreme self-discipline is often described as *ascetic*, a term originally

referring to the rigorous training of an athlete.⁸ The second level, the Illuminative Prayer, is typically the point at which personal revelation begins. The mystic's mind, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, is enlightened and inspired to greater levels of understanding than can be achieved by simple study of the scriptures. Not only has the soul been cleansed of sins of commission or *mortal* sins but the soul begins to grow in virtues such as charity, putting off sins of omission or *venial* sins.

In the third level, the Unitive Prayer, the soul finds union with God. Having gained a higher level of self-perfection through cleansing of sin, the soul comes closer to God through divine love⁹. While the prior two levels are seen as the product of the effort of the individual, this last stage of progression reveals a significantly more direct influence of God upon the disciple. San Juan de la Cruz, in *Subida del Monte Carmelo* (Ascent of Mount Carmel), makes this clear by stating,

Y así, la diferencia que hay del ejercicio que el alma hace acerca de las unas y de las otras potencias, es la que hay entre ir obrando y gozar ya de la obra hecha, o la que hay entre el trabajo de ir caminando y el descanso y quietud que hay en el término; que es también como estar guisando la comida, o estar comiéndola y gustándola ya guisada y masticada, sin alguna manera de ejercicio de obra; y la que hay entre ir recibiendo, y aprovechándose ya del recibo (Cap XIV, 7)

He further states that this is a “passive” state in which, simply by having one's eyes open, one may receive the gifts of God.

Another tradition which influenced the work of Santa Teresa was that of *Devotio Moderna* of the late 14th and 15th centuries. This concept involved a structured “methodical

⁸ It is in precisely these terms that Colahan describes the early life of María de Ágreda, stating that “her parents were exceptionally devout and regularly practiced demanding spiritual, ascetic exercises with the discipline of athletes” (11)

⁹ For more on the Catholic concept of divine love and its impact in literature, see Cortijo

prayer” in which the individual immerses and/or projects oneself into biblical scenes, a technique which had a profound impact on the work of Santa Teresa in that it emphasized and encouraged the idea of individual communion and communication with God in a manner not bound up in rote prayers and repetitions. Though often controversial among church fathers, this paradigm affords relative freedom to the disciple in their mystic search. It is this freedom which not only allows Santa Teresa to have her mystic experiences but also provides a basis for her manner of instruction, in that her system recommends many of those same techniques to achieve higher levels of spirituality.

Many of her writings – perhaps all of her major extant writings – deal directly with the subject of prayer. The word *oración* (prayer) appears over 1,000 times in her collected writings, not including other words with similar meanings. (Concordancia, 1831-1846) It is crucial to observe her own evolving process in her discussion and dissection of prayer throughout her works, particularly the differences in how she classifies the progression of prayer between *Libro de la vida*, *Camino de perfección* (The Way of Perfection) and *Castillo interior*.

Santa Teresa still follows the same essential pattern established by tradition but breaks these steps down further.¹⁰ In each of her works, she presents different subdivisions, ranging in number from four to nine. The nine grade system, presented in *Camino de perfección*, divides the concept as follows:

¹⁰ This process of subdivision of the classic three-fold process is by no means unique to Santa Teresa. Petroff, in *Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages to Power*, explores the mystic experience beginning with female mystics in the 13th and 14th centuries. In her examination, she describes a development of the mystic with different specific subdivisions. Evelyn Underhill, one of the foremost 20th century writers about the mystic subject, lays out a 5 step pattern in *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, consisting of “Awakening of Self”, “Purgation of Self”, “Illumination”, the “Dark Night of the Soul” and the “Unitive Life”.

- (1) vocal prayer
- (2) meditation
- (3) affective prayer
- (4) prayer of simplicity
- (5) infused contemplation
- (6) prayer of quiet
- (7) prayer of union
- (8) prayer of conforming union
- (9) prayer of transforming union.

Jordan Aumann states that: “The first four grades belong to the predominantly ascetical stage of spiritual life; the remaining five grades are infused prayer and belong to the mystical phase of spiritual life.” (*Spiritual*, 316) As such, since our principal focus will be on the mystical experience, more attention will be given to these latter grades (though not to the total exclusion of the former).

By comparison, *Castillo interior* presents a set of seven subdivisions. Santa Teresa does not give them specific names or titles. In lieu of a title, a one-line summary will here be provided for each “mansion”.

1. Overcoming sin through prayer and knowledge of self.
2. Perseverance in faith/prayer to further cleanse self and learn humility.
3. Dwelling place for those who have conquered sin through love of God.
4. Gaining of a new understanding by the soul:
 - Sweetness vs. Tenderness in prayer.
 - Imagination/Thought vs. Understanding
 - Pleasure vs. Delight
 - Prayer of Recollection
5. Preparatory union – Betrothal with Christ
6. Deeper influence of God:
 - Ecstasy
 - Grief
 - “Enjoying” God
7. Spiritual Marriage to Christ

In attempting to reconcile these different systems of thought, one runs into the difficulty that the layers are often interwoven and concurrent. However, each layer is still distinct in its pattern. As such, the following chart roughly lays out the correspondence between the levels of prayer/revelation of each system.

Classic Christian Model	<i>Libro de la vida</i>	<i>Camino</i>	<i>Castillo</i>
Purgative		Vocal prayer	Overcoming Sin
			Perseverance in Prayer
	Mental Prayer	Meditation	
		Affective Prayer	
Illuminative	Prayer of Peace	Prayer of Simplicity	Dwelling Place
		Infused Contemplation	New Understanding
		Prayer of Quiet	
Unitive	Prayer of Union	Prayer of Union	Preparatory Union
		Prayer of Conforming Union	Deeper Influence
	Prayer of Ecstasy	Prayer of Transforming Union	Spiritual Marriage

Rather than attempt to simultaneously apply all of these gradations in our further analysis of the text, we will focus on the latter, *Castillo interior*, as it is informed by the earlier work and may be seen as a culmination on her earlier ruminations on prayer.

Essentially, the self is replaced, piece by piece, with the image of that “supernatural entity” which the mystic seeks. In the case of nuns in the Spanish Golden Age, the entity with whom they sought unity, the ideal for which they were abandoning their old selves, was the Virgin Mary.

Lo místico in the writings of Santa Teresa

Vida, 10.1 Tenía yo algunas veces, como he dicho, aunque con mucha brevedad pasaba, comienzo de lo que ahora diré: acaeciame en esta representación que hacía de ponerme cabe Cristo, que he dicho, y aun algunas veces leyendo, venirme a deshora un sentimiento de la presencia de Dios que en ninguna manera podía dudar que estaba dentro de mí o yo toda engolfada en El. Esto no era manera de visión; creo lo llaman mística teología. Suspende el alma de suerte, que toda parecía estar fuera de sí: ama la voluntad, la memoria me parece está casi perdida, el entendimiento no discurre, a mi parecer, mas no se pierde; mas, como digo, no obra, sino está como espantado de lo mucho que entiende, porque quiere Dios entienda que de aquello que Su Majestad le representa ninguna cosa entiende.

Among all of Santa Teresa's Works, she directly speaks of mysticism only four times, all of them in her autobiography. She appears to approach the idea of mysticism cautiously, giving an indication to not even be certain if the word is, indeed, what she means to say. This may stem either from a desire to decrease suspicion from declaring herself to be a mystic (despite the fact that she is the very model of the mystic pattern) or from the projected image of humble docility common to women's writing in the era and Santa Teresa's writing in particular.

Vida, 11. 5. Pues hablando de los principios de los que ya van determinados a seguir este bien y a salir con esta empresa (que de lo demás que comencé a decir de mística teología, *que creo se llama así*, diré más adelante), en estos principios está todo el mayor trabajo; porque son ellos los que trabajan dando el Señor el caudal; que en los otros grados de oración lo más es gozar,

Vida, 12.5. En la mística teología que comencé a decir, pierde de obrar el entendimiento, porque le suspende Dios, como después declararé más, si supiere y El me diere para ello su favor. Presumir ni pensar de suspenderle nosotros, es lo que digo no se haga, ni se deje de obrar con él, porque nos quedaremos bobos y fríos, y ni haremos lo uno ni lo otro;

Yet, despite this seeming reluctance to dedicate herself completely to the term, she has a very clear idea of what she means by it. However, for her, the mystic experience is one which goes beyond the ability of words to fully express, making a direct explanation to those without a common frame of reference difficult if not impossible. Within what she is able to describe, it is an experience of union and of profound emotion:

Vida, 18.2 2. El cómo es ésta que llaman unión y lo que es, yo no lo sé dar a entender. En la mística teología se declara, *que yo los vocablos no sabré nombrarlos*, ni sé entender qué es mente, ni qué diferencia tenga del alma o espíritu tampoco; todo me parece una cosa, bien que el alma alguna vez sale de sí misma, a manera de un fuego que está ardiendo y hecho llama, y algunas veces crece este fuego con ímpetu; esta llama sube muy arriba del fuego, mas no por eso es cosa diferente, sino la misma llama que está en el fuego. Esto vuestras mercedes lo entenderán *-que yo no lo sé más decir-* con sus letras. Lo que yo pretendo declarar es qué siente el alma cuando está en esta divina unión.

While the term mysticism itself receives little direct attention in Santa Teresa's work, according to the *Concordancia de los escritos de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, she uses the Word *oración* over one thousand times in her assorted writings, often in connection with mystic experiences. (P. 1831-1846) Many times within the works of Santa Teresa, prayer becomes synonymous with mysticism, as will be further explored below. This equivalency makes sense in that, since the goal of mysticism is contact with the divine and prayer is the principal means exercised by mortals to make such communication possible, mysticism may be seen as a subcategory of prayer, a special sort of communication.

Levels of prayer

Santa Teresa creates a clear division between types of visionary experiences as she speaks of the difference between those who understand rationally and those who come to God in a manner more associated with feelings than with reason. She speaks of herself as falling into the second category and states that this approach brings one more readily – albeit still not easily – to the sort of contemplation which she associates with the mystic experience: “Y aunque por esta vía de no poder obrar con el entendimiento llegan más presto a la contemplación si perseveran, es muy trabajoso y penoso.” (*Vida*, 4.7)

For those who, like her, lend themselves more toward this emotional connection, she states:

A personas que tienen esta disposición les conviene más pureza de conciencia que a las que con el entendimiento pueden obrar. Porque quien va discurriendo en lo que es el mundo y en lo que debe a Dios y en lo mucho que sufrió y lo poco que le sirve y lo que da a

quien le ama, saca doctrina para defenderse de los pensamientos y de las ocasiones y peligros. Pero quien no se

puede aprovechar de esto, tiénele mayor y conviénele ocuparse mucho en lección, pues de su parte no puede sacar ninguna. Es tan penosísima esta manera de proceder, que si el maestro que enseña aprieta en que sin lección, que ayuda mucho para recoger (a quien de esta manera procede le es necesario, aunque sea poco lo que lea, sino en lugar de la oración mental que no puede tener); digo que si sin esta ayuda le hacen estar mucho rato en la oración, que será imposible durar mucho en ella y le hará daño a la salud si porfía, porque es muy penosa cosa. (*Vida*, 4.8)

For Santa Teresa, the mystic experience is one of mutual love, both expressed and received by the mystic. “Pues hablando ahora de los que comienzan a ser siervos del amor (que no me parece otra cosa determinarnos a seguir por este camino de oración al que tanto nos amó) [...]” (*Vida*, 11.1)

Just as the mystic’s process is one of growth over time, it is no surprise that Santa Teresa’s writings on mysticism also evolved over the course of her life. While literature of the Christian mystic tradition prior to Santa Teresa had generally spoken of 3 levels of mystic enlightenment, in *Libro de la vida*, Santa Teresa speaks of 4, describing them as different forms of prayer, then refers to 7 levels, analogized as distinct mansions, in *Castillo interior*. As she often makes reference to *Libro de la vida* – and the concept therein elaborated of these distinct levels of prayer – in *Castillo interior*, it is fundamental to lay out that initial elaboration on the theme.

In describing these 4 forms of prayer, the most concise yet thorough method may be the utilization of Santa Teresa’s analogy or, perhaps more appropriately, parable which lays them out in reasonable detail. As Jesus described Himself as being “living water” in the New

Testament, she employs an image of water, speaking specifically of watering plants. First, she states that one may haul water out of a well which is tremendous labor on the part of the waterer. Second, one may employ a water wheel, with which one would obtain more water with less effort. Third, one may plant by a river, naturally providing more moisture to the plants with still less effort on the part of the laborer. Finally, one may have one's plants watered by the rain, representing a gift from God with no effort from the gardener. (*Vida*, 11.7)

The earliest level of prayer – the first step in the development of the mystic's relationship with the Divine – is represented by the hauler at the well. The initiation of this process is difficult work, requiring hours upon hours of continuous prayer. It must begin, according to the saint, in isolation, pondering one's past and their sins committed. It is a process of repentance, of turning away from their sins and toward a desire and willingness to serve God:

Han menester irse acostumbrando a no se les dar nada de ver ni oír, y aun ponerlo por obra las horas de la oración, sino estar en soledad y, apartados, pensar su vida pasada. [...] Al principio aún da pena, que no acaban de entender que se arrepienten de los pecados; y sí hacen, pues se determinan a servir a Dios tan de veras. (*Vida*, 11.9)

Yet, despite the effort exerted by the faithful seeker, they remain dependent upon God for the water. In those moments when God sees fit to leave the well dry, the flowers, she states, must be watered with the tears and devotion of the repentant seeker. Yet, through their tears, they are meant to be glad to be doing the work. While it may appear paradoxical at first, this is a common theme throughout Christian literature and particularly applicable to the mystic model, as the sacrifice of oneself is viewed as the means to achieve both ultimate happiness and union with God. As the Saint puts it, “Pues, como digo, ¿qué hará aquí el

hortelano? Alegrarse y consolarse y tener por grandísima merced de trabajar en huerto de tan gran Emperador.” (11.10)

That this is a time of repentance, penitence and redemption from one’s sins (tying it directly to the first level of the mystic tradition) is made clear as she continues: “quiere el Señor dar muchas veces al principio, y otras a lo postre, estos tormentos y otras muchas tentaciones que se ofrecen [...] antes que ponga en ellos grandes tesoros.” (11.11) Here, she creates a direct connection between suffering and blessings, between self-sacrifice and nearness to Divinity. This is the essence of the purgative process which begins the evolution from mundane to mystic.

On multiple occasions, she refers to this first level of prayer as “oración mental”, a key term to keep in mind in her future writings. As for the second level of prayer (represented by the worker of a water wheel), she refers to “oración de quietud”, a state of mind requiring less deliberate and constant effort than the first (hence the comparative ease of working a water wheel rather than drawing water from a well). As she states, “con artificio de con un torno y arcaduces sacase el hortelano más agua y a menos trabajo, y pudiese descansar sin estar continuo trabajando.”

It is at this point, according to the Saint, that the soul begins to touch on that which is supernatural. It is this supernatural influence which eases the burden on the worker as that which cannot be understood simply though the diligence required of *oración mental* is gifted through God’s grace. “Digo que está más cerca el agua, porque la gracia da más claramente a conocer al alma.” (14.2) This is not to say that there is less work to be done – the flowers must still be watered – but the work itself is made easier through divine aid. She states that, at this level, “no cansa la oración, aunque dure mucho rato; porque el

entendimiento obra aquí muy paso a paso y saca muy mucha más agua que no sacaba del pozo. Las lágrimas que Dios aquí da, ya van de gozo" (14.4).

This is also a period of greater and more rapid personal growth than was previously experienced. "Este agua de grandes bienes y Mercedes que el Señor da aquí, hacen crecer las virtudes muy más sin comparación que en la oración pasada porque se va ya esta alma subiendo de su miseria y dásele ya un poco de noticia de los gustos de la gloria. Esto creo las hace más crecer y también llegar más cerca de la verdadera virtud, de donde todas las virtudes vienen, que es Dios" (14.5). Hence, spiritual growth becomes an exponential function wherein the closer one comes to true communication and union with divinity, the more quickly one approaches.

While one defining characteristic of the first level of mystic enlightenment, whether by the classical system of reckoning or that of Santa Teresa, is one of penitence and repentance from one's past, more sinful and worldly life, this is not to say that this process ends upon entering higher stages of enlightenment. Rather, its nature expands, including not only remorse for one's sins but also a distancing from other worldly concerns as one comes to find greater joy in communion with God – represented by the flowers and fruits of the garden (14.9) – than in those common earthly interests. As the Saint states:

Comiéntase luego, en llegando aquí, a perder la codicia de lo de acá, ¡y pocas gracias! Porque ve claro que un momento de aquel gusto no se puede haber acá, ni hay riquezas ni señoríos ni honras ni deleites que basten a dar un cierra ojo y abre de este contentamiento, porque es verdadero y contento que se ve que nos contenta. (14.5)

At times, the mystic soul is carried away by these touches of the divine, as demonstrated by Santa Teresa's writings, as well as those of many of her followers. Numerous times in her narrative (as at this point in her description of the 4 states of prayer), lengthy breaks are taken from the main thrust of her point to give praise to God for these

gifts. Some have held this to be particularly a feminine writing device and the Saint refers to it as a weakness for which she begs the reader's pardon but it is as much a part of the mystic tradition as the pattern itself as may be seen in the writings of many others who claim to have made contact with the divine, male or female. As the Saint puts it:

Vuestra merced me perdone, que salgo de propósito; y como hablo a mi propósito, no se espante, que es como toma el alma lo que se escribe, que a las veces hace harto de dejar de ir adelante en alabanzas de Dios, como se le representa, escribiendo, lo mucho que le debe. (14.12)

Still, in the case of Santa Teresa, her writing makes such detours more frequently than those of many mystic authors, at times making her writing seem disjointed and chaotic.

While this may seem trivial now, it is a point to which we will return.

Coming now to the third stage of prayer as described in this elaboration – that in which the garden is watered by a flowing river – the work of the laborer decreases further. “Quiere el Señor aquí ayudar al hortelano de manera que casi El es el hortelano y el que lo hace todo.” (16.1) While the first level required constant and deliberate mental effort and the second less, she states that in this third state, “Y entiende que lo hace sin ningún cansancio del entendimiento.” (17.2)

The mystic begins to lose their own will as it is subsumed into that of the Father. It is thus that she later refers to this as the “oración de unión” (20.18) They find themselves paralyzed by the power entering them, symbolized by the flowing river which now waters the plants, as Santa Teresa states that the soul “no puede ya ir adelante, ni sabe cómo, ni tornar atrás.” As she further elaborates, it is as though the soul begins to die as to things of this world and be left with only joy in in God. It represents a surrendering of control as she states, “Es un glorioso desatino, una celestial locura, adonde se deprende la verdadera sabiduría, y es deleitosísima manera de gozar el alma.” (16.1) The will and the mind become completely

occupied with God as “coge Dios la voluntad y aun el entendimiento” (17.5) On a spiritual level, the mystic is enslaved. (17.7)

The separation between this third level of prayer and the second or the fourth is difficult for the Saint to describe, despite her statement that, for the space of five or six years, this third stage of prayer came upon her frequently. She indicates that it occupies an interstitial space between the two, yet is unable to elaborate on precisely what makes that distinction beyond a fuzzy indication of a higher or lower degree of union with God. “Bien entendía que no era del todo unión de todas las potencias y que era más que la pasada, muy claro; mas yo confieso que no podía determinar ni entender cómo era esta diferencia.” (16.2) Indeed, her further attempts to explain are much of the same, repeated in different ways. For example, “Sólo consiente la voluntad en aquellas mercedes que goza”. (17.1) “ya no es suya el alma de sí misma; dada está del todo al Señor”. (17.2)

Compounding this difficulty is the fact that, while she explicitly lays out only four levels in this text, there are hints of additional intermediate levels between the ones described. She states, “Hay otra manera de unión, que aún no es entera unión, mas es más que la que acabo de decir, y no tanto como la que se ha dicho de esta tercera agua.” (17.5) It is clear from such statements that she sees a need for further elaboration which she is not currently able to give. Thankfully, this is not her last chance to explore these ideas, as will be seen in her future works.

Despite these confusions, she does at last come to one distinct difference between the third (river) state and the second (water wheel), which difference lies in the mystic themselves. “[...] las virtudes quedan ahora más fuertes que en la oración de quietud pasada”. The particular virtue which she emphasizes here is that of humility, stating “Aquí es muy mayor la humildad y más profunda que al alma queda, que en lo pasado” (17.3), though

she elsewhere speaks of charity, kindness and numerous other classic Christian virtues.

While the difference in the nature of the prayer or revelation is less clear, the principal difference she can lay bare is the change in the mystic herself, furthering the notion that the evolution of the soul of the mystic is as much a part of the process as the growth of their connection with God.

Eventually, the fourth level is reached, one in which the soul is elevated to the point that it is entirely united with God. The mind and body lose their strength, no longer as one dying but now as one dead to the things of the mortal world, having surrendered all to spiritual union with God. She refers to this as “éxtasis” (20.1) She does not at this time pretend to explain the phenomenon of this level of prayer with reason and logic, stating that she lacks the faculty to do so as compared with what else has already been written. As she has stated that she is more a person of emotion than of reason and logic, rather than define it or explain it, she seeks to describe the feeling, the sensation of the fourth level of prayer. “Esto vuestras mercedes lo entenderán -que yo no lo sé más decir-con sus letras. Lo que yo pretendo declarar es qué siente el alma cuando está en esta divina unión.” (18.2)

The ecstasy experienced by the mystic in this level of revelatory, transformative prayer is that which was captured by Bernini in his famous statue *L'Estasi di Santa Teresa*, sculpted a century later. The passage of *Vida* upon which it is based, itself a mystic experience, may be the best description of that feeling. In this vision, she is visited by an angel (one among many):

Veíale en las manos un dardo de oro largo, y al fin del hierro me parecía tener un poco de fuego. Este me parecía meter por el corazón algunas veces y que me llegaba a las entrañas. Al sacarle, me parecía las llevaba consigo, y me dejaba toda abrasada en amor grande de Dios. Era tan grande el dolor, que me hacía dar aquellos quejidos, y tan excesiva la suavidad que me pone este grandísimo dolor, que no hay desear que se quite, ni se contenta el alma con menos que Dios. (29.13)

Such experiences are often seen as a form of psychological substitute for absent sexual satisfaction – the image of penetration and pain mixed with extreme heights of pleasure contributing to such an interpretation – calling to mind the intimacy, the joining together with God which the mystic is brought to experience. It should be noted that this experience is not limited to women as may be seen in the writings of San Juan de la Cruz and others who also use semi-erotic imagery in descriptions of their relationship with the divine. Whether a product of sexual repression or a genuine metaphysical intimacy, the literary tradition of sensuality in descriptions of divine contact is a distinctive marker of the higher degrees of mystic union.

This is not to say, however, that the ever-increasingly-humble mystic believes themselves to be worthy of this union. It is important to note that even here, in the fourth (and, within this work, final) level of revelatory prayer, the purgative process continues, as demonstrated by the words of the Saint:

Acaéceme muchas, cuando acabo de recibir estas mercedes o me las comienza Dios a hacer [...] decir: «Señor, mirad lo que hacéis, no olvidéis tan presto tan grandes males míos; [...] No pongáis, Criador mío, tan precioso licor en vaso tan quebrado, pues habéis ya visto de otras veces que le torno a derramar.

Having now established Santa Teresa's meaning for each of these four types of prayer, we are better equipped to understand her later writing on the subject – considered by many to be her masterwork – *Castillo interior*. Yet, there is a larger purpose to having presented this brief summary of her thoughts as presented in *Libro de la vida* than simply acquiring definitions. In comparison with *Castillo*, it also serves as a demonstration of the advancement undergone by Santa Teresa over the course of the years as she further develops in her relationship with the divine.

As demonstrated previously, Santa Teresa is a woman who communicates in metaphor, more through image and feeling than through well-reasoned argument and logic. While she speaks through images of nature in *Libro de la vida*, she turns in *Castillo interior* to a manufactured construct of divine origin, a castle consisting of seven mansions, each drawing closer to a divine center. Each of the mansions represents another step along the mystic progression towards complete unity with the divine. The shape of the castle is unique; rather than a series of rooms, each mansion is likened to a layer which must be peeled away to reach the center. “No habéis de entender estas moradas una en pos de otra, como cosa en hilada, sino poned los ojos en el centro, que es la pieza o palacio adonde está el rey, y considerar como un palmito, que para llegar a lo que es de comer tiene muchas coberturas que todo lo sabroso cercan.” (M1:2.8)

The castle as a whole is simultaneously a representation of the soul and a space through which the soul travels in its mortal progression. While this, as the saint admits, initially seems contradictory, she reminds her readers that there is precedent for such concepts. “Ya habréis oído en algunos libros de oración aconsejar al alma que entre dentro de sí; pues esto mismo es.” (M1:1.5)

In the first mansion, the seeker first becomes aware of the existence of the castle to be explored. The door to enter this mansion and begin one’s journey toward the divine center involves the beginning of an awakening to one’s own carnal, mortal state and the first inklings of self-motivated prayer. The sinner begins to seek reconciliation with God through repentance and the building of an individual relationship with Him. For this purpose, the rote prayers prescribed by the church are insufficient. Rather, prayer becomes a conversation with one’s divine Creator guided by the heart rather than recitation of the words of others:

Porque, a cuanto yo puedo entender, la puerta para entrar en este castillo es la oración y consideración, no digo más mental que vocal, que como sea oración ha de ser con consideración; porque la que no advierte con quién habla y lo que pide y quién es quien pide y a quién, no la llamo yo oración, aunque mucho menee los labios; porque aunque algunas veces sí será, aunque no lleve este cuidado, mas es habiéndole llevado otras. Mas quien tuviese de costumbre hablar con la majestad de Dios como hablaría con su esclavo, que ni mira si dice mal, sino lo que se le viene a la boca y tiene deprendido por hacerlo otras veces, no la tengo por oración, ni plega a Dios que ningún cristiano la tenga de esta suerte (M1:1.7)

The opening of the door to the first mansion can be a very simple matter, consisting of an occasional prayer and a desire to do good. “tienen buenos deseos, y alguna vez, aunque de tarde en tarde, se encomiendan a nuestro Señor y consideran quién son, aunque no muy despacio; alguna vez en un mes rezan” (M1:1.8).

However, just as the gardener drawing water from the well in her earlier imagery has the hardest work to perform, the sinner, having entered the castle, must exert tremendous effort to move forward, despite not yet seeing the light at its center. For them, the temptations and sins which surround them in darkness are still strong and omnipresent, requiring constant vigilance to overcome. She states that within each room, the devil

debe tener [...] muchas legiones de demonios para combatir que no pasen de unas a otras y, como la pobre alma no lo entiende, por mil maneras nos hace trampantojos, lo que no puede tanto a las que están más cerca de donde está el rey, que aquí, como aún se están embebidas en el mundo y engolfadas en sus contentos y desvanecidas en sus honras y pretensiones, no tienen la fuerza los vasallos del alma (que son los sentidos y potencias) que Dios les dio de su natural, y fácilmente estas almas son vencidas (M1:2.12)

Santa Teresa here extends her metaphor to include individual rooms – not a few, she states, but “un millón” (M1:2.12) within each mansion through which a soul may freely wander having once reached the corresponding mansion. Each room, it appears, corresponds to a Christian virtue in which the soul may increase while inhabiting that room. Just as in *Libro de la vida*, Santa Teresa emphasizes a single virtue above all others which the penitent

seeker should endeavor to foster within herself: humility. “mientras estamos en esta tierra no hay cosa que más nos importe que la humildad. Y así torno a decir que es muy bueno y muy rebueno tratar de entrar primero en el aposento adonde se trata de esto, que volar a los demás;” (M1:2.9)

Within the second mansion, one begins to see the light at the center of the castle and hear the call of the divine. This does not take the form of a directly audible divine voice but, rather, it comes through intermediaries such as teachers, friends, family, and others. The soul here has begun actively seeking out divine light by attending church meetings, listening to sermons and participating in church rituals.

This mansion, however, remains deeply within the purgative phase of prayer. Just as the call to change one’s life comes more clearly, the voice of temptation also intensifies, attempting to call the seeker to leave the castle and return to the world and its ways.

It is noteworthy that this second mansion is afforded only a single chapter of elaboration in Santa Teresa’s writings while each of the other mansions receives at least two and as many as eleven chapters. However, given the subtle nature of the differences between the second mansion and the first, the second mainly consisting of greater perseverance in the face of an intensification of the first, it is no great surprise that the saint should find little need to elaborate on it as thoroughly as the others.

These first two mansions may be seen as subdivisions of the classical first, purgative level of prayer in that they deal with the cleansing of sin and purification of the soul. The third is also one of purification, though more the sort spoken of in the second or *illuminative* order of prayer, dealing with the heightening of the virtue of love in the cleansing process. This mansion is for those who have principally overcome sin and temptation, as the saint states, “A los que por la misericordia de Dios han vencido estos combates, y con la

perseverancia entrado a las terceras moradas ¿qué les diremos, sino bienaventurado el varón que teme al Señor?” (M3:1.1) By persevering through the temptations lying in wait in the first and second mansions, the soul is rewarded with a measure of protection against them.

It is here in the third mansion that the soul begins to truly make changes in themselves as they are no longer merely reactive hearers of the word but begin to actively work toward their goal. While the second mansion involved being led from without, the third revolves around a change from within, an increase and selflessness and humility, a surrendering of the individual will to that of the Father. One’s desires must be sacrificed in order to more completely and humbly serve the divine will. Just as the gardener drawing water from the well recognizes that it is God who fills the well, one who resides within the third mansion must acknowledge God’s hand in all their work rather than taking pride in their own individual labor. Also like the gardener, the inhabitant of the third mansion may expect periods of dryness and drought through which they must persevere.

Again, the Saint emphasizes the importance of humility in this process of overcoming one’s self. The soul will have acquired wounds while fighting against the serpents of earlier mansions which are in need of healing and Santa Teresa declares that humility functions as first aid to care for the wounds while waiting for further divine assistance. “humildad, que es el unguento de nuestras heridas; porque, si la hay de veras, aunque tarde algún tiempo, vendrá el cirujano, que es Dios, a sanarnos.” (M3:2.6)

The fourth mansion serves as a bridge between the *purgative* and the *illuminative* and elaborates in depth on the contrast between the two. This is where the soul first begins to touch upon the supernatural. From a literary perspective, it is important to note that, at this point, most likely due to this introduction of the supernatural, Santa Teresa’s thoughts and grammar become somewhat disordered. In the 6th portion of her text, regarding the fourth

mansion, Teresa explains this change as a byproduct of the difficulty of expressing the supernatural to those without a common frame of reference:

[...] hay cosas tan delicadas que ver y que entender, que el entendimiento no es capaz para poder dar traza como se diga siquiera algo que venga tan al justo que no quede bien oscuro para los que no tienen experiencia (1:2)

Her vocabulary also reveals much regarding her state of mind. She describes weakness, weeping and pain in her attempts to explain her experience and states that she has been oppressed by mental turmoil. The text here is peppered with indications of this mental anxiety, using words such as “distracted”, “confused”, and “excited”, contributing to a general lack of direction and understanding. She speaks again of multiple varieties of prayer, each one reflecting its own distinct experience, within this same mansion, often in disjointed fashion. In the third chapter of this portion of the text, the general lack of organization in her thoughts is well described as she states that “así anda de un cabo a otro, como tonto que en nada hace asiento.” (M4:3.8)

In this frame of mind, it can be difficult to sort through the multiple forms of prayer of which she speaks in this mansion as, by her own admission, Santa Teresa presents them somewhat haphazardly, as demonstrated by her own attempts to distinguish between them:

Mas como dije en otra parte la causa porque en esta manera de oración (digo en la que comencé esta morada, que he metido la de recogimiento con esta que había de decir primero, y es muy menos que la de los gustos que he dicho de Dios, sino que es principio para venir a ella; que en la del recogimiento no se ha de dejar la meditación, ni la obra del entendimiento) en esta fuente manantial que no viene por arcaduces [...] (M4:3.8)

Thus, she gives an interwoven presentation of the *oración de recogimiento* and what she elsewhere refers to as the *oración de quietud*. It is, however, quite understandable that these two forms of prayer are so linked as one turns to another of her works to understand in greater depth what is meant by the *oración de recogimiento*. In *Camino de perfección*, Santa Teresa explains:

Este modo de rezar, aunque sea vocalmente, con mucha más brevedad *se recoge* el entendimiento, y es oración que trae consigo muchos bienes. Llámase recogimiento, porque recoge el alma todas las potencias y se entra dentro de sí con su Dios, y viene con más brevedad a enseñarla su divino Maestro *y a darla oración de quietud*, que de ninguna otra manera. (28.4, emphasis added)

This, however, hardly serves as a complete definition. The concept here presented of entering within oneself is the same with which the first mansion began. More specificity is needed to understand the *oración de recogimiento*. A more complete definition may be taken from one of Santa Teresa's major influences, Francisco de Osuna's *Abecedario espiritual*, in which he provides a series of other possible names or terms associated with *recogimiento*:

- escondimiento, donde Dios se esconde en lo secreto del corazón del hombre
- abstinencia [...] de los pecados [...] de todo amor humano [...] del pensamiento que puede inebriar el corazón [...] de toda cosa que tenga especie de mal
- allegamiento, porque mediante este ejercicio se allega el verdadero Jacob a Dios
- encendimiento, con que las teas de nuestros corazones se encienden en el amor del Señor
- recibimiento, con que [...] abrimos todo el corazón y lo desembarazamos para dar a Dios
- consentimiento, porque [...] mediante ésta consienten en todo lo que [Dios] quiere
- redaño y grosura, que [...] ha de ser a Dios ofrecida para encender los sacrificios
- atraimiento, con que podemos atraer a Dios
- prohijamiento [...] donde el que es adoptado en hijo, luego comienza a gozar de los bienes del padre
- advenimiento del Señor al ánima
- alteza que levanta el ánima
- amistad o abrazamiento del corazón devoto al de Cristo
- ascensión espiritual con Cristo
- cautividad con que sujetamos a Él nuestro entendimiento
- cielo tercero, donde son arrebatados los contemplativos
(*Tercer*, 82-85)

The *oración de recogimiento* is clearly more complex than the image of entering into oneself which the Saint describes in the beginning. Boiling it down, it appears to be an initiatory phase in which one is first accepted into the realm of the supernatural.

Recogimiento may be seen as a state immediately preparatory to receiving the *oración de quietud*. To use the castle analogy, it may function as a doorway between the third and fourth mansions. In it, the seeker has yet to partake of the full joys of supernatural union but is truly moving beyond mundane concerns, surrendering themselves to their love of God.

The fourth mansion also includes the *oración de quietud*, previously encountered in *Vida*. Growing more distant from her castle analogy, she returns her the image of a water wheel drawing up the water of the spirit, linking the fourth mansion more clearly and directly to what was her second phase of prayer.

It is also in this part of the text that Santa Teresa introduces another simile and begins to speak not only of a progression from one stage to another but also an inner metamorphosis or evolution. As part of the progression between the fourth and fifth mansions, she writes of a silkworm which spends its life toiling and spinning silk for the benefit of others until, at last, it creates its own tomb and perishes in the sense that its life as a silkworm ends. The worm, having grown to maturity, spins its cocoon, which cocoon is Christ: “Pues crecido este gusano que es lo que en los principios queda dicho de esto que he escrito, comienza a labrar la seda y edificar la casa adonde ha de morir. Esta casa querría dar a entender aquí, que es Cristo.” (M5:2.4). This death is in the same sense described by Paul in Romans 6:6 in which he states, “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.”

This “death” is, naturally, not the end of the story as she goes on in the fifth mansion to describe the emergence of the butterfly, the beautified and perfected form of what was once a silkworm. It regains its life and strength as she states, “Entonces comienza a tener vida este gusano, cuando con el calor del Espíritu Santo se comienza a aprovechar del auxilio general que a todos nos da Dios” (M5:2.3). In the case of the soul, the completion of the

purgative process allows the “old man” to perish so that the soul may undergo a similar metamorphosis within Christ and become alive again through the power of the resurrection.

Here, she almost completely abandons her analogy of the castle, devoting her attention instead to this new image of the metamorphosis of the soul into something new and beautiful. Symbolic of escaping the bonds of earthly concerns, God grants her wings that she may begin to ascend. This ascent cannot be complete, however, as the butterfly’s wings lack the strength to reach the heavenly home from which the divine master calls.

This frustrates the mystic and causes them anguish, suffering not only for their distance from God but also on behalf of those who have not been unburdened of their sins. The charity of the mystic grows to encompass more of her mortal brothers and sisters, another step in her evolution toward the divine. She has exchanged one sort of pain for another, as the pain of the purgative battle against the devil can no longer reach her. She states, “Y osaré afirmar que si verdaderamente es unión de Dios, que no puede entrar el demonio ni hacer ningún daño” (M5:1.5). As expressed here, this is part of the definition of the *oración de union* which typifies the fifth mansion.

Her similes become further confused as she blends more ideas together in an attempt to capture the essence of the supernatural in terms that non-mystics can understand. Not only do we have the overarching symbols of the castle of the soul, the flowing waters and the metamorphosis of the butterfly but she also inserts other short-term metaphors. Mulberry trees, wax seals, the pain of being ground into fine powder and other ideas are blended together in hopes that one of the images will serve her purpose in communicating the soul’s divine experience within the mystic framework.

One of the more important images contributed here is that of the divine betrothal. While the soul has, indeed, been united to a certain degree with the divine, the union has not

been fully consummated. Mutual, undying love has been expressed but the celestial groom remains distant and untouchable, again bringing a mixture of joy and grief, love and pain.

These mixed emotions only intensify further in the sixth mansion. The bride is now being dressed and beautified for the long-awaited wedding. The pain of separation from the beloved God becomes unbearable, potentially causing illness nearly to the point of death. The show of love breaking through this darkness is brighter and sweeter. Not only has the will of the petitioner been surrendered to God but God now does as He will with the soul of the petitioner, requiring still greater faith on the part of the mystic: “es menester ánimo grande para a quien Dios ha de hacer estas mercedes, y aun fe y confianza y resignación grande de que

haga nuestro Señor del alma lo que quisiere.” (M6:5.1)

The soul is overcome by the force of that spirit which whisks her away from all knowledge of the mortal world. Returning to the analogy of water, Santa Teresa describes the state of the soul:

[...] con un ímpetu grande se levanta una ola tan poderosa, que sube a lo alto esta navecica de nuestra alma. Y así como no puede una nave, ni es poderoso el piloto, ni todos los que la gobiernan, para que las olas, si vienen con furia, la dejen estar adonde quieren, muy menos puede lo interior del alma detenerse en donde quiere, ni hacer que sus sentidos ni potencias hagan más de lo que les tienen mandado, que lo exterior no se hace aquí caso de ello. (M6:5.3)¹¹

Multiple sorts of visions are herein encompassed. Two which are highlighted are what she terms *visión intelectual* and *visión imaginaria*. In the first, one becomes acutely

¹¹ One here sees what may be viewed either as a direct criticism of church authority or a justification for the mystic to speak that which is not approved by that authority; dangerous ground to tread in either case. God has taken the mystic beyond the ability of either herself or those who govern her – her confessors and superiors within the church – to restrict her to that which is previously understood. What God has authorized (and, in fact, mandated) cannot be contained by mortal regulations and limitations.

aware of the presence of divinity, even to the point of hearing His voice. Despite not seeing Him, she is undeniably convinced of his presence.

One crucial distinction between these two types of visions is their duration. The Saint states that the intellectual vision “no es como las imaginarias, que pasan de presto, sino que dura muchos días, y aun más que un año alguna vez” (M6:8.3). She elsewhere describes the duration of the imaginary vision as being as brief as a flash of lightning.

To begin to explain the imaginary vision, she yet again calls upon a simile, that of a precious and powerful jewel sealed within a locket, loaned to the mystic by a divine owner whose coming is awaited. As the holder of the key, he can open the locket to reveal the brilliance of the jewel for a moment before closing it again:

es como si en una pieza de oro tuviésemos una piedra preciosa de grandísimo valor y virtudes; sabemos certísimo que está allí, aunque nunca la hemos visto; mas las virtudes de la piedra no nos dejan de aprovechar, si la traemos con nosotras. Aunque nunca la hemos visto, no por eso la dejamos de preciar, porque por experiencia hemos visto que nos ha sanado de algunas enfermedades, para que es apropiada; mas no la osamos mirar, ni abrir el relicario, ni podemos, porque la manera de abrirle sólo la sabe cuya es la joya, y aunque nos la prestó para que nos aprovechásemos de ella, él se quedó con la llave y, como cosa suya, abrirá cuando nos la quisiere mostrar, y aun la tomará cuando le parezca, como lo hace. (M6:9.1)

This jewel is Christ Himself, revealed briefly and rapturously to the view of the mystic – not revealed to her physical eyes but, rather, to those of her imagination. The mystic experiences this rapture more and more frequently as they approach the doorway of the seventh mansion. She is pierced by the spiritual dart which brings both pleasure and pain previously referenced in *Vida*. While Christ, the groom, may visit his bride-to-be in the sixth mansion, it is in the seventh that He dwells and where the marriage will be completed and consummated.

In distinguishing the unity of the sixth mansion from that of the seventh, the Saint employs yet another simile, that of two candles being brought together. They are brought into such close contact that they burn as one yet, in the sixth mansion, they may still be separated into two distinct and individual candles. The seventh, in contrast, is compared to the rain falling into a body of water. Therein, the waters merge and become inseparably one.

Finally reaching the seventh mansion, the spiritual marriage with God is brought about, yet not quite completely. Santa Teresa states that the spiritual marriage cannot be perfectly fulfilled within a human life. Still, the soul experiences this divine marriage, which begins through an imaginary vision, one in which God reveals Himself directly to the soul. This continues to a vision of an entirely different class, one which takes place not only in the senses and imagination but within the very deepest parts of the soul. Interestingly, she classifies the experience of spiritual marriage as belonging to the category of intellectual vision, though one far greater than those previously experienced: “mas lo que pasa en la unión del matrimonio espiritual es muy diferente: aparécese el Señor en este centro del alma sin visión imaginaria sino intelectual, aunque más delicada que las dichas” (M7:2.3).

Together with the spiritual marriage comes the return of other similes and images used previously. While the crossing over into the initial union with God was symbolized by the death of the silkworm so that the butterfly may be born, the seventh mansion sees the butterfly perish in supreme joy, now only being alive in Christ. While the soul has hauled water, been rained upon and been swept away by the flowing spiritual river, it is now plunged deeply into the water’s source. While she has before felt the darts of the spirit conveyed by the wings of cherubs, she now stands in the presence of the caster of darts as he plunges them again into her soul. While she has before wandered the mansion of her soul seeking its center, that center is the mansion of God.

Again comes the blending of pleasure and pain, though the soul now experiences total peace despite the tumult. By way of explanation, the Saint presents yet another pair of comparisons:

Está el Rey en su palacio, y hay muchas guerras en su reino y muchas cosas penosas, mas no por eso deja de estarse en su puesto; así acá, aunque en estotras moradas anden muchas baraúndas y fieras ponzoñosas y se oye el ruido, nadie entra en aquélla que la haga quitar de allí; ni las cosas que oye, aunque le dan alguna pena, no es de manera que la alboroten y quiten la paz, porque las pasiones están ya vencidas, de suerte que han miedo de entrar allí, porque salen más rendidas. Duélenos todo el cuerpo; mas si la cabeza está sana, no porque duele el cuerpo, dolerá la cabeza.

As Santa Teresa, Underhill, Petroff, San Juan de la Cruz, San Juan de Ávila, Fray Luis de Leon and others emphasize, there is not only a growth in knowledge and visionary experience but, also, an internal evolution, a change within the mystic which prepares them for the revelations they are to receive. Speaking more generally of the topic, Nelson views the process as one which leads toward a complete transformation of the self:

One other experience so consistent that it must be considered part of a basic definition of mysticism is the change occurring in what is perceived as the "self." Although the new image of self varies widely according to the various cosmologies in which it finds reference, all mystics appear to agree that supernatural unity is approached by inculcating "selflessness." (5)

In conclusion, for a mystic of Spain's *Siglo de oro*, there were two key points which identified the mystic. First, the gradual progression or from one revelatory phase to another, each one preparatory to greater revelations to come. Whatever the subdivision provided, the process is essentially the same, beginning with divesting oneself of the sins and concerns with this world and culminating in a profound, often highly sensual intimacy. Second (and perhaps most importantly), a parallel transformation and evolution of the mystic themselves showing greater humility and selflessness as they surrender themselves to the divine influence which draws them away from the concerns of this world.

Perhaps the most critical term to bear in mind in considering the mystic process, whether one of three steps or a hundred, is *preparation*. Each stage prepares the mystic for the next. The unrepentant soul cannot face God. The Saint often points to this fact, that the light must be received bit by bit and piece by piece, lest it be completely overwhelmed and swept away.

III. Architect of the Mystic City

This chapter will explore the relationship which Sor María de Agreda has with the traditional mystic pattern as elaborated by Santa Teresa. There are three essential questions which will be examined herein. First, how does the life of Sor María align with the principles of Spanish Golden Age mysticism? Second, how do her writings build on those principles? Finally, how does her experience in writing *Mística ciudad* demonstrate the mystic pattern? This last point will be in preparation for the following chapter, which will address the character of the Virgin Mary as she appears within *Mística ciudad* and her relationship with the mystic tradition.

Sor María de Agreda is principally known for three things, any one of which would have been sufficient to pique interest: her lengthy and intimate correspondence with King Philip IV; the legend of “The Lady in Blue” reputed to have appeared to the indigenous peoples of the Americas; and her controversial writings which some viewed as challenging papal authority. While each of her claims to fame is remarkable regardless of the agent by which they are carried out, each stands out even more when one considers her position in life, being a cloistered nun in a world where women were subaltern and having never left her home town of Agreda in Spain.

In beginning to approach the subject of Sor María’s life, it is important to note what Esposito rightly points out in his study of *Mística ciudad*:

“Most twentieth century biographical treatment of the Venerable Mother’s life appears to be a recapitulation of the sketchy sources made available in the 1800’s. Therefore, to truly envision her life would prove nearly impossible without examining the information provided by Fr. Joseph Ximénes Samaniego in his ‘prólogo’ of the 1670 version of *La Mística Ciudad de Dios*. Nearly all writers [about Sor María’s life] simply ‘reiterate’ in varying degrees of thoroughness, the information provided by Padre Samaniego in his prologue.” (4)

Thus, rather than exhaustively rehashing the life and biography of Sor María de Agreda, our focus in this chapter will be on those aspects of her life which, firstly, demonstrate the mystic pattern as (principally) outlined by Santa Teresa and, secondly, may be seen as having an impact on her depiction of the Virgin Mary in *Mística ciudad*.

The primary issue to be addressed in this chapter is to determine María de Agreda's relationship with Santa Teresa's model of mystic enlightenment. How well does her life fit into this mold?

In discussing her youth, Sor María states in her autobiography that "The understanding with which I knew all that is created was more advanced than my age, for the Most High enlarged my mind's capacity." (30) How is it that her capacity was so advanced? Her mystic journey – or, at the very least, the preparation for that journey – began much sooner than the detailed revelatory experience described in *Face of the Earth*.

Even in her earliest childhood, the seeds of mystic preparation were being sewn. According to Colahan, "her parents were exceptionally devout and regularly practiced demanding spiritual, ascetic exercises with the discipline of athletes." (*Visions*, 11) In her report to Father Manero, Sor María states that "from the age of nine or ten they made their children pray in constant devotions and had us engage in mental prayer" (115). The example received from her parents was one of extreme devotion. On the one hand, her father "was given to exaggerated displays of painful, penitential piety". (39) Her mother had her own touch of revelatory experience, culminating in that which inspired her to convert the family home into a convent. Sor María's early life demonstrates that both of these tendencies were passed down from her parents.

At the age of 16, she became a nun when her home was converted into a convent. Within months, she found "entrance to the prayer of recollection, where she annihilated

herself, forgot the earth, and, as if in a glowing furnace, was purified. From this [God] raised her to a higher eminence, in which the fire of divine love began to burn with great spiritual sweetness.” (*Life*, 253) Again, despite her youth, she is shown to be ascending on the path to mystic enlightenment. It is written that God “elevated her spirit, from degree to degree” (254), a pattern consistent with the mystic model established before her.

It should be noted that young Sor María was frequently ill and suffered greatly physically during her first years in the convent. In addition, it is recorded that she also felt overwhelmed by temptations, having inherited an exaggerated sense of self-condemnation from her father. As Colahan describes, “This scrupulosity, which her autobiography indicates is a continuation of her negative self-image as a child, caused her to impose painful and inappropriate forms of penitence on herself.” (93) This behavior may be seen as a form of purgative preparation for the mystic life.

While Santa Teresa’s *Castillo interior* would appear to leave all work of the Devil in the outer chambers, Sor María’s mind and spirit experienced no such protection. This, however, was considered part of the proving ground for the visions which were to follow:

“Before receiving the extraordinary graces which Divine Providence destined for her, the demon had permission to afflict her, outwardly, in a surprising manner. The infernal dragon left no means untried. When the servant of God offered up devotions, in the silence of the night, the demon extinguished the light, and sought to disturb her by frightful imaginings. [...] He maltreated her in person, and tormented her in every way to interrupt her exercises.” (*Life*, 254-255)

Consistent with the mystic pattern, such darkness was followed by light. From visions related to the symbols of the Sacrament to “varied divine apparitions” such as the appearance of the Virgin with her Son. While the struggles with darkness did not cease as her illness was blamed on demonic influence and the horrific visions continued. She states that she was tormented “with pains that cannot be mentioned, singularly strange for a soul

who had throughout life cherished purity.” (*Life*, 256) By her own words, she acknowledges the strangeness and uniqueness of her case.

Her biographer, Samaniego, is clearly familiar with the mystic process as he describes aspects of her life and experience following the same pattern previously established. He states, for example, that “The Lord designed to enter into intimate communication with this soul, by way of intellectual revelations and visions, and for this reason he favored her with the ecstasies which ordinarily introduce these visions.” (260) Within two years, she began to experience outward signs of her inward passion, referred to as *exterioridades*. She could be seen to be entering a trance as she experienced these visions and was said to levitate:

“The ecstasies assumed this form: The body was deprived of the use of the senses, as if it had been dead, or inanimate. It was a little raised above the earth [...] The face appeared more beautiful than usual, and the posture was so modest and devout, that she resembled a seraph in human form. She remained in this state for two and even three hours.” (261)

At this point, she began her much-famed bilocations to the American continent. While hardly the only mystic to report this phenomenon – not even the only Sor María de Jesus in 17th century Spain to experience it, for that matter – it is comparatively rare among Catholic mystics. A brief list of those of the Catholic faith across the centuries who have claimed to have been bilocated reveals similar circumstances and experiences to those of María de Agreda. From Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century to Saint Pio of Pietrelcina in the twentieth, a pattern may be seen of purgative sufferings in youth, levitations, ecstatic transverberation, visions and other such phenomena. Thus, while outside of the Teresan model, precedent exists for it within Catholic tradition.

Samaniego notes that, after three years of such experiences, Sor María “felt a great change in her interior.” Instead of dramatic *exterioridades* and bilocations, she “received sublime revelations and instructions in a manner purely intellectual. In her exterior nothing

extraordinary was apparent.” (272) This return to intellectual vision is held to be a product of force of will rather than natural evolution. As Samaniego continues, “Although the visions and revelations she now enjoyed were intellectual, she had, sometimes, imaginary, and even corporal visitations. But as soon as she felt that the visions, or expressions, came by the imagination, or the senses, she placed herself in indifference, called up her faith, and thus left no room for the suggestions of the demon.” (274)

This is not, however, the end of her growth as a mystic. In 1627, despite her youth, she was called upon to serve as Mother Superior of the convent. Confronted with this new responsibility and the trials which accompanied it, her prayers increased in fervency and she began receiving frequent visitations of the Virgin, who served as her counselor and companion. Samaniego reports that “From this epoch the communication of the Mother of God with this creature continued to be intimate, frequent, and sublime. She directed her, gave her counsel, corrected her defects, and imbued her with heavenly doctrine.” (278)

In this same year, she began to receive the instruction to write her masterwork, *Mística ciudad*. As part of her preparation for this task, her mystical insight continued to grow as God granted to her what Samaniego refers to as “a new infused science”, “a more distinct intelligence”, “a more eminent knowledge” and “a higher perfection” (281-283). After ten years in this state in which “This illumination was habitual to her, and permanent” (283), she began to write in 1637.

The mystic growth experienced during the period of this writing is best addressed in more detail with the discussion of the book itself as it is therein that it is best recorded. Sadly, however, the version which we read today is not from the manuscript begun in 1637. In 1643, her confessor was called away and the man who replaced him forced her to burn all that which she had written, believing that women had no place writing for the church. Her

original confessor returned and instructed her to begin writing again. He, however, died in 1647 and was replaced by the same confessor who had instructed her to burn her writings, an instruction which was repeated with what she had written in the intervening time.

In 1650, another confessor was assigned to her, one disposed to encourage her writing. Thus it was that she began a third time to write *Mística ciudad*. Under his orders, she also began work on an autobiography, one which she died before she was able to complete. While Samaniego provides some hints of what the latter portion might have held, stating that the last years of her life were “the most sublime and abundant” (301), it is a pity for the student of her life and writings that it was never completed.

While Samaniego’s description may lack the specificity of the Teresian model, he nonetheless makes it clear that Sor María’s mystic progression continues. As she makes her life mirror more exactly her perception of the Virgin Mary, her communion with her grows ever closer. In February of 1652, she vowed to obey the Virgin’s instructions in a vision described as “one of the most exalted visions to which the Lord had then elevated her”. Following this, “The Lord elevated her to a degree still higher” as she began to imitate Christ directly rather than His Mother. Relating more directly with the Teresian model, in August of 1653, “the Lord lifted her into a still more sublime state than she had yet known in her mortal life. He placed her in the novitiate of contemplation of the Essence of God. This novitiate is a state of union with God”. (303-305)

The relationship of these states is made explicit as Samaniego continues:

“The three novitiates are like the degrees of different elevations, each of which is more lofty than the preceding. The servant of God ascended from one to the other, the first preparing her for the second, and these two for the third. But it is worthy of observation here, that she did not leave the lowest degree to mount to the highest, for each is a preparation for the next in order, and necessary for its security; neither can the highest be attained except through the two first.” (305)

This serves as an excellent summary of the Teresan model of progression. Each step is a required preparation for the next yet preceding levels never cease to be applicable during the mystic's ascension.

As there are multiple levels of mystic union, Sor María's growth was not yet complete. Two and a half years later, according to Samaniego, she "was elevated [...] before the throne of the Most Holy Trinity" (306) and was again instructed to resume her work. So it was that, in 1655, she undertook for the third time to write the life of the Virgin Mary. As will be later discussed in further detail, this work contains a microcosm of the mystic process as progressively higher states of revelation are attained.

To be brief, this process continued until the day of her death. According to Rev. Augustine M. Esposito in his study of *Mística ciudad*, it appears that Sor María's life fits into the mystic model quite well:

"in Samaniego's biography of María de Agreda, we discover the course of events often typical of the lives of the mystics in all ages. [...] the remainder of María de Jesús' experiences in the Samaniego prologue recounts a spiritual "kenosis" in a strictly Pauline sense. This "emptying", has traditionally been witnessed by the Church as a pre-requisite to holiness and sainthood as well as mysticism. Sor María de Agreda's relationship with the Divine, in Samaniego's account, resembles the movement of a pendulum swinging between the agony and the ecstasy of surrender to God until the pendulum rests perfectly in the center in silence and peace – which is UNION." (Esposito, 8-9)

Her life may thus be seen despite the exceptionally young age at which her mystic progression began. However, the present study is not principally an investigation of her life but of her literary production. How do her writings match up with the mystic model provided by her predecessors?

Ensuring her conformity with established patterns of enlightenment would have been particularly crucial during María de Agreda's life. The Catholic church and its omnipresent eyes in the Spanish Inquisition had become increasingly wary of mystics in the intervening years since Santa Teresa. The church's power depended on the firm establishment of the Pope as the one and only authoritative voice to direct the Church under God's influence. Thus, while nominally encouraging communion with God, the church was quick to warn against putting too much faith in private or personal revelation and carefully vigilant of those who spread claims of having experienced it.

Accordingly, the more potentially controversial or heretical the idea being advanced, the more care had to be taken on the part of the mystic writer to display subservient conformity with that which had been established as acceptable. In the case of mystic enlightenment, such acceptability had been granted to Santa Teresa. Samaniego states that her "authority in these matters is sovereign, because of the approbation which the Church has stamped on her writings." (316) Sor María would certainly have been exposed to her writings. As stated by Colahan: "Teresa de Avila [...] not only was revered immensely but was widely read and consciously imitated by Hispanic nuns." (13) This shows abundantly in her work, not only in concepts but in the language chosen. These writings will now be examined in further detail.

The earliest extant work attributed to Sor María, *Redondez de la tierra y mapa de los orbes celestes* (known in English as *Face of the Earth*), reveals at first reading high levels of spiritual unity, far exceeding those anticipated of a mystic early in their development. This is likely the vision described by Samaniego as having been given while María was still a child, "With the earliest use of her reason" (242), though this is admittedly questionable,

particularly since there are passages of the text which are directly lifted from popular atlases of the period.

As quoted by Colahan, her autobiography reveals the heights of revelation which she reached in receiving the vision described in *Face of the Earth*. She states that she was shown the entire creation of God:

“when I first became capable of rational thought. [...] I saw things but took in their beauty on the surface, yet still perceiving the Creator in them; I was moved to love and serve Him, and became aware that their being, arrangement, and ordered functioning depended on divine wisdom and power. Great was this kind gift and benefit, *second only to knowing God*, and with it I suddenly went from ignorance of all things to wisdom about them.” (*Visions*, 30, emphasis added)

Given the nature of Teresan mystic progression, this description seems somewhat contradictory. In stating that the revelation received was “second only to knowing God”, Sor María appears to place this first revelation among the higher echelons of mystic experience. Yet she also describes her second such experience – possibly that recorded in *Mystical City* – as “Greater beyond compare [...] because the right hand of the All Powerful infused into my mind knowledge of the universe more abundantly than the first. I came to know the being of all things, their qualities and properties, with great penetration and perception of distinctions, as I shall say at the appropriate moment.” (*Visions*, 30) Hence, while this early revelatory experience was one in which she was able only to appreciate the beauty of creation on its surface, it was only years later, in connection with a far greater vision, that she was permitted a more profound comprehension of the divine nature of those creations. Hence, the mystic pattern seems accelerated but not transgressed against.

A further possible explanation for the advanced nature of this vision is elaborated by Colahan:

“It can be supposed then, without contradicting her own memories, that during her childhood, Sor María probably acquired her cosmographical knowledge through reading and put it down on paper in a first version of *Face of the Earth*. Years later she might easily have modified, amplified, and polished that juvenile draft, perhaps in the enthusiasm of writing *The Mystical City of God*, or even remembering in old age the second cosmographic revelations of her mature years, when she was writing her great narrative. Other circumstances, found in connection with the prologues for the treatise written at the end of her life, suggest this last possibility.” (*Visions*, 30-31)

Colahan, therefore, suggests the possibility that the text of *Face of the Earth* which we possess today is not entirely written with the perspective of one having their first visions but, rather, with the wisdom of a much later, more experienced mystic elaborating upon the work of her youth.

Her mental state immediately prior to the reception of this first recorded revelation was one of meditation and religious contemplation, perfectly in line with the Teresan model: “I found myself in contemplation after having received the most holy sacrament and given thanks, when there appeared a holy angel, exceedingly beautiful and delightful. He said to me, ‘May the Lord be your eternal well-being and give life to your spirit, my dear. [...] His Majesty wishes to keep his promise to give you mystical knowledge of all things.’” (48)

When was such a promise given to the young María? There are also other indications that this was not, in fact, her first visionary experience, as she states in this writing that she has been “well schooled by experience” and that she has received “many marvels” (48) in the past. Such a promise could well have been included among these earlier “marvels.” Alternatively, she could be referring to a scriptural promise or one given her through less extraordinary means.

At this point, the vision, while already elevated beyond normal mortal experience, appears to take a dramatic turn to higher echelons of mystic revelation: “As soon as I said, ‘The will of His Highness be done,’ He said to me, ‘My wife and turtledove’” (49). Despite

the phrasing used, this must not be confused with the unitive vision of marriage or betrothal to God. There has been no appearance of God Himself, only a voice delivered through a messenger. Still, the type of vision described extends beyond the introductory phases of the mystic pattern, as Sor María further elaborates:

“My understanding was through the illumination of revelation, without which, by natural means, it could not have come about. So that I might see and know and understand, the Lord endowed me with a special ability (and that in itself was another of his great marvels), in order that I might know all the face of the earth, the sea, some of the big rivers, the animals, the inhabitants, the cities and kingdoms, and the diversity of creatures – all these things – and still its being so big was not an obstacle.” (49)

It is important to note that she does not claim to have been physically lifted above the Earth in this experience. Rather, “it was by reproducing images of it for me” (50).

Considering that many such images would have been available to her through study of atlases, this sort of revelation seems to be along the lines of what is referred to as a doctrinal vision, one based upon that which one has read, heard and meditated rather than a spontaneous production of spiritual imaginings.

After a lengthy and numerically detailed description of the earth interspersed with exclamations of praise, her vision ascends higher as she begins to view “the Heavenly and Elemental Spheres” (70). While still in the realm of that which she would have studied and still treated with the numerical precision of a scientific text, this represents a higher elevation (both literal and spiritual) reached within this vision.

While this text contains significant detail regarding its content, it provides little information regarding the mystic experience which brought it about. Still, it is an important text to consider in evaluating the mystic progression of a young adherent to the mystic model. Fortunately, her later works provide far more information regarding the mystic process, both her perception of the general theory of it and her personal experience with it.

Escala espiritual

Perhaps the work which best illustrates Sor María's literary relationship with the mystic experience is her *Escala espiritual para subir a la perfección*. In it, she details a journey, an ascension to the throne of God, a symbolic example of the mystic experience. This work appears to be an answer to Teresa's *Castillo interior*, in that it uses much of the same vocabulary (with an apparent assumption that the reader is already familiar with the terms) and makes a similar argument, though with different emphasis. As such, this work cannot be ignored in examining Sor María's relationship with the mystic model as laid out by Santa Teresa.

As is frequently the case, the vision about which she writes comes during a time of prayerful introspection:

En la hora de oración estando recogida interiormente me mostró el Señor una escala de gran altura y belleza. Estaba firmada sobre una Cruz, la Cruz en la tierra, y llegaba a la escala desde ella hasta el cielo. En lo último de su eminencia la estaban sustentando Cristo nuestro Señor y su Santísima Madre. El Hijo procedía del trono del Padre Eterno, y estaba el Padre como mirando todo esto, y con aquella vista amorosa parece que llamaba y convidaba a subir. Yo estaba al pie de esta escala, mirando estos misterios y con la voluntad y deseos allá arriba. (leaf 1, recto-leaf 1 verso)

On this occasion, she not only hears the voice of God but witnesses Him upon His throne, together with Christ and the Virgin Mary. She is invited to come to His side, to be united with Him, the goal of every mystic. Before she can achieve these lofty heights, however, she must scale the ladder. A clear reference to Jacob's Ladder as described in the Old Testament, this ladder represents her own journey of enlightenment.

What, therefore, was required to climb the ladder? Very generally, Sor María states: "Lo que se me mostró había de hacer para subir era firmarme en la Cruz, y caminar por ella,

procurar las virtudes, y trabajar por alcanzarlas. [...] También me parecía había mucho que hacer para subir a lo alto.” (leaf 1, verso). Of what, however, does this seeking of virtues consist? What work is to be done to climb the ladder?

The following sections of the text lay out a series of false paths and *engaños* into which a soul may fall in their journey up the ladder. These pitfalls described follow well the mystic pattern. She first speaks of avoiding giving in to our natural, sinful impulses, the essence of the purgative phase, followed by a precaution against performing one’s penitences in a disordered fashion or taking one’s fasting to extremes. These are things with which she, herself, struggled in her attempts to cleanse herself of sin and temptation, making this a remarkably personal vision.

She next speaks of “Peligros que hay en no atender las sensaciones de la oración o dejarla por ellas” (leaf 13, recto). The mixture of pleasure and pain experienced in the mystic quest must be endured as the soul reaches higher levels of ecstasy. Next, she cautions against being carried away by this ecstasy to the point of forgetting its source or failing to confirm the truthfulness of what is communicated therein, as such ecstasy may be feigned by diabolical sources. She warns of pride, speaking of the “engaño que hay en pensar el alma estar muy adelantada estándose muy atrás” (leaf 13, verso). In accordance with Santa Teresa’s model, even after beginning to experience this ecstasy, there is a long way to go before true union is reached.

Following this, she cautions the reader regarding “visiones imaginarias y revelaciones”, another intermediate step on the path to mystic enlightenment. She emphasizes that, while these visions can have a divine source and are, in fact, an integral part of the ascension of the mystic ladder, there are others “que no son seguras ni perfectas, y estas son las que la misma alma se forma en su imaginación.” (leaf 27, verso – leaf 28, recto)

She speaks of the limitless potential of the human imagination and ways in which the Devil may take advantage of that potential to lead the seeker astray with false visions.

To avoid this, she states, the seeker must not cease to purge itself of sin and vice, calling upon Christ for forgiveness of sins and making use of one's Confessor to keep one's conscience clear. However, she also speaks of the "Peligro que puede hacer en que el Confesor no sea docto, o experimentado" (leaf 35, recto). Considering her own history of inconsistencies among her confessors which she discusses in detail later in the text (leaf 66), it is little wonder that she would have something of an axe to grind in this regard.

She next reaches a point at which the soul may move beyond that state in which such *engaños* may lead it astray and emphasizes the importance of doing so. This is her final major precaution (though reminders will be given throughout the text), indicating that the purgative state has been passed, leaving the soul free to explore the higher realms of mystic experience. At long last, the soul may begin on the *buen camino*, having left false paths behind.

In this next part of the text, she returns to the ladder and, in so doing, begins again at the first steps of the mystic process, stating that the first step on the ladder is *oración mental*. She speaks of the tremendous effort required during this stage of the mystic's ascension, just as did Santa Teresa, detailing "los principios en la via purgativa" (leaf 46, verso) and its hardships. She speaks of seeking after a perfected prayer, one which requires "recojimiento y soledad [...] el examen de la conciencia, y el enderezar la intención y otras cosas así." The voice of warning returns as she continues:

"En particular advertir que no es menester que haya como dicen mucha fuerza de brazos, y quebrantamiento de cabeza, que no se alcanza por eso este bien. Ni está este negocio en visajes, voces, ni alborozos, ni en torcer la cabeza, ni en fruncimiento de boca, ni en figuras de ojos, que todo esto

importa muy poco, antes bien como es cosa exterior podía ocupar, y al que lo viese no podemos saber que afecto le hará” (leaf 49, recto)

Thus, she emphasizes that the measure of such a prayer – as to whether it qualifies as “perfect” prayer – is not something which can be judged or measured from the outside.

Rather, it is seen in how the one who prays is affected thereby, whether to grace or to guilt.

Continuing the mystic progression in language familiar to those who have read Santa Teresa, she now reaches the second step of the ladder, which she refers to as “principio de la via iluminativa” (leaf 53, verso). The third step is titled “oración de recojimiento” and the fourth “oración de quietud”. Reaching the fifth step, the spirit begins to take ecstatic flight. The description of each step is essentially a rehashing of Santa Teresa’s model.

It is important to note that it is within this fifth step that she begins to speak of *exterioridades*, the phenomena which marked her youth. By her own evaluation, therefore, she experienced high levels of mystic revelation quite early on in her life. Is this a contradiction in the mystic pattern? Her description of her state of mind when experiencing the *exterioridades*, however, is one of a penitence more reminiscent of a purgative state:

“Solía verme con unos temores grandísimos del genero que he tenido siempre, si perdiera la gracia, si estaba en amistad de Dios, si le tenía enojado. Debíalo de disponer allí su Majestad, porque se me encubría, y me solía dejar en una soledad grande, con que esto se aumentaba. El Demonio se valía de esto, y me traía terribles, y espantosas visiones, y una había que siempre cuando estaba así afligida sonaba en mis oídos que me decía, O desdichada alma camino vas de perdición, todo esto que tienes es engaño, e imaginación [...] y el interior estaba tan oscuro, que todo aquello parecía verdad.” (leaf 65, verso – leaf 66, recto).

Hence, the visions experienced in the *exterioridades*, while being of an intensity reminiscent of higher levels of mystic progression, bore a message deeply rooted in a purgative state of mind. According to the model presented in *Castillo interior*, the devil would not have such great influence within the inner mansions. Perhaps the exhaustive

training, the self-punishing efforts to cleanse her sins and the other painful experiences of her youth would have been sufficient to account for the preparation needed to reach these upper echelons of revelation whilst still remaining plagued with a self-punishing mindset of guilt for her imperfections. This apparent contradiction is one to which we will return in further examination of her writings.

In her conclusion to the text, she acknowledges that there are still higher steps on the ladder which she has not yet reached and speaks of the effort required to continue to scale them. She then summarizes well her vision of the mystic experience:

“En pasando esta grada, o grado de oración se halla el alma muy cerca de las demás gradas que lo están del Señor. La puerta para entrar en visiones, y revelaciones de ordinario son los arrobos, y es cierto porque nos la da el Señor sola para lo exterior, sino que su principio es para algún buen fin de provecho espiritual. Luego pues se camina a tener particular luz para las revelaciones, o visiones. Algunas de las que sube pondré aquí. [...] Paréceme a mí que después de su gloria la principal causa porque el Señor concede estas mercedes a las almas, es por algún bien particular de la propia que recibe el beneficio, y de alguna otra, u otros.” (leaf 66, verso)

The ecstasy of this 5th step is here said to be but a doorway to further revelations and visions. The visionary experience becomes, for her, something very individual and specific to the seeker. While she does not continue further up the ladder, that portion which she does cover fits exceptionally well with the Teresian model of the mystic process.

Imitating the style and tradition of Santa Teresa, this is hardly a groundbreaking essay on the mystic process but that is not the purpose of the work. Rather, this helps to cement her place in the mystic tradition, providing her a measure of security. This provides her a foundation on which to build – as much in terms of literature and theory as in personal *gravitas* – in writing *Mística ciudad*.

While the historical record of her life may be seen as an example of the Mystic Process and *Escala* unarguably demonstrates her mastery of the mystic process, *Mística*

ciudad provides her a greater opportunity to speak of and for herself, not only through her depiction of the Virgin Mary but also through the image given of herself as the mystic recipient and first-person narrator of the work. Even within the visionary experience which comprises the bulk of *Mística ciudad* (which easily ranks among the highest levels of the Mystic Process, as will be shown in further detail hereafter), there is an echo of that process in Sor María's description of herself.

From the beginning, the Mystic Pattern is brought to the forefront as a theme of the work. The second and third paragraphs of the first volume serve as a representation of the Mystic Pattern in miniature. There is first a purgative process in which she casts off her fears, doubts, and weakness:

Este Señor Altísimo —después de largas resistencias que he referido y muy desordenados temores y de grandes suspensiones nacidas de mi cobardía, por conocer este mar inmenso de maravillas en que me embarco, recelosa de anegarme en él [...]

It is only after overcoming these fears that she is able to feel God's virtue and influence. Once purged, Sor María invokes the same language as her mystic predecessors, speaking of an enlightenment and illumination of the intellect, the sweetness and gentleness spoken of by Santa Teresa:

[...] me dio a sentir una virtud de lo alto, suave, fuerte, eficaz y dulce; una luz que alumbró al entendimiento, reduce a la voluntad rebelde, quietando, enderezando, gobernando y llamando a la república de los sentidos interiores y exteriores y rindiendo a toda la criatura para el agrado y voluntad del Altísimo y buscar en todo sola su gloria y honra.

Having undergone this preparation, she is called to a higher dwelling, separated from the evils and sorrows of the world, much like Teresa's description of a dwelling place for those who have conquered sin:

Estando en esta disposición, oí una voz del Todopoderoso que me llamaba y llevaba tras de sí con grande fuerza, levantando mi habitación a lo alto

(Eclo., 51, 13) y fortaleciéndome contra los leones (Ib., 4) que rugían hambrientos para alejar mi alma del bien que la ofrecían, en el conocimiento de los grandes sacramentos (misterios) que se encierran en este Tabernáculo y Ciudad Santa de Dios, y librándome de las puertas de las tribulaciones (Ib., 5) por donde me convidaban a entrar, cercada de los dolores de la muerte [...] y de la perdición, rodeada de la llama de esta Sodoma y Babilonia en que vivimos, y queriéndome atropellar para que ciega me convirtiese y entregase a ella, ofreciéndome objetos de aparente deleite a mis sentidos, informándolos fabulosamente con falacia y dolos.

Here, she breaks from the narrative and elaborates further on the preparation which she has received throughout her life for this moment. This idea of lifelong preparation, separate from the mystic process itself, is one which, as has been seen, is crucial in the personal history of Sor María and is a theme to which we will return in *Mística ciudad*.

Pero de todos estos lazos que preparaban a mis pies (Sal., 56, 7; 24, 15) me rescató el Altísimo, elevando mi espíritu y enseñándome con amonestaciones eficaces el camino de la perfección, y convidándome a una vida espiritualizada y angélica en la carne mortal, y obligándome a vivir tan solícita que, en medio de la hornaza, no me tocase el fuego y me librase de la lengua coquinada (Eclo., 5, 6- 7), cuando muchas veces me contaba terrenas fabulaciones (Sal., 118, 85); y llamándome Su Alteza para que me levantase del polvo y de la tenuidad que causa la ley del pecado, que resistiese a los efectos heredados de la naturaleza infecta y la detuviese en sus desordenadas 25 inclinaciones, deshaciéndolas a la vista de la luz y levantándome a mí sobre mí [...]

This image of the visionary being raised above herself is the essence of the first tiers of the mystic experience. Self-mastery and the ability to rise above one's earthly desires are the primary goal of the mystic in the purgative process.

Her attention now turns to her relationship with God and the terms by which He addresses her, the next logical step in the mystic progression:

y con fuerzas de poderoso Dios, correcciones de padre y caricias de esposo, muchas veces me llamaba y decía: Paloma mía y hechura de mis manos, levántate (Lam., 3, 28) y date priesa, ven a mí, que soy luz y camino, y el que me sigue no anda en tinieblas (Cant., 2, 10). Ven a mí, que soy verdad segura, santidad cierta, soy el poderoso y sabio y enmendador de los sabios (Sab., 7, 15).

He begins by beckoning her as from a distance, but with the promise of love and security. The third paragraph opens with the same sensual imagery employed by Santa Teresa of being pierced with arrows of love.

Los efectos de estas palabras eran en mí flechas de dulce amor, de admiración, reverencia, temor y conocimiento de mis pecados y vileza, con que me retiraba, encogía y aniquilaba; y el Señor me decía: Ven, alma, ven, que soy tu Dios Omnipotente, y, aunque hayas sido pródiga y pecadora, levántate de la tierra y ven a mí que soy tu Padre, recibe la estola de mi amistad y el anillo de esposa.

At last, the final stages of the mystic process are enveloped in a single phrase as his relationship with her evolves from father to friend to spouse.

This beginning establishes a framework within which María de Agreda proceeds to give, effectively, a brief discourse on the mystic process as she, herself, has experienced it. In the paragraphs which follow, she returns to the theme of spiritual preparation for the greater visions which are to come. She states in the following paragraph that six angels are sent “y me purificaron y dispusieron;” after which God grants her “un nuevo lumen”, greater illumination which brings her further knowledge. This leads to another phase of preparation as other, higher angels appear to reveal still greater things but, upon imploring them to share their knowledge, she is instructed “Detente, alma.” When she asks why, the angels respond, “Porque es menester, alma, que vengas descalza y desnuda de todos tus apetitos y pasiones, para conocer estos misterios altos que no se compadecen ni acomodan con inclinaciones siniestras.” Even after the numerous purgative stages she has undergone, she is still not sufficiently prepared for the instruction she is to receive. The mystic evolution continues, step by step.

In the fifth paragraph, tantalized by “un tesoro”, she declares:

“Propuse enmendar la vida y vencer mis apetitos, lloraba con suspiros y gemidos de lo íntimo de mi alma, porque se me manifestase este bien; y como

lo iba proponiendo, se iba corriendo el velo que encubría mi tesoro. Corrióse, pues, del todo y vieron mis ojos interiores lo que no sabré decir ni manifestar con palabras.”

After receiving further indescribable wonders, there is a break in time as she begins to speak of “Otro día” and the process repeats. The pages which follow revolve around phrases such as “que tu vida sea más angélica que humana y olvides todo lo terreno”, “desde este día no se ha de reconocer en ti resabio de hija de Adán”, “Y con estas ansias gasté algunos días, procurando perfeccionar mi vida, confesándome generalmente de nuevo y reformando algunas imperfecciones”, “Hice muchas promesas al Señor, proponiendo de nuevo apartarme de todo lo terreno y tener libre mi voluntad para sólo amarle, sin dejarla inclinar a cosa alguna, aunque fuese pequeña y sin sospecha; repudié y negué todo lo fabuloso y visible.”

Having laid the foundation for her elaboration on the mystic process and having given the reader a teaser, to use modern terms, of what is to come, Sor María now turns to a further discussion of her own lifelong preparation. As she states at the beginning of the second chapter: “[...]Para dejar advertido y declarado en lo restante de esta obra el modo con que me manifiesta el Señor estas maravillas, ha parecido conveniente poner en el principio de este capítulo, donde lo daré a entender como pudiere y me fuere concedido.”

Again, we see the mystic process play out in her life. She speaks of having had “un temor íntimo y grande” of losing her connection with God which drove her through her life to seek God in prayer. In response, she is promised a cleansing, “y todo lo exterior y sujeto a peligro te faltará desde hoy y tu tesoro estará escondido; guárdale de tu parte y consérvale con vida perfecta.” Following this pronouncement, she states, “Desde entonces conocí mudanza en mi interior y un estado muy espiritualizado. Al entendimiento se le dio una nueva luz [...]” (14)

At this point in the text, Sor María delves into a somewhat more detailed analysis of the Mystic Evolution, stating that there are multiple¹² levels of knowledge granted in these visions, due to a combination of the will of God and the preparation of the soul:

En este conocimiento hay modos o grados de ver de parte del Señor, según es la voluntad divina mostrarlo, porque es espejo voluntario. Unas veces se manifiesta más claramente, otras menos; unas veces se muestran unos misterios ocultando otros, y siempre grandes. Y esta diferencia suele seguir también la disposición del alma; porque si no está con toda quietud y paz, o ha cometido alguna culpa o imperfección, por pequeña que sea, no se alcanza a ver esta luz en el modo que digo y donde se conoce al Señor con tanta claridad y certeza, que no deja duda alguna de lo que se entiende. [...] (15)

She then makes it clear that she is speaking of that level which has been referred to as *Unitive*, that in which God becomes a companion, spouse and/or lover:

Y como el alma conoce y siente estos dulces efectos, con amoroso afecto dice el Altísimo, *Trahe me post te* (Cant., 1, 3) y corremos juntos; porque, unida con su amado, no siente las operaciones terrenas; [...] (15-16)

Sor María goes so far as to make direct reference to the imagery used by Santa Teresa in *Castillo interior* as she states:

Esto es propiamente estar en los atrios de la casa del Señor, porque está el alma a la vista donde reverbera la claridad de la lucerna del Cordero (Ap., 21, 23)” (17)

After continued description of the “perfection” of the knowledge and light received in this highest visionary state, she contrasts this with a lower level of reception:

Pero descendiendo a otro estado más inferior y que el alma tiene de ordinario, en que usa de la sustancia y hábito de la luz, aunque no de toda su claridad, en éste hay alguna limitación de aquel conocimiento tan alto de personas y estados, secretos y pensamientos que he dicho; porque aquí, en este inferior lugar, no tengo más conocimiento de lo que basta para apartarme del peligro y huir del pecado, compadeciéndome con verdadera ternura de las personas sin darme licencia para hablar con claridad con nadie [...] si no es

¹² English readers working from Fiscar Marison’s 1912 translation should take a cautionary note: The translation provided states that “there are *three* different ways or degrees” (emphasis mine) but the original text makes no mention of any particular number.

cuando el autor de estas obras tal vez da licencia y ordena que amoneste a algún prójimo, (19)

Petroff describes this kind of charity towards others as being part of the *Participatory* level of vision, accompanied by miracles and “psychic phenomena” (*Medieval*, 41).

Compare her description to that provided by Sor María:

The second type of psychic phenomena are those inner revelations and commanding voices which brought her into an active relationship with the outside world, including her performance of such offices as peace-making, erasing despair in others, and warning people of hidden sins and vices. (41)

That this participatory vision would coexist with a unitive vision is not by any means contradictory to the Teresian model. Again, while each phase of enlightenment builds on those previous, the lower levels never cease to be active in the life and experience of the mystic.

Throughout the narrative of the Virgin are interspersed counsels of the Virgin directly to the young mystic recipient writing on her behalf. As these relate more directly with Sor María the author than with Virgin Mary the subject, such comments pertain better to an analysis of Sor María’s mindset and experience than that of the work itself. Within these comments, one also sees elements of the mystic progression and the Virgin encourages her to continue to strive for greater purity and, as a result, greater union.

The behaviors prescribed are laid out as a preparation for the further light and knowledge to be bestowed on the visionary, despite the heights already reached by the very nature of the revelations already being received:

“Hija mía, de escribir los misterios y sacramentos de mi santísima vida, quiero que para ti misma cojas el fruto que deseas y **que el premio de lo que trabajares sea la mayor pureza y perfección de tu vida**, si con la gracia del Altísimo te dispones para imitarme, obrando lo que oyeres. [...] te hablaré palabras de vida eterna y te enseñaré lo más santo y perfecto de la vida cristiana y lo más aceptable a los ojos de Dios; con que desde luego te

comenzarás a disponer mejor para recibir la luz en que te son patentes los ocultos misterios de mi vida santísima y la doctrina que deseas. (240)

Looking at the scope of her writings, she appears to achieve the higher echelons of mystic enlightenment quite early in her mystical journey to the point that one might question if she is, indeed, following the same process outlined by Santa Teresa. Nonetheless, there is still a distinct advancement or ascension, displayed in her writings. As Esposito states:

María de Agreda's biographical and bibliographical sketch dovetail perfectly. That is, as Fr. Samaniego recounts María's spiritual life, with such detail, a clear vision of the spiritual 'progression' of her soul comes into focus for interested readers. [...] So very similar to Teresa de Avila was María de Agreda's aspiration to the 'decrease of self' for the sole purpose of an 'increase of God', that she too encouraged 'spiritual exercises' for all to practice daily in their search for God. (Esposito, 9-10)

Hence, while something of an anomaly in the Teresian model of gradual evolution, she is nevertheless distinctly – one might even say carefully – in harmony with Teresa's writings. This focus on continual "decrease of self", the unceasing purging of that which is ungodly, is a vital theme of her writing and in the character of the Virgin Mary as presented in *Mística ciudad*. Among the statements of the Virgin to her author she states:

Tras el conocimiento de Dios y su amor, se ha de seguir el conocer a ti misma, pensando y confiriendo tu poquedad y vileza. Y advierte que estas verdades bien entendidas, repetidas y ponderadas hacen divinos efectos en las almas. (242)

At the same time, Esposito acknowledges that she is an aberration among her religious contemporaries. His explanation for this difference is telling:

"Sor María de Jesús de Agreda's work contains literary characteristics which always remain "parallel" with others contemporary to her authorship. However, these "similarities" never quite converge with those of other authors of her same time period. That is her literary colleagues [...] utilized "experiences" as the spring-board for their literature. The Franciscan nun, on the other hand uses literature as the spring-board for the expression of her "religious experience". The dynamic among the two types of authors operates in reverse order" (17).

As we examine what is arguably her greatest work, this is a crucial distinction to bear in mind. While Santa Teresa and the majority of mystics based their writings upon their experiences, Sor María's mystic experiences revolved around literature, both that which she read and that which she produced. From the atlases and scientific studies which form the basis for *Face of the Earth* to the hagiographies and mystic writings which give birth to *Mística Ciudad*, her readings and her writings served to justify her own mysticism in an age of growing skepticism toward the mystic experience.

Perhaps the greatest variance in the work and life of Sor María from that of Santa Teresa is the absence of an endpoint aside from death, which would hardly be viewed as an ending for those with a belief in the eternal existence of the human soul. For Santa Teresa, there is a goal to be reached, an ultimate union to be achieved, a final mansion to enter. For Sor María, there are always more details to see, further steps to climb, greater union to be achieved. While Santa Teresa leaves the whisperings of Satan in the outer mansions, Sor María receives no such reprieve and, in her continual struggle against darkness, can never declare victory over Satan's influence. There is no such thing as "Good enough" for the flower of Agreda.

IV: The Exemplary Virgin

While it may be (and has been) asserted that any work will, of necessity, include aspects of the life of its author, the parallels between María and Mary are unlikely to simply be the product of subconscious projection. Certainly, the Virgin is held as a mirror for any devout woman in the Catholic faith of the period but María has other, larger objectives in mind. As Colahan states:

“A comparison of Teresa de Avila's self-portrait in *The Dwellings*, whose self-affirmation has been described by Weber as disguised and intentionally obfuscating, to that which Sor María projected onto the Virgin Mary in *The Mystical City of God* shows that Sor María, living half a century later, could speak with greater freedom about feminine equality. True, the self-affirmation was not openly her own and was given to a unique, deified woman, but Sor María's writings draw enough parallels between her Celestial model and herself to make it clear that her far-from-passive Virgin was a paradigm the author felt to be anything but inimitable.” (***)

This ability to “speak with greater freedom about feminine equality” would prove an inspiration for later authors. Santa Inés de la Cruz, in her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*, uses Sor María de Agreda as an exemplary woman whose life and writings justify women having a written voice within the Catholic church. While this is true, María's casting of the Virgin Mary in a position like her own and granting her a voice like her own would have had a far more personal value than the greater cause of feminine equality.

Sor María was already a controversial figure in the Catholic Church before the final writing of *Mística ciudad*. Between her claims to have been spiritually and/or physically transported to the American continent to preach to the local tribes and her lengthy advisory correspondence with King Philip IV, she had already come under the watchful eye of the

Inquisition more than once. Though exonerated on both occasions, it was clear that she would need to proceed with caution, particularly with a work which would prove as controversial as *Mística ciudad*. By making the life of the Virgin Mary an echo of her own, she establishes a powerful precedent for mystic women, like herself, to have the sort of experiences which she claimed to have had as well as the influence which she held.

Initially, the case of the Virgin Mary as a potential mystic appears to be problematic as one considers the visionary process of progressing from a sinful state to a pure one. After all, having been born without sin and, thus, having no need of a purgative process, how is this progression to occur? In María de Agreda's perception of the Virgin as presented in *Mística ciudad*, an answer is readily provided as the text examines her pre-mortal existence and the preparations made for her birth.

As indicated in the title of Chapter 11, not only was Mary prepared for her entry into the world but the world was also prepared in advance for her. "Que en la creación de todas las cosas el Señor tuvo presentes a Cristo Señor nuestro y a su Madre Santísima". In this conception of the creation of the universe, the Virgin was present from the beginning to serve, together with Christ, as a model upon which all of creation was based.

Throughout this portion of the text, Sor María inserts several chapters which represent a different sort of mystical experience than that which surrounds it. She provides an interpretation of several chapters of the biblical book of Revelation, relating the imagery contained therein to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. While still claiming to receive the interpretation from a higher source, these chapters clearly represent the more intellectual sort of vision arising from detailed study of the scriptures.

Prior to the "immaculate conception" of the Virgin, her parents (her mother, Anne, in particular) were also prepared. Chapter 12 details the circumstances of their lives and

elaborates on the prayers which they offered to God. These prayers, guided “por especial impulso del Espíritu Santo” (Vol. 1, 173) may be seen as the beginning of the preparation for Mary’s mystic experience. Just as María de Agreda’s mother was no stranger to the mystical relationship with God brought about through lifelong effort and preparation, the experiences of the Virgin’s mother formed a foundation of faith upon which God could build. Beginning in Chapter 13, María de Agreda writes that, in response to these prayers, God granted to them special gifts and graces, including extensive revelatory experiences. Anne and Joachim received visitations whose nature was quite similar to that of the visitations which would be given to the Virgin and Joseph in preparation for the conception of Christ.

Obviously, however, having spiritually prepared parents is no guarantee of divine contact. Thus, we see Mary in the following chapter being prepared from within her mother’s womb. As María de Agreda lays out the circumstances of the blessed pregnancy, it becomes clear that Mary’s contact with the Divine is guaranteed from the moment of her “immaculate” conception:

Concebida María Santísima sin pecado original, como queda dicho, con aquella primera visión que tuvo de la Divinidad, quedó su espíritu todo absorto y llevado de aquel objeto de su amor, que comenzó en aquel estrecho tabernáculo del materno vientre *en el instante que fue criada su alma dichosísima*, para no interrumpirse jamás [...] Y para que en la contemplación y amor divino fuese creciendo [...] con que ejercitó muchos actos de las virtudes que allí podía obrar, renovó el Señor la maravilla de *aquella visión y manifestación abstractiva* de su divinidad, concediéndosela otras dos veces; de suerte que *se le manifestó la Santísima Trinidad tres veces por este modo, antes de nacer al mundo*: una en el instante que fue concebida, otra la mitad de los nueve meses y la tercera el día antes que naciera. (Vol. 1, 312, emphasis added)

Thus, in María de Agreda’s narration, the Virgin Mary receives 3 separate visions of the collective Trinity while still within her mother’s womb. To understand the exact nature of these visions, however, it is crucial to carefully note her wording: “aquella visión y

manifestación abstractiva”. This is a term found not directly in the writings of Santa Teresa¹³. Rather, it appears to be a new contribution to the tradition of the mystic process in Spain by Sor María de Agreda. Fortunately, later on in *Mística ciudad*, Sor María provides a definition, contrasting it with intuitive visions:

[...] la levantó Dios a un estado en que la manifestó la Divinidad, no con visión intuitiva como a los bienaventurados, pero con otra visión clara y por especies criadas, que en todo el discurso de esta Historia he llamado visión abstractiva; porque no depende de la presencia real del objeto, ni él mueve por sí el entendimiento como presente, sino por otras especies que le representan como él es en sí mismo, aunque está ausente.” (Vol. 1, 537)

Hence, this is not a case, as in a unitive vision, of the Trinity actually appearing before the mystic to join with her, nor of the mystic being taken to the presence of the Trinity. Rather, there is a sending of a facsimile; similar, in a way, to the phenomenon of bilocation. In Sor María’s explanation of bilocation, the mystic figure appears in two places at once, though one is held to be a representation of the other, possibly carried by an angel. In an abstractive vision, the divine figure being sought sends a representation of Himself through a messenger.

That this term was popularized in Spain by Sor María¹⁴ is supported by the writings of Pedro de Catalayud who, in providing a similar (albeit more detailed) definition of the term, states that such visions were had by the Virgin, in circumstances similar to those described by Sor María. He also states, “Estas visiones abstractivas clarísimas tuvieron

¹³ This is not to say that such visions were not experienced by the Saint. The wording with which she begins *Carta XIII* describes a vision of the trinity which she states was neither precisely imaginative nor intellectual. Antonio de San Jose, compiling her letters in 1778, states in his notes that this vision was abstractive in nature. (*Cartas*, 118)

¹⁴ It should be noted that a similar distinction between the intuitive and the abstract in visionary experiences can be traced back at least as far as Gregory of Rimini in the early 1300s. “If a cognition does not terminate in a thing but in its representative, the thing is known abstractively, whether it exists or not.” (*Vision and Certitude*, 361)

Adam, Isaías, los Patriarcas, &c. la V. Virgen María de Jesús de Agreda” (*Doctrinas*, 354).

Clearly, he was familiar with the writings of Sor María and was utilizing her terminology.

She then continues with an explanation of the distinct levels of visionary enlightenment which the Virgin would experience throughout her life.

Y no se entienda que por no ser continuo este modo de visión, le faltó otro más inferior, aunque superiorísimo y muy alto, con que miraba por fe y especial ilustración el ser de Dios; que este modo de contemplación fue incesante y continuo en María Santísima sobre toda la contemplación que tuvieron todos los viadores juntos.

Pero aquella visión abstractiva de la Divinidad, aunque no era ajena del estado de viadora, con todo eso era tan alta e inmediata a la visión intuitiva, que no debía ser continua en esta vida mortal para quien había de merecer la gloria intuitiva por otros actos; mas venía a ser sumo beneficio de la gracia para este intento. (Vol. 1, 312-313, emphasis added)

Again, María de Agreda employs the language of Santa Teresa alongside her concept of the abstractive in her description of the separate states of the Virgin’s experience. The motion between this “visión abstractiva”, the day to day “ilustración” in which she was to live her life and the “visión intuitiva” which she was to merit through actions taken in her life has an echo in the Teresan model in that the Virgin did not perpetually live on that higher, mystical plane (at least, not yet). Rather, while the mystical influence of God was present to some extent throughout her days, the highest reaches of mystic communion and enlightenment were only attained on certain occasions.

Within the mystic model – perhaps moreso than most in the case of Sor María – there can be no progression without sacrifice and hardship. While the Virgin enjoyed peace and tranquility within her mother’s womb, her mother carried such a burden of hardship on her behalf. As the text continues:

La felicísima madre Santa Ana corría su preñado toda espiritualizada con divinos efectos y suavidad que sentía en sus potencias; pero la Divina Providencia, para mayor corona y seguridad de su próspera navegación de la

Santa, ordenó que llevase algún lastre de trabajos, porque sin ellos no se logran hartos los frutos de la gracia y del amor. (Vol. 1, 315)

Sor María describes Satan working against the Virgin's mother both physically and spiritually, bringing threats to both her life and her soul. Her response to these temptations is a perfect example of the progression brought about through the purgative process of rejecting evil:

Pero la invicta matrona resistió estos golpes varonilmente, con humilde fortaleza, paciencia, continua oración y viva fe en el Señor, con que desvanecía las marañas fabulosas del dragón y todas redundaban en mayores aumentos de la gracia y protección divina [...] (Vol. 1, 318)

The greater the opposition she faced, the more spiritual growth Mary's mother experienced. As the Devil turned the women who should have been her friends against her, she grew in charity towards them, one of the great virtues sought after by the mystic:

No se turbó Santa Ana con esta tentación, antes con toda mansedumbre y caridad sufrió las injurias y acarició a quien se las hacía; y desde entonces miró a aquellas mujeres con más afecto y les hizo mayores beneficios. (Vol. 1, 319)

With each attempt against Anna's virtue, the closer she grew to God as she continued to resist temptation:

[...] pero con el favor Divino alcanzó victoria de esta tentación *más gloriosamente* que de las otras; porque no dormitaba la guarda de Israel que guardaba a su Ciudad Santa a (Sal., 120, 4) y la tenía guarnecida con tantas centinelas, los más esforzados de su milicia, que ahuyentaron a Lucifer y sus ministros para que no molestasen más a la dichosa madre, que aguardaba ya el parto felicísimo de la Princesa del Cielo, y *se había dispuesto para él con los actos heroicos de las virtudes y merecimientos adquiridos en estas peleas*, y se acercaba el fin deseado. (Vol. 1, 320, emphasis added)

Each trial of her faith, each "heroic" action brought her greater virtue, glory and divine protection.

As a result of the early and even premortal preparations of both Anna and the embryonic Mary, it is no surprise that the Virgin would have begun her mystical contact at

such a high level. This helps to provide some validity to María de Agreda's apparent acceleration of the traditional mystic process. While the Spanish Nun's earliest visionary experiences (of which we have record) could be seen as much more advanced than those encountered by the average initiate to the mystic process, her own preparation was both extensive and intensive and, according to her own vision of premortal life, could be argued to have begun before her birth. Just as the experiences of the Virgin's mother may be seen as a foundation for her own experience, Sor María's mother also experienced visions which guided the course of her life and that of her family.

The birth of the Virgin

It should come as no surprise, considering the circumstances surrounding her conception and pre-birth experience that her birth should also have elements of the mystic pattern within it, both on the part of the Virgin and her mother. "Fue prevenida su madre Ana con ilustración interior [...] cómo llegaba la hora de su parto." As her body prepared itself for delivery, "la más que dichosa niña María al mismo tiempo fue arrebatada por Providencia y virtud Divina en un éxtasis altísimo" (Vol. 1, 326). In this state of ecstasy, she was spared the trauma of the birthing process.

Soon afterward, while still a babe in arms, she was to receive intuitively that which she had previously received abstractly as she was lifted up to the throne of God. She was there received by Father and Son and, despite initially not recognizing, due to her extreme youth, the depth and purpose of that which she witnessed, she was then granted understanding on a spiritual level. "y dando el lumen necesario desplegó su Divinidad y se la manifestó intuitiva y claramente en grado altísimo; siendo esta vez la primera que aquella alma santísima de María vio a la Beatísima Trinidad con visión clara y beatífica." (Vol. 1, 333)

The author here makes a crucial distinction between the levels of revelation received in her premortal and infant states. In stating that this was the first time that she saw the Trinity with clear vision, a vision which was granted “intuitiva y claramente”, it may be extrapolated that the intuitive vision is, in fact, higher than the abstract vision received within the womb. Despite this clarity and heightened understanding, however, her comprehension remained incomplete, “ignorando siempre la niña Reina la causa de todo lo que conocía”. (Vol. 1, 335)

Here also is found the first case of bilocation in the life of the Virgin, as Sor María records that Anna was completely unaware of the absence of her daughter: “Y con el mismo júbilo y reverencia la volvieron a poner en los brazos de Santa Ana, a quien se le ocultó también este suceso y la falta o ausencia de su hija; porque en su lugar suplió uno de los Ángeles de Guarda, tomando cuerpo aéreo para este efecto”. (Vol. 1, 335) Thus, the phenomenon for which Sor María gained much of her fame for its relative uniqueness is given support and precedent through the newborn Virgin as she appeared to be in two places at once.

Speaking directly to Sor María, Mary then speaks of the preparation and purification which she underwent, despite already being pure and sinless from this moment of her birth, to be the Mother of Christ:

y como no me tocó el óbice del primer pecado, no tuve el impedimento que los demás mortales para entrar por aquellas puertas eternas del Cielo; antes el brazo poderoso de mi Hijo hizo conmigo como con Señora de las virtudes y Reina del Cielo. Y porque de mi carne y sangre había de vestirle y hacerle hombre, quiso su dignación de antemano prevenirme y hacerme su semejante en la pureza y exención de la culpa y en otros dones y privilegios divinos. (Vol. 1, 341)

The first months of her life, as writes Sor María, were filled with visionary experiences. Even in her sleep, she was filled with visions and ecstasies, and was frequently

visited by angelic ministers. Sor María takes each type of vision in turn, first examining angelic visitations, “remitiendo las apariciones intelectuales e imaginarias para otros capítulos”. (Vol. 1, 363) It should be emphasized that, while her early childhood was thus endowed with an abundance of the elements of the mystic process, there is still room for growth in the Virgin’s mystic journey.

This fact is made clear in Sor María’s description of the angelic appearances which Mary received. While they carried symbols and emblems, “a la Reina María no le fue manifestada hasta el punto que concibió el Verbo Humanado.” (Vol. 1, 364) These appearances varied in type and quality as this growth took place, as Sor María expounds:

“Y como era consiguiente crecer en el fervor y ansias de ver al sumo bien [...] muchas veces por voluntad del Señor y por manos de sus Ángeles era llevada corporalmente al cielo empíreo, donde gozaba de la presencia de la Divinidad; aunque algunas veces, de estas que era levantada al Cielo, la veía claramente, y otras sólo por especies infusas, pero altísimas y clarísimas en este género de visión. Conocía también a los Ángeles clara e intuitivamente”. (Vol. 1, 383)

Again, the abstract vision “por especies infusas” is contrasted with a clear intuitive vision and though they are carefully kept separate from each other, both are experienced in their turn in the infant’s life. This, naturally, leaves room for additional growth in the mystic process, which growth would soon be witnessed.

Childhood of the Virgin

At the age of 18 months, Sor María’s Mary began to speak. This was not, writes the author, due to a lack of ability to have spoken previously but due to the simple idea that the time was not yet right. This is, however, the moment of a significant development in the life of the Virgin for another reason: her advancement in the mystic progression.

Pero antes de tener licencia del Señor para comenzar a hablar con los hombres, que fue a los diez y ocho meses de su tierna infancia, tuvo una intelectual visión de la Divinidad, no intuitiva sino por especies, renovándole

las que otras veces había recibido y aumentándole los dones de las gracias y beneficios. (Vol. 1, 389)

The description given is initially confusing considering the earlier definition of an abstract vision as being “por especies infusas” and the statement that this intellectual vision was “por especies” but there is clearly a higher status granted to this vision as it is stated to be “aumentándole los dones”. The solution may lie in the use of the term *infusas* to describe the representations of divinity experienced in an abstract vision while these *especies* lack such a modifier. Regardless, this clearly marks a moment of spiritual growth in the life of Mary as a toddler.

From this time on, Mary spoke often with God and the angels in prayer and sought humility diligently, choosing the poorest of clothes which her mother would allow her to wear, obeying her parents in all things and weeping prostrate on the ground, not in throwing tantrums as most children but in sorrow for the sins of the world. She mortified her body and her soul in rigorous spiritual exercise, similar to those practiced in the family of Sor María during her childhood.

At the age of three, she was brought to the temple to be given to the service of God. Upon being accepted therein, she was again lifted up:

en un ardiente éxtasis; y luego el Altísimo mandó a los Serafines que la asistían ilustrasen su alma santísima y la preparasen [...] Y con esta preparación, [...] fue llevada en cuerpo y alma hasta el Cielo empíreo, donde fue recibida de la Santísima Trinidad [...] Y luego la volvieron a iluminar de nuevo con otra cualidad o lumen con el cual vio la Divinidad intuitiva y claramente; siendo esta la segunda vez que se le manifestó por este modo intuitivo a los tres años de su edad. (Vol. 1, 430)

Similarly to Sor María being repeatedly prepared for higher levels of visionary experience, there is an immediate process of mystic preparation for Mary for this particular vision, despite this being the second time she has had this same basic experience. This

follows the pattern established in Sor María's other writings that preparation is never complete but the increase of light and knowledge must be continually repeated and amplified.

Though this appears to be merely a repetition of a previously received vision, Sor María indicates that the experience associated with the vision was, nonetheless, higher and greater. "el objeto es infinito; y aunque se le había manifestado otra vez claramente, pero siempre le resta infinito que comunicar de nuevo con más admiración y mayor amor de quien recibe este favor." (Vol. 1, 432) Upon the close of this vision but before returning to her natural senses, she is brought down from this clear, intuitive vision to one which she describes as *imaginaria* "en otro estado más inferior" (Vol. 1, 434) This is an important point as one considers the content of the vision, in which she is clothed for marriage with God.

"[L]a vestidura cándida y refulgente estaba sembrada de unas letras o cifras de finísimo oro y muy brillante, que decían: María hija del Eterno Padre, Esposa del Espíritu Santo y Madre de la verdadera luz. [...] y salió una voz del trono de la Santísima Trinidad, que hablando con María Santísima le dijo: Nuestra Esposa, nuestra querida y escogida entre las criaturas serás por toda la eternidad" (Vol. 1, 435)

There can be no question that this is a vision of Union, yet it is on a lower, imaginary level. Sor María thus makes clear an idea that even such a grand vision of unification with God can leave room for growth and can occur at a lower stage of the mystic process than might otherwise be imagined in Santa Teresa's model. In so doing, she also justifies to an extent her own early visionary experiences which might seem to be beyond what was to be expected of a mystic at her stage of development, such as being addressed by God as "my wife and turtledove" in her earliest recorded visions.

Does this conflict with the Teresan model? Not necessarily. It must be remembered that Santa Teresa established multiple levels of union, the first being a preparatory union. While quite lavish in its nature and description, this is still an elaborate betrothal rather than a

marriage as the declaration of her spousal station is in the future tense. Hence, this is a Preparatory Union rather than the all-consuming Transforming Union of the spiritual marriage itself. The first vision, seen in this light, may be recognized under the category of the Prayer of Conforming Union, the sixth of Santa Teresa's steps. The final Transforming Union has yet to take place.

As Mary's life progressed, so too did her virtue by practice and spiritual exercise and so, by extension, grew her connection with God. "Fue adornada María Santísima desde el primer instante de su vida con los hábitos de todas las virtudes en grado eminentísimo, y continuamente fueron aumentando con nueva gracia y operaciones perfectas". (Vol. 1, 481) Faith, hope, charity, prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, each virtue, despite being held in highest degree by the young Mary, were augmented through her daily life and the righteous actions in which she engaged herself.

These led to manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Ghost with the purpose of "dar alguna especial perfección a las potencias para que hagan algunas acciones y obras perfectísimas y más heroicas en las materias de las virtudes". (Vol. 1, 600) It is worth noting, due to its prominence held in the life of the author, María, that for her the gift of the Holy Ghost which is first and foremost before the rest is fear of God. (Vol. 1, 604)

After elaborating on these gifts, specific attention returns to the visionary experiences of the Virgin. In beginning, Sor María explains a principle crucial to understanding her concept of the visionary experience:

“[B]ien puede comunicar Dios mayores y más altas visiones y revelaciones al menos santo y menores al mayor. Y el don de la profecía con otros gratis datos puede concederlos a los que no son santos; [...] y por esto, cuando se hace comparación entre la excelencia de los profetas, no se habla de la santidad, [...] sino de la luz de la profecía y modo de recibirla, en que se puede juzgar cuál sea más o menos levantado, según diferentes razones. (Vol. 1, 615)

Hence, personal sanctity and purity do not necessarily directly correlate with elevation of visionary experience. This statement performs two functions for our author. Firstly, it provides an explanation for how the Virgin, despite her perfections, can occasionally receive lesser revelations than those for which she may be qualified. At the same time, it provides justification for Sor María, despite her imperfections, to receive highly elevated revelations throughout her life beyond what would normally be thought possible for one at her stage of progression.

This initially appears to be a significant departure from the concept of sequential elevation of revelation paired hand in hand with gradual personal progression. At the same time, there is in her other writings a distinct expectation that the mystic will progress both in personal righteousness and in visionary elevation. This need not be a contradiction. Rather, it ties into the concept expressed earlier that there can be no end to progression. No matter what step of the revelatory ladder you may be on or what your status of personal righteousness may be, there is always room to progress in both. Saint or sinner, all have the same work to perform, one of drawing closer to God. While she cautions strongly against backsliding, the continuance of progression is more important than the specific level of sanctity possessed.

She immediately moderates her apparent break with Teresian tradition by stating:

Pero no obstante que la gracia de visiones divinas sea distinta de la santidad y virtudes, qué pueden separarse, con todo eso la voluntad y Providencia Divina las junta muchas veces según el fin y motivo que tiene en comunicar estos dones gratuitos de las revelaciones particulares (Vol. 1, 616)

Hence, while there can be exceptions (of which she gives examples), the general rule is that those who receive great revelations should be purified in preparation to receive them. Mary, she points out, is no exception to this general rule. Being the most pure and prepared

of any being to have lived, she received revelations which were “más altas, más admirables, más frecuentes y divinas que a todo el resto de los Santos.” (Vol. 1, 622)

She now divides the visions received by Mary into five varieties which she elaborates in reverse order from Santa Teresa. While the latter began at the lowest degree and moved to the highest, Sor María begins at the center and moves outward:

- Visión clara de la Divina esencia
- Visión abstractiva de la Divinidad
- Visiones y revelaciones intelectuales
- Visiones imaginarias
- Visiones divinas corpóreas

She states that the first of these is the highest and that the Virgin experienced these clear, beatific, intuitive (three terms which appear to be interchangeable in this portion of the text) visions on many occasions throughout her life. She here mentions several¹⁵ such visions which are described elsewhere in her narrative, such as that experienced upon first leaving the womb. These visions are those in which God is beheld face to face, where the soul is united with God. She states the prerequisites for receiving such a vision are: a high degree of sanctifying grace, great purity through cleansing vision, and the neutralization of original sin. Finally, upon reaching these purgative prerequisites, there is a final preparatory operation performed by God, a finishing touch, as it were, which separates the soul from earthly concerns and fills the soul with a new light which takes possession of the soul and removes any residual darkness.

This is clearly a unitive vision of highest degree, which is made still more clear as Sor María states that these preparations lead one “para entrar en el tálamo de la Divinidad”. (Vol. 1, 630) This is the final chamber of the Teresan castle, the bedchamber of God, the supreme

¹⁵ “(Cf. supra n. 333, 340; infra p. II n. 139, 473, 956, 1523 y p. III n. 62, 494, 603, 616, 654, 685)” (Vol. 1, 623)

Transforming Vision which is the pinnacle of the mystic experience. While, in the case of the young Virgin, the marriage was still to take place, she had entered into this most sacred space. She has been given to understand the essence of God.

The next level addressed is that of the Abstractive vision, described as being significantly inferior to the Intuitive yet superior to all others. She stresses that, aside from the finishing touch described above, all other prerequisite preparations for the Intuitive vision apply to the Abstractive, “porque con ella entra el alma en los atrios de la casa del Señor Dios eterno.” (Vol. 1, 632) While this is where Santa Teresa would come to the Conforming union, the description provided by Sor María is still transformative in nature as the soul is enflamed “en el amor Divino y se transforma en él y la causa un olvido y enajenamiento de todo lo terreno y de sí misma”. (Vol. 1, 632) The focus of this transformation, however, is the sort of distancing of internal and external senses which form the basis of the Conforming union. Hence, the argument can be made that the Abstractive union of Sor María is roughly equivalent to Santa Teresa’s Prayer of Conforming union.

In descending to the next sort of vision described, she carefully explains the relationship between the Abstractive vision and the Intellectual vision:

la noticia abstractiva o visión de la divinidad se puede llamar revelación intelectual, pero doyle otro lugar solo y más alto por dos razones: la una, porque el objeto de aquella revelación es único y supremo entre las cosas inteligibles, y estas más comunes revelaciones intelectuales tienen muchos y varios objetos [...] la otra razón es, porque la visión abstractiva de la divina esencia se causa por especies altísimas, infusas y sobrenaturales de aquel objeto infinito; pero la común revelación y visión intelectual algunas veces se hace por especies infusas al entendimiento de los objetos revelados y otras veces no son necesarias infusas para todo lo que se entiende”

As Sor María here explains, the abstract vision may be considered a subcategory of intellectual vision but constitutes a higher tier in the mystic progression. She here gives a defining characteristic of the abstract vision as one specifically dealing with God Himself

and, thus, requiring a higher sort of representation than the more common intellectual vision. This makes clearer the place of the abstract vision in the Teresan model. Any vision of Union will, of necessity, deal with God and/or Christ as they are the one(s) with whom the mystic is being united. As a result, it may be deduced that the abstract vision fills the places of both the Vision of Preparatory Union and that of the Conforming Union. In *Libro de la vida*, the two are also given a single combined category. Thus, while not including the subdivisions present in *Castillo interior* or *Camino de perfección*, this still fits precisely with the Teresan model of the more general Prayer of Union as laid as forth in *Libro de la vida*.

Further explaining the Intellectual Vision, Sor María states that this sort of vision is that experienced by true prophets and may be distinguished by the revealing or understanding of some divine mystery. While some have spoken of things yet to come in a prophetic manner, the true Intellectual Prophetic Vision must include such a divine mystery to qualify as such. She provides the example of Caiphas being moved upon by divine impulse to prophesy regarding the death of Christ as a lesser sort of prophecy, lacking divine intelligence and light regarding such a mystery.

She now mingles concepts from several of Santa Teresa's writings, explaining that the intellectual vision can be of many varieties and grades (as seen in *Camino de perfección*), it of necessity involved a new understanding (as stated in *Castillo interior*) and generally required that the recipient be in a place of peace, separated from the concerns of the world (as stated in *Libro de la vida*).

What distinguished the experience of the Virgin in this sort of vision, as Sor María states, is that she experienced them continually when not in other, more exalted visions. It became as a state of being for her rather than a fleeting experience. This is due to her having already been revealed the deepest and greatest mysteries of God in their fullest degree.

Hence, her intelligence was permanently enlightened with this knowledge, one more complete and ever present than those experienced by other mystics and prophets. As a result, unlike other categories of visions mentioned in this chapter, Sor María does not provide specific examples of Mary's experiences of them at this time but promises to return to the subject.

Her attention now turns to Imaginary Visions. These visions deal with the physical world, that which can be comprehended within mortal imaginings of the world and its functions. It represents those things which can be perceived by the senses without greater divine enlightenment. It was in this sort of vision that, after the birth of Jesus, she is able to know of His actions while He is distant from her¹⁶.

This definition of the Imaginary Vision allows us to more precisely place Sor María's *Face of the Earth* within her own scale. Dealing as it does with things of this world, things which are seen and heard and are related to the mortal experience without revealing greater, grander mysteries of God, this is the position into which this earliest of her recorded visions would fall. Being only the second level in her system of divine inspiration, it appears not so surprising that one so young and inexperienced in mystic matters could receive and achieve such a vision.

Finally, she turns to her last category, that of Corporeal Visions. She begins by explaining two subcategories of vision, one which she defines as being genuinely Corporeal Vision and the other, while called corporeal vision, is improperly named as such. In a true corporeal vision, a supernatural entity actually appears before the mystic viewer. These visitations can be made by God, angels, saints, demons or any other supernatural being. God

¹⁶ "(Cf. infra p. II n. 965-994, 1156, 1204-1222)" (Vol. 1, 638)

need not restrict Himself to a vision of Union but can appear even in this lowest level of visions experienced by the Virgin.

The second sort of vision, that which is improperly called corporeal, is only an illusion or empty image of the supernatural entity being perceived. She states that the voice heard by the young Samuel calling him to the service of God may have been such a vision. This sort of vision, she states, was never experienced by the Virgin, being of too low a position for her exalted state and, as such, she spends little time discussing them.

The senses must be prepared for a Corporeal Vision. While an Imaginary Vision can be given in dreams and higher Visions remove the mystic from their mortal senses to higher levels of perception, the rapture or ecstasy of the Corporal Vision is one related to the senses, being exterior to the viewer. She states that these were often enjoyed by the Virgin (without being removed from her constant state of Imaginary Vision), including in the Annunciation of the coming of Jesus to her womb. She cannot, however, provide any further scriptural examples but states that she often perceived the heavenly host which guarded and protected her, as she describes in some detail in the following chapter. Even within corporeal visions, there are separate degrees, similar to those of direct communion with God, including of intellectual and imaginary. She goes on to describe these visions of angels as an indirect communion with God, compared to a light shining through prisms.

Returning from her discourse on different degrees of visions to the life of the child Mary, she abruptly inverts the trope of the mystic being pierced with ecstatic darts of love from God, stating that it was She who wounded the heart of God with such darts, to the point that, had the time not yet been right, God would have impregnated her at once. This inversion creates a new concept of divine unity, one in which not only is the mystic moved upon by God but God is moved upon by the mystic. This mutual ecstasy seems the natural

climax after reaching God's bedchamber or highest degree of Union. Yet despite the splendid revelatory heights reached by the Virgin, the secret of her destiny as the mother of God was kept from her.

In vision, God addressed her as His wife and turtledove and declared His infinite love for her:

Esposa y paloma mía, yo te amo con amor infinito, y de ti quiero lo más agradable a mis ojos y la satisfacción entera de mi deseo. [...] Por esta razón entenderás, Esposa mía, que habiéndote elegido con mi diestra para mis delicias y habiéndote enriquecido de mis dones, no será justo que mi gracia esté ociosa en tu corazón, ni tu amor carezca de su fruto, ni te falte la herencia de mis escogidos; y así quiero que te dispongas a padecer tribulaciones y penalidades por mi amor. (Vol. 1, 665)

Despite the heights of purity and visionary experience which the Virgin had achieved, she must still suffer darkness, trials and pain. Why? “que por este medio le quería acrecentar con mayor gloria.” (Vol. 1, 677) Passing through trials leads to greater glory, which fits well the mystic concept as experienced and expounded upon by Sor María, for whom the struggle against the darkness was as neverending as the potential for progression to which it was inextricably linked. From the age of three and a half until she was twelve years old, Mary experienced a distancing from God which caused her to question her worthiness, the which was a source of tremendous sorrow. Despite maintaining her consistent state of intellectual vision, she was denied other manifestations and visions. She could no longer perceive her heavenly guardians and was no longer taken up into the presence of God.

Bit by bit, after reaching the age of twelve, her visionary experiences began to return. First, at her imploring, “se corrió algo la cortina que encubría la vista de las sustancias espirituales y se le manifestaron los Santos Ángeles y los vio, como solía, en su mismo ser, sin estorbo ni dependencia del cuerpo ni sentidos.” (Vol. 1, 728) Yet, despite having her heavenly guardians revealed to her view, she was still denied the ecstasies which she had

experienced in the presence of God, though her angelic host promised her that the day was soon at hand that she would once again receive them.

Through them, she received the light previously spoken of (Vol. 1, 626) to repurify her mind in preparation for receiving once again those greater levels of spiritual ecstasy. Sor María states that such a renewal was necessary “para mudarla de aquel estado a este otro de diferentes y nuevos favores y proporcionar las potencias con el objeto y con el modo de verle”. (Vol. 1, 733) With this preparation, the day at last arrived that this successive elevation culminated in God revealing Himself to her anew in Abstract Vision:

Este orden de elevaciones iban causando en las potencias de la divina Reina los efectos y operaciones de amor y virtudes que pretendía el mismo Señor, que es cuanto puedo explicarlas; y en medio de ellas corrió Su Majestad el velo y, después de haber estado tanto tiempo oculto, se manifestó a su esposa única y dilecta María Santísima por visión abstractiva de la Divinidad. (Vol. 1, 734)

Upon the return of her divine spouse, her ecstatic joy was as great as had been her sorrow at His absence. He reassured her that His absence was due to no fault of her own but that she might merit anew His graces and blessings.

At the age of thirteen and a half, she received another Abstractive Vision in which God commanded her to be married, despite her vows of chastity and her desire to remain single. There was no explanation given to Mary for this command, though Sor María states that it was meant as a trial of her faith, similar to that faced by Abraham when asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Thus, she obeyed the will of God and of her priests (who had also received divine guidance in this matter) and, at the age of 14, was married to the 33-year-old Joseph.

In beginning the second volume, Sor María again begins with an introduction speaking of her own visionary experience. She states that God, accepting the work she had

done, declared, “necesitas de nueva y mayor disposición [...] con mayor pureza y conformidad a lo que has de entender y escribir.” (Vol 2, introduction 1) She was again asked to raise herself to a still higher level in preparation for that which was to come. She struggles against doubt, temptation and turmoil. Just as Mary was forced to suffer a distancing from God, so Sor María finds herself separated from the light of revelation, following which period she states: “comencé a levantarme de aquel confuso abatimiento en que estaba oprimida y sentí una fuerza que me fervorizaba en los deseos y en los actos de Fe, Esperanza y Caridad. [...] salí a buscar mi antigua luz y verdad.” (Vol 2, introduction 11) The mystic process begins anew, with a purgative confessional followed by a resurgence of light.

This process is gradual, with reminders to separate herself from the things of this world. She mentions a difference between the voice which now admonished her and those which she had experienced before. As it begins, she names it an intellectual voice and, as it ends, she states of the voice, “Y aunque juzgaba ser de ángel, pero entonces no le conocí tan claro, porque no le veía como otras veces; que en manifestarse o encubrirse se acomodan estos beneficios a la disposición que tiene el alma para recibirlos.” (Vol. 2, introduction 23) While clearly a revelatory experience, this vision lacks the resplendent glory and clarity of those hitherto received, which she judges to be due to her soul’s indisposition to receive higher things at that time. Just as Mary, upon returning from her period of celestial silence, was gradually reintroduced by the voices of angels before being thrust anew into the heights in which she had hitherto rejoiced, Sor María must pass through a similar reintroduction.

Thus is it that the Virgin asks to receive Sor María anew, despite her being weighed down by the burden of her sins. In reply, God grants her His light once again. As she states of the experience, “No es posible explicar lo que siente el alma en tales misterios y beneficios.” (Vol. 2, introduction 30) As always with the mystic process, these blessings are

given as a preparation for higher mystical visions, just as she states that Mary was being prepared for the Incarnation of Jesus in her womb. In this preparation, “iban creciendo los dones y favores de la gracia, y aunque parecen todos de una misma especie o género desde el principio, pero íbanse aumentando y creciendo; y yo no tengo términos nuevos y diferentes que adecúen a estos aumentos y nuevos favores” (Vol. 2, introduction 32)

Indeed, the visions received by the Virgin continued to increase in glory and scope in the days leading up to the conception of Jesus. Borrowing an aquatic image from the scriptures similar to those employed by Santa Teresa, Sor María states that God prepared Mary: “soltando el ímpetu del río (Sal., 45, 5) de la Divinidad, para que inundase con sus influjos a esta Ciudad de Dios”. (Vol. 2, 4) While in prayer on the first day of what is now referred to as the Novena, the Virgin’s spirit was raised up to a new dwelling place closer to God. Sor María describes this vision methodically, relating it to other visions received previously:

Sintió luego que allí la disponían con aquellas iluminaciones y purificaciones que recibía otras veces para alguna más alta visión de la Divinidad. [...] Con esto se le manifestó la Divinidad por visión, no intuitiva, sino abstractiva; pero [...] Fue esta visión más alta y más profunda que otras de este género; porque cada día la divina Señora se hacía más idónea y unos beneficios [...] la disponían para otros y las repetidas noticias y visiones de la Divinidad la hacían más robusta para obrar con mayor fuerza cerca de aquel objeto infinito. (Vol 2, 6)

Again, Sor María drives home the idea that each vision received prepares the mystic, making them spiritually stronger and better able to receive higher visions. The gradual building from angelic visitation to abstractive vision, rather than skipping straight to intuitive vision, is consistent with the idea that the mystic process must begin anew through thorough preparation. She repeatedly states in this section of the text that God sought to prepare her for the coming union which would result in the conception of Jesus.

One of the most descriptive images presented relates to the foundation of the City of God, a concept which she here begins to build in detail: “Toda esta visión y sus efectos ordenaba el Altísimo para abrir en el corazón de María las zanjas tan profundas como pedía el edificio que en ella quería edificar”. (Vol. 2, 10)

The second day saw her spiritually elevated to the same dwelling as before as a necessary part of her preparation for the vision to be received. Sor María emphasizes here the transformative nature of this vision, a transformation which makes Mary more godlike in nature. While receiving God’s wisdom on the first day, the second day sees her receive a measure of the omnipotent power of God as she is granted sovereignty over God’s creations. Through the power of a vision of Transforming Union, she is being made into a vessel more worthy to contain the divine presence of Jesus, a necessary step for the hypostatic union of God and mortal.

The third day, like the first two, Mary received an Abstractive Vision similar to the first two, yet greater in a way which Sor María finds difficult to express. She states, rather, “Muy tarda y desigual es nuestra capacidad para ir entendiendo los aumentos que iban recibiendo estos dones y gracias que acumulaba el Altísimo en la divina María, y a mí me faltan nuevos términos para explicar algo de lo que se me ha manifestado.” (Vol. 2, 28) Essentially, there is some sort of advancement and growth here, yet Sor María lacks the words to distinguish precisely how. She later states that Mary was given “cierto género de participación más alta de sus mismos atributos”. (Vol. 2, 32) As she had participated in His omniscience on the first day and His omnipotence on the second, she is brought to participate in God’s love for mankind.

On the fourth day of the Novena, she is raised to the same sort of Abstractive vision, though now “con nuevos efectos y más altas iluminaciones de aquel purísimo espíritu.” (Vol.

2, 38) That this vision remains in the realm of the Transforming Union despite the steady upward progression is made clear as she states that Mary came away from this vision “más inflamada y transformada en aquel objeto infinito”. (Vol. 2, 44) The fifth day is much like the fourth in that the primary emphasis is on the preparation and transformation which Mary is made to undergo in order to become more like God and, hence, more worthy to take her place as the mother of God. The sixth day also is the same sort of vision, yet again with “efectos más divinos” (Vol. 2, 59) in some vague fashion.

The seventh day sees a change in the sort of vision experienced in that, while the vision itself remains Abstractive, she is lifted up not only in spirit but in body also. “porque en éste fue llevada corporalmente por mano de sus santos ángeles al cielo empíreo, quedando en su lugar uno de ellos que la representase en cuerpo aparente.” (Vol. 2, 72) This marks the first bilocation since her earliest childhood, again raising the level of divine contact. Just as in those childhood visions at her presentation at the temple, she is clothed with ceremonial garb in preparation for the greater union to come, the Incarnation.

On the eighth day, she heard the voice of God Intellectually, following which she was again physically lifted up to heaven. Sor María again emphasizes that this vision is not Intuitive but Abstractive, though with even somehow greater light, purification and preparation. She states, that, despite the fact that there has been and continues to be great repetition in the gifts and visions granted, God continually grants something higher and new each time: “Pero de tal manera obraba en ella el Altísimo, que, cuando sacaba de sus tesoros infinitos cosas antiguas, siempre añadía muchas nuevas”. (Vol. 2, 99) Accordingly, as she is once again raised up to the presence of God, she is now seated upon a throne at the side of God, though the vision continues to be Abstractive in nature.

She undergoes sacred ceremonial sacraments too great for Sor María to adequately describe, following which she is crowned as the sovereign Queen over all creation. Then, at last, came the “finishing touch” which separates the Abstractive vision from the Intuitive vision:

“Para poner la última mano en esta prodigiosa obra de María Santísima, extendió el Señor su brazo poderoso y por sí mismo renovó el espíritu y potencias de esta gran Señora, dándole nuevas iluminaciones, hábitos y cualidades, cuya grandeza y condiciones no caben en términos terrenos. Era éste el último retoque y pincel de esta imagen viva del mismo Dios” (Vol. 2, 105)

This finishing touch, that for which Mary has been prepared for nine days, brings her to the closest similarity to God possible for a mortal subject to attain.

At last, at the age of fourteen years, six months and seventeen days, Mary received the visitation of the angel Gabriel in the midst of prayer. At the time of this visitation, God left her in her natural state rather than in the great ecstasy of vision. “Y esto dispuso el Altísimo porque este misterio se había de obrar como sacramento de fe”. (Vol. 2, 119) In order for faith to operate, the sure knowledge granted by the divine presence must not be active so that the will of the mortal is not overridden thereby. Mary was not to be ravished of God but was to give her consent of her own free will and choice.

At the instant of her acceptance of the will of God as delivered by the angel Gabriel to become the mother of God, Jesus was formed in her womb. In this same instant, the Virgin mother was lifted to full beatific vision “y se le manifestó la Divinidad intuitiva y claramente”. (Vol. 2, 139) In this state she is further transformed to provide perfect nourishment to the embryonic Jesus in her womb. In the culmination of her lengthy and miraculous preparation, “quedó María Santísima hecha cielo, templo y habitación de la Santísima Trinidad y transformada, elevada y deificada con la especial y nueva asistencia de

la Divinidad en su vientre purísimo”. (Vol. 2, 140) Mary then “salió del éxtasis [...] y fue el más admirable que tuvo.” (Vol. 2, 152)

One might at this point ask the question, if Mary has now reached the highest possible visionary experience and true Union with God, what is there left to be said with regard to the mystic process and the life of Mary? Sor María would hasten to answer that, since God is infinite, coming to know Him, drawing closer to Him and coming to be more like Him is an infinite and neverending process. This is a point emphasized time and time again in *Mística ciudad* and corroborated by her other writings, as seen in the preceding chapter. Spiritual growth has no endpoint but is a continual journey and so it will continue in the case of Mary.

Yet, as always with Sor María, great growth in visionary experience is paired with great suffering. She had already been made aware of the future suffering of her son, the which caused her tremendous sorrow for the 33 years of His life. This sorrow is to serve as a continual sacrifice to God. In an aside to her author, Mary refers to this sacrifice and instructs Sor María to grieve and mourn for the sins and ignorance of mankind in imitation of her own suffering. She further explains the ebb and flow and revelation and suffering in an aside to Sor María:

“Y tampoco es compatible por ley común y ordinaria que la criatura sea gloriosa y esté juntamente sujeta a padecer, aunque no tenga pecado. [...] Pero yo era pura criatura y no siempre había de gozar de la visión debida al que era Dios, ni tampoco me podía llamar siempre bienaventurada, porque sólo de paso lo era. Y con estas condiciones estaba bien dispuesto que padeciese a tiempos y gozase a otros, y que fuese más continuo el padecer y merecer que aquel gozar”. (Vol. 2, 175)

Thus, suffering and an increase in merit go hand in hand. “No pain, no gain”, as it were. If the Virgin not been permitted to suffer, she could not have merited the greater glory and blessings required to fulfill her responsibility as spouse and mother of God. Taking this

fundamental idea, Sor María's pattern of alternating (and, at times, intermingling) agony and ecstasy is given a purpose and function within the mystic process.

Sor María leaves no question as to the intensity of the suffering undergone by the Virgin at this time while between exalted visions. "Y cuando entre esta variedad quedaba la Señora del mundo más en su natural estado, porque así lo disponía el Altísimo, padecía un delirio causado de la fuerza y violencia de su mismo amor; [...] y así sucedía que con la herida penetrante de esta dulcísima flecha llegaba al extremo de la vida". (Vol. 2, 184)

In addition to physical suffering, the Virgin also undergoes fierce demonic assault. Just as Sor María stated that she was often tempted through false visions of Satan, so too Mary is attacked by the dragon, Lucifer between her high communications. Demons appear to her in corporeal form to taunt, torment and tempt her. She, naturally, is unscathed by their attempts, refusing to so much as look at their manifestations. Mary states, in an aside to Sor María, that those who achieve great union with God draw special attention from Satan like a magnet.

During these struggles, the Virgin continued to be transformed by the power of her visionary experiences, now being delivered by the embryonic God within her womb. While she continued to receive daily guidance, she also beheld the Lord, at times through abstractive vision and at others through a view of Him within her virginal womb as though looking through a crystal. Sor María speaks of the effects of these visions on her in this manner:

"Y este favor la transformaba toda en otro ser, inflamando su corazón y causando en toda ella tales efectos, que ninguna capacidad de criaturas los puede explicar. Extiéndase y dilátase el juicio más levantado de los supremos serafines y quedará oprimido de esta gloria (Prov 25, 27), porque toda esta divina Reina era un cielo intelectual y animado" (Vol. 2, 183)

For a time, it seems that Mary has reached a plateau in her visions, as while they continue to be higher visions in nature, they remain lower than the ultimate Union achieved at the conception of Christ within her. Sor María speaks of visions both abstractive and intelectual during Mary's pregnancy, as well as corporeal appearances of her angelic guardians. During Mary's visit with her cousin Elizabeth, for example, Sor María reports: "Tuvo en aquellos tres meses muchas visiones de la divinidad por el modo abstractivo, que era el más frecuente, y más lo era la visión de la humanidad santísima del Verbo con la unión hipostática, porque su virginal tálamo, donde le traía, era su perpetuo altar y oratorio." (Vol. 2, 232)

With the Christ child within her womb, her ecstasy of the spirit seems contagious to those around her. Joseph, Elizabeth and others are blessed by her presence and some are healed of their illnesses. Elizabeth and Joseph witness the sorts of *exterioridades* experienced by Sor María and other visionaries while observing Mary during her prayers, as Mary is lifted from the ground and visually transfigured.

Mary's personal progression continues as Sor María states that her love and humility continue to grow stronger as the baby develops on her womb. At last, the day arrives for the child to be born. After her lengthy visionary plateau, she is granted one of the highest visions of her life, one which lasts for over an hour, immediately preceding labor. She was:

"movida de un fuerte llamamiento del Altísimo con eficaz y dulce transformación que la levantó sobre todo lo criado y sintió nuevos efectos del poder divino, porque fue este éxtasis de los más raros y admirables de su vida santísima. Luego fue levantándose más con nuevos lumines y cualidades que la dio el Altísimo, de los que en otras ocasiones he declarado, para llegar a la visión clara de la divinidad. Con estas disposiciones se le corrió la cortina y vio intuitivamente al mismo Dios con tanta gloria y plenitud de ciencia" (Vol. 2, 473)

While Sor María finds it as difficult to compare intuitive visions as it is to compare degrees of infinity, her statement that this was one of the most rare of Mary's life, it is reasonable to extrapolate that this vision is at least on par with those intuitive visions previously experienced. Her ever-increasing humility is directly stated to be part of the reason for her being lifted up to this degree. (Vol. 2, 474)

Despite the ending of the beatific vision, she remains in ecstasy during labor. She is outwardly transfigured as light begins to issue from her body. Sor María states that she is deified by the experience, no longer appearing to be a mortal creature. While she had previously manifested *exterioridades*, this transfiguration outstrips the previous outward signs of her mystic communion, another indicator of her continued advancement in the mystic progression.

After the birth of her Son, she was able to experience a new sort of union with the divine in the person of the child in her arms. Sor María states that, “sucedió muchas veces, teniéndole en sus brazos, que con otro nuevo beneficio se le manifestaba la humanidad como un viril cristalino” (Vol. 2, 546) As she witnessed his soul's activity and sought to imitate it, she continues to be transformed by God, now in the form of her infant Son. This transformation, Sor María states, causes her to be even more spiritualized, made even more Godlike.

As the third volume begins, God once again distances himself from the Virgin mother. Sor María explains the reasons for this distancing, stating that, despite her grief over this separation, distance made her heart grow fonder. “Y con esta entereza misteriosa el incendio del castísimo corazón de la Madre levantaba la llama, como la fragua y la hoguera con el rocío.” (Vol. 3, 5) Thus it was that this period of dryness was not without purpose but served to further heighten her spiritual strength.

She was not to suffer long, however. She falls to worship her Son, now a toddler, in reply to which He tells her to arise. This, as it happens, is not simply a request to rise from her prostration but a call to raise her up once again in ecstatic, abstractive vision. She enjoys a sweet embrace from God, one combining the love of Father and Spouse. At this time, she is taught the new, higher law of grace and is fully established as the model and pattern for all those who would seek the path of righteousness.

The next significant vision recorded by Sor María continues this teaching of grace. Interestingly, this vision is neither intuitive nor abstractive but, rather, consist of intellectual images. Yet in this vision are communicated new, higher mysteries of the divine. In it, the Father states, in terms quite similar to those used by Mary in speaking to María, that she must continue to prepare for higher things to come. While Mary continually reminds María to imitate her, she is commanded to imitate God. He instructs her, “prepara tu corazón [...] Fervoriza tus deseos y aplica tu mente [...] Atiende, pues, hija y electa mía, que se te pide de tu parte gran disposición. Prepárate para las obras y misterios de nuestra poderosa diestra.” (Vol. 3, 69)

Sor María now digresses a bit to explain the purposes for which these visions and instructions are given to the Virgin, most of which are directly connected to her role as the mother and teacher of Jesus:

“Y para que no sólo quedase capaz de todos sino también de los diferentes modos de entenderla y saliese tan sabia discípula que pudiese después ser ella misma consumada maestra y madre de la sabiduría, usaba el Señor de diferentes medios en ilustrarla. Unas veces con aquella visión abstractiva de la divinidad, que en estos tiempos la tuvo más frecuente; otras, cuando no la tenía, le quedaba una como visión intelectual, más habitual y menos clara.” (Vol. 3, 78)

Throughout the remainder of her Son’s life, Mary is kept aware of His activities through visions of generally unspecified degree and variety. Even at His death, while she

monitors the journeys of His soul through ecstatic vision, she remains in a lesser degree of visionary glory than that experienced on prior occasions. After His resurrection, He appears to her and the apostles on numerous occasions but, even at their most intimate, these experiences are stated to be inferior to beatific vision.

A few days before Christ's final ascension to heaven, Mary, in vision, witnesses the members of the Trinity seated upon their thrones. As she prostrates herself before them, the Father commands her to rise higher. Upon hearing this command, "con virtud divina fue levantada y puesta en el trono de la Majestad real con las tres Divinas Personas." (Vol. 3, 789) She is spoken to by both the Father and the Son and given new responsibilities, filling the role previously occupied by the mortal Christ over the church and its followers.

At this moment, she renewed all the vows and petitions which she had made in such a manner that they were forever changed to be more fervent and unceasing. Following this renewal, she enters into a higher union with Christ than she had previously experienced. "quedó María santísima con un linaje de participación del ser de su Hijo, que no hallo términos para explicarlo [...] la elevó a otro nuevo ser de ciencia y potestad [...] todo lo recibió y tuvo con plenitud y dignamente nuestra Reina y Señora." (Vol. 3, 790)

A few days later, at the ascension of Christ into heaven, Mary is caught up with him and receives a greater measure of glory. Sor María states that this glory was earned by Mary during her life through her merits. On this occasion, Mary is bilocated once again, as Sor María states that "obró el poder divino por milagroso y admirable modo que María santísima estuviese en dos partes" (Vol. 3, 801) While one of her selves remained on earth to guide and comfort the members of the church, her other self remained with Christ on the right hand of his heavenly throne for three days. In this new position, Sor María states that Mary's

humility and wisdom reach their pinnacle, matching this highest point of visionary union with the divine with her most frequently highlighted meritorious characteristics.

In introducing the final volume, Sor María becomes introspective once again. She indicates that, like Mary, she has received many more visionary experiences than she has been able to elaborate, ranging from angelic apparition to direct communication with God. “sobre este favor son innumerables las veces que el mismo Señor por sí mismo, por su Madre santísima y por sus Ángeles me ha quietado y asegurado”. (Vol. 4 introduction, 2)

She notifies the reader that, just as her visionary experience continues to intensify, so too does the darkness which follows. She states that, in writing this part of the work, “he tenido nuevas y fuertes contradicciones, [...] no dejo escrito período ni palabra ni me determino a escribirla sin reconocer más tentaciones que escribo letras.” (Vol. 4 introduction, 3) Despite this, she continues to seek God and to further put off earthly concerns. Yet this only serves to intensify her torment as she describes a new transformation within herself, weakening her physical body and causing intense pain to the point that blood issues from her fingernails.

As always, however, greater suffering serves as preparation for greater things to come and this is to be a preparation for the final portion of the work she writes. Sor María describes the voice of God speaking to her, saying,

“Yo he querido que por este medio queden en ti extinguidos los efectos del pecado y seas renovada para nueva vida y operaciones más altas y de mi mayor agrado, y hasta conseguir este nuevo estado no podrás comenzar lo que te resta de escribir de la Vida de mi Madre y tu Maestra.” (Vol. 4 introduction, 7)

Mary then reminds her of the constant exhortations to humility and charity which she has made of Sor María during her writing and states that it is now time to raise herself to a more perfect imitation of the Virgin Mary. Without this further transformation of her soul,

this loss of herself, she cannot write the work, “porque la voluntad del Señor es que mi vida quede más escrita en tu corazón que en el papel y en ti sientas lo que escribes para que escribas lo que sientes.” (Vol. 4 introduction, 8) Putting this into other terms, the work which Sor María is to write is to simultaneously be the product of religious experience and an initiation of further religious experience. This is perhaps the best description of the relationship between her mysticism and her literary production. Rather than one simply producing the other, it is yet another cyclical relationship.

She stresses also in this introduction that the fear of losing God of which she has often spoken has been ever-increasing. Though it began in childhood, it raised to a higher degree upon dedicating herself to a spiritual life. Again, fear leads to humility which leads to greater seeking after God which, in turn, leads to greater fear of losing Him, and so on.

After spending three days enraptured in celestial vision, the Virgin returned physically to earth yet was still spiritually removed from the earth and its concerns for another three days. “los tres días primeros que estuvo la divina Madre en el cenáculo después de haber bajado del cielo, los pasó muy abstraída de todo lo terreno, gozando de la redundancia del júbilo y admirables efectos de la gloria que en los otros tres había recibido en el cielo.” (Vol. 4, 5) Despite the fact that such distancing from earthly cares is one of the requirements for mystic enlightenment at such levels, Sor María considers this to be noteworthy as this greater distance is indicative of a deeper inner transformation.

At the coming of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost, the Virgin experienced another intuitive vision, one somewhat different than those previously received. She states, “Quedó la purísima Señora transformada y elevada toda en el mismo altísimo Dios, porque vio intuitivamente y con claridad al Espíritu Santo y por algún espacio, aunque de paso, gozó de la visión beatífica de la divinidad”. (Vol. 4, 62) While previously, the visions classified as

intuitive or beatific were of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost in their separate forms, this vision speaks only of the Holy Ghost individually, though the phrase “de la divinidad” may be seen as somewhat vague. However, she also states that Mary was lifted up and transformed by God Himself. Whether this is a case of minimal detail being provided, a case of the Triune God being represented by a single component thereof or, in fact, a vision of only a single member of the Trinity, it is clear that this is not simply a repetition of the same vision which she had previously experienced.

At the same time, it must be remembered that not every vision of God the Father is intuitive in nature, even for Mary in her exalted state, nor even when she is brought physically before His throne. Such non-intuitive yet celestial visions have occurred before in the Virgin’s life and continue to occur, despite her continual spiritual progression. Such a vision is described shortly after the death of Saint Stephen, in which God commands her to ascend as He has done before and she rises to His presence yet “se le manifestó por una visión altísima, aunque no fue intuitivamente sino por especies.” (Vol. 4, 311)

Is this retroceding in her mystic progression? As we near the end of Mary’s life, an important pattern becomes clear which goes a long way toward explaining this apparent regression. One distinction to keep in mind is the manner in which the vision is brought on. While this is not necessarily universally the case, imaginary visions, such as this one, are often brought about in response to prayers and petitions on the part of the mystic. While they do not generally directly request divine manifestations, the vision comes as an answer to their righteous prayers. Their minds are prepared in a meditative, prayerful state and, as such, touch on the mind and are less explicitly transformative. Intuitive visions, on the other hand, tend to come at moments of significant covenants being made or further acts of consecration of the mystic being performed. Being committed to God in the temple in her childhood,

taking on the divine responsibility of being the Mother of Christ and participating in holy ceremonies, for example, are what trigger visions of an intuitive nature for Mary in Sor María's narrative. Thus, while both come as a result of the application of faith, imaginary visions often come as a response to words of faith and meditations on faith while intuitive visions come as a response to acts of faith. The transformation of the intuitive vision can be seen as a heightened form of the more ordinary transformation which naturally takes place as the mystic makes crucial, life-altering decisions.

There is another reason for which an Intuitive vision may be received apart from covenants made by the mystic. As Mary is lifted up in Imaginary vision, she repeats her petitions to God on behalf of the Church and its members. In response, God states that He will grant her desires. After this, He indicates that He wishes to bestow upon her her further understanding:

“Y para que tú entiendas el secreto de mi sabiduría con que conviene dispensar estos misterios, quiero que subas a mi trono [...] Ven, amiga mía, y entenderás nuestros secretos para el gobierno de la Iglesia y sus aumentos y progresos, y tú ejecutarás tu voluntad, que será la nuestra, como ahora te la manifestaremos.— A la fuerza de esta suavísima voz conoció María santísima cómo era levantada al trono de la divinidad y colocada a la diestra de su unigénito Hijo” (Vol. 4, 313)

Hence, the Virgin returns to the throne of God, being lifted into intuitive vision. Sor María goes on to explain that, through this process, the virgin is being made more capable of understanding higher divine mysteries by aligning her will with that of God. So that this could occur, the text indicates that “fue necesario que la gran Señora recibiese primero nueva participación de la divina ciencia y ocultísimos consejos de su Providencia” (Vol. 4, 316) It may be concluded, therefore, that in Sor María's conception of the mystic pattern, while higher echelons of visionary experience require prior preparation, the revelations themselves serve as preparation for greater knowledge and power to be bestowed upon the mystic.

This may be contrasted with another, lower form of transformation which can be seen upon consuming the Eucharist, wherein Sor María states that Mary was both spiritually raised up and transformed “en aquel divino incendio del amor” (Vol. 4, 113) and physically elevated from the ground. No details are given, however, as to any vision which may have been experienced at this time but, rather, of its effects on the Virgin. It is later stated that the consumed tokens, rather than passing through to the stomach, were absorbed by her heart, “como en retorno de la sangre que dio en la encarnación del Verbo” (Vol. 4, 124) Hence, the Eucharist became, for Mary, a return to that state of being experienced while she held the embryonic Christ within her womb. By taking part in sacred ceremonies, her heart is again transformed. However, this represents the renewal of a covenant, rather than taking on a new one. While the taking of the Eucharist triggered a form of transformation, there was no great vision to prepare her for some new direction being taken in her life nor were grand mysteries revealed to her.

On the subject of the heart of the Virgin, Sor María provides us with another insight into the visionary process by the workings of the Virgin’s heart immediately prior to the reception of divine favors. She states that, while seeking God’s aid in prayer, “sintió en su castísimo corazón alguna novedad y efectos dulcísimos, como le sucedía otras veces para algún particular beneficio que se le acercaba.” (Vol. 4, 347) Again, the process of preparation for divine revelation is highlighted, this time on a more minute and intimate scale. The vision which follows is one of personal, physical visitation of Christ and, as such, requires no great uplifting or distancing from the world and its concerns. Even so, Mary’s heart is prepared for the visitation which she receives. While Sor María has often spoken of such favors and feelings in connection with visionary experience previously, she makes clear here the relationship between those feelings and the revelation which follows.

The visionary experiences mentioned herein are hardly all those which occurred in the course of *Mística ciudad*. Many others, be they abstract, intuitive or otherwise, are mentioned in their turn, but a full elaboration of each would become overly repetitive and would not further our understanding of Sor María's vision of mystic progression. Suffice it to say that Mary's experience swings as a pendulum between battles with the darkest forces of evil and the sanctifying light of the divine. As our author states, she has written throughout this work "cómo se ejecutaron las batallas que María santísima tuvo con Lucifer y sus demonios y los triunfos que de ellos alcanzó y el estado en que después de estas victorias misteriosas la dejó el Altísimo por el tiempo que vivió en carne mortal." (Vol. 4, 505) This continues until a final, decisive victory over the forces of hell near the end of her life, following which victory she is placed into a state of perpetual abstractive vision. Sor María states that this visionary state, while quite familiar to the Virgin, was new in two ways. First, by virtue of its permanence, rather than being an occasional, fleeting experience. Secondly, this marked a new upward trajectory, with no more vacillation between high and low states. Now that the demons have been defeated, there is nothing left to pull her downward from her divine experience and her growth and spiritual elevation become continually higher and greater.

This continued "hasta que murió y pasó a la visión beatífica". (Vol. 4, 537) Coming, thus, to the time of her death, she is at last lifted up to that eternal glory for which she has been prepared throughout her life and brought to sit on her throne beside God. It is revealing to note that death, at least in the case of the Virgin, is another form of entering into beatific vision. She later says to Sor María, "Su Majestad dejó a mi elección si quería admitir el morir o pasar sin este trabajo a la visión beatífica y eterna." (Vol. 4, 744) This makes clearer an important point regarding the nature of Sor María's concept of the beatific vision. While

the higher levels of mystic vision require a level of detachment from the world and its concerns, beatific vision requires another level of separation, that of the spirit from the body. Though many mystics speak of their visionary (including Sor María) experiences by stating that they are uncertain of whether they are in the body or out of the body, the death of Mary, the separation of her spirit from her body, is herein synonymous with beatific vision. At last, Mary receives her throne of glory and the eternal embrace of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the Father commands her to ascend higher for the last time.

V: Conclusion

The concept of mystical contact with the divine is a theme echoed throughout many cultures and explored through their respective bodies of literature. The desire for such contact has spawned uncountable theologies, churches and cults. In much of the Western world over the last two millennia, the theology shaping its mystic literature has focused on Jesus of Nazareth and those intimately connected to His life.

In Golden Age Spain, under the guidance of the Catholic Church and the watchful eye of the Inquisition, seeking for divine knowledge beyond that dispensed and canonized by the Church was a dangerous pastime. Just as all literature of the time was judged by its contemporaries based on how it followed, deviated from or disrupted previously established literary traditions, mystic authors needed to firmly establish that their works and ideologies followed that canonized model if it were to be acceptable to the Church's governing body.

To accomplish this, just as other Renaissance authors and artists would study the works of the great masters as a pattern to follow, religious authors looked to those who had successfully come before them in creating their works of artistic and theological expression. Through this process was born the mystic pattern which we have examined. While each author has their particular interpretation of that pattern, the gradual, sequential process by which an earnest seeker comes into contact with the divine is as much at the heart of mystic literature as is the "Hero's Journey" to literature as a whole. Just as Joseph Campbell's "Monomyth" unites the world's great literatures across cultures, nations and time periods into a set of archetypes, the tradition of mystic literature depends on the archetypal mystic and their journey to reach the divine, regardless of the time or place from which it comes. From ancient prophetic figures such as Zarathustra, Moses, Muhammad and Jesus to those of

modernity such as Joseph Smith and Ellen G. White, the story of each follows a similar pattern, one of purgative darkness blossoming into cleansing light, some reaching higher levels of unity with divinity more quickly and more fully than others but still following the same essential process.

In order to understand Sor María de Agreda's conception of this mystic model, we must look to the tradition in which she would have been educated. To this end, we examined the writings of Santa Teresa, with which Sor María and her contemporaries would have been familiar. The mystic progression is a particular preoccupation of Santa Teresa, as she elaborates on it in at least three separate volumes. Whether in four, seven or nine phases, Santa Teresa's poetic descriptions of being swept up in the spirit as in a raging flow of water would have had a profound impact on Sor María.

Sor María would also have seen the amount of influence and power wielded by Santa Teresa through her visionary experiences, despite the subaltern status of women in the church during the Spanish Golden Age. By making herself an *other* among *others* and thereby differentiating herself from them, she subverts her subaltern status to gain a voice in society. Just as Santa Teresa bent the ears of church leaders and political figures, Sor María gained the confidence of her king. As a result of her influence, she would be spoken of by future authors as a defense of women having a voice in the church.

Sor María's visionary experiences and the influence they granted her brought her under intense scrutiny from the inquisition. Hence, she needed a secure justification for her voicing her mind. Just as she built upon the literary model of the mystic established by Santa Teresa and her predecessors, she needed an exemplary model of a female mystic to demonstrate that she simply followed her pattern. Who better than the venerated Virgin to

champion her cause? If one followed the example put forth by the Virgin Mary, how could her actions and ideas be called into question?

With *Mística ciudad*, Sor María crafts a Mary in her own image. This mystic image of the Virgin, a woman who was the supreme model for all Catholic women to follow, served as justification for her own mystic experience. Rooting this figure firmly within the mystic tradition established by Santa Teresa lends further gravitas to the image she creates and, by extension, to the author herself. Adherence to this mystic tradition permits the possibility of inclusion in the canon of mystic authors which would have granted her greater security in her position as a female writer in a church heavily dominated by the patriarchy.

Simultaneously, her deviations from Santa Teresa's model – in particular the frequent bilocations undertaken by the Virgin and, correspondingly, for which Sor María had gained significant fame (and infamy) throughout her life – linked the two women more closely still. If the Virgin could be in two places at once, why not a pious woman who strives to emulate her? If even the Virgin with all the protection of an army of the heavenly host was forced to alternate between agony and ecstasy, between literal battles against Satan and his demonic forces and the rapture of mystic bliss, why should not the faithful nun undergo similar challenges in both her physical and spiritual health? If Mary could have such tremendous influence in the government of the church, why should Sor María face reproach for her own involvement with the governing of Spain through her correspondence with the king?

It seems appropriate, in concluding the present study, to follow the pattern chosen by our author to further demonstrate the connection between author and subject. Each chapter of *Mística ciudad* concludes with words of the Virgin directed specifically to Sor María, asides which serve to elaborate, to answer questions and to counsel Sor María in how to conduct her life. While many connections may be made between the mystic experience of the Virgin and

that of Sor María, these moments constitute the places where their two lives most strongly converge. In these asides, she gives constant reminders to remain humble despite the heights of visionary experience she receives and encouragement to continue to grow in her imitation of the Virgin's life. Similar warnings have been given by Sor María throughout her mystic writings, that without such humility, the mystic runs the risk of falling into temptation and sin.

While some of these asides have already been discussed in the preceding chapter, the intimacy developed between author and subject is revealed in greater detail through these asides than at any other time. Taken as a concluding text, these asides serve as an instruction manual in the mystic process as envisioned by Sor María, a process founded in imitation of the Virgin. As such, they provide the foundation for a clear conclusion as to the use of the literary figure of the Virgin as a mirror of the author in her vision of the mystic experience.

One of the first of these moments, occurring while the Virgin in the narrative is still within her mother's womb, is brought about by a deeply personal question asked by the nun to the Virgin. María de Agreda stated at the beginning of the text that, from her earliest memory, she had feared to lose the presence of God in her life. She links this fear directly to her own preparation for the mystic experience: "Después que tengo uso de razón, he sentido un beneficio del Señor, [...] y es haberme dado Su Alteza un temor íntimo y grande de perderle; y éste me ha provocado y movido a desear lo mejor y más seguro y siempre a obrarlo y pedirlo al Altísimo" (Vol. 1, 13)

Sor María has often spoken of this fear in her previous writings, indicating that it has been a driving force in her search for divine approbation. Thus it is that she asks the Virgin at this point in the narrative how she, being free from original sin and having received so fully of the grace of God, could still fear losing her connection with divinity: "Si al primer

paso e instante de vuestro ser os previno la gracia, ¿cómo en habiendo comenzado a ser temíades perderla? Y si el Altísimo os eximió de la culpa, ¿cómo podíades caer en otras y ofender a quien os guardó de la primera?” (Vol. 1, 322)

This question provides a crucial link between Mary and María, connecting as it does their motivations for undergoing the arduous process of growth which accompanies the desire for closeness to Divinity. This question and its answer help to provide support for María’s own unique spiritual experience.

Turning, therefore, to the Virgin’s response, we see that the motivating fear of losing God’s presence is an integral part of María de Agreda’s vision of the mystic evolution:

Cuando en la visión que tuve de la Divinidad en el primer instante hubiera conocido mi inocencia y que estaba concebida sin pecado, son de tal condición estos beneficios y dones de la mano del Altísimo, *que cuanto más aseguran y se conocen tanto mayor cuidado y atención despiertan para conservarlos y no ofender a su Autor* (Vol. 1, 322, emphasis mine)

The emerging mystic thus requires a cyclical process of fear leading to grace leading to knowledge leading to greater fear, and so on. The sooner the disciple learns this depth of fear, the sooner the mystic process may begin to operate within them. Thus it is that Mary, continuing in her reply, states of this fear, “y desde mi concepción hasta la muerte no le perdí, mas antes creció en mí con la vida.” (Vol. 1, 323) In many of these asides to her author, the Virgin repeats the importance of living under such fear so as to maintain one’s course straight and perfectly humble.

While these instructions are filled with reminders and exhortations to imitate the humble life of the Virgin, the promise that comes with that command is powerful for the mystic seeker of God’s wisdom. “Y si tú, amiga, fueres tan diligente y fervorosa en imitarme

y tan atenta para obedecerme como de ti lo quiero, [...] el Altísimo será más liberal contigo de lo que tus deseos pueden extenderse.” (Vol. 4, 333) This, spoken to a woman who has witnessed (and, arguably, experienced by proxy) the highest degrees of celestial vision, is deeply meaningful. If she, through humble imitation of the Virgin, had the promise of greater gifts from God than even her enlightened desires could conceive of, how could any woman be denied the right to share those blessings and visions?

Whether the product of genuine visionary experience, hallucinations brought on by poor health and humble living conditions or simply a desire for power and a voice within the church and the world, Sor María’s application of the mystic model through the character of the Virgin Mary serves as a testament to the power of women to change the world. Through humble seeking of God’s grace by imitation of the Virgin – the type of life every woman in the church was intended to follow – women could come to speak with the power and authority of God Himself.

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