

**TERESA OF AVILA'S BRIDAL SPIRITUALITY
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE
MEDIIEVAL MYSTICAL TRADITION**

by

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, many scholars have studied the life and writings of Teresa of Avila, but few have situated her mysticism within a larger religious context. Furthermore, scholars have not thoroughly examined Teresa's bridal spirituality, a common theme in her writings, and they have not sufficiently discussed how the mysticism of medieval male and female writers shaped her bridal spirituality. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to understand how traditional or innovative Teresa's bridal spirituality was within the context of the medieval mystical tradition. A close comparison between the writings of Teresa and medieval mystics reveals that her bridal spirituality is often traditional, similar to the bridal mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta. However, she occasionally offered an innovative perspective on bridal spirituality.

Keywords: Teresa of Avila; medieval mystics; mysticism; spiritual marriage; Song of Songs; Spain

To my family

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INTRODUCTION

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) is one of the most well-known female mystics and saints of the early modern period. Only forty years after she died, Pope Gregory XV signed the papal bull of her canonization, and in 1970 Pope Paul VI declared her as a Doctor of the Church because of her sanctity and the influence of her teachings.¹ Teresa was born into a wealthy and religious family in Avila and in *The Book of Her Life* (1562-65) she presents herself as a devout child.² During her adolescence, however, she became preoccupied with “the empty things” of the world,³ and her father, worried about her character and soul, brought her to a convent school. After living there for a year and a half, Teresa realized her foolishness and started to devote herself to God.⁴ At the age of twenty, she felt that God was calling her to become a nun. She took the Carmelite habit at La Encarnación, where she lived with ease and comfort for many years. Around the age of forty, Teresa experienced a spiritual conversion. She realized that La Encarnación was not following the primitive Carmelite rule and, a few years later, Teresa founded the Discalced Carmelite order, which emphasized poverty and enclosure.⁵ In 1562, she opened a reformed convent in Avila. Teresa devoted the rest of her life to establishing

¹ Mary Catherine Hillkert, *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 53.

² *The Book of Her Life*, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976-1985): 1:55.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:61.

⁵ Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 112-13, 123.

more convents and, at the time of her death in 1582, she had founded sixteen Discalced Carmelite convents.

Teresa wrote five books, a few shorter works, poems, and hundreds of letters, leaving a detailed record of her religious reforms, spiritual experiences, and mystical thought. When she was forty-seven, she started to write a spiritual autobiography, *The Book of Her Life*, at the command of her confessors, who wanted to verify that her visions came from God.⁶ In 1566, Teresa wrote *The Way of Perfection*, a book on prayer, and, between 1572 and 1575, she wrote *Meditations on the Song of Songs*. From 1573 to the time of her death, Teresa penned *The Book of Her Foundations*, which records the founding of her convents. *Interior Castle* (1577), one of the most famous and influential mystical texts in Western Christianity, outlines how one can achieve union with God. She wrote at the request of her confessors, but she addressed her writings to the nuns in her convents. A collection of Teresa's works were published in Salamanca in 1588, and these works influenced many people. During Teresa's canonization proceedings, many laypeople, nuns, and priests gave testimony about the spiritual wisdom of her works,⁷ and her writings continued to shape the spirituality of nuns well into the seventeenth century.⁸

In several works, Teresa envisions either God or Christ as a spouse and often sees the soul as God's bride. Although her first work, *The Book of Her Life*, describes God as a spouse only once,⁹ bridal spirituality becomes a recurring theme in her later works. In 1572, she records a vision in which Christ appeared to her and announced they were

⁶ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 1:35. See also *Life*, in *Collected Works*, chapters 11-22.

⁷ Gillian Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 151-52.

⁸ Electa Arenal and Stacy Schlau, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 1989), 9-10.

⁹ *Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:65.

married. In her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* and *Interior Castle*, she often uses bridal images to explain how her nuns can become brides of Christ and achieve mystical union with him. Even though bridal spirituality is a focus of these works, scholars have not sufficiently studied her spousal relationship with Christ or her bridal mysticism, especially in relation to the larger religious context. In order to understand Teresa as a writer and mystic, a more thorough analysis of her bridal spirituality is necessary. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to determine the extent to which Teresa's bridal spirituality was traditional or innovative in the context of the medieval mystical tradition.

In the last thirty years, scholars have examined the lives and writings of medieval and early modern religious women, and the scholarship on Teresa reflects this growing attention to religious women. Many scholars have situated these women in their social, cultural, and religious contexts, especially focusing on how these women adhered to or subverted gender norms to secure authority for their works and visions.¹⁰ One of the first to do so was Alison Weber, who adopted the term 'rhetoric of femininity' to show that Teresa continually confirmed and undermined gender expectations to legitimize her authority as a female writer.¹¹ In response to Weber's research, scholars have debated whether Teresa conformed to or challenged the ideas and authority of the Catholic

¹⁰ See Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality: Hildegard of Bingen and Hadewijch of Brabant* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005); Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996); Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Catherine M. Mooney, ed., *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, ed. *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹¹ Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 15-16.

Church. Gillian Ahlgren maintains that, to avoid scrutiny of the Spanish Inquisition, Teresa often took a traditional approach to prayer and mystical union.¹² Carole Slade claims that Teresa used her writings to defend herself and challenge the restrictions the Church placed on women.¹³ Antonio Pérez-Romero adds that Teresa has a “subversive and revolutionary message”¹⁴ about the roles of women in the Church.¹⁵ Slade and Pérez-Romero seem to take no notice that some of Teresa’s writings adhered to the medieval mystical tradition, and this study challenges their one-sided argument.

Other scholars have pointed out that understanding Teresa within an historical context includes a look at how the larger religious and theological milieu shaped her ideas. Some have observed similarities between medieval writings and Teresa’s spirituality. Both Catherine Swietlicki and Deirdre Green assert that the Jewish mystical tradition influenced Teresa’s *Interior Castle*.¹⁶ Helmut A. Hatzfeld shows a few parallels between Teresa’s works and the mystical writings of Ramon Lull (1235-1315) and John van Ruysbroeck (1294-1381).¹⁷ Unfortunately, Hatzfeld does not indicate how Teresa would have known about Ruysbroeck’s writings, considering they were available only in Latin,¹⁸ which Teresa could not read. Adding to Hatzfeld’s study, Miriam Thérèse

¹² Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 4.

¹³ Carole Slade, *St. Teresa of Avila: Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 4, 6-7.

¹⁴ Antonio Pérez-Romero, *Subversion and Liberation in the Writings of St. Teresa of Avila* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Catherine Swietlicki, *Spanish Christian Cabala: The Works of Luis de León, Santa Teresa de Jesús, and San Juan de la Cruz* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), vii, 51-68; Deirdre Green, *Gold in the Crucible: Teresa of Avila and the Western Mystical Tradition* (Longmead: Element Books, 1989), 78-91.

¹⁷ Helmut A. Hatzfeld, “The Influence of Ramon Lull and Jan van Ruysbroeck on the Language of the Spanish Mystics,” *Traditio* 4 (1946): 347, 359, 364, 382.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 341.

Olabarrieta traces Teresa's usage of mirrors and a prison to the works of Ramon Lull.¹⁹

This thesis will add to Hatzfeld and Olabarrieta's studies by pointing out how the spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux influenced Teresa.

More recently, scholars have discussed how and why medieval female mystical texts influenced Teresa's *Book of Her Life*. Both Ahlgren and Elizabeth Rhodes observe that scholars have failed to notice that the translation and publication of medieval texts, which Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1435-1517) commissioned, must have affected Spanish spirituality.²⁰ In order to fill in this missing part of historical research, Ahlgren points out similarities between Raymond of Capua's (1330-1399) biography on Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and Teresa's *Life*.²¹ Similarly, Rhodes observes that Teresa's *Life* is based upon the lives of female mystics, including Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno (ca.1248-1309), Clare of Assisi (1194-1253), and Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373).²² Furthermore, Ahlgren and Rhodes claim Teresa imitated these works to legitimize her visions and book.²³ Elena Carrera also acknowledges parallels between Teresa's *Life* and medieval spiritual autobiographies or hagiographies, but suggests that Teresa departs from these texts in order to highlight her own ideas about prayer and visions.²⁴ Unfortunately, these scholars supply little evidence to prove Teresa

¹⁹ Miriam Thérèse Olabarrieta, *The Influence of Ramon Lull on the Style of the Early Spanish Mystics and Santa Teresa* (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1963), ix, x.

²⁰ Gillian Ahlgren, "Ecstasy, Prophecy, and Reform: Catherine of Siena as a Model for Holy Women of Sixteenth-Century Spain," in *The Mystical Gesture: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Spiritual Culture in Honor of Mary E. Giles*, edited by Robert Boenig (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 53; Elizabeth Rhodes, "What's in a Name: On Teresa of Ávila's Book," in *The Mystical Gesture: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Spiritual Culture in Honor of Mary E. Giles*, edited by Robert Boenig (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 95-96.

²¹ Ahlgren, "Ecstasy," 53, 61.

²² Rhodes, "What is in a Name," 95-96.

²³ Ahlgren, "Ecstasy," 61-63; Rhodes, "What is in a Name," 92, 96.

²⁴ Elena Carrera, *Teresa of Avila's Autobiography: Authority, Power and the Self in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Spain* (London: Legenda, 2005), 13-14, 169-187.

deliberately emulated other biographies, but they indicate that more research is necessary to see how Teresa's other works resembled medieval female mystical writings. By examining other parallels between Teresa and medieval mystics, this thesis will contribute to the work of these scholars.

Some scholars acknowledge that the influence of medieval mysticism is apparent in Teresa's bridal spirituality. Elizabeth Teresa Howe notes that there are some similarities in the bridal mysticism found in Bernard of Clairvaux's (1050-1153) *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and Teresa's *Meditations on the Song of Songs*.²⁵ A few other studies argue that some of the bridal mysticism found in Teresa's *Interior Castle* resembles the bridal spirituality of medieval male mystics.²⁶ These studies, however, do not comprehensively show how Teresa's bridal spirituality fits within the medieval male mystical tradition, and they do not indicate whether medieval female mysticism had any influence on Teresa's writings.

To understand the religious context of Teresa's day, a brief background of sixteenth-century Spanish mysticism is necessary. Teresa lived at a time when the Spanish Inquisition was suspicious of female mystics and visionaries because they claimed to have direct access to God, thus, undermining the authority of the clergy. Religious authorities were especially concerned that these mystics and visionaries were associated with a heretical group called the *alumbrados* who, because they claimed God

²⁵ Elizabeth Teresa Howe, "The Mystical Kiss and the Cantic of Canticles: Three Interpretations," *American Benedictine Review* 33 (1982): 304, 310.

²⁶ Bernard McGinn, "Love, Knowledge, and *Unio Mystica* in the Western Christian Tradition," in *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, edited by Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 82; Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 111; Elizabeth Teresa Howe, *Mystical Imagery: Santa Teresa de Jesús and San Juan de la Cruz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 160-61; Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 551, 558-59.

was speaking to them, denied the need for fasting, indulgences, and good works.²⁷ Throughout Teresa's life, her confessors and spiritual directors scrutinized her visions and writings, and a few times the Spanish Inquisition investigated her writings for heresy.²⁸ Despite all these concerns about mystical experiences, there was a "flowering of mysticism" in sixteenth-century Spain,²⁹ mainly because of the efforts of Cardinal Cisneros, inquisitor general and confessor to Queen Isabella. Cisneros supported many mystics,³⁰ and he commissioned the translation of works by Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Angela of Foligno, and Catherine of Siena into Spanish. Other medieval works that were available in Spain were the writings of Gertrude of Helfta (1256-ca.1301), Clare of Assisi, Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173), and Bonaventure (1217-74). For the first time, Spanish men and women could read medieval mystical works in the vernacular.³¹

Bridal spirituality figures prominently in many of these mystical texts. The Church Fathers described the soul in love with God as a bride,³² but the monastic writers of the twelfth century, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint Thierry (ca.1085-1148), and Richard of Saint Victor, built on these ideas to develop a bridal mysticism.³³ These writers became monks as adults and were familiar with the world's ideas on love

²⁷ Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 12-13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³¹ Maximilian Marnau, introduction to *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. and ed. by Margaret Winkworth (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 43; Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 9-10, 138-39.

³² Claude Chavasse, *The Bride of Christ: An Enquiry into the Nuptial Element in Early Christianity* (Bristol: Western Printing, 1940), 172-76.

³³ Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, vol. 2 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), 154-56.

and marriage.³⁴ They felt that the marital relationship between a husband and wife provided a powerful metaphor for the love between the soul and God, and emphasized that deep love of God led to the ultimate goal of life: union with him.³⁵ These writings circulated during and after their lives and shaped the mysticism of subsequent generations, including Richard Rolle (ca.1300-1349), Bonaventure, and Jan van Ruysbroeck.³⁶ Female mystics also described their relationship with God in bridal terms, but they often did so in more passionate ways than the male mystics.³⁷ They wrote about embracing and kissing Christ and they expressed their deep love for him in erotic ways.³⁸

Many of these medieval texts influenced the mysticism of religious men and women of sixteenth-century Spain. Carrera remarks that preachers and writers turned to the works of the twelfth century, such as Bernard of Clairvaux's commentary on the Song of Songs, to emphasize the need for having an intimate relationship with God.³⁹ Bernard, Richard, Bonaventure, Ramon Lull, and Ruysbroeck shaped the mysticism of Francisco de Osuna (ca.1492-ca.1541), a writer whom Teresa read.⁴⁰ Moreover, the female mystics who wrote about their loving relationship with Christ were popular saints in Spain. Men and women saw Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta as models

³⁴ Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France: Psycho-Historical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9-23.

³⁵ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 155.

³⁶ E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 183-85.

³⁷ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 22-23; Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), 270, 278.

³⁸ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 23; McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 270; Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 26.

³⁹ Carrera, *Teresa of Avila's Autobiography*, 27, 34.

⁴⁰ Mary E. Giles, ed. and trans., Introduction to *Francisco de Osuna: The Third Spiritual Alphabet* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 11; Hatzfeld, "Influence of Ramon Lull," 341.

of female piety, and religious women cited their writings to justify the legitimacy of their own thoughts and experiences and were often very successful in their attempts.⁴¹

Given the influence of many medieval mystics in Spain, how traditional or innovative was Teresa's bridal spirituality? By answering this question, this thesis will contribute to our understanding of how medieval texts shaped Teresa's works, especially how her mysticism resembled the writings of female mystics. More generally, we will begin to learn the extent to which the medieval mystical tradition affected the spirituality of sixteenth-century Spain.

Mysticism can conjure up the notion of visions and strange experiences, but these experiences do not define mysticism. Sometimes visions happen as a result of the mystical life,⁴² which we will see especially in Chapters 1 and 3 when Teresa and medieval female mystics write about the visions and experiences that occur because they are brides of Christ. According to Bernard McGinn, mysticism is "a process or way of life" in which the mystic prepares his or her whole life for an encounter with God. Often the goal of the mystic is to experience "some form of union with God."⁴³

Mystics often use common images, such as marriage, to describe their relationship with God and to explain how others can follow in their path.⁴⁴ Bridal spirituality is the "experience of spousal love of Christ," evidenced when the mystic

⁴¹ Carrera, *Teresa of Avila's Autobiography*, 51, 105, 123, 142, 169; Mary E. Giles, *The Book of Prayer of Sor María of Santo Domingo: A Study and Translation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 1-2, 55; Gillian Ahlgren, "Francisca de la Apóstoles: A Visionary Voice for Reform in Sixteenth-Century Toledo," in *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World*, ed. Mary E. Giles (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 128.

⁴² Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, xv.

⁴³ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), xvi.

⁴⁴ See Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 7-8, where she points out that medieval writers used images of mothering, nursing, family, marriage, and food and drink to describe religious life or their relationship with God.

writes about his or her loving and intimate relationship with God,⁴⁵ and bridal spirituality involves a mystical journey that often culminates in a spiritual marriage, or union, with him.⁴⁶ Therefore, examining the bridal spirituality of Teresa and medieval mystics includes an analysis of their relationship with God or Christ, and their explanations of what it means to be a bride and what the journey toward mystical union entails.

In order to demonstrate whether there is a connection between Teresa's bridal spirituality and that of medieval mystics, it is necessary to engage in a close comparative analysis of their writings. Since Teresa's works are available in English,⁴⁷ this thesis will rely on a recent English translation that most scholars use.⁴⁸ Many of the medieval works that were popular during Teresa's day are also available in English.⁴⁹ Placing Teresa's works beside the spirituality of well-known medieval writers will show how traditional or innovative her bridal images and mysticism were.

Certainly, the words "traditional" and "innovative" need clarification. Both E. Ann Matter and Olabarrieta state that modern scholars could view the word "traditional" in a negative way as it may seem that medieval and early modern authors are guilty of plagiarizing the ideas of others.⁵⁰ However, Matter indicates that many early modern and medieval works, especially medieval commentaries on the Bible, "work within a well-

⁴⁵ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 155.

⁴⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th ed. rev. (London: Methuen & Co., 1930), 425-26, 428.

⁴⁷ *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus*, trans. E. Allison Peers, 3 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973); *Teresa of Ávila: The Book of My Life*, trans. Mirabai Starr (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2007); *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Father Zimmerman (New York: Cosimo, 2007).

⁴⁸ *Collected Works of St. Teresa*.

⁴⁹ *Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs*, trans. Kilian J. Walsh, 4 vols. (Spencer, MA: Cisterican Publications, 1971-80); *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (London: Harvill Press, 1960); *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Paul Lachance (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993); *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald of Divine Love*, ed. and trans. Margaret Winkworth (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993).

⁵⁰ Matter, *Voice*, 6; Olabarrieta, *Influence of Ramon Lull*, 18.

defined tradition, each treatise incorporating specific parts of earlier ones.”⁵¹ Originality or innovation involves discussing something new, and Matter suggests that innovation also means adding to tradition in a new way.⁵² To determine whether Teresa’s bridal spirituality was traditional, this thesis will indicate significant points of convergence between her works and other medieval texts. Finding innovation in Teresa’s writings could mean discovering bridal images or ideas that other writers did not have. However, innovation could be more subtle than that. Teresa could also display innovation by enhancing or expanding on the ideas of her predecessors.

The initial task of choosing texts with which to compare Teresa’s writings is difficult because she rarely cites other books. She refers only to works by Augustine, Jerome, Gregory the Great, the Lives of the Saints, and a few Spanish contemporary books,⁵³ but Ahlgren claims that Teresa was “an avid reader.”⁵⁴ Teresa writes in *The Book of Her Life* that, while residing at her uncle’s house while she was ill, she spent most of her convalescence reading devotional books.⁵⁵ Convinced that Teresa would have read at least some of the medieval mystical texts circulating in the sixteenth century, scholars have found clues in her writings to suggest that she knew of or read the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta.⁵⁶ As we will see in the following chapters, bridal mysticism is a common theme in these works, making them obvious choices for this analysis.

⁵¹ Matter, *Voice*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵³ E. Allison Peers, *Studies of the Spanish Mystics*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 179.

⁵⁴ Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 39.

⁵⁵ *Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:66.

⁵⁶ Ahlgren, “Ecstasy,” 60; Howe, “Mystical Kiss,” 304; Paul Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 358; Marnau, introduction to *Gertrude of Helfta*, 43.

A close comparison between the writings of Teresa and medieval mystics reveals that Teresa's bridal spirituality is often traditional, but, in *Interior Castle*, she proposes some innovative ideas. As we will see in Chapter 1, Teresa records in her *Spiritual Testimonies* (1560-1581) that Christ appeared to her and declared they were married. Teresa's visions of her marriage to Christ and her understanding of this marriage mirrors Catherine of Siena's marriage to Christ as described by Raymond of Capua. Around the same time that Teresa recorded these visions, she wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs, in which she explains how her nuns can become brides of Christ and what it means to be brides. An examination of her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* in Chapter 2 uncovers its similarities with the bridal spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Chapter 3 compares the bridal mysticism in Teresa's *Interior Castle* to the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta. An analysis of these works demonstrates that Teresa's explanation of spiritual marriage remained traditional, although her description of how one advances toward marriage with God was innovative.

CHAPTER ONE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SPIRITUAL MARRIAGES OF TERESA OF AVILA AND CATHERINE OF SIENA

Introduction

In *Spiritual Testimonies*, Teresa of Avila writes of her spousal relationship with Christ. After she wrote *The Book of Her Life*, her confessors and spiritual directors ordered her to continue recording her spiritual experiences to verify that her visions were from God. Editors later compiled the sixty-five accounts she wrote between 1560 and 1581 into the *Spiritual Testimonies*.⁵⁷ In this work, she records that her spiritual marriage with Christ occurred on November 18, 1572 at the age of 57. At this point of her life, Teresa had already written several books and had founded seven Discalced Carmelite convents. In October 1571, she had been appointed prioress at the Carmelite convent La Encarnación, where she had become a nun at twenty years old. Teresa explains that, after being prioress for one year, she had a vision after receiving Communion from John of the Cross (1542-1591), a mystic and Teresa's friend who helped reform the Carmelite order. She was dismayed when John administered to her a small Communion wafer because she liked receiving a large wafer. Teresa records that Christ said: "Don't fear, daughter, for no one will be a party to separating you from Me."⁵⁸ Immediately after speaking to her, Christ appeared to her in a vision and gave her his right hand. He then proclaimed that, from that day on, Teresa was his bride. In 1575, while she was in her convent in Beas,

⁵⁷ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 1:369.

⁵⁸ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:402.

Teresa had another vision in which Christ gave her a wedding ring and told her that, because she was his bride, he would give her whatever she requested.⁵⁹ In the same year, while she was staying at her convent in Seville, Christ said they shared everything because they were married.⁶⁰

Only one scholar has briefly discussed Teresa's description of her marriage to Christ. In a short study on spiritual marriage, E. Ann Matter asserts that Raymond of Capua's account of Catherine of Siena's marriage to Christ proved her holiness. She also mentions that a few early modern nuns who married Christ had similar visions to the one found in Raymond's biography. Matter adds that Teresa married Christ, but she does not point out similarities between Teresa's and Catherine's marriages to Christ. Rather, she suggests that Teresa wrote about her marriage to legitimize her visionary life because Catherine was a model of female holiness during the sixteenth century.⁶¹ Although Matter does not provide evidence to prove that Teresa recorded this vision for an ulterior motive, her study raises the question of whether there were any parallels between the spiritual marriages of Catherine and Teresa.

Other scholars have examined similarities between Raymond's biography and Teresa's *Book of Her Life*, which she wrote several years before her marriage to Christ. Both Gillian Ahlgren and Elizabeth Rhodes argue that Teresa's spiritual autobiography imitated Raymond's biography in order to legitimize her spiritual experiences and book.⁶² It is difficult to know with certainty whether Teresa deliberately mirrored Raymond's

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1:404.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1:412.

⁶¹ E. Ann Matter, "Mystical Marriage," trans. Keith Botsford, in *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 38-40.

⁶² Rhodes, "What's in a Name," 92, 96; Ahlgren, "Ecstasy," 61-63.

biography, but these studies prove that there needs to be a more thorough investigation of whether Teresa's other writings showed similarities with Raymond's biography.

To understand the extent to which Teresa's bridal spirituality was traditional, this chapter will focus on her spousal relationship with Christ, which she describes in *Spiritual Testimonies* and *Interior Castle*. A comparison of her spiritual marriage with that of Catherine of Siena, as explained by Raymond of Capua, demonstrates that Teresa's marriage with Christ was traditional since both the event and her understanding of the marriage belonged to the tradition of spiritual marriage.

Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church and Medieval Period

Before analyzing Teresa's spiritual marriage, the term spiritual marriage needs clarification. Many patristic and medieval writers saw the soul's union with Christ as a spiritual marriage.⁶³ Origen suggests that the soul who loves Christ is a bride and their union is a spiritual marriage.⁶⁴ Describing the soul's mystical marriage to Christ became popular among twelfth-century male writers, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint Thierry, and Richard of Saint Victor.⁶⁵ Medieval religious women especially saw their mystical union with Christ in terms of marriage and wrote in detail about their intimate relationship with him.⁶⁶ Spiritual marriage can also refer to a marriage between a religious woman and Christ, in which Christ appeared to her in a vision, vowed to be her husband, and gave her a token, such as a wedding ring. Only a few religious women

⁶³ Alfred C. Rush, "Death as a Spiritual Marriage: Individual and Ecclesial Eschatology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 26 (1972): 81-82; Matter, "Mystical Marriage," 32-34.

⁶⁴ Chavasse, *Bride of Christ*, 172-76; Rush, "Death," 81-82.

⁶⁵ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 154-56.

⁶⁶ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 156-58.

in the medieval and early modern periods recorded having this vision.⁶⁷ This chapter will primarily use this particular definition of spiritual marriage because, when Teresa describes her marriage to Christ in *Spiritual Testimonies*, she is referring to the visions in which Christ married her.⁶⁸

A few medieval biographies and autobiographies of religious women record this kind of spiritual marriage. The earliest reference to spiritual marriage occurs in biographies of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (died ca. 305), a virgin martyr.⁶⁹ Most of the lives written from the ninth century to the thirteenth century simply portray Catherine as a virgin who dedicated her life to Christ. However, after the mid-thirteenth century, writers record that Christ married her in an actual ceremony. There are two versions of her marriage to Christ. In one version, Catherine married the infant Christ in a dream and, in the other, an adult Christ came down from heaven to marry her. In both versions, Christ took Catherine's hand, promised to be her husband, vowed never to leave her, and then gave her a wedding ring to confirm his promise.⁷⁰ Scholars do not know why this event was added by hagiographers, but what they do notice is that a few religious women from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had similar experiences. Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine Lewis write that Bridget of Sweden, Margery Kempe (ca. 1373 – after

⁶⁷ Matter, "Mystical Marriage," 37-41. Note that some scholars call this marriage a mystical marriage. However, this chapter will use the term spiritual marriage because Teresa does so in her works.

⁶⁸ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1: 402, 404, 412.

⁶⁹ Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis note that although there is no early evidence to suggest that Catherine of Alexandria was a real person, she was a popular saint from the eleventh century to the early sixteenth century. Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis, introduction to *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 1, 6.

⁷⁰ Katherine J. Lewis, "Pilgrimage and the Cult of St. Katherine in Late Medieval England," in *St. Katherine of Alexandria*, 48.

1438), and Catherine of Siena also married Christ.⁷¹ These women recorded having a similar vision as Catherine of Alexandria: Christ declared the marriage, vowed a wedding promise, and then presented a token to his new bride.⁷²

Catherine of Siena, a Dominican tertiary and mystic who led an active public life, also married Christ. Illiterate, Catherine dictated to her secretaries about four hundred letters, several prayers, and a book about a soul who asked God four petitions called *The Dialogue* (1377). Raymond, a Dominican friar, who met Catherine in 1374 and became her confessor and close friend, wrote a biography of Catherine between 1384 and 1395.⁷³ According to Raymond, Catherine took the Dominican habit at the age of eighteen, and, four years later, she had a vision in which Christ pledged to be her spouse.⁷⁴ He writes that Christ married her in the presence of the Virgin Mary, King David, John the Evangelist, the Apostle Paul, and Saint Dominic, and then gave her a ring and wedding vow.⁷⁵

Catherine of Siena's Influence in the Sixteenth Century

Raymond of Capua's *Life of Saint Catherine of Siena* and works by Catherine became available in Spain during the sixteenth century. Cardinal Cisneros commissioned Antonio de la Peña to translate Raymond's biography and Catherine's letters and prayers

⁷¹ Jenkins and Lewis, introduction to *St. Katherine of Alexandria*, 12-14. Note that Margery Kempe's spiritual marriage is extremely unique because she is the only woman in this list who was a wife and mother.

⁷² Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 246-47, points out that several medieval women who married Christ received wedding rings and or vows from Christ. See Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, *Margery Kempe's Meditations: The Context of Medieval Devotional Literature, Liturgy, and Iconography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 55, 57, who explains that both Bridget of Sweden and Margery Kempe received a wedding promise from Christ and a token that proved their marriage.

⁷³ Suzanne Noffke, ed. and trans., introduction to *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 2-3, 26.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁵ *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, 99-100.

into Castilian. Arnaldo Guillermo de Brocar published the biography in Alcalá in 1511 and Francisco de Canto republished the work in Medina del Campo in 1569.⁷⁶ Brocar also published Catherine's letters and *Dialogue* in Alcalá in 1512.⁷⁷

The publication of these works especially impacted the spirituality of sixteenth-century Spanish women. Two women attempted to justify the divine origin of their visions by pointing out parallels between their experiences and those of Catherine of Siena. Pope Julius II appointed a commission to investigate the authenticity of the visions of Sor María of Santo Domingo (ca. 1470-1524), a peasant who lived in the small town of Piedrahita.⁷⁸ María and her supporters, including Cardinal Cisneros and the Duke of Alba, argued that her visions and experiences were similar to Catherine of Siena's and, in the end, the commission cleared her name and praised her holy life.⁷⁹ In another case, Francisca de los Apóstoles, a visionary and a *beata* reformer (born 1541), had to prove, while she was on trial by the Spanish Inquisition, that her visions came from God.⁸⁰ Francisca explained that she allowed demons to enter her body so that they would stop torturing sinners. She admitted being worried about this experience, but she stated that she took great encouragement from Raymond's biography of Catherine, which recorded that Catherine had a similar experience.⁸¹ Although Francisca attempted to compare her mystical life to Catherine's, she was unsuccessful, mostly because the inquisitor felt that Francisca was arrogant throughout the trial. Thus, he declared her a

⁷⁶ Ahlgren, "Ecstasy," 53; Gillian Ahlgren, ed. and trans., *Inquisition of Francisca: A Sixteenth-Century Visionary on Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 66.

⁷⁷ Ahlgren, "Ecstasy," 54.

⁷⁸ Giles, *Book of Prayer*, 1-3, 7.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2, 55.

⁸⁰ Ahlgren, "Francisca de la Apóstoles," 123-24.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

heretic, blasphemer, and perjurer.⁸² Both cases demonstrate the popularity of Raymond's biography and prove that religious women had reverence for Catherine.

Catherine and Teresa deserve comparison because Teresa knew of Catherine and read Raymond's biography. In her *Life*, Teresa mentions that she was inspired by the lives of Catherine and a few other saints.⁸³ In a letter written on May 3, 1579 to Isabel de San Jerónimo and María de San José, Teresa tells her nuns: "Remember what St. Catherine of Siena did for the one who accused her of being a bad woman."⁸⁴ This incident is recorded only in Catherine's biography.⁸⁵ Raymond records that Andrea, a nun who lived in the same convent as Catherine, told the other nuns that Catherine was not a virgin. The nuns asked Catherine how she could have lost her virginity, but Catherine reassured them that she was a virgin.⁸⁶ Andrea was impressed with Catherine's response to the situation and soon realized that she had been wrong. Raymond explains that after this event, people began to talk of Catherine's sanctity.⁸⁷ Ahlgren argues that Teresa refers to Catherine in her letter to remind her nuns that God was on their side. A nun had accused Teresa and her nuns of sexual immoral behaviour, and Teresa felt her situation was similar to Catherine's.⁸⁸ Given the availability of Raymond's biography of Catherine in sixteenth-century Spain and Teresa's reference to a specific event in the biography, it is possible that Teresa read the biography or, at the very least, was familiar with it.

⁸² Ibid., 132.

⁸³ See *The Book of Her Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:194, where Teresa briefly refers to Catherine of Siena.

⁸⁴ *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2001-2007), 2:179.

⁸⁵ Ahlgren, "Ecstasy," 60.

⁸⁶ *Life of St. Catherine*, 140-42.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 144-46.

⁸⁸ Ahlgren, "Ecstasy," 61.

It is unclear whether Teresa read the translations of *The Dialogue* or Catherine's letters,⁸⁹ but even if she did read Catherine's works, a study of these would not be very helpful for this chapter. Catherine's own works do not focus on her mystical experiences. She does not mention her marriage to Christ in *The Dialogue*, and she only briefly describes the marriage in her letters.⁹⁰ Therefore, most of the information that Teresa received about Catherine's spiritual marriage must have come from Raymond's biography.

This chapter also focuses, in part, on Catherine because nuns of the sixteenth century were familiar with her spiritual marriage. Catherine mentions in her letters that Christ gave her his foreskin as a wedding ring,⁹¹ whereas Raymond states that Christ gave her a golden wedding ring.⁹² Although Raymond describes the ring differently from Catherine herself, early modern nuns were more familiar with Raymond's version of the marriage.⁹³ Sara F. Matthews Grieco explains that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Catherine's marriage to Christ, as portrayed in Raymond's biography, was a popular painted image in churches and convents.⁹⁴ Although Grieco's evidence is from Italy, her study confirms that nuns of the early modern period knew of the marriage Raymond described.

⁸⁹ Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*, 117, claims that Teresa read Catherine's *Dialogue*, but she does not provide evidence to support this.

⁹⁰ See *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 1: 147; 2: 184, 595.

⁹¹ See *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, 1: 147; 2: 184, 595.

⁹² *Life of St. Catherine*, 100.

⁹³ Matter, "Mystical Marriage," 38.

⁹⁴ Sara F. Matthews Grieco, "Models of Female Sanctity in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy," in *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 159, 171.

Two Spiritual Marriages

In *Interior Castle*, Teresa admits that those who marry Christ will have different experiences from others,⁹⁵ and there are slight differences between Catherine's and Teresa's marriage ceremonies. For instance, Teresa had three visions about her marriage to Christ that occurred at three different places and dates, while Raymond indicates that Catherine had only one vision. As we will see, the substance of the visions is what matters most to Teresa, not the number of visions she received. Another difference is that several saints witnessed the marriage between Catherine and Christ,⁹⁶ while Teresa mentions no witnesses. Raymond does not make the witnesses in Catherine's vision the focal point; rather, he focuses on the meaning of Christ's words and gestures, as does Teresa. Although the two marriages were not exactly the same, a closer look at Catherine's biography and Teresa's works demonstrates that there are key similarities between the two wedding ceremonies and the way the women understood the marriage.

Although both descriptions of spiritual marriage are short, Raymond and Teresa indicate that these visions were extraordinary. Raymond devotes a short chapter to Catherine's spiritual marriage. In previous chapters, Raymond describes Catherine's visions, but he signals that this vision of spiritual marriage was special. He records that this marriage was "wonderful,"⁹⁷ and "something special" because few people attained this relationship.⁹⁸ Teresa writes about her visions of marriage in three long paragraphs in *Spiritual Testimonies* and then describes them again in her *Interior Castle*.⁹⁹ When

⁹⁵ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:432.

⁹⁶ *Life of St. Catherine*, 99.

⁹⁷ *Life of St. Catherine*, 100.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁹ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1: 402, 404, 412; *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:388, 432-33.

Teresa retells her vision of spiritual marriage in *Interior Castle*, she declares that this vision was an “experience so different” from other visions. She then indicates, like Raymond, this vision was “so sublime” because she and Christ had a different relationship than most people.¹⁰⁰ These visions of spiritual marriage stand out in Raymond’s biography and Teresa’s works.

A closer analysis of Raymond’s biography reveals that Christ decided to marry Catherine because she deserved it. In Catherine’s vision of spiritual marriage, Christ is the one who is in charge: he decides to marry Catherine and he is the only one who makes the marriage vow.¹⁰¹ The biography then records that Christ said: “Since for love of me you have forsaken vanities and despised the pleasure of the flesh and fastened all the delights of your heart on me, now...I have determined...to espouse you.”¹⁰² Raymond claims that Catherine is worthy of this marriage because of her love of Christ and her strong faith.¹⁰³ Catherine is a passive participant in this narrative, but Raymond emphasizes that Christ married her because she earned the marriage.

As in the case of Catherine’s spiritual marriage, Christ married Teresa because he desired the marriage to take place, but also because she deserved it. In her *Spiritual Testimonies*, Teresa writes that Christ appeared to her in a vision and declared: “You will be My bride from today on.”¹⁰⁴ In both Catherine’s and Teresa’s visions, Christ decides to take them as his spouse and he makes the marriage vows, while the women remain quiet. Reflecting on this experience in *Interior Castle*, Teresa emphasizes that it is Christ

¹⁰⁰ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:433.

¹⁰¹ *Life of St. Catherine*, 99-100.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹⁰⁴ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:402.

who chooses when this marriage will take place.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, Teresa's vision demonstrates that she deserved this marriage because Christ tells her: "Until now you have not merited this."¹⁰⁶ It is unclear what she did to earn the marriage, and it is quite possible that Teresa did not know why Christ married her. She writes that, after she had this vision, she felt great confusion because she believed she did not give anything "in exchange for such amazing favors."¹⁰⁷ Yet, by including this modest statement and Christ's words in *Spiritual Testimonies*, Teresa reinforces the notion that Christ married only those who deserved this special relationship.

Women who had visions about marrying Christ often received a token, and Catherine's token was a wedding ring. Raymond writes that, after Christ vowed to be her wife, he put on Catherine's finger a "gold ring with four pearls set in a circle in it and a wonderful diamond in the middle."¹⁰⁸ Catherine told Raymond that "she could always see it on her finger and that there was never a moment when it was out of her sight," even though no one else could see this beautiful ring.¹⁰⁹ To him, the ring was important because it confirmed that her marriage with Christ had taken place. Twice Raymond refers to the ring as a "sign" and "confirmation" of the marriage.¹¹⁰

Teresa also received a token that played an important role in her marriage. In 1575 while Teresa was in her convent in Beas, she explains that Christ appeared to her in a vision and reminded her of their marriage. He then put on her finger a "beautiful ring,

¹⁰⁵ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:432.

¹⁰⁶ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:402.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Life of St. Catherine*, 99-100.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

with a precious stone resembling an amethyst.”¹¹¹ Teresa does not mention whether she saw her ring at all times, and her ring looked quite different from Catherine’s ring. What is significant is that both Teresa’s and Catherine’s rings serve a similar purpose in their visions: confirming the marriage. Teresa explains that Christ gave her the ring “as a token,”¹¹² and this word “token” is particularly telling as it demonstrates that the ring was a sign verifying Christ’s marriage vow.

Another important aspect of Catherine’s vision is the marriage promise. According to Raymond, after Christ slipped the wedding ring on Catherine’s finger, he declared: “You will overcome all your enemies and be happy.”¹¹³ This was a fitting promise since the biography reports that, after she married Christ, Catherine received a divine command to lead a public life. She had to confront people who opposed her and her work, but she knew that Christ supported her.¹¹⁴ Related to this is Christ’s vow that she would be happy. Raymond remarks that Christ married Catherine and gave her a wedding ring “so that when she went on to her task of rescuing souls from the swamps of this world she would never be downcast.” Raymond adds that Christ’s wedding promises gave Catherine strength and encouragement during future trials.¹¹⁵

A marriage promise of support also figures prominently in Teresa’s marriage with Christ. When she received her wedding ring in 1575, she reports: “Our Lord told me that since I was His bride I should make requests of Him, for He had promised that whatever I asked He would grant me.”¹¹⁶ Later that same year, while she was in her convent in

¹¹¹ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:404.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Life of St. Catherine*, 100.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-59, 106, 109-110, 142.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100-01.

¹¹⁶ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:404.

Seville, Christ appeared to her in a vision and repeated that she could ask God for anything she wanted because they were married. After hearing this promise, Teresa admits she “felt great dominion.”¹¹⁷ In the Spanish edition of this text, Teresa uses the word “señorío,”¹¹⁸ which means dominion, command, and lordship. Teresa and Catherine felt power and strength after hearing Christ’s marriage promises. Like Catherine, Teresa often faced difficulty and opposition from religious authorities,¹¹⁹ and Christ’s words are especially relevant in view of the troubles she had in 1575. Local religious authorities and Franciscan friars opposed the establishment of a Discalced Carmelite convent in Seville, and she lost support for her work in reforming convents from the General of the Carmelite order.¹²⁰ Both Teresa and Catherine receive promises of support to help them through difficult times.

Moreover, Raymond’s biography indicates that being married to Christ means having union with Christ. In the chapter following Catherine’s marriage, Raymond writes that, whether in public or in her cell, her soul was “entirely with her Heavenly Bridegroom.”¹²¹ Because of her marriage, she was always spiritually united with Christ.¹²² Although Raymond emphasizes Catherine’s spiritual oneness with Christ, he maintains that this union was not complete while she remained on earth. Christ told Catherine at the marriage ceremony to keep her faith until she goes to heaven to

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *Santa Teresa de Jesus: Obras Completas*, ed. Luis Santullano (Madrid: Aguilar, 1966), 289.

¹¹⁹ See Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 43-61 for an outline of the troubles Teresa faced when submitting her works to her confessors and establishing her convents.

¹²⁰ See *The Book of Her Foundations*, in *Collected Works*, 3:222-34; *Collected Letters of St. Teresa*, 1:205-211, 217-18.

¹²¹ *Life of St. Catherine*, 110.

¹²² Ibid., 111.

“celebrate the marriage that has no end.”¹²³ Full of sorrow, Raymond records the death of Catherine at the end of the book. However, he reminds himself that finally Catherine’s “nuptial union” with Christ was experienced in full.¹²⁴

In *Spiritual Testimonies* and *Interior Castle*, Teresa stresses that, in a similar way to that of Catherine, her marriage means she has a union with Christ that grows stronger after death. In Teresa’s first vision of her spiritual marriage, Christ says that their union is unbreakable: “No one will be a party to separating you from Me.”¹²⁵ Unfortunately, Teresa’s *Spiritual Testimonies* do not explain in great length what it meant to her to be married to Christ. However, in her *Interior Castle*, Teresa retells her vision and then explains that after the marriage she and Christ became “one.”¹²⁶ Like Raymond, Teresa understands that this special relationship lasts throughout life and even after death. Teresa adds that her marriage with Christ “does not come to its perfect fullness” while she lives.¹²⁷ Both Catherine and Teresa believed that, as brides of Christ, they have a union with him, but they looked forward to having a more complete marriage with him in the afterlife.

Scholars point out that spiritual marriage entailed suffering. Many medieval religious women strove to imitate the suffering and pain that Christ experienced on earth because they saw it as a way to experience union with him. Religious women imitated his suffering by enduring any painful physical illness, receiving the stigmata, or

¹²³ Ibid., 100.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 329.

¹²⁵ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:402.

¹²⁶ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2: 434.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 2:432.

experiencing loneliness or persecution.¹²⁸ As in a secular marriage in which a couple shares a life together, suffering was a way for a bride of Christ to share a life with Christ and experience union with him.¹²⁹

Throughout the biography, Raymond emphasizes Catherine's suffering¹³⁰ to highlight her union with Christ. Some time after Catherine's spiritual marriage, she complained to Christ that this life was keeping her from fully uniting with him, and said to him:

I pray you to be good enough to listen to one little request from me: that during the time you want me to remain in the body you will allow me to share in all the sufferings you endured, including your final Passion, so that, as I am not able for the moment to be united with you in heaven, I may be united with you through your Passion on earth.¹³¹

Raymond later records that Catherine experienced only some sufferings of Christ because no one could "endure the whole Passion of Jesus Christ."¹³² These sufferings included feeling Christ's crown of thorns pressed into her head, receiving the stigmata, experiencing great pain in her chest, and enduring illness throughout her life.¹³³

Raymond asserts that, after Christ married Catherine, she had a deeper spiritual union with him because she experienced and shared in his sufferings.¹³⁴

Teresa, like Catherine, endured Christ's sufferings in order to experience a more complete union with him. Teresa states that Christ appeared to her in a vision and said:

¹²⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 245-46; Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 131-32.

¹²⁹ Frank Graziano, *Wounds of Love: The Mystical Marriage of Saint Rose of Lima* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 225.

¹³⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 171.

¹³¹ *Life of St. Catherine*, 186.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 189.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 143, 174-75, 189-90.

¹³⁴ Graziano, *Wounds of Love*, 225-26.

“You already know of the espousal between you and Me. Because of this espousal, whatever I have is yours. So I give you all the trials and sufferings I underwent.”¹³⁵ Christ promised to give Teresa all his sufferings, but it appears from her works that she only experienced some of them. In 1576, a nun denounced Teresa to the Spanish Inquisition and the inquisitors in Seville demanded she respond to the charges of heresy and write an account of her spiritual life.¹³⁶ In a letter to the inquisitors, Teresa confesses she experienced many sufferings, including persecution, “unbearable interior torments,” and painful sicknesses.¹³⁷ In her *Interior Castle*, after admitting that her nuns will experience many illnesses, persecutions, and other trials, she discloses that in the last several years, she has not “spent even one day without pains and other kinds of suffering and other great trials.” She does not complain about this; rather, she gladly accepts these sufferings in order “to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³⁸ More important, Teresa’s vision of Christ emphasizes her close relationship with him. Teresa relates that since they are married and share everything, she can participate in Christ’s suffering.¹³⁹ In doing so, Teresa follows in the footsteps of Catherine who shared in Christ’s sufferings in order to have a closer union with him.

Conclusion

In their study on sainthood, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell note that many of the lives of female saints record that as young girls they did not want to get married.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:412.

¹³⁶ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 1:497.

¹³⁷ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:422-23.

¹³⁸ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:362.

¹³⁹ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:412.

¹⁴⁰ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 41-42.

We can see this in Teresa's and Catherine's works. Both Teresa and Catherine were attracted to the contemplative life at a young age. Raymond writes that, at the age of seven, Catherine and a few girls pretended to be nuns by "repeating the Our Father and the Hail Mary."¹⁴¹ She also ran away to find "solitude" and prayed in a cave for a few hours, until she realized she was too young to live alone.¹⁴² When Catherine was twelve, she told her family she detested the idea of marrying,¹⁴³ and she expressed her wish to become a nun.¹⁴⁴ Teresa too wanted to live as a nun. She recalls in *The Book of Her Life* that, as a young child, she and her brother wanted to be hermits and tried to make hermitages in their family garden.¹⁴⁵ She enjoyed when she and other girls her age "pretended we were nuns in a monastery" because she wanted to be a nun.¹⁴⁶ In her *Life*, Teresa writes that one of the reasons she decided to become a nun was because she "feared marriage."¹⁴⁷

Although Teresa did not want to marry, she embraced her marriage to Christ, just as Catherine did. After the marriage ceremonies, Catherine and Teresa often declared love for their spouse. Catherine referred to Christ as her beloved "Bridegroom."¹⁴⁸ Raymond remarks that Catherine had a "burning love" for Christ and that no one could separate her from her "sweetest Bridegroom."¹⁴⁹ To Catherine, nothing was as important as Christ: "In this wretched life I find nothing that attracts me. I seek no other one but

¹⁴¹ *Life of St. Catherine*, 27.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴⁵ *The Book of Her Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:55.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:56.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:61.

¹⁴⁸ *Life of St. Catherine*, 143, 193, 290, 333, 362.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

you. I love nothing but you.”¹⁵⁰ In Teresa’s commentary on the Song of Songs and *Interior Castle*, which we will analyze in the following chapters, she frequently describes Christ as her spouse and lover.¹⁵¹ At one point in her commentary, Teresa writes: “What greater good could I want in this life than to be so close to You that there be no division between You and me?”¹⁵² Since they were brides of Christ, Catherine and Teresa had an everlasting spiritual union with him, and this marriage became an important aspect of their spiritual lives.

Even as we observe similarities between the way Teresa and Catherine expressed their love for Christ and wrote about their marriages to Christ, we can see that their spousal relationships with Christ were part of a larger tradition. Hundreds of years earlier, religious writers had described nuns as brides of Christ. Matter asserts that “it was the teachers and confessors who encouraged nuns to think of their lives in religion as a marriage to Christ.”¹⁵³ Catherine and Teresa appropriated this tradition, but it became even more substantial through their respective experiences of spiritual marriage to Christ. Their spiritual marriages became the framework in which Catherine and Teresa understood their intimate relationship to Christ and their future life in heaven. It proved to them, and possibly to their confessors, that no one could break apart this special relationship and that Christ supported their public lives. Teresa accepted this tradition for herself and used it to shape her own spirituality.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 185.

¹⁵¹ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:247, 249; *Interior Castle*, 2:358, 278-79, 432-33.

¹⁵² *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:246.

¹⁵³ Matter, “Mystical Marriage,” 37.

CHAPTER TWO: A COMPARISON OF TERESA OF AVILA'S AND BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX'S COMMENTARIES ON THE SONG OF SONGS

Introduction

Religious women often drew from the erotically charged language of the Song of Songs to describe their mystical relationship with Christ,¹⁵⁴ but Teresa was one of the first women to write a commentary on this book of the Bible. In 1566 or 1567, Teresa wrote a first draft, which has not survived. She then wrote a second draft sometime between 1572 and 1575; on August 10, 1575, her confessor Domingo Báñez approved this second version. Although Teresa did not give a title to her work, it acquired the title *Meditations on the Song of Songs* because, in Chapter 1, she refers to the work as her “meditations.”¹⁵⁵

A few scholars have discussed the significance of Teresa's *Meditations*. Alison Weber states that, at a time when religious authorities discouraged women from interpreting the Scriptures, Teresa used her commentary to show that women have the right to experience the Song.¹⁵⁶ Elizabeth Teresa Howe emphasizes how Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* influenced Teresa's commentary and the works of John of the Cross. Howe maintains that Teresa's explanation of Song 1:1 was similar to Bernard's interpretation. At the same time, Howe asserts that Teresa's

¹⁵⁴ John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 60, 90, 92; Matter, *Voice*, 182, 190.

¹⁵⁵ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2: 212-13.

¹⁵⁶ Weber, *Teresa of Avila*, 115-19.

commentary differs from Bernard's in style and in her discussion of mystical union.¹⁵⁷

Howe's research provides an excellent starting point for demonstrating that there are some similarities between the two commentaries, but she overlooks the parallels between Bernard's and Teresa's understanding of mystical union. Howe also devotes inadequate attention to Teresa's explanation of Song 1:1, and does not address whether the commentaries have any similarities beyond the first verse. This chapter will provide an in-depth comparison between Teresa's and Bernard's commentaries to enhance our understanding of the relationship between Teresa and the medieval mystical tradition.

An examination of Teresa's *Meditations* and Bernard's *Sermons* will show that Teresa's bridal spirituality is traditional. She conforms to the medieval male mystical tradition because she, like Bernard, uses the verses in the Song to describe who and how one can become a bride, how being a bride leads to union with Christ, and what being a bride means for one's life.

The Song of Songs in the Early Church and Medieval Period

For hundreds of years, religious writers have been attracted to studying and explaining the Song of Songs,¹⁵⁸ possibly because much interpretation was needed to understand the erotic verses. When interpreting passages from the Song, patristic and medieval writers often acknowledged the literal or historical meaning of the text – a love song between a groom and bride.¹⁵⁹ However, commentators aimed to provide deeper insight into the text. In an allegorical interpretation, writers saw the bride as Christ's

¹⁵⁷ Howe, "Mystical Kiss," 304, 306-308.

¹⁵⁸ Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 17.

¹⁵⁹ Richard A. Norris Jr., trans. and ed., *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), xviii, 1.

Church. The tropological interpretation, which stressed how one should live out the moral meaning of a text, allowed writers to apply the relationship between the groom and bride to the intimate relationship between Christ and the individual soul.¹⁶⁰

The Song of Songs engaged the minds of Christian writers from the early Church and the twelfth century. Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-254), who wrote a commentary (ca. 240-44) and two homilies on the Song (ca. 244), viewed the bride as the Church, but he was also one of the first writers to describe the bride as the individual soul.¹⁶¹ Despite Origen's original approach, most patristic and early medieval writers interpreted the bride as the Church.¹⁶² Marvin Pope observes that interest in the Song waned from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, but revived in the twelfth century as monks became interested in the Song.¹⁶³ Scholars attribute this renewed attention to the Song to Bernard of Clairvaux, founder and abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux, who wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song between 1135 and 1153.¹⁶⁴

The religious and social context of the twelfth century reveals how and why Bernard provided a new perspective on the Song.¹⁶⁵ The new religious orders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, such as the Cistercians and Augustinian Canons, were largely made up of adult men who decided to pursue a life of seclusion. Jean Leclercq asserts that many Cistercian monks had been married or were familiar with love

¹⁶⁰ Matter, *Voice*, 13; Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1995), 55.

¹⁶¹ Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 17.

¹⁶² Matter, *Voice*, 13.

¹⁶³ Pope, *Song of Songs*, 121-22.

¹⁶⁴ Murphy, *A Commentary*, 24-25.

¹⁶⁵ Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit*, trans. Claire Lavoie (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 24-26; David William Kling, *Bible in History: How the Texts Have Changed the Times* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97.

literature, and, thus, felt that the love between a man and woman could express the deep love between Christ and the individual soul.¹⁶⁶ Bernard turned to the erotic verses in Song and developed a tropological interpretation of the text.¹⁶⁷ Taking this even one step further, he emphasized that personally experiencing the powerful and intimate love of Christ could lead to the ultimate goal of life – union with Christ.¹⁶⁸

Bernard's sermons influenced the mysticism of the medieval and early modern periods. For instance, his sermons had a tremendous impact on other monastic writers of the twelfth century, who wrote their own commentaries on the Song to explain mystical union.¹⁶⁹ These monastic writings, in turn, inspired the prose, poems, and devotional works of many late medieval and early modern religious men and women, who appropriated the Song to express their love for Christ and to explain how they could attain mystical union.¹⁷⁰

Bernard of Clairvaux's Influence in Sixteenth-Century Spain

Bernard's works influenced the spirituality of sixteenth-century Spain. At the request of Cardinal Cisneros,¹⁷¹ Bernard's letters were translated and compiled into three editions between 1497 and 1499, and Fernández de Santaella translated Bernard's

¹⁶⁶ Leclercq, *Monks and Love*, 9-23.

¹⁶⁷ Kling, *Bible in History*, 103-04; Matter, *Voice*, 125.

¹⁶⁸ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 164-66; Matter, *Voice*, 125-26.

¹⁶⁹ Matter, *Voice*, 132-33.

¹⁷⁰ Matter, *Voice*, 133, 182-193; James I. Wimsatt, "St. Bernard, the Canticle of Canticles, and Mystical Poetry," in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 82-92.

¹⁷¹ Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 10. In Alastair Hamilton, *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Alumbrados* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 25-26, he mentions that Pedro Ruiz de Alcaraz had an enormous library of books, of which included Bernard's sermons.

sermons, including his sermons on the Song of Songs, in 1511.¹⁷² Many early sixteenth-century Spanish writers who practiced “recollection,” which emphasized that prayer led to love or union with God, were influenced by patristic and medieval writings, including those written by Bernard.¹⁷³ Francisco de Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, published in Toledo in 1527, demonstrates this influence as well. Osuna regularly quotes from or refers to Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of Saint Victor, and Bonaventure. In fact, he quotes or refers to Bernard approximately forty-five times to explain how one should love God and how prayer helps achieve a close relationship with God.¹⁷⁴

Teresa refers to Bernard twice in her writings. In *The Book of Her Life*, Teresa acknowledges that one must contemplate Christ’s life in order to grow closer to God. Then she lists several saints who also contemplated Christ’s life, mentioning that “St. Bernard found his delight in the humanity” of Christ.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, in a short document that records several words of advice for her nuns, Teresa tells her nuns that Saints Francis and Bernard believed that one should not flaunt the devotion that lives within one’s heart.¹⁷⁶

Unfortunately, there is little evidence to determine the extent of Teresa’s familiarity with Bernard’s works. Teresa’s first encounter with Bernard may have come

¹⁷² Melquiades Andres, *La Teología Española en el Siglo XVI*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1976): 1: 383.

¹⁷³ Kieran Kavanaugh, “Spanish Sixteenth Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements,” in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, eds. Louis Dupré and Don E. Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 70-71.

¹⁷⁴ *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, 43, 176, 211, 237-38, 246-47, 274, 279-80, 297, 329-30, 332, 361-62, 417-18, 453, 571-72.

¹⁷⁵ *Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:194.

¹⁷⁶ *Santa Teresa: Obras Completas*, 713.

from reading Osuna's book.¹⁷⁷ In her twenties, Teresa read Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet* and was inspired by his approach to prayer.¹⁷⁸ It is possible that Teresa knew about Bernard's commentary, as she indicates that she was familiar with other commentaries on the Song. In Chapter 1 of *Meditations*, she declares that the verses in the Song "contain great things and mysteries" and adds that when she "asked learned men to explain what the Holy Spirit meant by them and what the true meaning was they answered that the doctors wrote many commentaries and yet never finished explaining the words fully."¹⁷⁹ Teresa then acknowledges that she heard some explanations of the Song,¹⁸⁰ and Howe believes that Teresa was most likely referring to Bernard's sermons.¹⁸¹ We do not know with complete certainty whether Teresa read Bernard's sermons, but this passage does demonstrate that Teresa's confessors and spiritual directors informed her of other commentaries on the Song, which could have included Bernard's sermons.

Exegetical Method

Teresa's commentary reveals that she did not want to diverge from previous commentaries. Carole Slade, however, contends that Teresa "disassociates" herself from previous commentaries and, by admitting that even male writers had not completely unravelled the meaning of the Song, Teresa is able to "contradict and correct previous

¹⁷⁷ Carole Slade, "Saint Teresa's *Meditaciones Sobre Los Cantares*: The Hermeneutics of Humility and Enjoyment," *Religion and Literature* 18 (1986): 41.

¹⁷⁸ *The Book of Her Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:66-67; Kavanaugh, "Spanish Sixteenth Century," 75.

¹⁷⁹ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:219.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:220.

¹⁸¹ Howe, "Mystical Kiss," 304.

commentators.”¹⁸² Slade does not consider what Teresa wrote about the first verse of the Song:

I interpret the passage in my own way, even though my understanding of it may not be in accord with what is meant. For if we do not depart from what the Church and the saints hold (which is why learned men who understand the matter will examine this carefully before you see it), the Lord gives us license – from what I think – just as He does when we think of the Passion and consider many more things about the anguish and torments the Lord must have suffered than the Evangelists record.¹⁸³

Here, Teresa admits that her explanation of Song 1:1 might differ from the original and intended meaning of the text. By giving the example of how her nuns reflect on the sufferings of Christ that are not written in the Bible, and by stating that God gives them permission to do this, she demonstrates that her interpretation of the Song is permissible as long as it does not contradict what the Church teaches. By adding that learned men will read her work before her nuns even see it, Teresa makes it clear to her readers that her confessor and other spiritual directors would make sure that she did not promote any improper understanding of the verses. Neither Teresa nor her confessor wanted her interpretation of the Song to undermine a traditional exegesis.

Both Howe and Slade emphasize the differences in the way in which Bernard and Teresa wrote their commentaries.¹⁸⁴ They observe that Teresa expounded only Song 1:1-2 and 2:3-5, while Bernard wrote eighty-six sermons on Song 1:1-3:1.¹⁸⁵ Howe adds that Bernard demonstrates, what she calls, “his biblical erudition,”¹⁸⁶ since he quotes from various biblical books throughout his commentary. Teresa’s work does not appear very

¹⁸² Slade, “*Meditaciones*,” 34.

¹⁸³ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:219.

¹⁸⁴ Howe, “Mystical Kiss,” 303-04; Slade, “*Meditaciones*,” 34-35.

¹⁸⁵ Slade, *Author*, 51; Howe, “Mystical Kiss,” 306-07.

¹⁸⁶ Howe, “Mystical Kiss,” 311.

“scholarly” when compared to Bernard’s commentary because she quotes biblical passages sparingly.¹⁸⁷ While noting differences in method and style, Howe and Slade overlook a shared exegetical method: both Bernard and Teresa rely on personal experience to interpret the Song.

Bernard was one of the first commentators on the Song to encourage his readers to experience the Song.¹⁸⁸ In his first few sermons, Bernard makes it clear that his monks can understand the meaning of the Song only if they live out what the bride says and does. He states: “Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning.”¹⁸⁹ He emphasizes this method of understanding the Song in his third sermon: “Today the text we are to study is the book of our own experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss.”¹⁹⁰ By urging his monks to look at their own spiritual experiences, Bernard offers a very personal method of interpreting the Song.

Bernard also demonstrates that he understands the verses in the Song because he experienced what the bride did. In his explanation of the kiss that the bride requests in Song 1:1, Bernard claims that when he first dared to kiss Christ’s feet, Christ forgave his sins.¹⁹¹ At one point he writes: “I ask of him what I ask of neither man nor angel: that he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”¹⁹² Bernard then observes that in Song 2:5, when the bride says, “Prop me up with flowers, encompass me with apples,” the bride wants “the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 8, 77.

¹⁸⁹ *On the Song*, 1:6.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 1:16.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 1:20.

¹⁹² Ibid., 1:9.

fruits of good works made fragrant by faith.”¹⁹³ He then adds: “I am telling you of what comes within my own experience,” and proceeds to explain that his sermons are like good works because his sermons can make “the proud man humble” or “the timid man brave.”¹⁹⁴

In her *Meditations*, Teresa, like Bernard, emphasizes the importance of experiencing these verses. She frequently urges her nuns to repeat what the bride in the Song says and tells them that they need to experience these words.¹⁹⁵ In Chapter 4, referring to the verses in the Song, she writes: “May the Lord give us experience of them, for they are very difficult to explain.”¹⁹⁶ In other places, she insists that her nuns will only understand the Song if they undergo what the bride does,¹⁹⁷ which resembles Bernard’s assertion.

Teresa relies on her own personal experience to interpret the Song, which Bernard also did in his commentary. In her first chapter, referring to herself in the third person,¹⁹⁸ Teresa writes: “I know someone who for a number of years had many fears, and nothing gave her assurance, but the Lord was pleased that she hear some words from the *Song of Songs*, and through them she understood that her soul was being well guided.”¹⁹⁹ This person “understood that it was possible for a soul in love with its Spouse to experience all these favours” described in the verses.²⁰⁰ She, like Bernard, discloses to her readers that she personally lived out the words in the Song, which helps her understand the verses. At

¹⁹³ Ibid., 3:42.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:236, 240, 243.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 2:242.

¹⁹⁷ See also Ibid., 2:242-43, 245-46, 249.

¹⁹⁸ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2:479, notes that this one among many instances where Teresa refers to herself in the third person.

¹⁹⁹ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2: 218.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

the end of Chapter 3, Teresa declares: “I do not ask You for anything else in life but that *You kiss me with the kiss of Your mouth*, and that You do so in such a way that...my will may always, Lord of my life, be subject to Your will.”²⁰¹ Both Teresa and Bernard reveal that they requested the kiss of the mouth, and they used this experience to understand Song 1:1. In her assessment of Teresa’s commentary, Slade points out that *Meditations* differs from “Bernard’s more abstract, impersonal discussions” because Teresa believes that enjoying or experiencing union with Christ leads one to understand the Song.²⁰² However, a closer look at *Meditations*, in comparison with Bernard’s sermons, shows that Teresa’s personal approach to the Song is not new; centuries before she wrote her work, Bernard read the Song in a similarly personal way.

Their exegetical method encourages readers to live out the Song, and by admitting that they have experienced the verses, Bernard and Teresa suggest that they and their readers can become the bride in the Song. Bernard declares that a soul who loves Christ can be called a bride.²⁰³ Likewise, Teresa repeatedly emphasizes that, by experiencing the Song, one can become a bride of Christ.²⁰⁴ A detailed analysis of how both writers use Song 1:1 to illustrate who and how one can become a bride of Christ will provide a deeper insight into their bridal spirituality.

Interpreting Song 1:1

In his introduction to the Song of Songs, Bernard demonstrates that only a few consecrated religious will understand the message of the Song. He addresses his

²⁰¹ Ibid., 2:242. See also Ibid., 2:246-47, where Teresa shows that she experiences the verses in the Song. Note that Kavanaugh places Teresa’s scriptural quotations in italics to highlight these quotations.

²⁰² Slade, “*Meditaciones*,” 35, 37.

²⁰³ *On the Song*, 1:39.

²⁰⁴ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:236, 240, 246-47.

commentary to the monks at Clairvaux, pointing out that he would have written a different commentary if he addressed “people in the world,” who are not as spiritually mature as his brothers.²⁰⁵ He adds that it is impossible for someone to study this book “before the world’s glamour and entanglements have been firmly repudiated.”²⁰⁶ Bernard, furthermore, believes that very few monks can understand the Song. He explains that “novices, the immature, those but recently converted from a worldly life, do not normally sing this song or hear it sung.”²⁰⁷ Instead, he discloses that only the spiritually mature and those disciplined by study can understand what the Song means for them.²⁰⁸ Bernard, thus, provides a “totally monastic reading” of the Song because he emphasizes that only his fellow monks will really understand and experience the Song.²⁰⁹ The monastery becomes “the only place” where one can fully understand the book.²¹⁰

In his third and fourth sermons, Bernard explains how his monks can become brides of Christ. At the beginning of Sermon 3, Bernard asks the monks to experience the first verse of the Song, but adds that very few have sincerely uttered: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”²¹¹ He claims that the soul must go through stages or steps in order to ask for and to receive the kiss of Christ’s mouth. He writes that, first, one must kiss Christ’s feet and he likens this step to a “genuine conversion of life,”²¹² or

²⁰⁵ *On the Song*, 1:1.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:2.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:7.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ Matter, *Voice*, 125.

²¹⁰ Kling, *Bible in History*, 108.

²¹¹ *On the Song*, 1:16. Note that quotations of the verses of the Song of Songs will be taken from both Bernard’s and Teresa’s works because sometimes they quote the verses differently. According to Howe, “Mystical Kiss,” 306, Teresa probably did not have a Bible in front of her while she wrote her work because the Spanish Inquisition prohibited vernacular Bibles. Therefore, there will be minor verbal discrepancies between the verses she and Bernard quote.

²¹² *On the Song*, 1:21.

the sorrow for one's sins.²¹³ In the next step, one can kiss Christ's hand. This step is given only "to those making progress,"²¹⁴ meaning those who prove that they have repented by not repeating their sins and producing good works.²¹⁵ After these steps, one can ask for the most intimate kiss of all – the kiss of Christ's mouth.²¹⁶ Bernard's analysis of Song 1:1 demonstrates that, just because his monks are in monastic seclusion, they will not automatically become the bride in the Song; rather, they need to strive to make spiritual progress.

Teresa echoes Bernard's approach by addressing her explanation of the Song to those who live within a monastery. Although she mentions that her confessor will read the work before her nuns see it,²¹⁷ throughout she addresses her commentary to her "sisters" or her "daughters." Here Teresa mirrors Bernard's sermons, indicating that her nuns constitute her intended audience because those who live in the world have difficulty understanding the Song.²¹⁸ She recalls listening to a sermon based on the Song and hearing how people laughed in embarrassment at some of the words.²¹⁹ Not only does she realize that the laity are not mature enough to understand the erotic verses in the Song, Teresa also mentions that convent life prepares nuns to experience the Song. In her second chapter, Teresa asks:

God help me, what are we religious doing in the monastery? Why did we leave the world? For what reason did we come? In what better way could we be occupied than to prepare rooms within our souls for our Spouse and

²¹³ Ibid., 1:17.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 1:21.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 1:18.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 1:19-22.

²¹⁷ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:215, 219.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 2:217.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 2:217-18.

reach the stage in which we can ask Him to give us the kiss of His mouth?²²⁰

In the first few chapters of her *Meditations*, Teresa comes to a conclusion remarkably similar to that of Bernard – the consecrated religious who are withdrawn from the distractions of the world are more likely to become the bride in the Song than other believers.

Teresa continues to provide a traditional interpretation of Song 1:1 by explaining that becoming a bride involves spiritual development. Howe points out that Teresa does not describe the kisses of the feet and hands that Bernard discusses in his sermons,²²¹ but Teresa realizes, like Bernard, that one must reach a certain stage in order to ask Christ for his kiss. Teresa believes that her sisters cannot simply, or superficially, ask for the kiss. Instead, she reflects Bernard's thoughts by insisting that her nuns need to take time to prepare their souls before they can even ask for the kiss. Teresa devotes the rest of Chapter 2 to informing her readers what to do – or not do – in order to prepare to ask for the kiss. She tells her readers that they can never attain the stage of the kiss if they do not care about committing venial sins, do not withdraw completely from the world, or preoccupy themselves with what others think or say about them.²²² At the end of the chapter she urges her nuns to “beg” Christ for the kiss and to do whatever they can so that he will grant their request.²²³ She concludes that a nun will attain the bridal state in this

²²⁰ Ibid., 2:224.

²²¹ Howe, “Mystical Kiss,” 307-08.

²²² *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:224, 231-32, 234-35.

²²³ Ibid., 2:236.

stage only if she “has been occupied in much prayer, penance, humility, and many other virtues.”²²⁴

Another parallel between Bernard and Teresa is their emphasis on the role of Christ in Song 1:1. Bernard makes it clear that, even after taking all these steps, Christ plays an important role in this last stage, as he is the one who “bestows” and grants the kiss of the mouth.²²⁵ Even though the soul has to prove it is worthy to receive the kiss, it is Christ who grants the soul’s request for the kiss. In *Meditations*, Teresa shares these thoughts by demonstrating that after the soul asks for the kiss, Christ decides to bestow the kiss upon the soul. She asserts that the kiss is a “favour” granted by Christ,²²⁶ and that he “desires to answer the petition of the bride.”²²⁷ Antonio Pérez-Romero claims that Teresa, by recognizing the limitations of the soul’s efforts and claiming that Christ does most of the work, is doing something unique.²²⁸ However, Bernard also believed that receiving the kiss depends on Christ. Teresa echoes Bernard’s first few sermons: in order to be like the bride in the Song, one must be devoted to leading a life worthy of Christ who grants the requested kiss.

After explaining who and how his readers can prepare themselves to ask for the kiss, Bernard defines the kiss of the mouth as a mystical experience. In Sermon 3, he interprets the kiss of the mouth as a “mystical kiss” and an “intimate experience.”²²⁹ At the end of the sermon, he adds that when the soul receives the kiss from Christ, the two

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ *On the Song*, 1:20; 1:49.

²²⁶ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:236, 237, 240.

²²⁷ Ibid., 2:243.

²²⁸ Antonio Pérez-Romero, “Bypassing Asceticism: *The Song of Songs* and the Spirit of ‘Reformed’ Christianity in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” *Mystics Quarterly* 23 (1997): 22-23.

²²⁹ *On the Song*, 1:16.

become “one spirit.”²³⁰ Bernard gives the monks at Clairvaux a glimpse of what they could experience after they receive the kisses of the feet, hands, and mouth – union with Christ.

Bernard describes this union in two different ways. In Sermon 7, Bernard claims that, in secular love, a married couple shares everything and “nothing that causes division”; thus, it is fitting to see the relationship between the soul and Christ in a similar way when the kiss occurs.²³¹ He returns to this comparison in his eighth sermon: “For if marriage according to the flesh constitutes two in one body, why should not a spiritual union be even more efficacious in joining two in one spirit? And hence anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.”²³² He relies on the marriage and the physical union of the bride and groom in the Song to explain to his monks what the union between the soul and Christ is like. In other sermons, Bernard explains that the union between the soul and Christ is a union of wills. In Sermon 71, when Bernard discusses union in more depth, he writes that the soul becomes “one spirit with God,”²³³ and in union there is “the concurrence of wills.”²³⁴ He adds that before union “their wills, and their substances are distinct and different” but in union there is “a communion of wills.”²³⁵ Bernard is certain that union leads the soul to have the same desires as God.

In *Meditations*, Teresa, like Bernard, provides a mystical interpretation of the kiss in the Song. Howe contends that Teresa compares the kiss of the mouth to mystical union only in her *Interior Castle*, and, therefore, proposes a discontinuity between

²³⁰ Ibid., 1:20.

²³¹ Ibid., 1:39.

²³² Ibid., 1:52.

²³³ Ibid., 4:53.

²³⁴ Ibid., 4:54.

²³⁵ Ibid., 4:55-56.

Meditations and Bernard's commentary.²³⁶ However, the evidence proves that Teresa believes that when Christ grants the kiss of the mouth, the soul achieves union with Christ. At the beginning of Chapter 3, Teresa once again tells her nuns to ask for the kiss that the bride requests and then writes: "Oh, how happy will be the lot of one who obtains this favor since it is a union with the will of God; such a union that there is no division between Him and the soul, but one same will."²³⁷ After devoting most of her second chapter to explaining how her nuns can prepare themselves to ask for the kiss, she affirms that whoever receives the kiss from Christ experiences union with him, which coincides with Bernard's explanation of the kiss.

Later in the third chapter, Teresa compares the union between the soul and Christ to marriage, which Bernard also did. She writes:

If a peasant girl should marry the king and have children, don't the children have royal blood? Well, if our Lord grants so much favor to our soul that He joins Himself to it in this inseparable way, what desires, what effects, what heroic deeds will be born from it as offspring, if the soul be not at fault!²³⁸

Here, she suggests that a close union produces good deeds like a married couple who have children. In his sermons, Bernard immediately sees the connection between the marriage relationship of a man and woman to the intimate relationship between Christ and the soul. Teresa also briefly uses the metaphor of marriage to describe the union between the soul and Christ.

Furthermore, Teresa understands union as a harmony with God's will, which reflects Bernard's understanding of mystical union. McGinn notes that, in *Interior*

²³⁶ Howe, "Mystical Kiss," 308.

²³⁷ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:236.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:240.

Castle, Teresa describes union with Christ as a union of wills, like other male medieval mystics, such as Bernard.²³⁹ He does not mention that Teresa's explanation of the union of wills is also in her *Meditations*. At the beginning of Chapter 3, Teresa defines union as Christ and the soul having "one same will," which Bernard did in his sermons. In this union, the soul forgets itself and wants only "to please this most sweet Bridegroom."²⁴⁰ Teresa mentions that many people do their own will. For instance, there are people living in the world who care too much of what others think or say about them and have trouble "denying their own will."²⁴¹ Teresa adds that those who receive the kiss and have the same will as God have "contempt for all earthly things," do not desire their own good, and only rejoice "with those who love their Lord."²⁴² As in the case of Bernard, Teresa believes that, in order to achieve mystical union, the desires of the soul must merge with the will of God. Through an exegesis of Song 1:1, both Teresa and Bernard conclude that a true bride of Christ reaches a state of unity with him.

Interpreting Song 2:4-5

In their commentaries of the verses following Song 1:1, both Bernard and Teresa indicate that to live as a bride of Christ is not a selfish endeavour for personal benefit. In several sermons, especially Sermons 50 to 58, Bernard expresses that union with Christ causes the soul to love and serve one's neighbour.²⁴³ Pérez-Romero claims that Teresa opposes the importance of good works because, from Chapters 4 through 7, she

²³⁹ McGinn, "*Unio Mystica*," 82.

²⁴⁰ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:236-37.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:234-35.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 2:237.

²⁴³ M. Corneille Halfants, introduction to *Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs*, ed. Kilian J. Walsh, 4 vols. (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 1: xxv-xxvii; Leclercq, *Monks*, 22.

emphasizes that the soul does not need to do anything because it is God who grants to the soul the experiences found in the Song.²⁴⁴ However, a closer look at her *Meditations* reveals that Teresa echoes Bernard's thought that being a bride of Christ means living a life of service. After defining union as having "one same will," Teresa writes: "It is a union not based on words or desires alone, but a union proved by deeds" because the soul wants to serve and please Christ.²⁴⁵ When Christ joins himself to the soul, the soul will produce good deeds.²⁴⁶ After attaining the wonderful stage of union with Christ, the married soul wants to devote a life of service to Christ. The idea that being a true bride leads the soul to service is prominent in both Bernard's and Teresa's interpretations of Song 2:4: "The King led me into the wine-cellar, he set love in order in me."²⁴⁷

In his explication of Song 2:4, Bernard asserts that a true bride of Christ serves and loves one's neighbour. In Sermon 49, Bernard writes that the wine cellar could refer to the Church,²⁴⁸ but he focuses on how Christ leads the soul into the wine cellar.²⁴⁹ He explains to his monks that, after this experience, "you return to us full of grace and love, you will not be able, in the ardor of your spirit, to conceal the gift you have received; you will communicate it."²⁵⁰ Not only does Bernard indicate that, when Christ leads the soul into the wine cellar, the soul experiences great "divine love," but he also writes that in the cellar the soul can receive the spiritual gift of preaching or, more generally, telling others about God's love.²⁵¹ By explaining that those souls who have been led into the wine

²⁴⁴ Pérez-Romero, "Bypassing Asceticism," 25-27.

²⁴⁵ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:236.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:240.

²⁴⁷ This is Bernard's quotation of the text. *On the Song*, 3:21.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:22.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:23-24.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:23.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3:23-24.

cellar come back with spiritual gifts, Bernard affirms that being a bride is connected to helping and serving others. Bernard then connects the second half of Song 2:4 to loving God and one's neighbour. In Sermon 50, Bernard considers how one first loves God and then loves one's neighbour. He maintains: "Love exists in action."²⁵² By this he means that whoever loves God deeply must love one's neighbour, especially one's enemies.²⁵³ He then mentions that his brothers at Clairvaux want to devote their life to prayer and study, but when this ordering of love occurs, they want to show love by attending to "weaker brothers" or going to "those who need to speak to us or be helped."²⁵⁴ Bernard concludes that when one lives like a bride and loves God, then one will lead an active life in the monastery, especially by loving or helping other monks.

When Teresa explains Song 2:4,²⁵⁵ she emphasizes that her nuns will live an active life, in a similar way to Bernard. Teresa observes that in this verse God grants the bride another favour: he leads the soul into a wine cellar. In the wine cellar, God gives to one person "a little wine of devotion, to another more, with another He increases it in such a way that the person begins to go out from himself," and then "to some He gives great fervor in His service; to others, impulses of love; to others, great charity toward their neighbours."²⁵⁶ Teresa follows in Bernard's footsteps by associating this verse with the receiving of spiritual gifts and using this verse to tell her nuns that brides of Christ will benefit those around them. When she discusses the second half of Song 2:4, Teresa stresses the importance of love toward others. She comments:

²⁵² Ibid., 3:31.

²⁵³ Ibid., 3:31-32.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 3:34.

²⁵⁵ In *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:251, Teresa's version of Song 2:4 reads: "He brought me into the wine cellar; set charity in order within me."

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

The King set charity in order within me, set it in order so well that the love the soul had for the world is taken away; the soul's love of itself turns to disregard; its love for its relatives is such that it loves them solely for God; its love for its neighbors and its enemies is unbelievable unless experienced.²⁵⁷

Consistent with Bernard's exegesis, Teresa writes that when one lives as the bride in the Song and loves God deeply, one cannot help but love its neighbours and enemies.

Bernard strengthens the link between bridal spirituality and good works in his explanation of Song 2:5: "Prop me up with flowers, encompass me with apples, because I languish with love."²⁵⁸ He briefly examines what this means if the bride is understood as the Church,²⁵⁹ but subsequently he describes the speaker as the individual soul. McGinn states that Bernard uses this verse to demonstrate that the active life comes from the contemplative life.²⁶⁰ To Bernard, the flowers in this verse symbolize faith and the fruit, good works. The bride must request "an assortment of the fruits of good works made fragrant by faith."²⁶¹ In order to describe the relationship between faith and works, he maintains that "there is neither fruit without flower nor a good work without faith."²⁶² At the end of this explanation, he urges his readers "to advance in faith and good works" until Christ comes again.²⁶³ Bernard uses this verse in the Song to show that, when one is truly a bride of Christ, one cannot help but perform good works for the rest of one's life.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 2:255.

²⁵⁸ Note that this is Bernard's quotation of the text: *On the Song*, 3:39.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 3:40.

²⁶⁰ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 222-23.

²⁶¹ *On the Song*, 3:41-2.

²⁶² Ibid., 3:41.

²⁶³ Ibid., 3:43.

As in Bernard's commentary, Teresa relates Song 2:5²⁶⁴ to the active life and realizes those who live as brides of Christ want to serve others through good works, despite enclosure. She asserts that the flowers symbolize good works and she likens the bride's request for apples to the soul's demand to experience sufferings and persecutions.²⁶⁵ Teresa's reading diverges slightly from Bernard's in that he saw the fruit as good works, while she described the flowers as good works. Nevertheless, Teresa, like Bernard, recognizes the importance of the bride's doing "great works in the service of our Lord and of its neighbor." Teresa further reflects Bernard's interpretation when she states that the contemplative life begets the active life. She writes that the soul in this stage wants to do works to please God and the scent of the works "spreads to the benefit of many."²⁶⁶ Although there are "many things" the soul can do in this active life,²⁶⁷ Teresa does not give her nuns any concrete examples of what they can do in their monasteries to benefit those around them. She admits that *The Book of Her Life* furnishes "detailed explanations about when a soul may go out to benefit others" and, therefore, she should not go into any more detail.²⁶⁸

Here, Teresa ends her commentary on the Song of Songs rather abruptly. She tells her nuns that she wanted to explain only some verses of the Song and, thus, it would "be bold" to comment any further. In her concluding remarks, Teresa hopes her nuns can

²⁶⁴ Teresa quotes Song 2:5: "Sustain me with flowers; surround me with apples for I am dying with the sickness of love." *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:255.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:257, 259.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:257.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:258.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:260.

understand some verses in the Song, and encourages them to ask for some of the experiences the bride in the Song has received.²⁶⁹

Conclusion

Both Weber and Slade mention that, although Domingo Báñez approved of Teresa's commentary on the Song of Songs, another confessor, Diego de Yanguas, ordered that she burn all copies of her *Meditations* in 1580. They also quote Jerónimo Gracián's introduction to *Meditations*, which he published in 1611 in Brussels. In this introduction, Gracián explains that Yanguas believed a woman should not be allowed to write a commentary on the Song.²⁷⁰

Apparently, Yanguas later regretted this decision. María de San José, prioress of the Discalced Carmelite convent in Seville, testified at Teresa's canonization trial in 1595 that "afterwards the Father regretted what he had done, since there was nothing in the book contrary to our holy Faith."²⁷¹ In 1610, the Duchess of Alba stated that Yanguas ordered Teresa to burn the book "not because there was anything wrong in the book, but because he thought it unfitting that a woman should write on the Songs."²⁷² Yanguas was worried that Teresa had commented upon this erotic book, but he never criticized her interpretation of the Song.²⁷³

Perhaps Báñez approved of Teresa's commentary and Yanguas repented of his condemnation of *Mediations* because she presented a traditional exegesis of the verses.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Weber, *Teresa of Avila*, 117; Slade, *Author*, 50.

²⁷¹ María de San José, quoted in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, 2: 354.

²⁷² Duchess of Alba, quoted in Ibid. Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 75 notes that we only have Teresa's *Meditations* because some of her nuns copied the manuscript before she burned it and safely hid the copies.

²⁷³ Claire F. Brunetti, "Songs of Silence: The Affection of Bride and Body in the Rhetoric of Bernard of Clairvaux, Margery Kempe, and Teresa of Avila," (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1991), 133, 138.

A comparison of *Meditations* and Bernard's *Sermons* demonstrates both Teresa and Bernard use passages in the Song to explain that a soul can become a bride of Christ only after significant spiritual progress. Moreover, they insist that the soul espoused to Christ will experience a spiritual union with him, and this union will compel the soul to love and serve its neighbours.

Although Teresa did not present an innovative interpretation of the Song, simply the fact that she was one of the first women to write a commentary on the Song is significant. The Song was a topic of discussion among many educated medieval religious men, and through her own commentary, Teresa was able to pass on this exegetical tradition to her nuns. In Chapter 2, she mentions that other authors have commented on the Song, but her nuns "will not have money to buy books." Thus, one of the reasons she is writing her own commentary is so that her nuns could read the short commentary at any time and learn how to apply the Song to their lives.²⁷⁴ Teresa's *Meditations* makes the Song relevant for her nuns and, thereby, carries forward bridal spirituality into sixteenth-century Spain.

²⁷⁴ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:225.

CHAPTER THREE: TERESA OF AVILA'S BRIDAL MYSTICISM IN THE CONTEXT OF MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM

Introduction

In 1577, Jerome Gratian, Teresa's confessor, ordered her to write another book for her nuns about spiritual matters, and Teresa realized this work was different from her other works. On December 7, only eight days after completing the book, Teresa wrote Gaspar de Salazar, one of her spiritual directors. She mentioned that her "jewel," *The Book of Her Life*, was still in the hands of the inquisitor, but that she had written another jewel, *Interior Castle*.²⁷⁵ She claims her latest work had "many advantages over the previous one" and it was "more exquisite."²⁷⁶

Scholars also acknowledge the exceptional qualities of *Interior Castle*, calling the work "an inspiration"²⁷⁷ and a "spiritual masterpiece,"²⁷⁸ but they debate its uniqueness within the history of Western mysticism. A few point out that, to some extent, the book was influenced by the medieval mystical tradition promoted by Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of Saint Victor, and William of Saint Thierry.²⁷⁹ Bernard McGinn and Gillian Ahlgren note that Teresa's reference to 1 Corinthians 6:17 in her last section of *Interior Castle* links her to Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of Saint Victor, and William of Saint

²⁷⁵ *Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Avila*, 1:581-84.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:583.

²⁷⁷ E. Allison Peers, *Studies of the Spanish Mystics*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 109.

²⁷⁸ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2:266.

²⁷⁹ McGinn, "Unio Mystica," 82; Green, *Gold in the Crucible*, 69-70.

Thierry who also used this same verse to explain mystical union.²⁸⁰ McGinn argues that because Teresa, like medieval mystical writers, saw union as a union of wills, she did not contribute anything new to the mystical tradition.²⁸¹

On the other hand, some scholars emphasize the originality of *Interior Castle*. Ahlgren, in a detailed analysis of the seven sections of *Interior Castle*, sometimes points out Teresa's connections to the larger mystical tradition, but her main aim is to highlight "Teresa's theological creativity,"²⁸² such as her grasp of the Trinity.²⁸³ Other scholars hardly mention medieval mysticism's possible influence on Teresa's ideas. Rowan Williams asserts that Teresa the theologian has been overlooked by many scholars and wants to prove that Teresa "was an independent theological thinker"²⁸⁴ and, therefore, does not examine whether the *Interior Castle* is traditional. Even though E.W. Trueman Dicken acknowledges that "no-one ever writes upon a blank page," he argues that Teresa's mystical teachings in *Interior Castle* are original and her own.²⁸⁵ Edward Howells, who analyzes Teresa's and John of the Cross's descriptions of the soul, insists that Teresa presents a unique understanding of the soul in *Interior Castle*.²⁸⁶

Only a few scholars have examined the bridal spirituality in *Interior Castle*. Alison Weber argues that Teresa disguises the erotic images in *Interior Castle* among many other images.²⁸⁷ Claiming that erotic spirituality was dangerous in sixteenth-

²⁸⁰ McGinn, "Unio Mystica," 62-63, 65, 82; Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 111.

²⁸¹ McGinn, "Unio Mystica," 82.

²⁸² Gillian Ahlgren, *Entering Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 8.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁸⁴ Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Continuum, 1991), ix.

²⁸⁵ E.W. Trueman Dicken, *The Crucible of Love: A Study of the Mysticism of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1963), 300.

²⁸⁶ Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002), 1-2.

²⁸⁷ Weber, *Teresa of Avila*, 99.

century Spain because the Spanish Inquisition saw a close association between sexuality and the devil, Weber concludes that Teresa's subdued bridal images keep her and her *Interior Castle* safe.²⁸⁸ Others have demonstrated how Teresa's bridal images were traditional, challenging those scholars who emphasize Teresa's originality. Ahlgren and Elizabeth Teresa Howe briefly note that the bridal images found in the last three stages of the *Interior Castle* are similar to what patristic and medieval authors had written about the erotic love between the soul and God.²⁸⁹ Similarly, Jess Byron Hollenback observes that Teresa was not the first writer to see the ultimate goal of mystical life as spiritual marriage. He then suggests that Teresa was influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux because they both describe mystical union as spiritual marriage.²⁹⁰ Unfortunately, these scholars do not provide a detailed comparative analysis of the bridal mysticism found in *Interior Castle* and the mysticism of medieval male mystics. They also do not investigate whether Teresa's bridal mysticism had any connection to the medieval female mystical tradition.

This chapter will add a more complex perspective on Teresa's bridal spirituality. A comparison of *Interior Castle* to medieval mystical works by Bernard of Clairvaux, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta reinforces the argument that Teresa embraced a traditional view of spiritual union. However, her bridal mysticism in *Interior Castle* is more developed and innovative than in her *Meditations*. When compared to the writings of these other mystics, we see that Teresa expands on their discussion of how the soul grows in union with God. Furthermore, as she discusses how love and knowledge play a role in bridal mysticism, she adds to the ideas of her predecessors. An analysis of

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 99-100, 114-15, 122.

²⁸⁹ Ahlgren, *Entering*, 63-64, 84; Howe, *Mystical Imagery*, 160-61.

²⁹⁰ Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 551, 558-59.

Interior Castle will present a more balanced contribution to the debate on this text and provide a new discussion of how Teresa's bridal spirituality relates to the medieval female mystical tradition.

Teresa of Avila and the Medieval Mystical Tradition

Scholars agree that Teresa's mysticism is unlike the mysticism described by Meister Eckhart and the female Beguine mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as Hadewijch of Antwerp (thirteenth-century) and Mechthild of Magdeburg, (ca.1208-ca.1282).²⁹¹ McGinn calls this mysticism *unitas indistinctionis* because these mystics claimed that there was no distinction between God and the soul once union occurred.²⁹² Teresa would not have had access to the writings of these mystics because they were not available in Spain during her life.²⁹³ Thus, it is impractical to compare Teresa's bridal mysticism to the German mysticism of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

When determining which medieval texts written by male mystics to compare with Teresa's *Interior Castle*, it is clear that Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* is an obvious choice. Other scholars have noted some similarities between the mysticism of Teresa's *Interior Castle* and Bernard's *Sermons*.²⁹⁴ Of the medieval male writers, Bernard of Clairvaux was the most familiar to Teresa. Teresa's spiritual directors saw

²⁹¹ McGinn, "Unio Mystica," 82; Howells, *Mystical Knowing*, 2; Green, *Gold in the Crucible*, 69-72.

²⁹² McGinn, "Unio Mystica," 70-71.

²⁹³ Frank Tobin, ed. and trans., *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998) 7-8; Mother Columba Hart, ed. and trans., introduction to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 1; Edmund Colledge, introduction to *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 21.

²⁹⁴ McGinn, "Unio Mystica," 62-63, 65, 82; Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 111; Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 551, 558-59.

some similarities between her mysticism and the mystical works of Richard of Saint Victor, William of Saint Thierry, and Bonaventure,²⁹⁵ but she never mentioned these writers, and there is no evidence to verify she read their works. In addition, there is not enough bridal imagery in these works to prove an affinity between Teresa and them, as there is with Bernard.

Since works by medieval female mystics were available during Teresa's life, a comparison between these works and *Interior Castle* is necessary to determine the extent to which Teresa's bridal mysticism was traditional. Chapter 1 has already demonstrated the similarities between Teresa and Catherine of Siena. The writings of Angela of Foligno and Gertrude of Helfta are more appropriate choices for this chapter because, like *Interior Castle*, these works outline how Angela and Gertrude grew in their mystical relationship to God.

Spaniards of the sixteenth century, including Teresa, knew of Angela of Foligno's life and work. Angela was a wife and a mother, when at the age of forty, her husband, sons, and mother suddenly died. *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno*, which Angela's confessor Arnaldo wrote, recounts her spiritual conversion, her decision to take the Franciscan habit, and her many mystical experiences.²⁹⁶ The first part of the *Book* describes nineteen steps of Angela's spiritual journey, and then seven steps record her growing union with God. Angela was called "Blessed" and was often referred to as a saint, even though she was never canonized.²⁹⁷ Cardinal Cisneros encouraged the translation of the *Book* into Spanish, and in 1510, it was published in Toledo.²⁹⁸ Teresa

²⁹⁵ Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 138.

²⁹⁶ Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 16-21.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21, 23.

²⁹⁸ Rhodes, "What's in a Name," 86.

may have learned about Angela's *Book* by reading Francisco de Osuna or Bernardino of Laredo,²⁹⁹ but it is possible she read the work herself. Paul Lachance notes that Teresa's description of a soul that is suffering "like a person hanging"³⁰⁰ is similar to Angela's comparison of suffering to a person "hanging without any supports."³⁰¹ One of Teresa's poems employs the refrain: "I die because I do not die,"³⁰² which resembles a phrase in Angela's *Book*.³⁰³ Although Angela's stages to union do not coincide with Teresa's stages, there are similarities between their works, as we shall see later.

Gertrude of Helfta's *Herald of the Memorial of the Abundance of Divine Love* was a popular book throughout early modern Europe,³⁰⁴ and it is possible Teresa was familiar with it. The *Herald* is divided into three books, the second of which Gertrude, a Benedictine nun, wrote, while the other two were written by someone who knew Gertrude. Book 1 is a biography of Gertrude and the other two record Gertrude's revelations and visions.³⁰⁵ The writers of the *Herald* were well-educated and familiar with the writings of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint Thierry, Richard of Saint Victor, and others.³⁰⁶ In the *Herald*, Gertrude focuses primarily on God's love and her "spirituality is always spousal,"³⁰⁷ in that she always writes about having a close, intimate relationship with Christ.³⁰⁸ Maximilian Marnau maintains that the *Herald* was published in many different countries in the sixteenth century, but she does not mention if

²⁹⁹ Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 23, 114, 386-87.

³⁰⁰ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:423.

³⁰¹ Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 358.

³⁰² "Aspirations Toward Eternal Life," in *Collected Works*, 3:375.

³⁰³ Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 358.

³⁰⁴ Marnau, introduction to *Gertrude of Helfta*, 43.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 30. See *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald of Divine Love*, 86, 104, 190-91 for some examples.

there was a Spanish edition of Gertrude's text. She does note that the confessor of King Philip II of Spain read to him Gertrude's work while he was dying.³⁰⁹ Francisco de Ribera, who wrote a biography of Teresa, refers to specific sections of Gertrude's *Herald*,³¹⁰ demonstrating that her work was available during Teresa's life. Without identifying her source, Marnau writes that one of Teresa's confessors "recommended her to take Gertrude as spiritual mistress and guide."³¹¹ Although there is little evidence that proves Teresa read Gertrude's *Herald*, this work will help shed light on how traditional and innovative *Interior Castle* was.

The Soul's Spiritual Espousal to God

A brief summary of the first four sections of *Interior Castle* will provide some background to the bridal mysticism found in the last three sections. Each section represents one of the seven stages of a soul's spiritual journey to God. At the beginning of the work, Teresa describes the soul as a castle which is made up of many rooms or dwelling places. The center of this castle, she insists, is where God and the soul meet and experience union.³¹² The first four sections of the work explain what the soul must do in order to progress from one stage to the next. Teresa writes that "the door of entry to this castle is prayer and reflection."³¹³ Once in the first dwelling place, the soul must stop being "absorbed with its possessions, honor, or business affairs."³¹⁴ In the second stage,

³⁰⁹ Marnau, introduction to *Gertrude of Helfta*, 43.

³¹⁰ *Francisco de Ribera: Vida de Teresa de Jesús*, ed. Jaime Pons (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1908), 77.

³¹¹ Marnau, introduction to *Gertrude of Helfta*, 43.

³¹² *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:283-84.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 2:286.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:294.

the soul continues to pray, avoids sinning, and perseveres through trials.³¹⁵ Then, after improving itself, the soul moves to the third stage, where the soul must guard itself against venial sins, do penance, perform “works of charity,”³¹⁶ and learn great humility.³¹⁷ In the fourth stage, the soul devotes itself to prayer, and God grants an experience, which Teresa calls “the prayer of quiet”³¹⁸ because the soul receives “the greatest peace and quiet.”³¹⁹ Here, “the will finds rest” in God’s presence.³²⁰ She claims that when God brings the soul to this stage, the soul continues to improve itself.³²¹

In the last three sections of *Interior Castle*, the soul experiences three kinds of union. According to Teresa, the fifth stage is a type of union where “His Majesty is so joined and united with the essence of the soul that the devil will not dare to approach.”³²² In the sixth stage, “the Lord joins it with Himself, without anyone understanding what is happening except these two,”³²³ and then in the last stage, the soul and God become one.³²⁴ The union of the fifth stage should not be confused, however, with the union found in the sixth or seventh stages. Although Teresa admits the fifth and sixth stages “are almost identical,” she suggests that “the force of the effects is very different.”³²⁵ Dicken points out that the last three stages in *Interior Castle* are different only in how permanent or how intensely they are felt.³²⁶

³¹⁵ Ibid., 2:297, 299.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 2:306.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 2:313.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 2:323.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 2:324.

³²⁰ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2:273.

³²¹ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:332.

³²² Ibid., 2:337.

³²³ Ibid., 2:379.

³²⁴ Ibid., 2:434.

³²⁵ Ibid., 2:344.

³²⁶ Dicken, *Crucible of Love*, 424.

Teresa immediately recognizes that it is very difficult to distinguish between these three kinds of union and, therefore, uses a traditional metaphor. She confesses that “there is no way of knowing how to speak” about the union experienced in the last stages, “nor can comparisons help in explaining them.”³²⁷ Nevertheless, she concludes that she cannot find a better comparison “than the sacrament of marriage.”³²⁸ Teresa even acknowledges that she is using a well-known comparison when she writes: “You’ve already often heard that God espouses souls spiritually.”³²⁹ Although she does not indicate whether her nuns knew about spiritual espousal through her own works or other works, it is obvious that comparing marriage to the bond between the soul and God was not new.

Four hundred years earlier, Bernard of Clairvaux turned his attention to the Song of Songs because he realized that the relationship between a bride and groom could be compared to the relationship between the soul and God. In the introduction to his *Sermons*, Bernard reveals that the marriage song between the bride and groom can help his monks understand “the sacrament of endless union with God.”³³⁰ In Sermon 7, he writes that in marriage the bride and groom “share the same inheritance, the same table, the same house, the same marriage-bed, they are flesh of each other’s flesh.”³³¹ He then asserts that the soul and God have a similar relationship as a bride and groom because they also share everything.³³² In his following sermon, Bernard poses a rhetorical

³²⁷ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:335.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:354.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:354.

³³⁰ *On the Song*, 1:5.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 1:39.

³³² *Ibid.*

question: “For if marriage according to the flesh constitutes two in one body, why should not a spiritual union be even more efficacious in joining two in one spirit?”³³³

A few medieval female mystics took the comparisons between marriage and mystical union even further than Bernard by asserting that betrothal is a step prior to union. Before writing about her marriage to Christ, Gertrude recorded that she had a vision in which Christ took her hand and pledged “a troth” of love.³³⁴ “From that hour, in a new spirit of joyful serenity,”³³⁵ Gertrude accepted this new stage in life. She felt that before their betrothal, she had not entered into a deep relationship with Christ.³³⁶

Angela’s *Book* records a similar experience. The first nineteen steps in the *Book* “is her gradual surrender, bit by bit” to Christ. At this point, Arnaldo, Angela’s confessor, starts counting the steps from one again. The next seven steps describe her entry into union with God.³³⁷ Although Angela does not achieve marriage with God until the seventh step,³³⁸ the *Book* indicates that she experienced union with God before the final step. Arnaldo records that the love Angela and Christ had for each other grew during her pilgrimage to Assisi.³³⁹ After Angela returned home, Christ appeared to her in a vision and declared: “You are holding the ring of my love. From now on you are engaged to me and you will never leave me.”³⁴⁰ Christ’s betrothal to Angela demonstrates they had a committed relationship and, on some level, union. Bernard does not see the soul’s

³³³ Ibid., 1:52.

³³⁴ *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald*, 95.

³³⁵ Ibid., 96.

³³⁶ Ibid., 95.

³³⁷ Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 59.

³³⁸ *The Book*, in *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, 205, 211.

³³⁹ Ibid., 140-42.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 143.

growing relationship to God in terms of betrothal, but betrothal is an important stage in Gertrude's and Angela's spiritual journey.

In the fifth section of *Interior Castle*, Teresa compares the growing union between the soul and God to courtship, enhancing bridal mysticism in a new way. She declares:

Here below when two people are to be engaged, there is discussion about whether they are alike, whether they love each other, and whether they might meet together so as to become more satisfied with each other. So, too, in the case of this union with God.³⁴¹

Kieran Kavanaugh notes that Teresa compared the stages of marriage of her day to the soul's mystical journey to God.³⁴² In the medieval and early modern periods, a man and a woman met a few times to get to know each other before betrothal.³⁴³ What Kavanaugh does not indicate is that Teresa provides a metaphor that medieval mystics had not employed before. As Teresa offers several reasons why the union in the fifth stage is comparable to courtship, it becomes clear that she sees the soul's spiritual journey in a new way. First, she wants to make it clear that this stage "passes in a very short time,"³⁴⁴ since these encounters with God usually last for only half an hour at a time.³⁴⁵ Second, she intends to demonstrate that the soul and God must get to know each other, just like a man and woman who are about to be engaged. She explains that when the soul and God meet, the soul learns "about the goodness" of its future spouse to "know Him more."³⁴⁶ Third, the aim of fifth stage is to prepare the soul for the sixth stage: spiritual betrothal.

³⁴¹ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:355.

³⁴² Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2:491.

³⁴³ Beatrice Gottlieb, *The Family in the Western World from the Black Death to the Industrial Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 63.

³⁴⁴ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:355.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:343.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:355.

Teresa tells her nuns that, after these meetings, the soul is in love with God and the soul desires and prepares for the “divine betrothal.”³⁴⁷ Her bridal mysticism goes even further than that of Bernard, Gertrude, or Angela, as these writers did not describe a stage of courtship. In a new and creative way, Teresa expands on medieval mysticism by writing that, as the relationship between the soul and God deepen, they experience a period of courtship.

Teresa then adds to the medieval mystical tradition when she portrays the growing bond between the soul and God to betrothal. In the sixth section of *Interior Castle*, Teresa suggests that some time after courtship, there is a “token or pledge of betrothal.”³⁴⁸ Teresa, like medieval female mystics, insists there is a stage of betrothal, but she provides a more thorough discussion of spiritual betrothal than Gertrude and Angela. She claims that when God wants to grant betrothal, he gives an experience, which Teresa calls a rapture.³⁴⁹ In a rapture “God carries off for Himself the entire soul, and, as to someone who is His own and His spouse, He begins showing it some little part of the kingdom that it has gained by being espoused to Him.”³⁵⁰ A person who experiences this “cannot speak at all,” and his or her body becomes so cold that “the person doesn’t seem to have any life.”³⁵¹ Although rapture only lasts a short while, afterwards the soul feels united with God for several days.³⁵² Teresa’s description of betrothal is quite different from Gertrude’s and Angela’s because betrothal in *Interior Castle* comes with an experience in which God shows the betrothed his kingdom. She

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 2:359.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 2:379.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 2:382.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 2:384.

³⁵² Ibid.

then acknowledges that those who are betrothed to God have an even stronger relationship with him than before,³⁵³ which Gertrude and Angela also claimed. However, Teresa expands on their thoughts. According to Teresa, the devil “sees the soul entirely surrendered” to God, and he cannot interfere as much as he could have in the courtship stage and he has difficulty breaking up this betrothal.³⁵⁴ The soul and God have pledged their love for each other and their marriage is almost inevitable.³⁵⁵ Neither Gertrude nor Angela assume that marriage will inevitably follow betrothal. Through her discussion of spiritual betrothal, Teresa enhances the bridal mysticism of the medieval period.

In the sixth section of *Interior Castle*, Teresa also discusses the place of love and knowledge in bridal mysticism, which was common among medieval mystics.³⁵⁶ Mysticism is affective and intellectual because closeness to God produces love and “yields a kind of knowing” of him.³⁵⁷ As we will see, many mystics had various ideas on the relationship between love and knowledge.³⁵⁸

Scholars regard Bernard as an affective mystic because he focuses on the importance of love throughout his sermons.³⁵⁹ Bernard writes: “God is love, and the deeper one’s union with God, the more full one is of love.”³⁶⁰ As we saw in Chapter 2, Bernard insists the soul’s journey to God includes three kisses: the kiss of Christ’s feet, the kiss of his hand, and, finally, the kiss of Christ’s mouth.³⁶¹ To Bernard, the three

³⁵³ Ibid., 2:433, 434.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 2:355, 356.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 2:359, 378.

³⁵⁶ McGinn, “*Unio Mystica*,” 60.

³⁵⁷ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, xv.

³⁵⁸ McGinn, “*Unio Mystica*,” 85.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 63.

³⁶⁰ *On the Song*, 2:63.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 1:18-19.

kisses represent “three stages of the soul’s growth in love”³⁶² and the bride who asks for the kiss of the mouth “is in love.”³⁶³

Gertrude also emphasized the importance of love by describing an experience called the wound of love, which is based on Song 2:5. The Septuagint and some Latin translations quote Song 2:5 as: “I am wounded by love.”³⁶⁴ Some patristic and medieval writers asserted that God wounded the bride in the Song of Songs with love to show his powerful love and to increase the bride’s desire for God.³⁶⁵ A few medieval female mystics claimed that Christ wounded them with an arrow,³⁶⁶ and Gertrude’s experience of the wound of love was well-known in Teresa’s day.³⁶⁷ In the *Herald*, Gertrude writes that she asked “a certain person” to pray for her every day: “By your wounded heart, most loving Lord, pierce her heart with the arrow of your love.”³⁶⁸ Then one day, full of desire for Christ, she asked for his arrow of love. A few days later, Christ appeared to her and inflicted a wound in her heart with an arrow.³⁶⁹ Gertrude insists this was a painful, yet wonderful experience; she felt “sweetness of such inestimable love” and “incomprehensible love.”³⁷⁰ This experience helped her commit her “thoughts, words,

³⁶² Ibid., 1:22.

³⁶³ Ibid., 1:39.

³⁶⁴ Winkworth, *Gertrude of Helfta*, 138.

³⁶⁵ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 60, 203; McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 172. Although Bernard did not write about the wound of love, his contemporaries did. See *Of the Four Degrees of Passionate Charity*, in *Richard of Saint-Victor: Selected Writings on Contemplation*, ed. and trans. Clare Kirchberger (London, Faber and Faber, 1957), 213-14.

³⁶⁶ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 172, 278.

³⁶⁷ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 120-21; *Ribera: Vida de Teresa*, 61. Hadewijch of Brabant (mid-thirteenth century) wrote about an arrow that wounded the soul but she was not known in the sixteenth century. Hart, introduction to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 1.

³⁶⁸ *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald*, 102.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 102.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

and deeds” to loving and cleaving to Christ.³⁷¹ The subsequent chapters record Gertrude’s growing intimate relationship with Christ.³⁷²

Teresa follows in the footsteps of medieval mystics by paying attention to the role of love, but she does so in her own way. In the sixth section of *Interior Castle*, Teresa indicates that the soul, after courting God for some time, “is fully determined to take no other spouse.”³⁷³ However, the soul has to wait for a pledge of betrothal³⁷⁴ because God wants the soul to “desire Him vehemently.”³⁷⁵ Then, before betrothal, the soul is “wounded in the most exquisite way” by an arrow.³⁷⁶ As Teresa continues her explanation, she writes that this experience is an “action of love”³⁷⁷ and “is so powerful that the soul dissolves with desire.”³⁷⁸ Both Teresa and Gertrude believe that the wound of love is meant to increase the soul’s love for God, but Teresa states this experience occurs before God pledges spiritual espousal. This is not to say that Teresa does not emphasize the role of love in any other sections of *Interior Castle*. She believes that love between God and the soul plays an important part in the courtship stage, spiritual betrothal, and the last stage, spiritual marriage.³⁷⁹ She, like Bernard, understands that love is an essential element in each stage of the soul’s mystical journey to God. Although Teresa mirrors the writings of other mystics by emphasizing the role of love in

³⁷¹ Ibid., 102-03.

³⁷² Ibid., 104-08.

³⁷³ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:359.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 2:359.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 2:366.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 2:367. Note that Teresa wrote about her wounding experience in *Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:252, which later became the subject of Bernini’s famous statue *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*.

³⁷⁷ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:367, 368.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 2:368.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 2:355, 398, 400, 421, 441, 450.

bridal mysticism, she modifies the mystical tradition by asserting that intense love is necessary to achieve the next stage: spiritual betrothal.

Although love is important in medieval mysticism, knowledge also has a significant role to play.³⁸⁰ For medieval mystics, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint Thierry, and Hugh of Saint Victor, this knowledge is “a higher, intuitive awareness beyond conceptual knowing” because the soul learns who God is.³⁸¹ Often these writers discussed the relationship between love and knowledge, claiming that as love grows, knowledge of God increases, and vice versa.³⁸² In his commentary on the Song, Bernard likens the kiss of the feet to the soul’s spiritual conversion, the kiss of the hand to the soul’s growing spiritual progress, and the kiss of the mouth to the soul’s union to God.³⁸³ Knowledge of self is present at the initial stage when the soul recognizes its sinfulness³⁸⁴ because, when the first kiss occurs, the soul is “conscious of sin” and weeps for its sins.³⁸⁵ Then after the soul receives the kiss of the mouth, the soul receives knowledge of God and learns who he is.³⁸⁶

Medieval female mystics also believed that growing in knowledge was a necessary aspect of the soul’s mystical journey. Before Christ betroths Gertrude, he tells her: “You will be like a bride who knows all the secrets of her spouse and who, after having lived a long time with him, knows how to interpret his wishes.”³⁸⁷ After attaining

³⁸⁰ McGinn, “*Unio Mystica*,” 64.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 65-66.

³⁸³ *On the Song*, 1:20-21.

³⁸⁴ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 202.

³⁸⁵ *On the Song*, 1:17.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:24, 102.

³⁸⁷ *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald*, 87.

spiritual marriage, Gertrude learns some “secrets” about God,³⁸⁸ such as the intricate relationship between God and Christ.³⁸⁹ Gertrude received knowledge of God only after their union was complete. On the other hand, every step in Angela’s growing union with God is linked to knowledge of God and self-knowledge.³⁹⁰ She believes that “knowledge of itself” and a knowledge of the “goodness of God” work together.³⁹¹ When one realizes he or she has offended God, “one begins to attain knowledge of God” and “the more one knows, the more one loves.”³⁹² Later, Angela insists that, before the soul is wedded “in the sweetest form of love” to God, knowledge of him must “come first.”³⁹³ Unlike Gertrude, Angela believes that knowledge of God produces love of him, and this love leads to union.

In the sixth section of *Interior Castle*, Teresa puts forward both a traditional and innovative interpretation of the role of knowledge. Teresa uses a metaphor other mystics had not employed when she writes that, after spiritual betrothal, God “begins to give the betrothed” several jewels.³⁹⁴ It is possible Teresa used this metaphor because during the sixteenth century, a man would give his betrothed gifts, such as a ring.³⁹⁵ To Teresa, the soul receives the jewels of “knowledge of the grandeur of God” and self-knowledge.³⁹⁶ Teresa continues her marriage metaphor by creatively describing knowledge as a jewel that God gives to his betrothed, but Teresa also follows in the footsteps of Bernard and Gertrude. Teresa, like Bernard and Gertrude, believes that knowledge of God is an

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 170.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 188, 209.

³⁹⁰ Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 94.

³⁹¹ *The Book*, in *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, 194.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid., 301.

³⁹⁴ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:390.

³⁹⁵ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2:491.

³⁹⁶ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:390.

important stage as the soul advances in its relationship with him. Before achieving complete union with God, the soul must experience a “deep enlightenment and knowledge of His Majesty”³⁹⁷ and learn “some secrets, things about heaven.”³⁹⁸ Teresa then embraces the ideas of Bernard and Angela when she explains that knowledge of God is often related to knowledge of self. As the soul knows more about God, the more the soul realizes it sinned against a God “of so many grandeurs.”³⁹⁹ Knowledge of God and self-knowledge work together to create a deeper understanding of who God is, which helps the soul progress toward spiritual union. By asserting that after betrothal God gives the jewel of knowledge, Teresa creatively explains how knowledge plays a role in bridal mysticism, but she also conforms to the medieval mystical tradition through her explanation of knowledge and self-knowledge.

As we turn to the last section of Teresa’s *Interior Castle*, we see that the bridal mysticism in this section is traditional. She concludes that the soul, near the end of its spiritual journey, enters into spiritual marriage. Here, Teresa uses the more general definition of spiritual marriage, which Bernard, Gertrude, and Angela used: a spiritual union between the soul and God. Moreover, when she explains spiritual union, she quotes some of the same scriptural passages that twelfth-century writers used to describe this union.

Many male and female mystics described the mystical union between the soul and God as a spiritual marriage. Bernard suggests that when the soul receives the kiss of the mouth, the soul and God become one.⁴⁰⁰ He claims that, like the physical union between

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 2:380.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 2:380.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 2:390.

⁴⁰⁰ *On the Song*, 1:20.

a husband and wife, there is a spiritual unity between the soul and God.⁴⁰¹ Love “joins two beings, not in one flesh, but in one spirit, making them no longer two but one.”⁴⁰² In her last step toward union, Christ marries Angela. Arnaldo recounts that Christ said to Angela: “You are I and I am you,”⁴⁰³ and then they lay down on Christ’s bed,⁴⁰⁴ proving they were spiritually one. Angela realizes that after this marriage takes place, this union between them is permanent.⁴⁰⁵ After describing the wound of love, Gertrude writes that she wanted to attain the “state in which a soul united with God becomes one spirit with him.”⁴⁰⁶ In the ninth chapter of Book 2, called “The Inseparable Union of Her Soul with God,”⁴⁰⁷ Gertrude writes that, while she was sick in bed one day, Christ appeared to her, announced their marriage, and promised that they were now one.⁴⁰⁸ The *Herald* also records how Christ revealed himself to another nun in order prove that Gertrude’s visions and revelations came from him. Christ told this nun: “I have deigned to join my heart so courteously and so inseparably with her soul that she is to become one spirit with me.”⁴⁰⁹ These mystics achieve oneness with God in the final stage of their spiritual journey.

When Teresa’s nuns turn to the seventh section of the *Interior Castle*, they learn that the final stage in the soul’s mystical journey is union with God, which echoes the sentiments of other medieval mystical writers. Hollenback points out that, like her predecessors, Teresa sees the last stage of the soul’s growing relationship with God in

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 1:52.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 4:186.

⁴⁰³ *The Book*, in *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, 205.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 205.

⁴⁰⁶ *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald*, 104.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 84.

terms of marriage.⁴¹⁰ Like Bernard, Teresa believes that spiritual union is like marriage because, just as those who are married cannot be separated, God does not want to be separated from the soul.⁴¹¹ Teresa then echoes Bernard, Angela, and Gertrude by declaring that in this union the soul “is made one with God.”⁴¹² She also asserts, as does Angela, that there is an intensity and finality to this union.⁴¹³ Teresa provides a traditional view on mysticism when she explains that in the final stage the soul and God unite and no one can tear apart this union.

In order to describe this mystical union further, Bernard quotes and comments on 1 Corinthians 6:17 and various passages from John 10 and 14.⁴¹⁴ Bernard quotes 1 Corinthians 6:17 several times to describe spiritual marriage. In Sermon 61, he mentions in passing that in union the soul and God become one in spirit, adding that “as the apostle says: ‘He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.’”⁴¹⁵ In Sermon 71, he quotes 1 Corinthians 6:17 five times and in Sermon 83 two times in order to demonstrate how in this union the soul and God become one.⁴¹⁶ Bernard also associates a few passages from John with the relationship between the soul and God. Quoting John 14:10, he writes that Christ said: “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” By comparing how Christ and God are one, Bernard concludes that so the soul and God can be one.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁰ Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 551, 558-59. See *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:433.

⁴¹¹ *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:434.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 2:434.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 2:441.

⁴¹⁴ McGinn, “*Unio Mystica*,” 62-65.

⁴¹⁵ *On the Song*, 3:140-41.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:53, 56-57, 182-86.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:51.

In a later sermon, he quotes John 10:38,⁴¹⁸ and acknowledges that the soul and Christ can be one, just as Christ and the Father “are truly one.”⁴¹⁹

Teresa’s deployment of biblical passages in her section on spiritual marriage provides another strong link to the medieval mystical tradition. After Teresa explains spiritual marriage, she refers to 1 Corinthians 6:17: “Perhaps this is what St. Paul means in saying *He that is joined or united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him*, and is referring to this sovereign marriage.”⁴²⁰ McGinn and Ahlgren argue that Teresa’s reference to 1 Corinthians 6:17 justifies her description of mystical union because Bernard also quoted this verse.⁴²¹ A few pages after Teresa quotes this verse, she comments upon the great love that Christ has for those souls whom he weds. She then adds:

And thus, while Jesus our Lord was once praying for His apostles – I don’t remember where – He said that they were one with the Father and with Him, just as Jesus Christ our Lord is in the Father and the Father is in Him. I don’t know what greater love there can be than this. And all of us are included here, for His Majesty said: *I ask not only for them but for all those who also will believe in me*; and He says: *I am in them*.⁴²²

These are references to John 17:20, 21, 23.⁴²³ Although these verses do not correspond exactly with the verses Bernard used, both Teresa and Bernard connect Christ’s words about his relationship to God the Father with the bond between the soul and Christ.

Teresa’s use of these scriptural passages is significant because she rarely quotes Scripture. Since she did not have access to vernacular translations of the Bible and did

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 4:52-57.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 4:52-53.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 2:434. Note that Kavanaugh italicizes Teresa’s scriptural quotations.

⁴²¹ McGinn, “*Unio Mystica*,” 62-63, 65, 82; Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 111.

⁴²² *Interior Castle*, in *Collected Works*, 2:436.

⁴²³ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2:497.

not know Latin, she only knew verses by hearing them or reading them in spiritual works.⁴²⁴ By quoting from 1 Corinthians and the Gospel of John, Teresa demonstrates that her understanding of the union between God and the soul have a biblical foundation, just as Bernard did hundreds of years before her.

Conclusion

Although Teresa's mysticism showed some creativity, after her death, her contemporaries focused on the resemblance between her ideas and the thought of medieval mystics. María de San José, the prioress of Teresa's convent in Seville, read the seventh section of *Interior Castle* to Rodrigo Alvarez, a Jesuit, and he believed it was "conformable to Catholic truth and in accordance with Holy Scripture and the teaching of the Saints."⁴²⁵ He even added that anyone who read Gertrude of Helfta's *Herald* would recognize that Teresa's understanding of union was "the same" and, thus, "true."⁴²⁶ Francisco de Ribera (1537-91), a Jesuit who taught at Salamanca University, made a similar remark in his biography on Teresa (1590). Ribera defends Teresa's mystical doctrines and spiritual experiences,⁴²⁷ by comparing them with Gertrude of Helfta, Catherine of Siena, and Angela of Foligno.⁴²⁸ For instance, he refers to Chapter 5 of Book 2 in Gertrude's *Herald*,⁴²⁹ the chapter in which Gertrude tells of receiving the wound of love,⁴³⁰ to legitimize the wounding of love recorded in Teresa's *Book of Her*

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 2:208-09.

⁴²⁵ Benedict Zimmerman, introduction to *The Interior Castle* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), xii.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., xiii.

⁴²⁷ Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 156.

⁴²⁸ Ribera: *Vida de Teresa*, 61.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁴³⁰ Gertrude of Helfta: *The Herald*, 101-03.

Life.⁴³¹ When defending Teresa's mysticism, Antonio de Quevedo and Luis de León, both Augustinians, highlighted the convergences in her writing with the mysticism taught by Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of Saint Victor, and Bonaventure.⁴³² Quevedo and León also claimed that Teresa's visions and ideas resembled those of Gertrude of Helfta, Catherine of Siena, and other saints.⁴³³

Teresa's contemporaries emphasized the traditional nature of her mysticism, but we must recognize that her bridal mysticism was also innovative. True, she followed in the footsteps of Bernard, Gertrude, and Angela in her comparison of the soul's spiritual journey to God as a marriage and in her description of mystical union. Yet, she addressed a topic that had been written about hundreds of years earlier and built upon the ideas of her predecessors. She expanded the marriage metaphor by likening the relationship between the soul and God to courtship and betrothal, the stages preceding marriage in her day. While discussing the role of love and knowledge in bridal mysticism, a common theme in the writings of medieval mystics, she quietly added her own interpretation of how and when love and knowledge occur. Her own explanation of the wound of love and the jewel of knowledge give a clearer picture to her nuns of how they can grow in a closer relationship to God. She incorporates the ideas of previous writers, but she explains in her own way how her readers can achieve spiritual unity with God.

⁴³¹ *Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:252.

⁴³² Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity*, 138.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 138-39, Howells, *Mystical Knowing*, 64.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of fifteen years, Teresa of Avila's bridal spirituality became an increasingly common theme in her writings. In her first two works, Teresa sometimes refers to herself or her nuns as brides of Christ. At the beginning of *The Book of Her Life* (1562-65), Teresa recalls the day she took the Carmelite habit: "I remember the kind of profession I made and the great resolve and happiness with which I made it and the espousal that I entered into with You."⁴³⁴ When she wrote *Life*, she had not yet experienced spiritual marriage with Christ,⁴³⁵ and in this passage Teresa simply equates becoming a nun to becoming a bride of Christ. In *The Way of Perfection* (1566), a book on prayer, occasionally she describes God as Spouse⁴³⁶ and encourages her nuns to think and act as brides who want to please and serve God.⁴³⁷ Then, in 1572, Christ appeared to her in a vision and declared: "You will be My bride from today on."⁴³⁸ Some time between 1572 and 1575, Teresa started writing her commentary on the Song of Songs. Teresa admits in *Meditations* that she realized a soul could experience what the bride experiences in the Song.⁴³⁹ It is quite possible that her spiritual marriage to Christ helped her understand the verses in the Song and that this event inspired her to write the commentary. What is certain is that Teresa devotes her two later works, *Meditations* and *Interior Castle* (1577) to explaining how her nuns can become brides of Christ and what

⁴³⁴ *Life*, in *Collected Works*, 1:65.

⁴³⁵ Kavanaugh, *Collected Works*, 2:488.

⁴³⁶ *Way of Perfection*, in *Collected Works*, 2:43, 74, 86, 169.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:70, 124-25.

⁴³⁸ *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *Collected Works*, 1:402.

⁴³⁹ *Meditations*, in *Collected Works*, 2:218.

being a bride means. A comparison of Teresa's bridal spirituality to the writings of medieval mystics provides a deeper look into her spiritual marriage and mysticism.

Through analyzing Teresa's own experience as a bride of Christ, we can see that her bridal spirituality was traditional. Many male and female mystics described their relationship to God in terms of marriage, but only a few medieval and early modern women recorded a vision in which Christ married them. By the sixteenth century, Catherine of Siena's marriage to Christ, described by Raymond of Capua, had become a model, as other nuns who married Christ had similar experiences.⁴⁴⁰ Teresa's wedding ceremony resembled Catherine's. As in the case of Catherine's marriage, Christ married Teresa because she deserved it, he presented her with a wedding ring to confirm the marriage, and he promised her support. More important, their marriages to Christ signified that they had a deep, intimate union with Christ.

Teresa aims to explain how her nuns can become brides of Christ through a traditional exegesis of the Song of Songs. Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* were influential during the medieval and early modern periods. Thus, it is appropriate to compare Teresa's and Bernard's interpretations of the verses. Both writers were attracted to the Song because the relationship between the bride and groom could explain God's mystical relationship with the soul. Teresa and Bernard assert that few people can truly understand and experience the verses in the Song. By analyzing these verses, they discover that the soul only becomes a bride of Christ by building and maintaining a relationship of love with Christ. They also conclude that a true bride will

⁴⁴⁰ Matter, "Mystical Marriage," 38.

experience a spiritual union with Christ that will lead to loving and serving one's neighbours.

Several years after Teresa wrote her commentary, she penned her *Interior Castle*, a work that was both traditional and innovative. By comparing this mystical treatise to medieval writings that Teresa knew, we can see that Teresa does not provide radically divergent perspectives on bridal mysticism. She still offers a traditional definition of spiritual marriage. While describing part of the soul's spiritual journey to God as courtship and the gift of jewels, Teresa provides new and creative images that expand the picture of medieval mysticism. At the same time, her explanation of betrothal, love, and knowledge subtly enhances the mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta.

For the most part, Teresa's spousal relationship with Christ and her explanation of how her nuns could follow in this mystical path was traditional, not departing from what had been understood before her. Identifying these points of convergence sheds light upon the way in which medieval male mystical tradition, predominantly represented by Bernard of Clairvaux's writings, influenced Teresa's bridal spirituality. In addition, we can see that medieval female mystics were spiritual models for Teresa, and Teresa's spirituality often resembled the works of Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta.

More important, Teresa's bridal spirituality offers a glimpse into why she became one of the most popular female mystics in the Catholic Church and among scholars. Through her own description of her spousal relationship with Christ and her explanation of how her nuns could become brides of Christ, she did not reject the spirituality of

medieval writers, but inserted herself into the medieval mystical tradition. At the same time, she continued to breathe life into bridal mysticism. At the age of sixty-two, Teresa introduced innovative perspectives on bridal mysticism in the writing of *Interior Castle*. Perhaps at this point in her life her bridal spirituality had developed and she was confident to express her creative ideas to her nuns. We can see that Teresa's innovation does not reject or discard the ideas of other writers. For Teresa, innovation includes expanding or enhancing the mysticism of medieval writers. In this way, Teresa passed on the spirituality of her predecessors to her readers living in sixteenth-century Spain, and still added her own voice to the medieval mystical tradition.

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