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## BEYOND BAROQUE STYLE:

### A New Look at María of Ágreda's Treatment of Mary's Life and Person in the *Mystical City of God*

Marilyn H. Fedewa\*

In the quiet of a cloistered Franciscan convent in seventeenth-century northeastern Spain, a silent prayer was raised to God. In it the abbess Sor María of Ágreda shared her misgivings about her abilities to write something so daunting as the biography of the Blessed Mother of the Son of God. The year was 1655, and Sor María had already written the biography of Mary once, and then burned it, having been told that it was not the role of women in the Church to write. Nevertheless, Mary's inspiration in the abbess's life persisted, and so did Sor María's desire to share that inspiration with others. Therefore, her calling to write also persisted.

The result, in seventeenth-century baroque Spanish, was an eight-book three-volume set comprised of between 1,600 and 2,000 pages in Spanish in printed form—depending on the edition. The devotional volumes drew the attention of lay and religious alike throughout Spain and Europe. Sor María of Ágreda's admirers included King Felipe IV of Spain who consulted Sor María for twenty-two years in a collection of six hundred letters exchanged between them. Her treatment of Mary's life was also revered by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Franciscan missionaries who worked diligently to

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spread the Gospel in the Americas, and who carried the volumes with them, alongside the Bible, in decorative missionary trunks.

*Mystical City of God*, as her work was titled, treated the life of the Blessed Mother from the vantage point of apocryphal sources popular at the time; private revelations and visions of a highly refined, spiritually conscious religious woman; and an interpretive inspiration based in a Baroque storytelling tradition. It was published in 1670, five years after Sor María's death. The title page alone comprised one hundred words. The only full English version, which took Father George Blatter—a Catholic priest from the South side of Chicago—a period of over ten years to translate between 1902 and 1914, totaled just shy of 2,700 pages in length.

Since the seventeenth century, *Mystical City of God*, Sor María of Ágreda's signature work, has been both praised and decried for its lengthy Baroque treatment of the life of Mary. Today, Sor María's devotional portrayal of Mary is relatively well-studied in programs of Spanish literature and history, particularly in the American Southwest where she is documented as having mystically bilocated to Native Americans to share with them the Gospel. In these programs of Spanish literature and history, her work is most frequently seen as a window to understanding seventeenth-century Spanish culture and expression. Yet, in the opinion of some, her contribution to Marian spirituality has long been overshadowed and discounted by the very nature of that hyperbolic expression.

Today, our language is rapidly evolving, as people "IM," "LOL," and—"BTW"—"twitter" and "tweet." "Toxic assets" have morphed into "legacy costs" on "prime-time" "TV," "no prob." Many of these terms are now in the new *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is also adding words like "puh-leeze" (Sept. 2007), "bouncebackability" (Dec. 2006), "virtualize," and even the Pig-Latin term "ixnay" (Mar. 2007).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> New entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), as accessed March 14, 2009, at [www.oed.com/news/updates/newwords0903.html](http://www.oed.com/news/updates/newwords0903.html).

In contrast, in the year 1655, Sor María wrote the following in the beginning of Mary's biography, as translated 107 years ago by Father Blatter:

O powerful and exalted Queen, fulfill thy promises by manifesting to me thy graces and attributes ... to which I should adorn my soul, so as to become worthy to be thy daughter and the bride of thy most holy Son.<sup>2</sup>

... [For] the Lamb of God ... is the ... beacon of light ... which at one and at the same time enlightens, raises to fervor, teaches and reprehends, chastens and enlivens, calls and deters, ... discloses the hidden and the profound, ... which reveals to me the world, its state ... all the secrets of men ... [and] the true and the false principles which guide them.<sup>3</sup>

... Moreover ... in this never failing light ... I enjoy a vision and habitation of peace and I understand the mysteries and sacraments of the life of the Queen of heaven.<sup>4</sup>

Hyperbole notwithstanding, it is clear from the beginning that Sor María clearly understands her role as a bride of Christ, and from whence comes the illumination that infuses her understanding of the life of Mary. *The Lamb of God ... is the ... beacon of light*. Yet, where is the place today in the United States for such a Baroque personality and author as Sor María de Ágreda? And how can we appreciate her ornate portrayal of the Blessed Mother, who is perhaps the essence of unadorned beauty?

Was the notorious Casanova perhaps right when, imprisoned in the ominous eighteenth-century underground prison in Venice known as "The Leads," he described *Mystical City of God* as the "wild conceptions [and 'fantastic visions'] of a devout, melancholy Spanish nun ... shut in by convent walls"?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> María of Ágreda, *Mystical City of God: The Conception* (Books 1 and 2), *The Incarnation* (Books 3 and 4), *The Transfixion* (Books 5 and 6), *The Coronation* (Books 7 and 8), trans. George J. Blatter (Chicago: Theopolitain Company of Chicago, 1914; reprinted Albuquerque, NM: Corcoran Publishing Company, 1949). This reference is from *The Conception*, 14, 15. Further citations from this reference are cited as MCOG, followed by the volume name and page.

<sup>3</sup> MCOG, *The Conception*, 38, 40.

<sup>4</sup> MCOG, *The Conception*, 41-42.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Casanova de Seingalt, *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova de Seingalt, 1725-1798*, Vol. 10, "Under Leads [Prison]," trans. Arthur Machen (12 vols.; London: Privately printed, 1894), 5.

In short, no, Casanova was not right. Yet, how are we to uncover the gems of Mary's utterly inspiring simplicity, her sleek motherly beauty, in such a lengthy ornate work as *Mystical City of God*? One example is found in the way Venerable Fr. Solanus Casey read *Mystical City of God*—prayerfully, on his knees, meditating on the life of Mary—each day, for fifty years. [It was Fr. Casey who personally gave the four-volume set of *Mystical City of God* to my husband's family in 1952.]

Short of that, a new, streamlined translation of *Mystical City of God* would help—not the currently available well-meaning abridgement of the 1902 work—and apparently there is one in the works. In the meantime, however, we can easily appreciate Sor María's treatment of Mary, through three complimentary approaches. First, Sor María's practice and achievement of Quiet Prayer provided the foundation from which she chronicled her internal dialogues with God the Father, Christ, and Mary. Second, Sor María's reverence for—and personal relationship with—Mary as paragon, teacher, and role model, informed the abbess throughout her lifelong quest to be a worthy bride of Christ. Third, in understanding Sor María's writing as a "grand theological poem" replete with devotional metaphors, we may derive inspiration from her portrayal of Mary as the "New Jerusalem."

### 1. Quiet Prayer

First, therefore, we will consider the profound effects of quiet prayer in the life and writing of Sor María. This time-honored Franciscan tradition was also documented in the writings of Sor María's countrywoman, St. Teresa of Avila, who died about twenty years before Sor María was born, and whose own writing, *Interior Castle*, was prominent in Sor María's convent library. When I met a few years ago with the present-day nuns of Ágreda, and asked them where they spent their primary focus, they replied with stirring passion that it was in this very arena of quiet prayer.

In the early mornings, and throughout the day and evening, Sor María practiced a devotional state of quiet prayer, with great receptivity to a state of internal discernment and understanding. In this illumined state, she grew in wisdom and

understanding; she received many spiritual insights; she contemplated the utter beauty of Mary's role as the Blessed Mother; and she recorded her insights, her interpretive impressions of Mary, and, yes, her personal visions of the Mother of God. All this she did from a state of quiet, the acknowledgment of which today is often lost amid the "noise" of the Baroque style so prevalent in her era. In the beginning of *Mystical City of God* she writes about this state of quietude:

[We must] preserve the tranquility and quiet of spirit . . . [necessary] for retaining the proper light and information; for not in all states of mind, though they are of the highest and most advanced, can the soul engage in that exalted activity which is necessary to correspond to such exquisite and delicate influences.<sup>6</sup>

The beaconlight of the Lamb of God . . . Christ . . . dispel[s] the darkness.<sup>7</sup>

In this knowledge of God, which primarily is called the knowledge of pure intelligence (*scientia simplicis intelligentiae*) . . . I petitioned Him to make known to me the place which was held by the Mother of God and our Queen in the divine intelligence . . .<sup>8</sup>

"I felt a change within me," she wrote, "and a highly spiritualized state of mind. To my understanding was given a new light, which illuminated it and infused into it a knowledge of all things in God. . . . It is a knowledge of light, holy, sweet and pure, subtle, penetrating, sure and agile, causing love of good and hatred of evil."<sup>9</sup> "Thus . . . in the state of enlightenment, I see also and recognize the same Queen and Lady as She speaks with me."<sup>10</sup> Yet, despite her rarified spiritual states, Sor María was sensitive to the questions such knowledge might raise in the discerning reader, and so she took great care, in the beginning of *Mystical City of God* and occasionally throughout, to explain the nature of her visions to the reader.

<sup>6</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 50-51.

<sup>9</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 48.

Simply put, and following in the footsteps of Saint Augustine, Sor María divides her visionary experience into three basic categories. "Corporeal vision" describes the state in which she saw spiritual beings and events with her *physical* eyes, most especially the Blessed Mother and the angels that attended to her. "Imaginative vision" describes the state in which she saw images in her *mind's eye*, a state mirrored in many seers' experiences during contemplative prayer. Finally, Sor María describes "*intellectual* vision," a state in which her mind "saw" or was led to understand many complex spiritual truths. In this area of intellectual vision, or interior knowing, Sor María's refined intellect and understanding excelled, and this is where she found her greatest surety and comfort.<sup>11</sup>

In these deeply quiet and prayerful states, a traditional Franciscan practice to this day, Sor María meditated upon Mary's character and life through the lens of her own understanding and with the tools available to her in seventeenth-century Spain. Sor María's conventual asceticism, amid the religious practices of the cloistered order of the Immaculate Conception, enhanced this process to a great degree.

Thus, Sor María prayerfully contemplated the Immaculate Conception of Mary, an important yet controversial issue of the day. So devoted to the Immaculate Conception of Mary was Sor María's family, they dedicated their ancestral home as a convent under St. Beatrice de Silva's order of the Immaculate Conception. At that time, Sor María's two brothers had already joined the Franciscan order. Sor María (who was then eighteen years old) and her mother and sister joined the convent, while her father entered a Franciscan monastery in a nearby city as a lay brother. The Immaculate Conception, however, now an established Church doctrine for over 150 years, was at that time, in Spain and elsewhere, very controversial. "Maculists" and "Immaculists" churned out over twelve thousand pamphlets on every aspect of the issue surrounding Mary's sinlessness from the

<sup>11</sup> In his article "Visions and Apparitions," in volume 15 of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912), Lucian Roure outlines traditional Catholic teaching on visions as initially defined by Saint Augustine in the fourth century and later expanded by the eighteenth-century pope Benedict XIV and others. Sor María defines her visions within this framework.

instant of her conception. "It is contrary to our need for Christ's redemption," argued some. "It is an important sign of God's presence within us," said others.<sup>12</sup>

It was an issue that María of Ágreda would take up with gusto and devotion later in her life, influencing not only the King of Spain on the doctrine, but also the pope of her later years who would make the most definitive statement on the doctrine until Pope Pius IX's proclamation in 1854.<sup>13</sup> It was also an issue that some today think may have provided the initial impulse to condemn her work, despite the fact that her position was in concert with the Church's ultimate decision on the dogma.

For Sor María's part, she devoted over two hundred and sixty pages of Book One of *Mystical City of God* to the thoughts and events leading up to Mary's birth. In these rarified states of quiet prayer, many of which were in personal internal dialogue with the Blessed Mother, Sor María developed her own understanding of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, a human conception that was both physiological as well as spiritual. She wrote:

Although the conception happened according to the ordinary course of nature, yet the Most High freed it from imperfections and disorders, permitting only what was strictly required according to nature, in order that the proper material might be furnished for the formation of the most perfect substance within the limits of a mere creature . . . so that the conception, though natural and according to the common order, was nevertheless directed, supplemented and perfected by the action of divine grace . . .<sup>14</sup>

Today, some parents might summarize the physiological aspects of conception to their children by phraseology reminiscent of the "birds and the bees." And, of course, modern-day

<sup>12</sup> Marilyn H. Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>13</sup> Author's phone interview with Fr. Thomas A. Thompson, S.M., Director of the Marian Library (University of Dayton, Ohio), and faculty member of the International Marian Research Institute, November 21, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> *MCOG, Conception*, 174-75.



film-makers are no strangers to the portrayals of physical conception in explicit love scenes.

By today's standards, Sor María's treatment is tame, discreet, fitting for a cloistered nun, yet explicit enough in its description of the nature of the actual matter used to form Mary's embryo, which we might interpret today as "good genes of healthy clean-living people." Even so, she saw more:

I see the Ark of the Testament [Mary, as a *mystical* Ark<sup>15</sup> of the Covenant] joined together, enriched and placed in the temple of a sterile mother [Anne] .... I see the ... order of nature break from its laws to be rearranged; I see new laws ... conquering those of nature .... I see the formation of a new earth, and of a new heaven being the womb of a most humble woman ... where the Divinity [would] preside, where the courtiers of the ancient heavens gather, and whither a thousand angels are delegated to form a guard over a tiny, animated body not larger than that of a little bee.<sup>16</sup>

The Sorbonne, however, working overtime to critique what was later determined to be a faulty translation—amid many incomplete copies proliferating throughout Europe and South America<sup>17</sup> at the time—decried *Mystical City of God's* "scandalous assertions," its "impious impertinence" and the "indecent language"<sup>18</sup> in the book's treatment of the Immaculate Conception. Paradoxically for one of the Church's loyal pioneers in advocating the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Sor María's cause for sainthood would have progressed considerably more had she not advocated so adamantly for it in *Mystical City of God*.

"If Sor María had not advanced the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception so much in her books," wrote one of her postulators prophetically in 1692, "she would be beatified—at

<sup>15</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 326.

<sup>16</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 181-82.

<sup>17</sup> Author's email correspondence with Fr. Antonio Artola Arbiza, Professor Emeritus, Universidad de Deusto-Bilbao, April 4, 19, and 26, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> T. J. Campbell, "Maria de Agreda," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913; electronic version by New Advent, Inc., 1997), as accessed online February 17, 1998, at [www.knight.org/advent/cathen/01229a.htm](http://www.knight.org/advent/cathen/01229a.htm).

least—by now.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, however, her cause drew a papal decree of “perpetual silence” in 1773, in great part due to the controversy surrounding the dogma.<sup>20</sup> To contemporary eyes, this would seem a soluble problem, in that the Immaculate Conception has now been official since 1854. Yet, while it was still under debate by successive popes who disagreed with each other over the centuries, those popes who favored the dogma tended to favor Sor María’s cause for sainthood, and those popes who did not favor the dogma did not favor her cause.

Nevertheless, Sor María sat at her desk and wrote Mary’s life, as she perceived it through her visions, and as she understood it through her reading in the *Protoevangelium of James* and other apocryphal writings which provided supplementary material replete with specific details that were commonly accepted in her time. Thus, Sor María vividly portrays Mary’s elderly parents Joachim and Anne, the fifteen stairs that Mary climbed with “majesty and firmness of mind”<sup>21</sup> on her way to the Presentation at the Temple, and the day of Mary’s death as the Friday before the feast day of Mary’s Assumption into Heaven on August 15th.

More importantly, María of Ágreda also records her internal dialogues with God the Father, Christ, and Mary, and these are interspersed throughout the text, so that we may distill from it her relationship with God and Mary, as well as the nature and refinement of her spiritual state as she undertook her writing. A special treat for the aficionado of such relational prayer is to be found in the dramatized dialogues between Mary and her willing pupil, Sor María, at the end of most chapters of *Mystical City of God*. In these we now move to our second approach

<sup>19</sup> Statement by Padre José Falces in 1692, as quoted by Manuel Peña García, *Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda* (Ágreda: El Burgo de Osma, 1997), 319; further exposition in Antonio Artola Arbiza and Benito Mendiá, *La Venerable M. María de Jesús de Ágreda y la Inmaculada Concepción: El proceso eclesiástico a la “Mística Ciudad de Dios* (Soria, Spain: La Heras, 2004), 94.

<sup>20</sup> Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue*, 257-58, and “María of Ágreda, Lady in Blue,” *Catholic Southwest: A Journal of History and Culture* 20 (2009): 61.

<sup>21</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 332-33.

to understanding Sor María's interpretation of Mary: that is, Mary in her role as exemplar and teacher.

## 2. Mary as Exemplar and Teacher

At the end of most chapters of *Mystical City of God*, Sor María inserted a section frequently titled "Instructions from the Heavenly Queen." In these sections, Sor María recorded her internal dialogues with Mary. In them, Mary advised Sor María from a pinnacle of wisdom. Interspersed throughout the 2,700-page biography of Mary, these dialogues covered a generous gamut of advice about the spiritual life that a nun of her times might need and appreciate. Certain gems stand out in these personal addenda, particularly the concept of dilation. "O my daughter," Mary said to her, "forget all the earthly things in the hiding place of thy silence, and imitate me with all thy fervor . . . dilate thy heart."<sup>22</sup> "Be alert," Mary instructed her pupil. "Dilate thy heart."<sup>23</sup> "Let . . . understanding dilate, . . . [in order to] soar in thought to the noblest, the most excellent, the most perfect and the most divine."<sup>24</sup>

Nowadays, of course, modern-day medicine and technology abound with examples of the usefulness of dilation. In optometry, eye-drops dilate the pupil of the eye so that a doctor may examine its health. In photography, the adjustments of a camera's lens aperture allow for varying levels of light exposure in a photograph. In pregnancy, cervical dilation is essential to a natural childbirth. Very importantly, in cardiology the healthy dilation of blood vessels and arteries facilitates the essential flow of blood in and out of the heart.<sup>25</sup>

In Sor María's day, the concept of dilation was more metaphorical, yet no less meaningful. The nature of the heart is, after all, very close to the nature of the soul. In sixteenth-century France, Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622) wrote of the importance of listening "to hear God speak in the depths of the heart." In Chapter 3 of *Interior Castle*, Teresa of Avila

<sup>22</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 308.

<sup>23</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 499.

<sup>24</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 472.

<sup>25</sup> Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue*, 112.

briefly mentions the "interior sweetness" resulting from dilation of the soul. In the twentieth century, Pope John Paul II preached that "the heart in biblical culture, and also in a large part of other cultures, is that essential center of the personality in which man stands before God as the totality of body and soul."<sup>26</sup>

"Take notice then, my Daughter," Mary instructed Sor María, "that the example of these events of my life should serve thee for thy instruction and direction. Treasure up this example lovingly in thy bosom and allow it to dilate thy heart."<sup>27</sup> It was a lesson that Sor María embraced wholeheartedly and one that she often shared in later years with her spiritually recalcitrant friend, King Felipe IV of Spain.

"O Lady, continue to teach me and enlighten me," Sor María prayed, "that my heart may dilate in the sea of thy perfections, furnishing me with worthy material for the praise of the Almighty."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Sor María reported that "the Queen . . . became more intimate with me and continued her intercourse with my soul . . . filling my soul with the light and knowledge of eternal life."<sup>29</sup> In these dilated states, Sor María opened herself to all phases of Mary's life, and of course especially to Mary's life as mother to the Redeemer, and her motherly role during the life and Passion of her Son. "The resemblance between Christ and his most holy Mother is clearly manifest," wrote Sor María, describing the shared "sword of sorrow" that "pierced the heart of Son and Mother" in the Garden of Gethsemane, to the extent that Mary was to "concur and cooperate in the Redemption."<sup>30</sup>

So touching is Sor María's portrayal of Mary's maternal love that film icon Mel Gibson read *Mystical City of God*, among

<sup>26</sup> Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. John K. Ryan (2 vols.; Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1975), 1/Bk.6:270-71; Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook; revised and annotated, with Introduction by Benedict Zimmerman (London: Thomas Baker, 1921), 113-14; sermon by Pope John Paul II, June 28, 1984, preached at Gemelli Polyclinic and Faculty of Medicine, Rome, as published in *L'Ossevatore Romano* 843:9 (Eng. weekly ed.).

<sup>27</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 544.

<sup>28</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 197.

<sup>29</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> MCOG, *Transfixion*, 71, 472, 70.

other references, in preparation for writing his film script for the runaway success *The Passion of the Christ*, released in 2004. Many film critics noted that Gibson's film portrays Christ's passion with a poignant treatment from Mary's point of view, frequently focusing on Mary's magnetically sorrowful eyes as they follow the repeated tortures endured by her son.<sup>31</sup> There are other notable similarities between Gibson's and Sor María's treatment of the Passion. As in the film, *Mystical City of God* describes Mary meeting Jesus on the way to Calvary and Mary's wishing she could die in her son's place. It portrays the insidious presence of Satan throughout the proceedings, the cloths provided to Mary to wipe her son's blood, and the gentle nun's pained descriptions of ceaseless blows battering the Savior and his shredded flesh.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, Sor María provides countless images of Mary's unflinching strength, her motherly love for her son, and the unbreakable though often unspoken bond between them. By the time the final volume, entitled *The Coronation*, was written, depicting Mary's life after the death of her son, Sor María describes Mary's being raised to the throne of God and the Trinity's invitation to her to become "absorbed in the abyss of our Divinity."<sup>33</sup>

Since Mary's assumption into heaven was not made doctrine by the Church until 1950, almost one hundred years after the Immaculate Conception became dogma, once again Sor María demonstrated the visionary nature of her private revelations in describing her vision of the "most beautiful . . . Queen, crowned with the stars."<sup>34</sup>

Despite this and similar accolades, Sor María never shied from clarifying that Mary was a "daughter of Adam and a mere creature" and that all the "splendors of Divinity contained within Her are only a participation" suitable to the woman who was to be his mother.<sup>35</sup> Even the invitation of the Holy Trinity,

<sup>31</sup> Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue*, 104.

<sup>33</sup> MCOG, *Coronation*, 306 (cited in Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue*, 104).

<sup>34</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 221.

Sor María clarified, was extended to Mary only "as far as is possible to a mere creature."<sup>36</sup> This concept of a "mere creature," however, and its potential, is an intrinsic part of the beauty and the inspiration of the biography as revealed to Sor María by Mary. Through Sor María's revelations, as imparted to her by Mary, the readers of *Mystical City of God*—as mere creatures themselves—are invited to participate intimately in not only the story of the redemption, but also in its process of sanctity. As Sor María progresses in her text, and shares the revelations of Mary, what emerges clearly is that this is not meant to be a passive experience. By the express invitation of the Blessed Mother, Sor María is invited to engage on the path of spiritual growth, with Mary as guide and teacher, as is the reader.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, it is Sor María's treatment of Mary's role in the redemption that leads us seamlessly into an examination of the abbess's work as a "theological poem."

### 3. Metaphors in a Theological Poem

In *Mystical City of God*, Sor María describes Mary as "the New Jerusalem."

Presently I saw a most precious veil covering a treasure and my heart burned with desire to see it raised and to look upon the sacred mystery which I understood was hidden beneath. . . . Presently the veil fell entirely and my interior eyes saw . . . a great and mysterious sign in heaven; I saw a Woman, a most beautiful Lady and Queen, crowned with the stars, clothed with the sun, and the moon was at her feet (Apoc. 12, 1).<sup>38</sup>

This dazzling image evolved into Sor María's representation of Mary, and it was further infused with Saint John's imagery from the book of Apocalypse. John "saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" in gold and countless jewels.<sup>39</sup> In Sor María's heart, she

<sup>36</sup> MCOG, *Coronation*, 306.

<sup>37</sup> Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue*, 104-5.

<sup>38</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 27, citing Apoc. 12:1.

<sup>39</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 198, 201-202, citing Apoc. 21:1-3, 18.

equated this image with Mary. As the Mother of God, Sor María reasoned, Mary provided a dwelling for Christ in her womb, just as John described the city of Jerusalem as "the dwelling of God with men" (Apocalypse 21:3). Thus the New Jerusalem became to Sor María an enduring metaphor for Mary, and she began to refer to Mary as a "mystical" Jerusalem, coining the title phrase for her book, *Mystical City of God*.<sup>40</sup>

Sor María wrote eloquently about Mary as the New Jerusalem, clarifying that "all her gifts, her greatness and virtues are the cause of new wonder to the saints. New also, because She came after all the ancient Fathers, Patriarchs and prophets, and in Her were renewed and accomplished all their clamors, their prophecies and promises. New, because she came without the contagion of guilt and under a new dispensation from the law of sin. New because she entered into the world triumphant over sin, the devil and the first deceit, thus being the greatest new event since its beginning." Sor María additionally interpreted the moment of the New Jerusalem's coming down from heaven as an eternal moment depicting "the creation of Mary by the hand of the Almighty."<sup>41</sup>

This creation represented to Sor María the spiritual—or immaculate—conception of Mary, and its portrayal reminds us that the language of the mystic is often poetic and metaphorical, a thought echoed through the centuries by many who have struggled to understand the visionaries who bequeathed their insights to us in writing. Following in the footsteps of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, Sor María often wrote metaphorically. She described the wound of divine love as "so sweet and attractive that the more it prevails the more it is sought." She

<sup>40</sup> Fedewa, *María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue*, 99.

<sup>41</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 202, 199. This shared symbolism of Mary as the "New Jerusalem" (MCOG, *Conception*, 197, 201-2) was memorialized by multiple engravings in early editions of the work, most notably by Pedro Villafranca (1668) for the frontispiece of the first Spanish edition, featuring Duns Scotus across from Sor María. Later, in the painting entitled *St. John the Evangelist and Mother María de Jesús de Ágreda*, Cristobal de Villalpando (1649-1714) portrays Sor María and Saint John together contemplating a vision combining Mary and the city of Jerusalem (oil on canvas, 74"h x 50"w, on display at the Regional Museum of Guadalupe in Zacatecas, Mexico).

portrays Mary as serenading her son in prayers that were like "scarlet lace, with which she bound and secured his love."<sup>42</sup>

"All of *Mystical City of God* is a grand construction of poetic theology," Antonio Artola Arbiza writes, echoing many thoughts expressed by Pope Paul VI extolling the "way of beauty," so distinct from the "way of truth" as pursued by scientists and theologians.<sup>43</sup> Artola cites the astonishment following the book's publication, for its subtle concepts of spirituality, its noble style and narrative technique, its lucid speculation augmented in the quiet light of prayer, and its pious Marian sentiment. Yet, he concludes, "it is ultimately a poem."<sup>44</sup>

In 1999 the Vatican Secretary of State issued a statement that there were no errors of faith or morals in *Mystical City of God*. Yet the statement hindered Sor María's cause for sainthood because it further specified that the Mariology of *Mystical City of God* differed from the Mariology of Vatican II. In response, in 2003, the president of the Spanish Mariological Society and a participating member of the Pontifical International Marian Academy of Rome, Fr. Enrique Llamas, came to Sor María's defense. He penned a book which three years later would be published in English as *Venerable Mother Ágreda and the Mariology of Vatican II*. In it, Llamas, as translated by Fr. Peter Fehlner, F.I., provides example after example of harmonious similarities between *Mystical City of God* and *Lumen gentium*. In doing so, he cautions the reader not to confuse the vast stylistic differences between the two documents—the sparing and theological character of *Lumen gentium* and the repetitive, narrative, and exuberantly baroque style of *Mystical City of God*—with the essential similarity between the two.

<sup>42</sup> MCOG, *Conception*, 303; MCOG, *Incarnation*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> See Artola Arbiza and Mendiá, *La Ven. M. María de Jesús de Ágreda*, 42, more literally translated as "a grand poetical-theological construction" (*una gran construcción poético-teológica*). Earlier, in a 1995 production by Radiotelevisión Española entitled "Sor María, La Dama Azul," in the series *Mujeres en la Historia* directed by María Teresa Álvarez, Artola Arbiza described it similarly, calling it a "theological poem." See also: Enrique Llamas, *Mother Ágreda and the Mariology of Vatican II*, trans. Peter D. Fehlner (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2006), 5, 8, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Artola Arbiza and Mendiá, *La Ven. M. María de Jesús de Ágreda*, 35.



Since the abridged version of *Mystical City of God* is frequently rated by Amazon.com to be among the top ten books in a list of the one hundred most frequently purchased books on Mariology, let us accord *Mystical City of God* its rightful place among texts honoring Mary. Yet, unlike some well-meaning readers, we need not be compelled to read *Mystical City of God* literally, nor to accept as revealed truth the number of steps Mary ascended on her way for the Presentation at the Temple, or the exact date of her death. Rather, by applying discernment to these visionary private revelations about and of Mary, let us move beyond the Baroque extravagance of *Mystical City of God*. Let us enjoy its author's immersion in Quiet Prayer as she contemplates the Virgin. Let us dilate our own hearts to listen to Sor María's internal dialogues with the Blessed Mother as Teacher, and let us enjoy the theological poetry of *Mystical City of God*, to soar to the heights of Christ's love as we hold the hand of his Mother.