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MYSTICS AND MOTHERS

Devotion to Mary among Dominican Women through the Centuries Part I*

*Sr. Donna Maria Moses, O.P.***

Introduction

Saint Dominic de Guzman's (1170-1221) devotion to Mary, the Mother of God and his stance beside her before the crucifix are integral to the Dominican Charism and have shaped the contemplative spirituality of men and women of the Dominican Order for over eight centuries. From the time of Saint Dominic to the eighteenth-century, Dominican mystics have joined their own sufferings to those of the Crucified Lord and the Blessed Mother and experienced raptures and visions standing before them in penitential prayer. Their cultural and historical understanding of God differed significantly from that of our times. In the cultural and historical context in which they lived, their experiences spoke to people in a way that is hard for us to comprehend.

Brother Wayne Teasdale, adjunct professor at DePaul University, Columbia College and the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, makes the case that mysticism is the universal spirituality that unites all religions because it is not concerned

*This paper, focused on the spirituality of Dominican women mystics in Italy and Germany, 1250-1850, is subtitled "Part I." Sr. Donna plans to continue her research on this topic and present her findings at future MSA meetings.

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with the moral precepts or codes of law set down by a particular tradition, but rather with the direct communication of God to the human heart. Calling upon his own experience, Teasdale concludes:

It's really the story of every person who awakens to himself or herself—to the mystery within, without and beyond us. Every one of us is a mystic. We may or may not realize it; we may not even like it. But whether we know it or not, whether we accept it or not, mystical experience is always there, inviting us on a journey of ultimate discovery.¹

It is certainly true that all religions present examples of men and women who have been in direct communication with the divine. God communicates with each human heart in a special way and the mystical presence of Jesus Christ is offered to all who come to Him with sincere heart. Yet, as these examples show, there are individuals whose contact with this mystical presence is more vivid, more constant and more compelling than what the average believer experiences. Through the centuries the Dominican Order has recognized, tested and affirmed the mystical experience of uniquely gifted mystics in order to discover what the richness of their experience has to offer the rest of us.

According to Father Bertrand Wilberforce (1839-1904), the mystical life “is a life more true, more beneficial, more noble and exalted than any merely natural life, but it is secret, invisible and spiritual.”² Wilberforce observed that mystical theology differs from dogmatic theology in that it is not abstract but practical, and it differs from moral theology because it is not motivated by a desire to avoid sin and attain virtue, but rather guides the soul into the most perfect degree of the love of God. This grace is a supernatural gift of God, poured into the soul by the Holy Spirit raising it to a supernatural state most holy, righteous and pleasing to God. The Mother of God is intimately

¹ Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 1999), 3.

² Bertrand Wilberforce, O.P., “Treatise on the Mystical Life,” in Florence M. Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci: Her Life, Her Letters, Her Community* (London: Burns and Oates, 1908), xviii.

involved in the dynamic love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the communication of that sacred love poured out as balm for wounded humanity. She nourishes the souls of the mystics with the sweet milk of divine mercy and guides them in intimate union with her Son. In intimate exchanges between the heart of the mystic and the sacred heart of the falsely accused, afflicted, scourged and crucified Christ, Mary stands closely by as witness encouraging the acceptance of worldly pain and dishonor as the way of salvation and ultimate union with the Holy Trinity in heaven. Union with God in Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit is the central focus in the lives of each of the mystics described in the following pages. Mary, the Mother of God, is a companion on the way that leads to that union.

Soon after Saint Dominic's death in 1221, his followers began to imitate his contemplative practice of prolonged meditation on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the company of the Blessed Mother and sharing with others the fruits of their contemplation. The most famous of the early mystics formed in this tradition was Saint Agnes of Montepulciano.

1. Agnes of Montepulciano (1274-1317)

On the day Agnes was born into a wealthy family near Montepulciano, burning torches appeared in the heavens signaling that this child was special. It was reported that wherever she knelt to pray violets, lilies and roses sprang up in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mother of God to whom she dedicated her life with special devotion. By the time she was six years old she made a vow of virginity and began urging her parents to let her enter the convent. They tried to convince her that she was too young to consider such a thing, but she begged them to move to nearby Montepulciano, so she could make frequent visits to the convent. On one of these visits as Agnes was traveling with her mother and the women of the household they passed a hill on which stood a bordello. Suddenly a flock of crows swooped down and attacked the little girl. Screaming and plunging, they scratched and frightened the poor little thing badly before the women managed to drive them away. The women believed that the birds were devils who resented the purity and goodness of

little Agnes, and they predicted that one day she would drive them from that hilltop—a prediction that later turned out to be true.

In 1283, nine-year-old Agnes was allowed to enter with the Franciscans, who were known as “Sisters of the Sack” because of the coarse fabric and simple cut of their garments. Although Agnes, born into nobility, was accustomed to fine clothes and accessories, she was not at all dismayed by the crude costume of these followers of Saint Francis. In fact she made such exceptional progress in initial formation with the Franciscan sisters that they saw in her a perfect example of the Franciscan way of life. Consequently, at the age of fourteen she was given the position and responsibility of Bursar for the community. She reached a high degree of contemplative prayer and was favored with many visions. One of the loveliest of these is the one for which she is best known. On the eve of the Feast of the Assumption, Our Lady, Queen of the Angels, appeared to Agnes in a vision.

Agnes begged aid, supplicating her between her tears, not for her own merits—which she thought not to have—but in order only to satisfy a need. She begged the Queen of the Heavenly Court to grant her the courtesy to show her her Son; and insisted that she could be sure that the great reverence due to her Son would increase from her being able to show it as a sign, especially to those who are wandering on this earth. Therefore, because of the power of this prayer and the impression made upon the heart of the Virgin by the insistent fervent prayers of Agnes, [Our Lady] could not reject the question and Agnes prevailed in procuring the favor for which many before her had begged without success. On the foretold night the holy nun, with all the power of the Holy Spirit and with mind collected in prayer, asked the Queen of the Virgins the favor of that most desired grace. Suddenly there appeared a light all around her like one never before seen on earth. In that celestial light the Queen of the Universe appeared in a garment that glowed like the sun and with a crown of stars. In her arms she held the Son of God made flesh through her. He that gives life and nourishment to all animated beings appeared to [Agnes] like an infant suckling at his mother’s breast, taking nourishment himself with little drops of milk. The devoted virgin Agnes felt herself transported in ecstatic joy as the Queen of Paradise placed the Holy Infant in her arms.³

³ Raymond, of Capua, *Sant’Agnese Poliziana*, ed. Uga Boscaglia ([Firenze]: Libreria ed. fiorentina, 1954), 52-53. Hereafter cited as Boscaglia (ed.), *Sant’Agnese Poliziana*.

The Holy Infant wore about his neck a gold cross on a delicate chain. Agnes pressed the Child to her breast and felt such blissful tenderness in the embrace that she was reluctant to hand him back. When the vision faded, Madonna and Child were both gone, but Agnes found herself still clutching tightly the little gold cross the Holy Infant had worn. In order to bring about the prediction that Agnes would one day build a convent on the hill where the bordello stood, the Blessed Mother also appeared to her in a vision and gave her three small stones which she would one day ask her to use to build a convent. Agnes was not planning to build a convent or go anywhere other than where she was with the Franciscans at that time. The Blessed Mother simply told her to keep the three stones as a reminder to pray to the Holy Trinity for guidance.

The Blessed Virgin appeared to [Agnes] in order to deliver three small stones that would be used later to fulfill a pledge to found a church dedicated to her [Our Lady].

It all happened immediately in the supernatural life of the virgin [Agnes]—a pledge was given, during prayer, which could not be kept silent; indeed the task was to spread the word, but also the event that lay behind it, so that in all justice it could be considered among the most important fundamental activities of the saint. In fact, devout people were completely won over by the prayer and meditation of the child. Among them sprouted one heart filled with all tenderness particularly towards the happy Virgin Mary, Mother of God: therefore many began to address the Blessed Mother with lively affection. Once, when the heart of the child was all on fire for the Queen of Virgins during prayer, the most merciful Mother of the virgin's Spouse appeared to them in all her splendor and, speaking gently, showed them again the three stones which she had given [Agnes].⁴

The young mystic's name and reputation for holiness spread quickly and soon after the vision of Mary handing her the three stones, the event was known throughout all of Italy. Pope Nicholas IV summoned her to Rome and commissioned her to assist in the foundation of a new Franciscan convent. A year later, with special dispensation from Pope Nicholas IV, Agnes

⁴ Boscaglia (ed.), *Sant' Agnese Poliziana*, 40-41.

was elected Superior even though she was only fifteen years old. For twenty years Agnes grew in her reputation as one who could penetrate the secrets of God in her prayer. Holy Communion, the main source of her sustenance, she received in mystical ecstasy from an angel. Besides maintaining a strict fast, as a further act of mortification she slept on the floor with a stone for a pillow. She lived on bread and water from the time she was fifteen to the age of thirty when her spiritual director instructed her to eat other foods because of her poor health.

In his account of the life of Saint Agnes, Blessed Raymond of Capua maintained that:

In the Dominican litany there was a Latin invocation of the Mother of God as "Scala Dei" that Agnes said frequently and which brought her much happiness.

*Ave Maria, virgo virginum
Sancte Trinitas sacrarium,
Angelorum speculum,
Scala sanctorum omnium,
Tutum peccatorum refugium:
Cerne, pia, meum periculum,
Suscipe, clementissima, meum suspirium
Et da mihi tuum placatum Filium.⁵*

Agnes gradually learned that she was to leave the Franciscans, among whom she had been very happy, and return to Montepulciano where she would found a Dominican convent on the hill where the old bordello had stood, using the three stones given her by the Blessed Mother during her vision. In 1306, Agnes returned to Montepulciano to build the convent as instructed by the Blessed Mother. The inhabitants of the hill-top brothel put up a vicious resistance, but the people of Montepulciano rallied behind Agnes, destroyed the house of ill repute, and turned over the land to Agnes for her new foundation. The prior of the nearby church, Santa Maria Servite, laid the first stone, leaving Agnes to worry about where and how to get the funds to build the new church and convent. Agnes succeeded in gathering the necessary resources and the

⁵ Boscaglia (ed.), *Sant' Agnese Poliziana*, 51, n. 37.

church and convent of Santa Maria Novella, now called Saint Agnes, were soon ready for dedication with a long line of candidates waiting to enter. Agnes was convinced that the community must be anchored in the Dominican Rule because of their devotion to the Blessed Mother. She made the requisite arrangements with the Dominican provincial, transferred to the Dominicans, and was established as Prioress of Santa Maria Novella. The Dominican friars provided chaplains and spiritual directors and the new community prospered despite the setback of some architectural flaws in the original design of the convent that had to be corrected for sake of safety.

At the age of forty-nine, Agnes's health began to fail. She was taken to the nearby mineral baths for treatment. Although she miraculously restored a drowned child to life there, she herself did not regain her health. Agnes offered her sufferings up to God for the redemption of souls and, after a long and painful period of illness, she told the community gathered around her deathbed: "You will discover that I have not abandoned you. You will possess me forever." She was buried in Montepulciano where her tomb soon became a place of pilgrimage. Agnes was canonized by Benedict XIII in 1726, and her feast is celebrated on April 20.

Saint Agnes is most frequently represented in art as receiving in her arms the infant Jesus from the Blessed Mother or holding a model of the town of Montepulciano where she built the church dedicated to the Mother of God. Blessed Raymond of Capua, Master General of the Order (1380), wrote an account of Agnes's life that was translated into Italian by Uga Boscaglia in 1954. (The excerpts above have been translated into English by the author of this paper.) The church that Saint Agnes built in 1306 and dedicated as Santa Maria Novella was restored after her canonization in the seventeenth century and rededicated as Santa Agnese. The fourteenth-century portal and façade bear the famous image of Saint Agnes holding a lamb and lily with the town of Montepulciano appearing behind her. The terra cotta brick bell tower dates to the eighteenth century. Religious artworks inside depict the Madonna and Holy Infant Jesus and the Madonna of the Milk. There is still a great devotion to the Blessed Mother in the hilltop village of

Montepulciano, and numerous images of Madonna and Child can be found in its many churches.

The body of Saint Agnes is kept on the high altar in the church bearing her name and her relics are preserved in the sacristy and sanctuary. After her death her body remained incorrupt and a fragrant liquid flowed from her hands and feet. Her tomb has been frequently visited by pilgrims throughout the centuries, the most famous being Saint Catherine of Siena. In a famous legend, when Saint Catherine bent over the body of Saint Agnes to kiss her foot, witnesses were surprised to see the entombed Saint Agnes raise her foot up into the air so that Catherine did not have to stoop so far.

2. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Caterina di Iacopo Benincasa was born in 1347 to a wool-dyer, Giacomo Benincasa, and his wife Lapa. Those who knew her as a child reported that she was so joyful and talkative that they gave her the nickname Euphrosyne (lighthearted). When she was five-years-old she learned the *Hail Mary* prayer and made a practice of praying it climbing up and down the stairs repeatedly on her knees. In this way the Blessed Mother placed in her heart the desire from the time she was a child to dedicate herself completely to God. The following year Catherine had a vision of Jesus dressed in royal vestments surrounded by the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Mary Magdalene and the Apostles in the clouds above the Dominican church near her home. Thomas McDermott refers to this vision as the beginning of Catherine's spiritual development and a foreshadowing of what was to come. He quotes Conleth Kearns' translation of the description of the love for Jesus and Mary this vision enkindled in her young heart:

The great vision of the Royal Christ . . . stirred Catherine so deeply and powerfully that from that time onwards every spark of love for the things of this world was quenched in her heart. In its place was kindled a holy and all-absorbing love for our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God of the glorious Virgin Mother.⁶

⁶Thomas McDermott, O.P., *Catherine of Siena: Spiritual Development in Her Life and Teaching* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2008), 21, citing Raymond, of

After this event Catherine no longer played like a typical child of six, but became pious and penitential, scourging herself and praying the Our Father and Hail Mary. Her mother tried everything she could think of to get her to play like the other children of the household, but Catherine continued her frequent practice of climbing the stairs on her knees repeating the Hail Mary at every step. Sometimes her mother would gasp as the child seemed to ascend the stairs without touching the steps with her feet.

This early incident of repetition of prayer to the Mother of God while climbing the stairs, under which she later would make her cloister, has been connected to a Tuscan devotion of the time. Denis Wiseman explains that the practice of genuflecting on the stairs in honor of Mary was not unique with Catherine, but was a common devotion in cities such as Siena that had been placed under the protection of the Mother of God.⁷ Catherine would later employ the metaphor of climbing stairs as a way of teaching spiritual development. Although there is no mention of the Dominican litany referring to Mary as *Scala Dei* that was so loved by Saint Agnes in the *legenda* about Catherine, it can be seen that through the practice of praying to Mary while climbing the stairs Catherine developed an understanding of the progress of the human soul. She is credited with transferring the image of Mary as *Scala Dei* to Christ himself.

Another image for spiritual growth begins to appear in some letters . . . possibly written after February 1376. It is that of the staircase (*scala*) on the body of the crucified Christ with three stairs (*scaloni*) going to his feet, opened side, and mouth.

This image of the staircase on the body of Christ allows Catherine to speak now of *stages* of spiritual development . . . the three *scaloni* on the body of Christ represent different degrees of love of God and neighbor.⁸

Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans., introd, and annot. Conleth Kearns, O.P. (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1980), 34, #35. This latter work hereafter cited as Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*.

⁷ Denis Vincent Wiseman, O.P., "Jesus Christ Crucified and Gentle Mary: Salvation and Mary in the Life and Writings of Catherine of Siena," *Marian Library Studies*, n.s. 27 (2005-2006): 235.

⁸ McDermott, *Catherine of Siena*, 92, 93.

After being chastised for her repeated practice of Marian devotion on the stairs of her home, little Catherine left the house to find a place to pray in solitude and went to a cleft in the rocks outside the city gate. Her brother Stefano followed her and reported that as she prayed, her body levitated up to the roof of the cave where she remained for several hours. Catherine later revealed to her confessor that Jesus appeared to her there to tell her she would suffer much on his account but that the time had not yet come.

When Catherine returned home for the next two years she prayed continually to Mary, Queen of Virgins and Angels, to be her spiritual guide. Day and night, she prayed that the Queen of Virgins would draw her to a life of angelic virginal purity. Withdrawing again and again to the cleft in the rock outside the city gate, Catherine prayed to Mary with these words:

O most blessed and sacred Virgin, the first among women to consecrate for ever by a vow your virginity to that Lord who so graciously raised you up to be the Mother of his only-begotten Son: I call upon that motherly love of yours which no words can express, asking you to overlook my unworthiness and my nothingness, and graciously to grant me this great favor—to give me as my Spouse the One I long for from my inmost heart, your own all-holy and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ; and I promise him and promise you that to no other spouse will I ever give myself, but in my own humble measure I too will keep my virginity for ever spotless for him.⁹

So it came to pass that when she made her final vows years later, Catherine believed she received her eternal spouse from his own Mother.

Catherine began a lifelong fast, refusing to eat any meat and eventually giving up bread as well, living only on uncooked fruits and vegetables. At the same time a close relation of hers, Thomas della Fonte, joined the Dominicans in 1356, and became her confessor until Raymond de Capua, the author of her *Legenda*, was assigned to take his place in 1374. From him she developed such a veneration of the Dominican Order that

⁹ Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 35, #35.

she would daily kneel and kiss the places on the pavement where the Friars traveled to and from Siena. By the time she reached a marriageable age, twelve-years-old in those days, she had firmly resolved not to make herself presentable for the suitors her parents arranged to visit. To her mother's dismay instead of making herself attractive to potential suitors, Catherine denied herself sleep, hardly ate at all, cut off all her hair and hid away under the stairs. Her mother tried to break her resolve to enter the convent but she refused to give in. Even when the rest of the family treated her with contempt, she remained cheerful envisioning her mother and father as Mary and Joseph and her brothers and sisters as Christ's disciples. Eventually they give up trying to convince her and let her go on practicing her devotions in peace.

In her fifteenth year she moved into a space under the stairs of her father's house permanently. This was not a room, but more of a closet. In that cramped space she undertook a life of penance and prayer. She ate only raw vegetables and drank only water. For a hundred hours at a time she prayed in complete silence, sitting or lying prostrate on a bare wooden beam. She wore a hair shirt and bound an iron chain around her body so tightly it dug into her skin. Three times a day she scourged herself with that chain to the point of bleeding. For the next three years, Catherine kept absolute silence, speaking to no one except to her confessors and communicating with others only in writing. She wrote seeking membership with the *Mantellate*, a group of apostolic Dominican lay women committed to service of the poor and sick in Siena and was accepted.

Although the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience were not required of the *Mantellate*, Catherine made these vows privately and lived them austere throughout her life. She later confessed to Raymond that her only teacher during those three years under the stairs was Jesus Christ himself. She said that at first she was afraid of the visions because the devil also tried to play tricks upon her. She discovered that the diabolic temptations began in delight and ended in a feeling of deep disgust and nausea, whereas the divine visits brought peace to her soul growing in sweetness as they continued. In this way she came to be able to discern when it was Jesus, First Truth, who spoke

to her and when it was the devil. In one account written by Raymond de Capua, the devil offered Catherine a beautiful silk dress and she turned to Mary in prayer. The Queen of Virgins, the Mother of God, appeared to her. She seemed to be drawing a very beautiful garment from the side of her crucified Son, which she herself even adorned with bright and gleaming jewels. Then, as she clothed Catherine with the decorated garments, she said, "Be certain, daughter, that the garments that come from the side of my Son exceed all clothes in beauty and adornment."¹⁰

Catherine began to converse regularly with Jesus in this way as an intimate friend. Sometimes he was accompanied by the Blessed Mother and sometimes by Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Paul, or Saint John the Evangelist, but mostly it was Jesus himself who came to her. Through these mystical experiences of the presence of Jesus as companion, she came to feel that she was slowly diminishing and he was increasing. She joined her own penitential sufferings to the sufferings of Christ on the Cross consoled by visions of the Blessed Mother and the Apostles with him at his scourging and crucifixion. The Blessed Mother nourished her with milk from her own breast and encouraged her to take Mary Magdalene's thirty-three years of penitential life as a model for her own. When she grew weak from fasting and self-mortification, it was Mary who held her up to receive communion and enabled her to participate in the Mass.¹¹

One day the Blessed Mother, Saint John the Evangelist, the Apostle Paul, Saint Dominic and the Prophet David appeared to her in a vision. The Blessed Mother took her right hand, extended her fingers and offered them to her Son. Jesus took her hand and put on it a gold ring with four pearls and a diamond. Jesus promised her that this mystical espousal was but a foretaste of the wedding they would celebrate when she joined him in heaven and he made her promise to accept any

¹⁰ Tommaso Caffarini [Thomas Antonii de Senis "Caffarini"], *Libellus de Supplemento. Legende proluxe virginis Beate Catherine de Senis*, ed. by Guiliana Cavallini and Imelda Foralosso (Rome: Edizioni Cateriniane, 1974), 13-14 (nos. 71-90).

¹¹ Wiseman, "Jesus Christ Crucified and Gentle Mary," 246.

task that would be asked of her in his name. He and the Blessed Mother encouraged her with the understanding that she would prevail over all enemies. She was twenty-one at the time and still living in the cell under the stairs, leaving it only to attend Mass. Jesus commanded her to leave her cell at once and go out to minister to the sick and poor so that he could minister to them through her. Though she felt anguish leaving the cell where she had such sweet intimate exchanges with Jesus, he assured her that he would not cease his visits to her, but increase them and guide her in all that she should do. Catherine responded:

Not my will be done, Lord, but yours; be that done in all things, for I am darkness, and you are Light; I am she who is not, and you are HE WHO IS; I am gross foolishness, and you are the Wisdom of the Father. But may I ask you, Lord, if it be not presumptuous, how can what you say be done? . . .

To this our Lord replied in words like those of the archangel Gabriel when he said: "No thing shall be impossible with God."¹²

From the moment Catherine left her cell, a hunger grew in her for Communion so that she could become one with her spouse in body as well as in Spirit. That hunger grew stronger daily until her death, and she received Communion as frequently as she could. She begged the Lord to teach her Latin so that she could pray the Psalms; she envisioned Jesus walking with her on the way to Mass at San Domenico praying the Psalms with her. By a miraculous gift, she learned to read and recite the Psalms in Latin. She prayed her favorite—"Incline unto my aid, O God; O Lord make haste to help me"—daily for the rest of her life.¹³

She took up service as a maid in her fathers' house and went out to tend the poor and sick of the neighborhood. She could not turn away anyone who came to her in need and gave alms to the poor to the point of emptying the larders of food, but whatever she gave away miraculously multiplied and was

¹² Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 116, #121 and 122.

¹³ Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 105, #113.

restored the next day. She grew closer to Jesus through these acts and prayed for the ability to see the souls of those who came to her for help. Jesus granted her the ability to see the beauty or ugliness of the souls of others as easily as she could see physical beauty or disfigurement. It was this ability that later made her the intimate friend of priests and religious and the confidante of Pope Gregory XI.

One day she told her confessor that Jesus came to her, opened her left side, took out her heart and carried it away. Several days later in chapel at San Domenico she fell into a trance and a brilliant light began to shine around her. Jesus appeared to her again, opened her left side and placed his own heart within her. A fire began to burn in her soul and she fell into a rapture that lifted her off the ground where Mary the Queen of Heaven and Mary Magdalene appeared beside her. About this time the plague struck Siena and Catherine went out to those who were afflicted. She had visions of Jesus drawing her to his side to drink of his own blood, to draw strength and healing from him as she ministered to the sick and dying, and of the Blessed Mother who nourished her with milk from her own breast to sustain her in charity and sweetness of disposition.

From 1374 to 1378, Raymond served as Catherine's confessor and spiritual guide. Together they worked to bring an end to the Great Schism and the return of the papacy to Rome. Mysteriously, just before his election as Master of the Order on April 29, 1380, Raymond received a message from her although she was nowhere nearby at the time. As he passed in front of a picture of the Virgin Mary and silently prayed a Hail Mary, all at once he heard the voice of Catherine speaking to his soul, "Fear absolutely nothing. I am here for you. I am in heaven for you. I will protect and defend you. Do not be anxious; do not be afraid; I stand here for you."¹⁴ Blessed Raymond later learned that this occurred just at the hour of her death. She was thirty-three years old. He returned to Siena to compile her *Legenda*, working with several other priests and religious who also called Catherine their spiritual Mother. Those dedicated to her cause for canonization included Thomas Caffarini, several of

¹⁴ Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 342, #368.

the Dominican Friars from San Domenico including Tomasso della Fonte and Bartolomeo Dominici, Franciscan Lazzarino da Piza and the Augustinian hermit Giovanni Tantucci who wrote the eulogy for her funeral. A pious widow in Rome named Semia reported to Raymond that she also had a mystical experience the day before Catherine died while praying before the tabernacle. An angel appeared to her with a golden key and opened the tabernacle in which she saw a young woman wearing a three-part crown of white, gold and red. Then, a choir of angels appeared with Christ the King enthroned in heaven and the young woman fell prostrate before him as he welcomed her as his well-beloved spouse and daughter Catherine.

Then at another word from the King, she rose to her feet and stood beside the throne, in readiness for the arrival of the Queen who had now made her appearance, coming towards the King and accompanied by a great throng of maidens. When the Queen arrived, Catherine stepped smartly down from the step on which she was standing, and adored her on bended knees. Then the Queen of Heaven stretched out her hands to her and said: "Welcome to my well-beloved daughter Catherine!" and raising her to her feet, gave her the kiss of peace. Catherine again adored the Empress of Heaven, and then, at a word from her, went to meet the maidens of her train.¹⁵

These included Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Agnes of Montepulciano and Saint Margaret of Hungary, with whom Catherine took her place wearing her three-part crown.

Most of Catherine's 382 letters were dictated by her to several secretaries and occasionally to Raymond himself in the last ten years of her life. None of the letters are written in her own handwriting. Other examples of her thought can be found in her *Dialogue* and in her prayers. All of her letters bear the heading, "In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary," and a few give deeper insight into the Marian aspects of her spirituality. In the earliest of her letters, written sometime before 1374 to the abbess Giovanna of the Monastery of Santa Marta in Siena and her sub-prioress Niccolosa, Catherine wrote that together they must run headlong towards Truth by putting

¹⁵ Kearns (trans.), *Life of Cathertne of Siena*, 344-346, #372-373.

to death perverse human will and disciplining the members of the body. Catherine prayed for them to the Blessed Mother.

O sweetest treasured love! I can see no other answer for us but the sword that you, dearest love, had in your own heart and soul. That sword was your hatred for sin and your love for the Father's honor and our salvation. Oh sweetest love, this was the sword that struck your mother's heart and soul.¹⁶

Catherine prayed for this image of the Blessed Mother's acceptance of the suffering of Christ to melt the hardness of their hearts and increase their willingness to be pierced by the same sword, submitting to the yoke of obedience and accepting the sometimes painful burden of guiding the lost sheep entrusted to their care and guidance.

He now has the form of flesh, and she like warm wax has received from the seal of the Holy Spirit the imprint of loving desire for our salvation. By that seal and engrafting the eternal divine Word became incarnate. She like a tree of mercy receives within herself the soul of the Son—that soul consumed, wounded, pierced through by the Father's will. She, like a tree receiving a graft, is wounded by the knife of hatred and of love. Hatred and love are so intensified now in mother and Son that the Son runs to his death because of his longing to give us life; so great is his hunger and desire to obey his Father that he has set aside any selfish concern for himself and runs to the cross. And his dearest gentlest mother does the same. Willingly she gives up her [natural] love for her Son. Not only does she not, as a mother would, deter him from death, but she would make herself the ladder, *wants* him to die. This is no surprise, though, for she has been wounded by the arrow of love for our salvation.¹⁷

In Letter 18, referring to the tradition that the Virgin Mary had neither swaddling clothes nor blankets for Jesus, Catherine strove to inspire the wife of Bernabò Visconti of Milan to influence him to be reconciled with Pope Gregory XI living in exile.

¹⁶ *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, Vol. I., ed. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1988), 38. Hereafter cited as Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*.

¹⁷ Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, 1:38-39.

It is an awesome thing to see the good gentle Jesus, the one who rules and feeds the whole universe, in such great want and need that no one else has ever been as poor as he. He is so poor that Mary hasn't a blanket to wrap him in. . . .

Use the things of this world as nature needs them, but not with excessive attachment. For it would be very displeasing to God if you were to set your heart on something of less value than yourself. That would be nothing but a surrender of your dignity. For people become like what they love. If I love sin, which is nothingness, I too become a nothing.¹⁸

Again in Letter 62, to the Augustinian nuns of San Gaggio near Florence and the Benedictine nuns near Monte San Savino, Catherine encouraged them to embrace poverty and obedience by referencing the humility, poverty and obedience of Jesus and his Blessed Mother, Mary.

He was so poor that he had nowhere to lay his head. At his birth the gentle Mary didn't even have a little blanket in which to wrap her Son. So you, his spouses, must follow such a way of poverty. You know you have promised to live such poverty until you die, and I beg you, for love of Christ crucified, to keep that promise. Otherwise you would be adulteresses rather than spouses, since you would be giving your love to something apart from God.¹⁹

Catherine wrote to Raymond in June 1375 about her experience at the execution of a nobleman [probably Niccolò di Toldo] condemned for taking up the cause of Pope Gregory XI.

I waited for him at the place of execution. I waited there in continual prayer and in the presence of Mary and Catherine [of Alexandria], virgin and martyr. Before I arrived I knelt down and stretched my neck out on the block, but I did not succeed in getting what I longed for up there. I prayed and pleaded with Mary that I wanted this grace, that at his last moment she would give him light and peace of heart and afterwards see him return to his destination. Because of the sweet promise made to me, my soul was so filled that although a great crowd of people was there I couldn't see a single person.²⁰

¹⁸ Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, 1:74-75.

¹⁹ Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, 1:197.

²⁰ Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, 1:110.

She knelt beside him making the sign of the cross and reminding him that she would soon be with him at the wedding feast of everlasting life. As the executioner struck the fatal blow, the condemned man shouted, "Gesù! Caterina!" and she received his dismembered head in her hands.

The following month, Catherine again used the images of sowing a seed and grafting a tree to describe the relationship between Mary and the Incarnate Word in a letter to Monna Paola, the abbess of the hermitage Santa Maria di Fiesole in the hills above Florence.

Oh ineffably tender love, how sweet this union of yourself with humanity! You have indeed shown ineffable love by all your graces and gifts to your creatures, but most of all by the gift of your Son's incarnation, the gift of seeing supreme exaltedness bend down as low as to our humanity. Human pride must really blush to see God so humbled in gentle Mary's womb. She was the field wherein was sown the seed of the incarnate Word, God's Son. Truly, dearest sister, in that lovely field the Word was engrafted into Mary's flesh as a seed is sown in the earth. In the sun's warmth it sprouts and blossoms and bears fruit, while the seed's husk remains in the ground. This is exactly what the fire and warmth of God's divine charity for the human race did after he had sown the seed of his Word in the field that was Mary.²¹

She informed the abbess of the invitation Pope Gregory XI was about to send to all religious in Italy to swear allegiance to him and asked her to prepare herself to join them by engrafting herself into the Word. Catherine pleaded with her to remember that she and all of her spiritual daughters were presented to Jesus Christ through Mary and to take heart from Mary's own faithfulness and courage.

Oh blessed gentle Mary! She gave us the gentle Jesus as a blossom. And when did that blessed blossom produce fruit? When he was grafted onto the wood of the most holy cross—then we received perfect life. And when we say that the seed's husk remained in the earth, what do we mean? This husk was the will of God's only-begotten Son. In so far as he was human, he was clothed in this will, in his desire for the Father's honor and our

²¹ Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, 1:117-118.

salvation. So strong was this boundless desire that he ran like one in love, enduring pain, disgrace and abuse, all the way to his shameful death on the cross. Mary did exactly the same, dearest sister, for she could desire nothing but God's honor and the salvation of his creatures. This is why the doctors tell us, referring to Mary's immense love, that she would have made a ladder of her very self to put her Son on the cross if there had been no other way.²²

Letter 83 was written to assuage the fears of her mother, Lapa Benincasa, as Catherine was returning to Siena with the entourage who had traveled to Avignon to prepare for Pope Gregory XI's return to Italy. Catherine wrote:

I want you to learn from that sweet mother Mary, who for God's honor and our salvation gave us her Son, dead on the wood of the most holy cross. When Mary was left alone after Christ had ascended into heaven, she stayed with the holy disciples; and then she willingly agreed to their leaving, for her Son's glory and praise and for the good of the whole world, even though it was wrenching, since they had been a great consolation to each other. She chose the pain of their departure over the consolation of their staying, and this only because of her love for God's honor and our salvation. Now it is from her I want you to learn, dearest mother. You know that I must follow God's will, and I know that you want me to follow it. It was God's will I go away—and my going was not without mystery, nor without worthwhile results. It was also God's will that I remain away; it was no mere human decision, and whoever says anything else is lying.²³

Several years before Catherine met Raymond of Capua, the Blessed Mother appeared to her in a vision and promised to send one of her devotées to her as father confessor. For this reason, Catherine always referred to Blessed Raymond as Mary's gift to her, as in Letter 211.

My son, given to me by the sweet Mother Mary, I do not want you to grow wearied out and discouraged by any trouble of spirit you may have to undergo. I will, rather, that you persevere in that good, holy, true and faithful resolution which I know that God in his mercy has given you.²⁴

²² Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, 1:118.

²³ Noffke (ed.), *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, 1:252-253.

²⁴ Cited in Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*, xvii.

Later, in Letter 226, she wrote to Blessed Raymond again,

In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of sweet Mary. To you, most beloved and dear father and son in Christ Jesu, given to me by the sweet Mother Mary, I Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, write to you in his precious blood.²⁵

Finally, in Letter 373, written just before her death, she encouraged Raymond to continue their work of reforming the Church now that their common goal of returning Pope Gregory XI to Rome had been realized.

I beg and implore you, my father and my son, given to me by that sweet Mother Mary, if you feel that God is now turning towards me an eye of mercy, resolve to begin a new life yourself; like a man dead to all the pull of his sense-nature, fling yourself into the service of the bark of Holy Church.²⁶

In 1375 Catherine received the Stigmata, which was visible only after her death. She died on April 29, 1380, of a stroke at age thirty-three. After Catherine's death, Raymond worked to the end of his life in 1399 for the reform of religious life in Prussia, Saxony, Poland, Bavaria, Swabia and Italy. Catherine's body was exhumed and found incorrupt in 1430, and she was canonized in 1461 by Pope Pius II. Her feast day is celebrated on April 29. Her head and thumb are displayed for veneration in the Basilica of San Domenico in Siena, while her body is buried in the Basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome.

3. Catherine de' Ricci (1522-1590)

Alessandra Lucrezia Ramola (called Sandrina) was born in the Manelli Palace near the Plaza of the Church of the Annunciation in Florence April 23, 1522, to a noble banking family. Her father Pierfrancesco de' Ricci was banker to the Medici family and held several prominent posts in the government. A political revolt in 1527 wrested power from the Medici

²⁵ Cited in Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*, xvii.

²⁶ Cited in Kearns (trans.), *Life of Catherine of Siena*, xvii-xviii.

family, but the de Ricci's remained well-connected despite the intrigues that followed. In the midst of this tumultuous period, Sandrina began to experience the ecstasies for which she ultimately became so famous. On Thursday and Friday of every week, seven-year-old Sandrina locked herself in her room to contemplate the persecution, suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ and pray. However, far from being an unruly child, as this odd behavior might imply, those who knew Sandrina in childhood reported her to have "a most calm and serene disposition, a sweet and serious contemplative manner that belied her tender years."²⁷

When she expressed the desire to enter the convent, her stepmother arranged for her to become a student under the mentorship of her aunt, Lodovica de' Ricci, abbess of the Benedictine monastery of San Pietro de Monticelli. With the Benedictines, Sandrina refined the devotion to the Passion of Christ that was to be the center of her prayer life. The Benedictine nuns who first witnessed Sandrina's method of prayer were so moved by the tenderness and sincerity of her devotion that they could not bring themselves to direct her to more conventional forms of prayer.²⁸

Although it was common for a daughter of the Italian nobility to enter a monastery for a life of prayer and penance, many who did so were unable to leave behind their attachment to worldly luxuries. But, Sandrina had a deep love of poverty and was scandalized when she witnessed two Benedictine nuns fighting over a precious illuminated prayer book left behind by a deceased nun. Sandrina was so disillusioned by this episode that she quietly left the monastery and returned to her family estate in Prato. Not wanting to spread ill will, she refused to reveal her reasons to any except her confessor. Soon after returning home, Sandrina met two mendicant Dominican nuns from the monastery of San Vincenzo who daily begged alms at the doors of the wealthy villas in Prato for their mission of preaching. She followed them and took daily communion with

²⁷ Florence Mary Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci: Her Life, Her Letters, Her Community* (London: Burns and Oates, 1908), 3.

²⁸ Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci*, 10.

them at San Vincenzo. She asked her father to let her enter with them, but he felt humiliated by her leaving the Benedictines at San Pietro and feared a repetition. Soon after his refusal, Sandrina's health deteriorated quickly and she became deathly ill. The best doctors in Tuscany were summoned, but no cure could be found. For weeks she lay in bed too weak to move pleading for an angel to intervene with her father on her behalf. Jesus appeared to her in a vision offering her the ring of divine espousal. Standing with him as witnesses were the Blessed Mother and two Dominican Saints Thekla and Cecilia. Jesus told her that she would be espoused to him forever, but that she would endure persecution, illness, grief and sorrow. He assured her that he would be with her through it all and that she would eventually triumph. When the vision ended she was restored to perfect health and rapt in joy.²⁹

Pierfrancesco was so grateful for his daughter's miraculous recovery that he agreed to let her enter with the Dominican nuns in San Vincenzo. She was just thirteen-years-old when she received the Dominican habit and the religious name Catherine, the name of her deceased mother. During the reception ceremony, the Blessed Mother appeared and led Catherine to a beautiful meadow where she communicated to her the sweetness of giving up all earthly joys for the sake of following her Son. Jesus and the Holy Spirit appeared, too, and blessed her with the gift of insight into the souls of others. She felt that Maddalena de' Strozzi was given to her by the Blessed Mother to be her special guardian.³⁰

The novice mistress attempted unsuccessfully to convince her that her personal devotional practice would not fit well with the rigors of the novitiate. The raptures Catherine experienced every Thursday and Friday made her absent at times the novices were expected to be present. Even when she was present, due to lack of sleep from being in ecstasy, she acted dim-witted and apathetic. When it came time for the nuns to vote on her acceptance to make her profession of vows, it suddenly dawned on Catherine that they did not intend to accept

²⁹ Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci*, 25-26.

³⁰ Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci*, 29.

her. In desperation she spent weeks throwing herself at the feet of every sister she came across begging them not to turn her away. However, this dramatic appeal might not have succeeded had it not been for the fact that her uncle, Fra Timoteo, was the spiritual director of the convent. It would be understandable if the nuns felt a certain obligation towards him to accept his eccentric niece. Be that as it may, when it came time to cast the vote, each sister believed that the all of the rest would vote against Catherine and resolved in her own mind to be the one nun who voted for her. When the vote was counted, they were surprised to learn that all had been swayed in her favor. Because of the subsequent feelings of joy, peace and consolation they felt at this miraculous result, they believed the outcome to be the work of the Holy Spirit. Catherine made profession on the feast of Saint John the Baptist, June 24, 1536, to her uncle, the Prior of San Domenico, Fra Angelo da Diacetto.

The raptures she experienced in private continued to be followed by such a complete loss of sensibility that other nuns thought she must either be an idiot or a charlatan. They amused themselves by asking about her experiences in order to ridicule her. For two years this went on, but the Blessed Mother appeared to her repeatedly instructing her to bear it all patiently as Jesus bore his mocking and humiliation on the Cross. So it happened that the scorn of the others served only to deepen her identification with Christ's passion. Gradually, the life-threatening illness and violent seizures she suffered from at her father's house returned and again no cure could be found. The nuns were ashamed of their previous maltreatment of her and prayed for her recovery. The illness caused her such prolonged agony that "those who were witness of [it] were continually moved to tears: and they found it almost equally hard to understand how the good and just God could allow such innocence to suffer so terribly and unintermittingly."³¹

Fra Girolamo Savonarola, the reformer who was burned at the stake in 1498, was prior of San Marco in Florence and was instrumental in the founding of the monastery of San Vincenzo.

³¹ Domenico Maria Sandrini, *Vita di Santa Caterina de' Ricci delle Ordine di San Domenico* (Firenze: Francesco Moicke, 1747), 206.

The nuns in that community continued to follow him even after death through the direction of one of his followers Fra Silvestro de Marradi. According to the legend, Savonarola had predicted that one day the nuns would be attacked and carried off forcefully by soldiers on horseback. This reportedly came about in 1512, when the Viceroy of Naples, Raymond of Cordona, attacked the city of Florence for siding with the French and refusing to restore the Medicis to power. He and his army of 12,000 men stormed the town of Prato just outside the gates of Florence. The unmarried women all took refuge at San Vincenzo and when the soldiers rushed in to seize them, they were met by none other than the Blessed Mother who ordered the soldiers not to desecrate her sanctuary and commanded them to protect it instead. Astounded, they fell to their knees and swore upon the altar to defend the place from attack. In memory of this miracle, which occurred on the feast of St. John the Baptist, a procession is made each year on that day with a statue of Our Lady lit by torchlight followed by the Mass of our Lady sung by a full choir. Consequently, a cult in honor of Savonarola sprang up at San Vincenzo where they still keep some his belongings and a few of his ashes as relics.³²

When Catherine took ill and they feared she might die, the sisters at San Vincenzo prayed to Savonarola for a cure for Catherine on the eve of his Feast. The chronicles of the monastery report that Catherine left her bed for the first time in two years and managed to crawl to the altar where the relics of Savonarola lay and fell asleep there. Catherine had a dream as she slept of Fra Girolamo Savonarola and two Dominican companions, Domenico and Silvestro. Savonarola addressed her saying "I have come to cure you. But you must first promise me always to obey your superiors and your confessor, and then you must go to confession this morning so as to receive communion."³³ When the vision ended, she was completely cured.

³² Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci*, 38-40.

³³ Catherine de Ricci, *Le Lettere spirituali e familiari de S. Caterina de' Ricci, fiorentina religiosa domenicana in S. Vincenzo di Prato*, ed. Cesare Guasti (Prato: Ranieri Guasti, 1861), 48.

Upon the restoration of their poor sister to good health, the community had a radical change of heart and decided that if the miraculous cure was real, then her raptures might also be real. They resolved to send her at once to Fra Timoteo to ascertain whether this was the work of the Holy Spirit or a deception by the devil.

In answer to Fra Timoteo's questions, Catherine revealed that in all of the apparitions she experienced of the Lord, the Blessed Mother and the Saints, the effect had been to fill her soul with peace, joy and love that are signs of the work of Holy Spirit rather than the chagrin and disturbance of that other spirit who seeks to confound. To test her further he replied that her visions were most likely traps set by the devil to ensnare her soul and instructed her to be on guard and make the sign of the cross over any apparition that might appear to her. However, her visions were most frequently of Jesus and the Blessed Mother. Catherine protested that it would be offensive to make the sign of the cross over Him who endured it and her who witnessed it. Fra Timoteo insisted and added that she must report her visions to him personally every evening. Catherine felt this verdict was another indication of their distrust of her and the visions. From that time on she began to dread their reoccurrence and prayed for them to cease.

Just as the community and Fra Timoteo resolved to trust in the authenticity of these visions, Satan came to undermine Catherine by interrupting her prayer with supernatural sounds, smells and visions. The devil began bargaining with her that, if she promised not to pull others away from his clutches with her stories of saintly apparitions, he would cease to disturb her prayer. Finally, taking on the guise of Saint Peter, the devil tried to convince her that all this talk of saints was distracting the sisters and causing them to neglect seeking the human help needed to cure her. She made the sign of the cross and called upon God's help and the vision disappeared at once. The feelings of depression and sadness that followed confirmed that this was the work of the devil and she begged for God's mercy to take the visions away, whereupon the Lord appeared to her

again to comfort her and promise that Satan would not ever deceive her.³⁴

On Christmas day 1540, the Blessed Mother appeared to her with the Holy Infant in her arms and allowed Catherine to hold Him. The following week the Blessed Mother appeared again with Jesus, the Resurrected Lord, while Catherine was embracing the Body of Christ she had removed from the crucifix on the wall of her cell. In April of 1541, Catherine had a vision of the crucified Christ whose body was so badly disfigured and so weighed down that his flesh seemed about to tear away from the nails. She surmised from this that she herself was about to suffer greater agonies. This time she was comforted by Mary Magdalen who appeared and led her to the foot of the cross where she kissed the feet of Christ and the wounds in His side.³⁵

In that same year, after receiving communion from the Queen of the Angels, she was taken up to heaven in rapture. Mary presented her to the King of Heaven who took her heart and replaced it with a new heart formed from the heart of his own Blessed Mother. This marvelous exchange filled her with such unspeakable joy that she felt her soul raised high above the earth and was able to see with eyes that penetrate the depths of the souls of those around her. This new heart burned with such a flame of love that she felt she was no longer herself. The atmosphere surrounding her became a heavenly air that sustained her more than food and she felt herself transformed at the deepest levels of her being. The grace of the change of heart caused Catherine to see the crucifix through the compassionate eyes of the Sorrowful Mother. By degrees the pain of the crucifixion began to manifest itself in her body, culminating finally in the wounds appearing in her hands and feet and side on the first Thursday of February 1542. This marvelous phenomenon lasted for twenty-eight hours and was repeated every week for two years. The spectacle drew a large crowd who came to witness and wonder at it.³⁶

³⁴ Filippo Guidi, *Vita della Venerabile Madre Suor Caterina de' Ricci* (Firenze: Sermatelli, 1617), 78-80.

³⁵ Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci*, 57-58.

³⁶ Serafino Razzi de' Predicatori, *La Vita della venerabile Madre Suor Caterina de' Ricci, vergine, nobil fiorentina, monaca nel monastero di San-Vincenzio di Prato* (Lucca: Busdraghi, 1594), 63.

In 1544, at the usual time for the phenomenon to occur, Catherine suddenly experienced the feeling that Jesus and the Blessed Mother were standing apart from her and preparing something new. She followed them and found herself present at the Last Supper. Jesus said to her, "Arise! Let us go." She followed him to the Garden of Gethsemane, and experienced over the course of twenty-eight hours every feeling of the Blessed Mother and Jesus during his last days on earth. The witnesses present reported that in this state of rapture her body rose into the air completely motionless with her eyes fixed on the crucifix, her gestures conforming to the motions of the Lord's own body as he moved through his sufferings and agony on the cross.³⁷

At times a voice would come from her that was not her own voice, but rather the voice of Christ, or his Blessed Mother, Saint Dominic or one of the other Dominican saints. In these voices she spoke directly to sinners and prayed for them, reproaching them gently for things which she alone could not have known. This rapture was interrupted only by the hour for Communion and all who participated reported that at that hour such a perfume of holiness emanated from her body that entire monastery was scented with it. When the precious body and blood had been consumed, Catherine emerged from the rapture with the sacred wounds still freshly bleeding and the visible marks of the scourging and the crown of thorns imprinted deeply in her own flesh. The superiors of the convent did all they could to recommend discretion in speaking of these events. Nevertheless, news about them almost immediately reached Padre Francisco Romeo di Castiglione, the Father Provincial of the Roman Dominican province, who ordered an investigation of the phenomena. Catherine submitted to the investigation humbly, begging the Lord and the Blessed Mother to make them cease so that the convent would not fall under criticism and the peace of the community be disturbed. The Father Provincial accused her of making a pact with the devil and made her promise to put an end to the deceptive visions. Her response was that she could not make them stop because she

³⁷ Capes, *St. Catherine de' Ricci*, 64-65.

had not made them begin. However, she promised to pray to God for them to end.³⁸

Distressed by the disturbance her ecstasies were causing, Catherine asked to be given a humble position out of the public eye. Instead she was appointed to serve as sub-prioress, and then elected prioress. At the age of twenty-five, she was made prioress for life, a position in which she served for the remaining forty-three years of her life with great sensibility and authority giving spiritual direction to other prioresses, members of the Tuscan nobility, and several priests who went on to become bishops, princes, and cardinals. Among these were three who later became Popes Marcellus II, Clement VIII, and Leo XI.

The raptures of Catherine lasted only for about ten years, while the rest of her life was spent in almost complete silence during which she wrote or dictated over 400 letters to members of other religious houses and Tuscan dignitaries who sought spiritual guidance from her. When she did write it was with great pain due to the infliction of the stigmata. One of her most notable correspondents was Saint Filippo Neri, the founder of the Oratory, whom she claimed as a spiritual son given to her by the Blessed Mother. Among her other spiritual sons was a Florentine notary, Buonaccorso Buonaccorsi, who became a benefactor of the monastery. Catherine's letter to him in 1553 described the four virtues through which the Blessed Mother would be a support for him.

Because we are so frail and ignorant, it is still not enough that these messengers come to us to make preparations; we need one another and far greater help: and this is our Queen, our Mother and refuge. Let us turn to her, the most abundant source of all virtues, let us fall prostrate before her and ask her that, as our Mother, full of mercy and pity towards her children, she will prepare us, and, in her own time, show us her sweet Son and lay him in our soul and in our heart. Then once the divine source of love is close to us, he will make our love perfect, as far as our frailty is capable of that. And that is how I want to see you, my dearest son.³⁹

³⁸ Razzi, *Vita della Venerabile Madre Suor Caterina de' Ricci*, 104-105.

³⁹ Catherine de' Ricci, *Selected Letters*, ed. Domenico Di Agresti, trans. Jennifer Petrie (Oak Park, Ill.: Dominican Sources, 1985), 53-54. Hereafter cited as Di Agresti (ed.), *Selected Letters*.

After the death of her father, her brother Ridolfo and uncle Federigo began to quarrel over finances. Ridolfo pleaded with Catherine to intercede for him. In 1559, trying to bring peace to the family, Catherine urged Ridolfo to turn over a new leaf and entrust himself to the care of the Blessed Mother.

For all that I still have you in my heart, praying God that he will be pleased to make you walk by the straight and true path, obeying his holy commandments, and that on your pilgrimage to Loreto, you have had so much grace from our holy Mother that she has taken you as her own and will keep you safe for ever. And this she will do, if you are in the right frame of mind and make the effort to live a good disciplined life in your profession, ensuring that all your actions are to God's honor. I have no doubt that if you do this you will have all you wish for.⁴⁰

In 1561, Catherine wrote an appeal to Filippo Salviati, a relative of Francesco de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, urging him to join her in presenting themselves to Jesus and the Blessed Mother just as Jesus and Mary offered themselves to God.

Mary is that ark full of divine treasures, and through her are fitted the heavens and the earth and human minds and hearts which believe in God, filled with the majesty and glory of our Savior, our Father and lord. And we, small and ignorant as we are, have neither the knowledge nor the power to understand to the least degree the fullness of that ark . . .

My wish is that on that morning we go to that holy table and, though poor and naked, run first of all to that ark of fullness, our Mother, so that she may clothe and adorn us. All her riches are for us: we can ask her and she will not refuse us them, if only we are humble and don't take her precious gifts to throw them in the mud; but if we beg them for our adornment and to be able to go to her beloved Son to present ourselves in order to do his will, be sure that not only will she adorn us, but will come with us to do us still greater favors.⁴¹

Catherine also formed a spiritual friendship with the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, Joanna of Austria, and her successor

⁴⁰ Di Agresti (ed.), *Selected Letters*, 7.

⁴¹ Di Agresti (ed.), *Selected Letters*, 47.

Bianca Capello. The Grand Duchess turned to Catherine for her prayer. Catherine wrote to her in 1582, promising to pray to the Queen of the Holy Rosary for her intentions.

I am asked to recommend to your Highness the request made about the holy Rosary of the Queen of Heaven and earth. It was made to you here and you promised to help. So I remind you that your approval is sufficient for this community, and because it is something which greatly pleases the glorious Virgin, your Highness will be rewarded by her for granting this wish: I mean the Holy Rosary here in San Domenico, Prato.⁴²

The Grand Duchess became a great benefactor of San Vincenzo which she supported until her death in 1587.

Although the raptures for which Catherine was best known ceased after 1554, she continued her customary exercise of contemplating the Passion of Christ every week until her death in 1590, after a prolonged illness. She was beatified by Clement XII in 1732, and canonized by Benedict XIV in 1746. Her body reposes on the high altar in the church and convent of San Vincenzo, now called Santa Caterina in her honor. Because she died on the Feast of the Purification of our Lady, February 2, her own feast day is deferred to February 13. The Dominican community still residing at Santa Caterina in Prato, Italy, celebrates her feast annually with a novena ending on February 2.

4. Maria Columba Weigl of Altenhohenau (1713-1783)

Elisabeth Franziska Weigl, born on March 8, 1713, as her parents' second child, was baptized on the same day in Saint Peter's, the oldest parish in the city of Munich. Her parents led an exemplary Christian family life. The father, Franz Paul Weigl, had inherited from his parents a brandy distillery and, because of his great beneficence, was known throughout the city as "Father of the Poor." A year after Elisabeth's birth a great tragedy struck the happy family. It was the time of the War of the Spanish Succession and the country of Bavaria had suffered greatly under occupation by the Austro-Hungarian soldiers. Munich, the capital of the country, had been ravaged by vicious warriors

⁴² Di Agresti (ed.), *Selected Letters*, 34.

eager for plunder. As the little Elisabeth lay in her crib, an Austrian hussar barged into the dwelling and raised his sword over the child to strike her dead. Only by a superhuman feat of strength, did the alarmed mother prevent the savage blow and save her child. However, this caused such a shock to her own nervous system that she died shortly afterwards. Franz Paul Weigl resolved not to marry a second time, but concerned himself with finding the best care for his two children. Elisabeth Franziska was always a frail child and very sick, often so sick that the doctors doubted she would live.⁴³

From her earliest childhood on, the little Elisabeth had intimate conversations with her guardian angel, whom she frequently saw standing beside her as a gleaming star. Very early on the blessed child showed the Weigl family trait of special compassion for the poor. Elisabeth had greatest joy when her father gave alms for poor children or when she could give something of her own. Already at the age of four, she was taught to read in German and Latin by the Christ-child who appeared to her in a miraculous way. So it is not surprising that Elisabeth had a great longing for the Sacraments from her earliest childhood. An English woman was hired to prepare her for the Sacraments, and she was allowed to make First Holy Communion at seven-years-old, an unusual event at that time, granted because of her understanding and the deep desire. Elisabeth saw the Holy Infant in the Communion host which gave her unspeakable joy, and an apparition of her deceased grandfather visited her, bringing her much peace and comfort. The vision of her grandfather seemed so real that she did not know the poor man had been dead for some time.⁴⁴

When Elisabeth turned fourteen years old, the contract with the English woman came to an end, and she presented the young girl to the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. At the same time she made an offering of Elisabeth for the poor souls. The noble teacher could not have prepared her blessed pupil better for her future calling. Soon after the marriage of Elisabeth's

⁴³ A. M. Weigl and Karl Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte und Novenenbüchlein* (Regensburg: Maristen Druck und Verlag, 1983), 5-6.

⁴⁴ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 7-8.

only brother, her father died. This sudden death brought the greatest grief to the poor girl who was still not full grown. She became so sick with grief that she could not even take part in the funeral of her beloved father. Elisabeth's future call was clear even during her father's lifetime. She wanted to live her whole life for God. She received the Dominican habit on August 27, 1730, and was given the religious name of Maria Columba (i.e., Dove).

A name is especially symbolic for people who have a special life task assigned from God. To be "simplices sicut columbae," as innocent as a dove (Mt. 10:16), is in the words of Jesus the exemplary inner character of the disciple, and innocence was certainly the mark of Columba. As an infant heaven poured out such an overly rich measure of grace upon her that she was named after the bride that the heavenly bridegroom praises in song and calls his dove whose beautiful face he longs to behold and whose lovely voice he longs to hear.⁴⁵

Even in her novitiate years she undertook pious works of expiation in atonement for the rationalist and materialist sentiments that were leading so many astray in her day. Despite her pains to keep her practices hidden, her piety did not go without notice by the other sisters. In her innocence she believed that everyone in the novitiate received these graces and concluded that it must be so with everyone in the cloister. When she noticed conflict among the sisters, she prayed with all her might to be like the others. Columba felt it to be a great sacrifice that she was unable to lead a life of private penance and prayer. However, her whole life she remained true to her vow to the Immaculate Conception to offer her own sufferings for the sake of the poor souls and thanked her for this grace.

At the end of her novitiate, Columba received the stigmata on August 19, 1731. She was asked to record the experience in writing. Out of holy obedience and not out of any self-pride or desire for attention, she described this experience in a moving manner. In the evening after examination of conscience before

⁴⁵ Karl Besler-Ungerer, *Columba Weigl von Altenhohenau, 1713-1783: eine Mystikerin des Bayernlandes aus dem Dominikanerorden* (Munich: Missionsdruckerei Mariannahill, 1983), 42.

God, she prayed for a blessing and went to lie down in peace. Suddenly she heard a beautiful voice:

Columba, be still and prepare yourself, because the divine majesty will appear together with the heavenly host in the morning and nail you to the middle of a great Cross. You will experience everything that up until now you have only prayed about. Confess your sins and prepare yourself!⁴⁶

After hours of prayer and joy, anxiously waiting much too long for the morning to come, Columba returned hurriedly to her cell. It seemed to her that she was in a heavenly palace filled with a pleasant aroma. Heavenly music played and she heard angels singing, "Come, spouse of Christ—come bride of Christ!" Nearby were all the preparations for her crucifixion. The Blessed Mother, innumerable angels and other saints were there.

Christ, the Lord, came forth barefoot, with a crown of thorns on his head and carrying on his shoulder a great heavy Cross. All the angels and saints fell on their knees and showed their deep reverence. Christ lay down the Cross in the middle of them and spoke, "Columba, my bride, you must be crucified after my example, just as I was crucified for human sinfulness." Columba was laid on the Cross and Christ took her right hand, stretched out her arm and drove a nail through it. An angel caught the blood in a chalice that filled to overflowing. In the same way her left hand was driven through and her feet with great pains. Then Christ spoke: "Now you are, my bride, surrendered on the cross. Now I will open your side also." The open wound was one finger long and two fingers wide and much blood and water flowed out of it. Christ then said, "Now you are my bride and I am your bridegroom, because I have made you in my own likeness."⁴⁷

For three hours, from one until four in the night, Columba hung on the Cross. Suddenly Saint Dominic came and threw himself in utter humility before the Divine Savior and said: "I thank you, Oh God, that you have heard your Servant and adorned my Order with this flower!" Christ responded, "Dominic . . . Take her up from the Cross! And you, Thomas, bind

⁴⁶ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 10.

⁴⁷ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 11.

her with the white belt as a band of purity! Give her up as signs of victory over sin with a lily and a cross in her hand. Let her triumph against the devil, hell, flesh and the world." Then Christ turned to Columba and said: "Every Friday you shall suffer with me the same pains in the same way. Sometimes they will last a quarter hour, sometimes as long as Our Father. Sometimes your face will change into the form of mine. Every Friday your wounds will be renewed and much blood will flow from them."⁴⁸

Two days after her solemn profession of vows on August 27, 1731, Columba was permitted the experience of an exchange of her heart with the heart of Jesus in a vision.

Christ showed her a heavenly garden. She saw in it four fields: one with lilies, the second with roses, a third with a variety of beautiful flowers, and a fourth with rosemary. In this garden there were countless paths, so that Columba believed there could be no end and no exit. There were many trees with rare fruits. Then Christ led her into the innermost garden, that also was beautiful enough, but they had to walk over thistles and thorns to get there. At the first step blood began to run from Columba's feet. "Do not be frightened my bride," said Christ to her, "this garden belongs to me and to you, give me your heart!" Columba answered with complete confidence, "Oh my divine Love, I am ready to give my whole self to you. Take away my heart."⁴⁹

Christ took away her heart that was all red and deeply wounded. Flaming fire came forth from it and its light spread throughout the whole garden. Then the Lord took his own Heart imprinted with his holy Name and placed it in the wound in Columba's side. As Christ had told her after her stigmatization, she experienced the pains of the crucifixion every Friday. Usually they lasted about a quarter of an hour and overtook her suddenly. Her constant innermost prayer was that these would come only at night so that no one would observe them happening. Columba suffered with Christ, not only in his crucifixion but in all the other stages of his life and ministry. Throughout the course of the liturgical year, Columba experienced visions of Jesus from his childhood to his resurrection

⁴⁸ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 12.

⁴⁹ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 13.

and ascension into heaven. Christ appeared to her as a pilgrim, beggar, good shepherd, gardener, a twelve-year-old boy and as a child carrying a cross. She had a vision also of the Holy Trinity in heaven and the Mother of God. She traveled with the Blessed Mother over the mountains to visit Elizabeth, lived through the wonderful birth in Bethlehem, fled with the Holy Family into Egypt, and searched with Mary for Jesus in Jerusalem. Again and again, she walked with her the painful road to Calvary.⁵⁰

The chronicle also stressed that when she suffered the Passion of the Lord alongside his Sorrowful Mother, one could hear her repeatedly utter the words: "The Queen of the martyrs is my love. I am with my Heavenly Mother and accompany her in her suffering." When suffering with Christ on Calvary, she stood beside the Sorrowful Mother of God and lamented: "O Queen of the martyrs!" On the night of Holy Saturday Columba was always with the Mother of God in order to suffer what she suffered and felt that the Blessed Mother permitted her to experience all of the pain that she herself experienced from her own childhood to the death of her son Jesus.

The Sorrowful Mother promised Columba three particular graces: to strengthen her in holy virtue so that her soul would never suffer the slightest damage, to always help her prevail in her fight against the enemy's cunning and to give her anything she requested for the poor souls if she requested it by calling on her name. The Blessed Mother promised she would never forsake her in life or in death.⁵¹

As Christ had told her after her stigmatization, she experienced the pains of the crucifixion every Friday. Usually they lasted about a quarter of an hour and overtook her suddenly. Her constant innermost prayer was that these would come only at night so that no one would observe them happening, but obeying a command from heaven she tried to describe them in writing, calling upon her crucified majestic Bridegroom to help her describe the unnatural pains that she experienced in her own body crucified and resurrected every Friday.

⁵⁰ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 14.

⁵¹ Besler-Ungerer, *Columba Weigl von Altenbohenau*, 194.

After experiencing the five wounds of Christ she prayed for the pains not to happen when others could observe them, and she begged God to forgive her sinfulness in not wanting others to know. She wrote that she did not know when they would happen but she did know that whenever they happened no human eye would want to witness it and she prayed for them to only happen at night when the others were asleep. She admitted, however, that every time she prayed this she received the same answer.

My Bride, my Dove, as long as it is the will of God, so long will you hold this in prayer. Surrender yourself to God's will and let the King of Heaven and Earth do what and how He wills. Surrender yourself to the most high and holy majestic will that called you from youth to this crucified state.⁵²

The chronicles of her life report that she experienced a special visit from Jesus, Mary and the Dominican Saints on January 8, 1733.

At 8 o'clock in the evening Maria Columba came to her cell. She was suddenly overcome by such great angst, fear and unhappiness that she no longer recognized any grace in the pains she suffered. This dejection was so powerful that she could not keep still and in great anxiety she cried aloud for help from her sisters but no help came. Suddenly her cell was lit up and she was surrounded by the Blessed Mother, Saints of the Dominican Order and Saints from other Holy Orders she did not recognize. After them came a triumphal procession of people all dressed in the finest clothes. They all had crosses on their foreheads and waved fragrant branches of rosemary.

Last of all came a small wagon decorated most beautifully, pulled by six snowy white horses that shone like gold adorned with gilded ornaments made from the purest gold. Although Columba did not know at the outset that there was someone in the little wagon, she soon noticed that a child, more beautiful than any she had ever seen, was seated inside it. He was dressed in the robes of a king with a rosary across his arm and a cross in his hand. Upon the hand that held the cross he wore a ring set with six diamond stones in the middle of which was painted the name Jesus. In the other hand he held a staff upon which were six lilies. The procession was leading the child up on a mountain top.

⁵²Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 17.

Columba saw that in this little wagon there was still one more seat. She asked what the meaning of it was and was answered that it was meant for her, if she remained true, she would one day take this seat and be taken up to heaven with her beloved. She was also assured that the graces she received from suffering the Passion were true and from God. She should not let fear drive her from them. Then her holy guardian angel spoke to her that such fear and doubt came from Satan. Then the three angels appeared who every Friday gathered the blood flowing from her wounds. One of them had a golden chalice in his hand. It was opened and inside she saw it filled with blood that shone like rubies.⁵³

The following Friday as she suffered the Passion, she found herself on that same mountain, surrounded by the same Saints as before. She was laid on the cross and hoisted high and as she hung upon the cross so much blood flowed from her wounds that the green mountain was covered with it. She received the crown of thorns from the Christ child. The Blessed Mother, the Holy Father Saint Dominic, Saint Francis and a host of holy souls and angels appeared. All voices joined together in a song of praise with various musical instruments. When the song was done, Columba lost all fear and remained full of trust. Many times throughout the years of 1732 to 1753, the Mother of God appeared to her with some poor soul in need of prayer. The Blessed Mother instilled in her special graces for seeing into the souls of others and rescuing those who were suffering. In her own suffering she called upon the protection of Mary, Queen of Heaven and Queen of all the Martyrs.

Columba thanked the Queen of Heaven for the graces she was given to help the poor souls. Mary answered, "I will show you everything!" Suddenly, radiant with joy, Saint Dominic appeared to thank the Queen of Heaven for the fullness of blessings that his daughter Columba had received from her and asked Mary to keep his daughter under her protection. Mary answered him: "I hold Columba under my protection; she has been chosen by the Son of God for all eternity." Whereupon the Mother of God gave Columba her blessings and the vision disappeared.⁵⁴

⁵³ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 19.

⁵⁴ Besler-Ungerer, *Columba Weigl von Altenbohenau*, 142.

One day Columba had an irresistible urge to see her own soul. She prayed to her holy guardian angel, who explained that she should pray for this grace to her Holy Father Dominic. After three days of sustained prayer, a week later her guardian angel appeared to her in the night gliding across the floor to her bed. Near him was her soul in the form of a small child, beautiful, snow white, brilliant and gleaming. The guardian angel asked her to take the child to her, but she could not do it because, although it had a human shape like a child, it was like trying to grasp a cloud. The guardian angel smiled at Columba because she could not grasp the soul. Columba asked why her soul did not have flesh like the poor souls she had seen in visions before. The angel answered, "I want to show you exactly as you are." In that same instant, the angel let go and the soul began to slide to the floor as if it were unable to hold itself upright. "Just so are you," said the angel. These falls signify your weakness. If the sins in your soul were visible, you would die from beholding them. Columba said a prayer of thanks to Saint Dominic for her many graces through which she learned the profound mercy of God towards her and fell to her knees in grateful prayer. Occasionally she wished to see this particular saint, especially on his feast, because from him she learned to trust and follow God's will.⁵⁵

In the depth of her heart Columba shied away from the extraordinary experiences she received and feared that she was being deceived by Satan. Many of her own sisters treated her like an outcast, calling her a fake, a liar and a cheat. Some even labeled her a witch. Because of this, she fled to God in prayer often begging him to take these apparitions from her. Six Provincials and five Father confessors stood up against Columba with all their authority and theological knowledge to try to find a possible way to dismiss her as a swindler. In the year 1745, an investigation of the wound in her side was undertaken and it was asserted to be true. However, the accusations and persecutions against Columba continued and, as late as 1770, the truth of her visions were still doubted. The Provincial called for another investigation. The inquisitor brought the

⁵⁵Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 22-23.

matter to a close, finding that Columba was a true innocent soul, straightforward, mild, honest, amenable, obedient, quiet, peaceful, conformed to God's will, trustworthy, and on the whole a very good example for others.⁵⁶

Very late in the year 1774, Columba was elected Prioress. This was no light obligation for her because she longed to live a quiet life alone for Jesus. Although Columba's call to religious life began with a private vow to the Immaculate Conception for the sake of poor souls, one can see that the crucified Christ was the main focus of her visions and prayer. The Blessed Mother and the saints often accompanied him, but Jesus remained always at the center as she united her own physical sufferings with his as an offering for poor souls living and deceased. A prayer of hers that survives from this time provides a deep insight into her soul.

See my most beloved Jesus, how my whole body is full of pain! In your sweet Heart I place all my pain and through the same I offer myself in your eternal praise. O Sweet Love of God. I turn over to you all the sorrow which you have brought to the same Heart of God. My most beloved Jesus! Because I cannot pray in such great pain, I ask you to offer for me your own holy prayer which you made in your sorrow. I surrender myself totally to your holiest will just as you surrendered yourself to the heavenly Father's will. I am prepared to suffer all that you suffered in your own body. Sorrow is a blessing that signifies the all loving action of God for us.⁵⁷

On August 27, 1781, Mother Columba made her fiftieth jubilee of profession. Through a special dispensation, the pilgrims and acquaintances present for the celebration were allowed to enter the enclosure of the convent. Columba was so ill that she could not come into the parlor. About her last years and days there is no firsthand account. She died on August 31, 1783. The people who had sought her help during her lifetime, called upon her after her death to pray for them. Altenhohenau was privately owned for over 100 years, but Columba's grave did not go unremembered. Because the church was kept locked up, the people tucked slips of paper in the handles of

⁵⁶ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 23-27.

⁵⁷ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 28-29.

the doors with requests for prayers and notes of thanks for prayers answered. From the many votive offerings of thanks that accumulated over hundreds of years through prayer to Mother Columba, some still survive. One hundred years after her death, her bones were exhumed, placed in a small specially prepared oak container and buried beneath the altar in the chapel. The votive offerings and relics from her stigmatization are still kept nearby.⁵⁸

Since 1924, the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose in California have maintained Saints Peter and Paul Priory at Altenhohenau. In 1983, on the 200th anniversary of Columba's death, two accounts of her life were published in German, drawing upon resources available in the archives at Altenhohenau: a handwritten biography by Father Franz Joseph Nock, O.S.B., and an unpublished work by Professor Ludwig Fischer of Bamberg. (The excerpts cited above were translated into English from these two sources by the author of this paper.)

Conclusion

The penitential practices of the Dominican mystics bore great spiritual fruit both in their own lives and in the lives of those to whom they ministered and gave counsel. The divine visits they experienced united them with Jesus and his Blessed Mother in the sweetest and most profound ways. Their mystical encounters seem to have taken five distinct forms: 1) the mystical betrothal, 2) an exchange of hearts, 3) sharing the maternal delight of holding the infant Jesus, 4) sharing in the suffering of the passion and crucifixion and 5) encounters with the saints in heaven and those who had left the earthly plane for the mystery beyond death. In the case of each of the mystics, the Blessed Mother played a similar role. She led them to her Son with gentle encouragement, shared the infant Jesus with them, instructed them in maternal wisdom, gave them in marriage, introduced them to the Saints in heaven, and accompanied them in their ministry to others.

The severity of their fasting, scourging and personal discipline was not common even in their own day, but any religious

⁵⁸ Weigl and Besler, *Columba Weigl: Lebensgeschichte*, 30-31.

given to such extraordinary practices today would be subjected to a battery of psychological tests. Any novice who persisted in them would not be invited to profess vows. Any professed who manifested such symptoms later would be sent for a psychological assessment. Rather than promote the mystical experiences described above, religious today are steered towards the kind of awakening to deeper self that happens through personal reflection, prayer and insight. However, it is not only our knowledge of psychology that makes the experience of the mystics unlikely to be replicated today. The Dominican mystics described in this paper did not have the resources or education available to religious today. Today's mystic can employ her imagination through the study of theology, science and the arts and is not limited to devotional practices and verbalization of interior revelation. The purposes of seeking more perfect understanding of the essence of divinity, opening the heart to the creative impulse of the Holy Spirit, entering into more intimate relationship with the Holy Trinity and exploring the sacredness of life remain the same.

Young religious women seeking to make profession today are not encouraged to consider being given in mystical betrothal to Jesus, but rather to freely give themselves to God through a radical commitment to God and the Church. Rather than envisioning a mystical exchange of heart, today's religious might join in a ritual prayer of consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus or pray a novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. They are encouraged to join in one heart and one soul with other religious in the common purpose of preaching the Gospel and ministering to the poor. Today's religious bring their own daily sufferings and challenges to God in prayer and unite these with the Lord's own suffering and death rather than inflict pain or suffering upon themselves. The image of Mary presenting Jesus, a toddler with a man's face, turned away from her and towards the beholder to give a sign of blessing is preferred to the image of Mary holding an infant Jesus nursing at her breast.

To discover how the mysticism of the thirteenth to the eighteenth century evolved to what it is today, one must first look at what form the mystical experience took in the missionary

lands of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The projected second part of this study will explore the life and person of Mary in the vision and writings of the founders of Dominican congregations in the United States, Latin America and Africa.