

# ***spiritual life/Online***

Online continuation of ***spiritual life*** magazine

Published 4 Times a Year

Volume 3 Number 1 • Spring 2017



## ***The Annunciation by Fra Angelico***

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### **Publisher**

Washington Province of  
Discalced Carmelite Friars,

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***spiritual life/Online*** is the continuation of the print edition of ***spiritual life*** (1955-2014) (ISSN 0038-7630). ***spiritual life/Online*** is a Catholic four-times-a-year electronic publication: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. © 2017 by the Washington Province of Discalced Carmelite Friars, Inc., 2131 Lincoln Road NE, Washington, DC 20002-1199. Tel: 1-202-832-6622.

**P**ERHAPS THE GREATEST—and the simplest—lesson we can learn during the season of Lent is that Christ's passion and death are followed by his glorious resurrection from the dead. Jesus' new life after his painful death is clearly portrayed in the Gospels and is dramatically reenacted in the sublime liturgy of Holy Week and Easter Sunday. This is not a startling new faith-filled reality for any of us, since we progress through these moments of Jesus' death and resurrection every year. This sacred drama is a time, however, for each of us to embrace these mysteries with a deeper love.

This time of year is not only about dramatic reenactments of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. No, it is also a time to be with Jesus in a deeply personal and quiet way as he endures his suffering—his fear in Gethsemani, his pain as he is tortured, his humiliating crucifixion—and unite ourselves with this suffering Lord of ours. Grasping the depth of Jesus' anguish as he is tortured and killed raises our awareness of how totally he is one of us—“a man like us in all things but sin.”

Our faith and hope in the transforming victory of Jesus' Resurrection give us the courage to embrace the Cross of Christ as the clear and certain way to eternal life:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Rom 8:38-39)

*Edward O'Donnell*

## **The Hidden Treasure of Every Now**

WHEN OUR WORLD SEEKS to crumble around us—our personal world or a much wider one—where do we go for strengthening and hope? We pause to examine the ongoing developments while many perplexing questions rise spontaneously. Is God really in charge? Then how could this happen? Why doesn't God do something about it? If God rules over this planet and all who inhabit it, why does so much seem to take a wrong turn?

### **Gospel Views**

Jesus told his disciples, “To you has been given knowledge of the mysteries of the reign of God” (Lk 8:10). Yes, they were granted some insight into the movement of events, yet not enough to prepare them for what would occur on the hill of Calvary. The “whys” must have taken over within them as they saw their Messiah stripped, flogged, and crucified. The reign of God does not issue clear-cut explanations when tragedy enters a human situation.

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Christ swings open a gate to the mystery of God's governance, yet what we perceive can be darkness to human eyes, not because the mystery is dark in itself but because its overwhelming light is beyond the capacity of our limited vision.

**Jesus' eyes  
focus upon  
those whose  
need cries  
out for aid**

The glory of the Resurrection did not penetrate the blackness of that earlier Friday when Jesus' followers looked on the agonizing conclusion of their Master's demise. In this world

of ours, the rhythm of the Kingdom must always move according to hope. John the Baptist, the forerunner, had introduced his declaration "The reign of God is at hand" with the admonition "Reform your lives" (Mt 3:2). And Jesus echoed his words in the very same sequence (Mt 4:17).

The good news Christ proclaimed was indeed so good that it had never before been heard as his lips explained it and as his miracles of healing confirmed it. God is always involved in human history, but Jesus came to give a fresh revelation of what divine control is all about. He would turn upside down any value system honoring only the rich and powerful, the proud and successful. The poor and hungry can be too readily excluded from social arrangements that scorn their helplessness. Jesus' eyes focus upon those whose need cries out for aid. In the beatitudes, the Teacher reveals how loss can

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be made to lead to new fulfillment. Thus, where emptiness seems to prevail for the sorrowing, the lowly, the persecuted, and the insulted, blessedness can take hold.

### **The Kingdom Is Now**

Matthew's Gospel presents the reign of God under a variety of metaphors that employ images familiar to a rural scene: seeds and weeds, fields that yield a harvest or a buried treasure, and a domestic image of yeast and flour. Here is human life in the concrete, subject to physical movement and change.

Divine action penetrates all cosmic reality. Prophets of the Hebrew Bible honored creation in its multiple manifestations. The New Testament builds on this foundation. Jews and Christians sing with the Psalmist, "How manifold are your works, O Lord. In wisdom you have wrought them all" (Ps 104:24).

The door to the Kingdom, as Christ announced it, is open to everyone who knocks and truly longs to enter. We are children of time, inextricably caught up in the passage from what is to what will be. We have been fashioned as temporal beings. The reign of God points to an everlasting destiny. However, our way there is through the here and now: "Your kingdom is a kingdom for all ages and your dominion endures through all generations" (Ps 145:13).

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We are situated in a particular era where we find ourselves today, placed according to a divine plan devised specifically for us. Each of us says to God, “Your hands have made me and fashioned me. Give me discernment” (Ps 119:73). No one is a repetition of someone else. Every descendant of Adam and Eve will participate in the reign of God in a unique way: “I have called you by name. You are mine” (Is 43:1).

### Treasure of the Moment

Change is the rhythm of human existence. We cannot know the future, although we can be sure it connects with what we are now experiencing. The past, even though it has gone, is still part of where we are today. Whatever has been, becomes a legacy we bear within us. The future has not yet arrived. We have some inkling of the shape it will take, but we aren’t absolutely sure. Surprise can be contained in the not yet. *Before* and *after*—these words speak of the flow of time in my life, the journey from what was to what will be.

Jesus said, “Trade till I come” (Lk 19:13). The *now* of this moment is the currency of the kingdom for us in our earthly dispensation. It is the coin of the realm handed to us moment by moment. The coin of each successive instant can add up to treasure in a field that we leave buried too long—letting time

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waste itself away without giving us any worthwhile return. We can also spend the coin of this *now* in anger, jealousy, or contempt of others. That would be to deface it, turning value into its opposite.

When we take hold of the treasure of the moment in a way that makes it profitable for the reign of God, we dig in the field of our consciousness. That means we exercise there an effort to be attentive to the God who is always attentive to us.

This doesn't require us to stop whatever we're doing, although a slight pause will help. I take hold of the coin of the realm and see on it the imprint of my Maker who rules my destiny. Infinite goodness gives me the riches of this instant and all the instants that follow. I recognize a heavenly design, the mark of eternity on each passing minute. I do not want to squander these royal gifts.

## **Another View: Lawrence of the Resurrection**

In the seventeenth century, the Discalced Carmelite lay brother Lawrence of the Resurrection left a message about the presence of God in human living, simple advice that has captured the attention of Catholics and Protestants alike. A former soldier in the destructive Thirty Years War, he lacked a strong educational background and described himself as “a clumsy oaf who broke everything.” In his Paris monastery, he was assigned to kitchen chores

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and later worked in the sandal shop. His letters and remembered conversations were collected by his fellow friars who recognized their worth. Brother Lawrence looked at divine sovereignty as service of us, God's creatures: "This King, full of goodness and mercy, lovingly embraces me, seats me at his table, waits on me himself, gives me the keys to his treasure, and treats me in all things as his favorite." Do you realize, as Brother Lawrence did, that you are God's favorite? Brother Lawrence says to us:

*God has various ways to draw us to Himself. He sometimes hides from us, but faith alone—never lacking when needed—must be our support and the foundation of our trust, which must be placed entirely in God.... Faith lets me touch him and he never withdraws from us unless we first withdraw from him. Let us take care to remain near him. Be with him always.*

The presence of God in every moment of time is the central theme of Brother Lawrence's message to us:

*The holiest, most ordinary and most necessary practice of the spiritual life is that of the presence of God. It is to take delight in and become accustomed to this divine company,...conversing lovingly with God all the time, at every moment, without rule or measure.<sup>3</sup>*

What practical advice does he give?

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*Since you are aware that God is present to you during your actions, that God is in the center and depths of your heart, stop your activities from time to time, to adore God within, to give praise, to ask help, to offer your heart and to be thankful.*

Often in our daily routine, we have to come to a halt, and, in our speed-driven contemporary culture, we resent being forced to wait. The virtual reality presented by computers offers us the swiftness of the Internet, but intermittent delays are also part of the process. Frustration too readily takes hold. Brother Lawrence would suggest we calmly use the interlude, short or prolonged, to turn to God, to commune with Jesus—no road rage, no computer rage, no anger at a checkout line that has slowed down.

**We don't  
always have  
to be in  
church to be  
with God**

Brother Lawrence reminds us, “We don’t always have to be in church to be with God.... A brief lifting up of the heart is enough, a brief remembrance of God.” He tells us, “We must not get discouraged when we forget this holy practice for all that is needed is to calmly take it up again.... It must always be carried out gently, without giving in to any disturbance.” We simply acknowledge when our minds have wandered and turn again peacefully to the Guest within.

## The Hidden Treasure of Every Now

### Our Treasure

Financial consultants urge us to take stock of our assets, to establish an economic plan that maximizes return. When we invest with Jesus, we are promised an astonishing hundredfold in this world “and in the age to come, everlasting life” (Mk 10:30).

This is the treasure in heaven we draw on already, a treasure we use not only for ourselves but generously for others. God has given us hours and days and years—stretching onward from the initial conception in our mother’s womb to a final chapter when mortal time ends its days for us. Once our minds and hearts come to a deeper awareness of the riches of time, it shines, radiant with possibilities. We are no longer spendthrifts, letting the hours spill out of our hands without any real return to profit us. We look at our brother, Jesus, who is our never-failing companion. We listen to his invitation: “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you” (Mt 11:28).

Existence in this world is no easy vacation without demands. The years assign ongoing and differing tasks, but we do not work alone. Laws underlying the rule of God are bent in our favor: “In your plans for us, there is none to equal you” (Ps 40:6). We listen to Brother Lawrence: “Everything is possible for one who believes, still more for one who hopes, even more for one who loves.”

## The Hidden Treasure of Every Now

Every moment brings an opportunity to take hold of new wealth linked to an imperishable inheritance: “You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established” (Ex 15:17–18).

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### ***The Church of Mercy. Pope Francis***

“The Church’s roots are in the teaching of the apostles, the authentic witnesses of Christ, but she looks to the future, she has the firm consciousness of being sent—sent by Jesus—of being missionary, bearing the name of Jesus by her prayer, proclaiming it and testifying to it.

A Church that is closed in on herself and in the past, a Church that only sees the little rules of behavior, of attitude, is a Church that betrays her own identity; a closed Church betrays her own identity! Then, let us rediscover today all the beauty and responsibility of being the Church apostolic! And remember this: the Church is apostolic because we pray—our first duty—and because we proclaim the Gospel by our life and by our words.”

## **Some Guidelines for Gospel Spirituality**

WESTERN THOUGHT AND CULTURE have been influenced greatly by two pre-Christian philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. While Aristotle was a pupil of Plato, the two differed very much in their philosophies.

Plato's thought was other-worldly. He downplayed all things material, including our bodies, and put his focus on escaping this material world and reaching a purely spiritual world. He would, of course, not have been in harmony with the idea of a resurrection of the body.

Aristotle, on the other hand, had a great respect for things material, perhaps even the idea of their eternity. His writings, however, were lost to the Christian world for a number of centuries but preserved by the Arabs, and reintroduced when they occupied Spain in the Middle Ages.

Some of the early Christian Fathers seem to have been influenced by Platonism. St. Augustine would be one. But his study of and love for the Bible proved

## Some Guidelines for Gospel Spirituality

to be a saving grace for him. And over the centuries, Platonic thought could be found in such movements as Jansenism, which downplayed our human worthiness to receive the Eucharist. The guiding light of Pope Pius X, who encouraged frequent and even daily communion, helped bring Catholicism out of such Jansenistic influence.

With these cultural trends in mind, let us now turn to some guidelines for living a Gospel spirituality today, guidelines which of course are nonexhaustive.

### Gospel Spirituality

A Gospel spirituality calls us *first* to an interpersonal life. Jesus is presented to us as the person in whom we receive the gift of the Spirit. In Matthew's picture of Jesus, we see that the basic identity of the Christian is found in his or her relationship with Jesus, much more radically than in externals or practices.

Our encounter with God leads us likewise to the interpersonal life of community or Church, as both Matthew and Luke-Acts bring out. In the Gospels, Jesus is always concerned with restoring those whom he heals to community, where they can share, celebrate, and embody what they have found in Jesus. Of course, though, Christian community life is not to be confused with lockstep uniformity

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or the negation of individual values. Quite the contrary—it is open to a multidimensional reality and mystery.

*Second:* The Gospel calls us to recognize that our spirituality is rooted in the history of this world.

**The Gospel calls us to recognize that our spirituality is rooted in the history of this world**

Our encounter with God in Christ is made possible by the historical events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. In other words,

he entered into the history

of this world to give it a saving value for us. We are living now in the framework of that history, in a period begun by Jesus' resurrection and moving toward his second coming.

The pagan philosophy of Neoplatonism, which has influenced many Christians, downplayed the importance of history in this world. In so doing it also downplayed the unique value of the events in each person's life, along with the importance of each person's growing to a fullness of life in this world. A wholesome Christian spirituality does not call us to abandon this world or to consider its history—the history of our brothers and sisters, and our own history—as insignificant. The Gospel instead calls us to abandon only what is selfish and sinful.

*Third:* The very human picture of Jesus in Mark and Luke, and Luke's constant concern for the psy-

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chology of the disciples, leads us to state that our spirituality must be based on a wholesome anthropology. We have only to recall Jansenism and its many predecessors in Christian history to realize the need for this guideline. The Gospels, however, call us to give more adequate attention to the union of body and soul and to the integration of the whole person—including the strengths and needs of the body, the senses, sexuality, instinct, imagination, etc.—into the harmony their Creator wishes for them. How often we notice in the Gospel that Jesus is appealing to the basic goodness in the human nature of those he calls to grow.

*Fourth:* The principal direction of the growth to which the Gospel calls us is always characterized by faith, hope, and love. Unless we keep this priority in mind, we can get trapped in too many false or fake religious issues that lead to discouragement and the dead ends of a lack of love between people. Again, history is full of examples of the name of religion being used for other than faith, hope, and love.

*Fifth:* The Evangelist Mark, in his insistence on the role of faith, identifies for us that any struggle or “asceticism” in the Christian is primarily the struggle to believe or trust and that this more essential concern should never be clouded over by or even replaced by peripheral “mortifications,” such

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as those seen in some of the Pharisees in the Gospels. In this struggle to believe and trust, we are at the core of what it means to give ourselves to God.

Each of us personally needs to search in our own lives just what practical applications we need to draw from the above five guidelines. Which ones call for more attention in our here and now?

And each of us needs to reflect on the Gospels to see if we need additional guidelines for our journey toward Gospel wholeness. This search can be done in prayer—and especially in our awareness of the presence of the Lord to both help and guide us—as we remember the promise of Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel to be with us always, even to the end of time: "And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world" (Mt 28:20).

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"I think this is truly the most wonderful experience we can have: to belong to a people walking, journeying through history together with our Lord, who walks among us! We are not alone; we do not walk alone. We are part of the one flock of Christ that walks together."

Pope Francis, ***The Church of Mercy***

## **Any Friend of Teresa's**

**T**HREE IS THE OLD ADAGE that the character of a person can be determined by observing who their friends are. In the spiritual realm, this same principle can be applied in observing the saints we choose as patrons and patronesses. In the case of Saint Teresa of Avila, her heavenly companions are in keeping with her own richly developed personality: Saint Peter, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and Saint Mary Magdalen.

It is hard to compete with this cast of characters in the matter of conviction, expressiveness, and passion in their relationships with Jesus Christ, with the exception, perhaps, of Saint Teresa herself. It is Saint Magdalen whom I would like to reflect upon here. Saint Mary Magdalen has received considerable attention through the novel *The Da Vinci Code*,<sup>1</sup> the movie of the same name, and all the commentaries that have followed.

### **Mary of the Gospels**

For Saint Teresa, however, and many others of us, Saint Mary Magdalen is an old friend. She was

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an original member of Jesus' group of friends and supporters and is well documented in both Christian Scripture and tradition. She is, moreover, an archetypal personality who generates the imaginative flow that is vital to the spiritual reality of the Christian myth.

In a homily in the year 591, Pope Gregory the Great—perhaps in an attempt to simplify—combined a number on Gospel women, two of them named Mary, into one character. This composite character has given us the familiar Saint Mary Magdalen: the follower and supporter of Jesus (Lk 8:1–3); the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Lk 10:38–42); the woman caught in adultery (Jn 7:53–58); the woman out of whom several devils had been cast (Lk 8:1–3); and the woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and wiped them with her hair, then anointed them with precious nard at Simon's party (Lk 7:36–50). Mary Magdalen was the first to see the risen Christ and to bring the news of the Resurrection to the other apostles (Jn 20:1–2, Jn 20:18). It was her role in this event that merited her the title of “Apostle to the Apostles” given her by Saint Augustine.

Current scriptural studies distinguish the several women that Gregory combined in the sixth century, but Saint Mary Magdalen—a beautiful self-possessed woman, who found, followed, and

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loved Jesus—remains the central image. Saint Teresa's relationship and understanding of Mary Magdalen embraced this comprehensive image of femininity as represented by Gregory's amalgam of Gospel women, an image that provides a multi-layered projection of the feminine in relationship to Jesus and his response to them.

### Other Sources

There are several other sources that add details to the orthodox Gospel account of the relationship between Mary Magdalen and Jesus, namely, the Gnostic gospels. These texts, written at the time that the four Gospels were written or shortly thereafter, were excluded from the Canon of revealed texts and, in some cases, provoked the ire of the early Fathers. Three of the Gnostic gospels are relevant to this discussion. The first is the *Gospel of Mary Magdalen*, which details some very deep communications between Saint Mary Magdalen and Jesus. There is a strongly esoteric quality to the material such as is found in Paul's Letter to the Hebrews and in John the Evangelist's *Book of Revelation*. *The Gospel of Philip* is another Gnostic resource on the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalen.

As in the gospel attributed to her, Jesus' choice of Mary as the one to whom he revealed some of

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the deeper senses of his mission is brought into question. The appropriateness of Jesus' revelation of deeper truths to a woman is what is called into question. The suggestion is that such teaching should be reserved for the male followers of Jesus. In this gospel of Philip, it is Saint Peter who is the objector. His brother, Saint Andrew, is able to calm him down, and the community proceeds in its mission. Likewise in this gospel, Philip suggests a deeper intimacy between Jesus and Mary Magdalen: "He kissed her on the mouth."<sup>2</sup>

The author of these texts, probably not Saint Mary Magdalen nor Saint Philip, expresses conflicts in the early Church communities about the roles of female and male Christians. This is no surprise. But it would be a mistake to reduce the meaning of these very interesting texts to this item. Dr. David Oswald, a Jungian scholar, argues that the Gnostic movement in early Christianity represented the early Church's search for an image of the Incarnate God.<sup>3</sup> It is good to keep in mind that the doctrine of the Incarnation—that Jesus was both God and man—was not an easily formulated dogma.

The controversy over the person of Christ commanded the intellectual energies of Christian thinkers for several centuries and provoked the convocation of no fewer than four councils. Secondly, it is obvious that the Gnostic gospels reveal a

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very strongly mystical flavor in the early Church. The so-called “Church of Peter” was successful in carrying out the establishment of Christianity. The “Church of Mary (Magdalen)” bore the early mystical impulse, projected in the intimacy between Jesus and Mary Magdalen, which would later find a home and development in the religious and monastic traditions after the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.

### Differing Traditions

Differing mythological traditions around the life of Saint Mary Magdalen developed in Eastern and Western Christianity. The Eastern Church viewed her as a wealthy patroness of Jesus from whom he had cast out seven devils. She stayed with him in the darkest part of his passion and was the first to witness the Resurrection. After the Ascension, she went to Rome where, because of her affluence, she was able to meet with Tiberius Caesar. She told him about Jesus and how he had risen from the dead. Evidently this conversation took place at a dinner table because Caesar responded to her story of the Resurrection by stating that an egg on the table would sooner turn red than that a man would rise from the dead. The egg turned red before their very eyes. The image of Mary Magdalen holding a red egg is sometimes seen in the iconography of the Eastern Church.

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In the Western Church, France has the greatest claim on Saint Mary Magdalen. In this tradition, Mary Magdalen, Mary Cleophas, and Mary the mother of James, sailed to France and brought the Gospel to Marseilles. The port at which they arrived is called *Saintes Maries de la Mer*. They brought with them an Egyptian servant, a woman of color, whose name was Sara. She became the patroness of the gypsies in Europe and is honored annually in a two-day feast on June 4. After establishing Christianity in Marseilles, Saint Mary Magdalen withdrew to a hermitage in Baurne where she lived the remaining years of her life as a hermitess. It is believed that her body is entombed at the cathedral of Vezelay, which became a place of pilgrimage in her honor.

A group of French Gnostics in the twelfth Century believed that the servant girl, Sara, was the daughter of Jesus and Mary Magdalen. She married into the family of Merovee and the blood line of Jesus continues through this family to our times. Though there is no factual or historical basis for this legend, it has inspired a great deal of fantasy and intrigue in groups such as the Knights Templar, Freemasons, and in other arcane traditions from the Middle Ages to our own time.<sup>5</sup>

**Saint Mary Magdalen was a specifically chosen patron for Saint Teresa**

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### Patron for Saint Teresa

Saint Mary Magdalen was a specifically chosen patron for Saint Teresa. There are more than twenty references to her in her *Collected Works*. Her choice of the Magdalen, as she understood her, served as a model for an essential detail in Saint Teresa's understanding of spirituality. Specifically, Mary Magdalen—along with Saint Paul—exemplifies what Teresa labels as “having a love for God which is impossible to hide.”<sup>6</sup> This occurs in the realm of affectivity, which is the hallmark of her Carmelite spirit. It is characterized by a total and unconditional surrender to love to the point of indiscretion. Using Mary Magdalen as a model of this kind of loving, Saint Teresa writes in the *Interior Castle*:

*Do not think it would be a small mortification for a woman like her (Mary Magdalen) to wander through the streets (and perhaps alone because her fervent love made her unaware of what she was doing) and enter a house she had never entered before, and afterward suffer the criticism of the Pharisee and the many other things she must have suffered?*<sup>7</sup>

In Teresa's mind, God reserves the right to “reveal His grandeurs to whom He will.” Again, she gives Saint Paul and Saint Mary Magdalen as prime examples of recipients of this grace. God does “leave”

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fortitude in the wake of his favors: “the determination and strength of an adult so that it might trample everything under foot.”<sup>8</sup> This grace is given to souls “in conformity with what they themselves do in order to allow Him to work.” What they themselves do, it seems, determines the potential of God’s loving communication. In the case of Mary Magdalen, her trip to the house of Simon and devotion there toward the person of Jesus was a total sacrifice, a *kenotic* dismembering of the masks of her personality.

### Self-Emptying

In psychological terms, the radical self-emptying suggested at this level of loving is related to the reversal of narcissism. Dr. John Haule, in his study of Saint Francis of Assisi, uses the expression “courting narcissistic crisis” to describe the phenomenon of radical self-emptying as seen in the life of Saint Francis. This is the level and intensity of the self-emptying that Saint Teresa’s model, Saint Mary Magdalen, exemplifies. Haule writes:

*Saint Francis courted this disorder and fragmentation, placing himself at the brink of breakdown or self-annihilation, until some force that seemed wholly other to the ego emerged and autonomously reversed the process. He sought out experiences that threatened him with an existential crisis*

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*through the arousal of seemingly uncontrollable emotions with the counterintuitive expectation that an autonomous process—initiated by God or activated by forces that had been slumbering in the self—would effect a Great Reversal whereby the good and bad become one, the profane world would dissolve, narcissistic energies would be channeled, and a sense of transcendent coherence would supervene.<sup>9</sup>*

What Saint Teresa describes as the gift of spiritual maturity, “trampling what is meaningless underfoot,” explains the possibility of letting in something outside the closely knit fabric of the ego world. Haule suggests that facing the existential dread and diving into the narcissistic pot opens the possibility of having our old world collapse with a “possible” numinous reconstruction. There is a risk:

*Narcissistic energy is what the European alchemists called the alexipharmac, the poison that kills and heals. It kills the mental functioning of the schizophrenic, while it carries the mystic through the eye of the needle and onto the landscape of ecstasy. It kills the conventional world and heals by introducing us to the sacred cosmos.<sup>10</sup>*

Theologically, Teresa's self-emptying is based in the baptismal emersion into the death and Resurrection of Christ. It provides the basic rhythm of Christian consciousness. The essence of the Chris-

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tian mystery being the narcissistic crisis of God “disidentifying” with God:

*Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate and it was thus he humbled Himself. (Phil 2:6–8)*

### Examples of Holy Indiscretion

In a commentary on the spirituality of the Beguine mystics, Bernard McGinn makes this observation on Marguerite Porete, a French Beguine, author of *The Mirror of Souls*. She was burned at the stake in 1313 and, like Joan of Arc, has had her name restored. There is evidence that her writing had an influence on the thought of Meister Eckhart:

*The soul's abandonment of discretion reflects a paradox found within courtly love. The rules of courtly love or “courtesy” demand discretion, conforming to the conventions and norms of society, and “measure,” avoiding excesses of feeling and behavior. Yet the courtly lover continually violated these standards of courtesy and measure and acted in solitary and excessive manner.*

*Porete has combined this language of courtesy with an apophatic language of mystical union. The union with-in-love is rapture. Rapture is the act and work of love. The language of love includes*

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*a complex of independent terms and figures of speech (disrobing, nakedness, loss of discretion, loss, shame, abandon) that reinforce the basic sexual metaphor. As Dame Amour says, there is no discretion in love. The soul gives up her honor, her shame. She disrobes herself of will. Her union with her Divine Lover occurs in nakedness. She gives herself over to abandon. She “falls” into love.<sup>11</sup>*

Another example of holy indiscretion, if I may use the term, is Blessed Charles de Foucauld. Jean Jacques Antier relates this comment of Bishop Guerin, Blessed Charles' superior, to the abbot of the Cistercian Abbey at Neiges where Charles spent time as a Trappist:

*I deeply respect his heroic virtue. I am only surprised that he does not perform miracles. I had never seen such holiness in this world, except in books, but I must admit I have some doubts about his prudence, about his discretion. Those ascetic practices of his, which he also insists that his companions follow, are such that they would soon be too much for neophytes. Moreover, the intense mental efforts he demands of himself and that he hopes to demand of his disciples seems to me to be so superhuman that I am afraid such concentration might drive any disciple mad before he died from excessive asceticism.<sup>12</sup>*

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Both Saint Teresa and Saint Mary Magdalen lived in societies where one's existence could fall completely into the collective vision of others where honor

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fall completely  
into the collec-  
tive vision of  
others**

and shame could be so arbitrary. It is rather clear in the history of salvation that it has been the heroes and heroines of holy indiscretion, who broke the molds of convention, who carry out the redeeming work of God. Consider these ancients:

Moses, Judith, Ruth, David, Tamar, Peter, Lucy, Cecilia. Jesus himself, a carpenter's son, whose truthful acts of human love, combined with Divine Wisdom, made his society's honorable and discrete fellows very nervous.

Like Mary Magdalen, Francis, Charles de Foucauld, and the ancients, Saint Teresa's holy indiscretion was rooted in her deepest conviction of the love of God. She celebrated her participation in that love through her daily life and relationships and through her hidden communion with him. The social boundaries of honor and shame were "trampled underfoot":

It [the soul] deplores the time it was concerned with its reputation and deplores the deception it suffered in believing that what the world called honor was honor. It sees how this belief about honor is the greatest lie and we are all involved in it.<sup>13</sup>

## Any Friend of Teresa's

### Freedom

Saint Teresa's freedom from the propriety of honor was not a holy thought limited to the hours of prayer. It was an infused characteristic allowing her natural affinity to the naked truth to flow like a spring out of her soul with a high quality of passion. There was little doubt about how she felt about anything or anybody, because she had an intensity of confidence that can only come from the deepest and loving connection to the Truth. Consider her statement regarding a "learned man" who lacked the experience in prayer that she herself had:

*Let him not be surprised to think these things (contemplative graces) are impossible—everything is possible with the Lord—but strive to strengthen his faith and humble himself in that the Lord makes a little old woman wiser, perhaps, in his science, even though he is a very learned man. With his humility he will do more good for souls and for himself than becoming a contemplative without it.<sup>14</sup>*

So it is not surprising that Saint Teresa felt such a deep bond with Saint Mary Magdalen, the woman whose courageous love of Jesus Christ continues to attract and inspire us today in fulfillment of his words:

*She had done what she could; she has anointed my body for its burial. Truly I tell you wherever*

## Any Friend of Teresa's

*the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.<sup>15</sup>*

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### NOTES

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## Book Notices

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