

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

## UST Research Online

---

School of Divinity Master's Theses and Projects

Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity

---

2022

# Union in Obscurity: Ruth Burrows' Contributions to Developments in Mystical Theology

Sister Elizabeth John Wrigley OP

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, SrElizabethJohn@SistersofMary.org

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod\\_mat](https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod_mat)



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wrigley, Sister Elizabeth John OP, "Union in Obscurity: Ruth Burrows' Contributions to Developments in Mystical Theology" (2022). *School of Divinity Master's Theses and Projects*. 35.  
[https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod\\_mat/35](https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod_mat/35)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Divinity Master's Theses and Projects by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact [asle4660@stthomas.edu](mailto:asle4660@stthomas.edu).

THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Union in Obscurity: Ruth Burrows' Contributions to Developments in Mystical Theology

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Divinity

of the University of St. Thomas

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

© Copyright

All Rights Reserved By

Sister Elizabeth John Wrigley, OP

St. Paul, MN

2022

This thesis by Sister Elizabeth John Wrigley, OP fulfills the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Theology approved by John Froula, Ph.D. as Thesis Advisor, and by Kenneth Snyder, Ph.D., and by Rev. John Gallas, S.T.L. as Readers.



---

John Froula, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor



---

Kenneth Snyder, Ph.D., Reader



---

Rev. John Gallas, S.T.L., Reader

## **Part I: A Landscape of the Issue**

### *Universal Call to Holiness, Universal Call to Mysticism*

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” This admonition of Christ in St. Matthew’s Gospel has for ages been the impetus to abandon conventional wisdom and worldly values so to better align one’s heart and desires with those of the Father. Beginning with St. Anthony in the desert and the monks of the eremitical tradition, this invitation to perfection has been historically understood to mean a literal “setting apart” as lived by consecrated persons. Perhaps in various times this interpretation has erred on the side of precluding Christians outside of the consecrated state from the pursuit of perfection; the eventual correction of this tendency by the Second Vatican Council has come down to us in the pithy “universal call to holiness.” Specifically, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states

The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples of every condition... thus, it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.<sup>1</sup>

The example of Christ Himself evidences that all Christians are invited to the fullness of perfection, according to the form of life to which they are called.

While not explicitly stated in the Council’s universal call to holiness, the spiritual tradition of the Church has always understood the perfection of the Christian life in tandem with a growing interiority of the soul, ultimately arriving at union with God in contemplation—otherwise referred to as the mystical life. Seen in the wider context of spiritual theology, the universal call to holiness likewise includes a universal call to the contemplative, or mystical, life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), §40, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 396-397.

Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, the great disciple of both St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross, asserts that the mystical life is no less than spiritual adulthood. Garrigou-Lagrange explains this claim through two conclusions derived from the nature of grace. First, holiness consists in the perfection of charity, which is wrought by sanctifying grace. Second, docility to the Gifts of the Spirit, which generally constitute the mystical life, depends upon sanctifying grace. The principle is the same for both.<sup>2</sup>

### ***A Universal Call—but has No One Answered?***

From the conclusion that the call to holiness is simultaneously a call to the mystical life a new problem presents itself: where are the mystics? The classical answer to this question is that while all are called, many Christians tragically lack the requisite generosity needed to allow grace to accomplish its transformative work in the soul. In his *Living Flame of Love*, St. John of the Cross reasserts the universal call while bemoaning the timorousness of many Christians:

It should be known that the reason is not that God wishes only a few of these spirits to be so elevated; he would rather want all to be perfect, but he finds few vessels that will endure so lofty and sublime a work. Since he tries them in little things and finds them so weak that they immediately flee from work, unwilling to be subject to the least discomfort and mortification...he proceeds no further in purifying them and raising them from the dust of the earth through the toil of mortification.<sup>3</sup>

In this instance, God mercifully desists from sending greater purifications to those unwilling to profit by them so that they might not reject His grace. It can safely be presumed that should such Christians later realize the salutary effect of mortifications and trials, God would readily resume

---

<sup>2</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co, 1954), 349-354.

<sup>3</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 27.

His work until these souls were perfected. This position is echoed by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, who also points to the issue of inhospitable “spiritual environments” in which souls may find themselves. For this reason, while Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange helps us see that holiness and the contemplative life are convertible, he distinguishes between the remote call to the mystical life and the proximate call.<sup>4</sup> All are called to the mystical life, but this can be said to be proximate insofar as environmental factors and the preference for comfort inhibit the soul’s full blossoming into spiritual adulthood.

Given what has been said, the optimism and accessibility of a “universal call” to the mystical life seems to have ended on a flat note—ostensibly, many Christians seem to have the misfortune of inadequate spiritual circumstances or are so wanting in generosity as to block the work of grace. Garrigou-Lagrange concedes this very point:

Even in the natural order, the greater number of men do not succeed in disciplining their passions, although they are all called to do so by their very nature as rational beings. Likewise, among those who spend many years in the study of some science (such as mathematics, law, or medicine), only a small number acquire a profound knowledge of it. Inventors and extraordinary geniuses are rare.<sup>5</sup>

But are we satisfied with this state of affairs? It is indeed a tragic thought that God would allow His design for the ordinary mystical flourishing of baptized Christians to go largely unfulfilled. Considering we are speaking here of souls in a state of grace, living a deliberate sacramental life, what does one make of many of our canonized saints? Among those ardent servants of God are many whose biographies evidence little by way of mysticism, typically conceived. Are we to conclude that these great souls advanced in grace yet without reaching the summit in this life? It

---

<sup>4</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, 378.

<sup>5</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, 382.

would seem we are indeed forced to concede this, unless there be some element in our understanding of the mystical life that is out of focus or incomplete.

### ***Ruth Burrows: Refining the Tradition***

It is the fundamental premise of English Carmelite and writer, Ruth Burrows, that mystical theology has come out of focus like binoculars focusing too closely on one object: sensible manifestations of mystical grace. Contrary to the protestation of figures like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, there exists a tendency to make the reception of sensible graces a benchmark of one's progress towards perfection. The result of this outsized emphasis on tangible favors is an incomplete understanding of the mystical life: one that equates such favors with mysticism itself. In opposition to this linear conception of spiritual development, Burrows proposes two paths toward the heights of divine union—one being those rare souls who do, in fact, receive sensible graces. To these she will assign the category “light on” and number them in the vast minority. The majority instead belong to a category termed “light off.” As will be seen, both have truly attained a life of perfection, though their mystical union with God is lived out in the obscurity of faith.

This rough sketch of Ruth Burrows' claim, which will be expanded upon in greater detail, arose from her own personal experience in Carmel and was then given theological undergirding. Ruth Burrows, the pen name of Sister Rachel of Quidenham Carmel, was born in 1923 and entered Carmel in 1941 having completed only her secondary education. Serving later as novice mistress and then prioress, Burrows was significant in guiding her monastery through the post-conciliar period which proved so challenging for many religious congregations.<sup>6</sup> Despite these

---

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Jones, *The Gospel Mysticism of Ruth Burrows: Going to God with Empty Hands* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2018), 3.

credentials, Burrows' life in Carmel was itself marked by an interior tumultuousness through which her spiritual doctrine has been forged. Her biographer, Michelle Jones, details a few trials helpful to our purposes:

In her early years in Carmel, Burrows perceived her interior life as radically at odds with her spiritual milieu...Burrows details that most of the books she found in her monastery's then impoverished library were concerned with the various phenomena commonly associated with the spiritual life...[such literature] caused her to believe that her own dark, barren, inner life was thoroughly deficient...even though they were regarded as marks of divine favor, Burrows was repelled by the "experiences" discussed in the books available to her. For her, presenting the Christian life in terms of what one can expect to feel at different stages "made the way to God seem 'professional' and unreal"—far from the simple way of prayer set forth by Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

Burrows' aversion to the articulation of spirituality typical of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century exacerbated a darkness that characterized her interior life. This suffering was rooted in a deep longing for intimacy with God, which such literature served to aggravate. With this yearning Burrows applied herself ardently to the bridling of her passions and the exercise of charity, yet all the while experiencing a persistent emptiness.<sup>8</sup> Here we will briefly touch upon some milestones that led Burrows to understand her state and develop her theology.

Experiencing a profound conversion at the age of seventeen and then entering Carmel shortly after, it wasn't until 1950 that Burrows was first introduced to St. Therese of Lisieux. In the Little Flower Burrows found a soul-sister, a companion in Christ to whom she could relate. Urged on by St. Therese's image of the feeble bird who nonetheless kept its eyes fixed on the Divine Eagle, Burrows learned a spirituality of radical trust in the goodness of Jesus. Jones observes, "Burrows found in Therese resounding affirmation of her hitherto hesitant spirituality of exposing her nothingness to God in trust."<sup>9</sup> The contradiction between desire and darkness

---

<sup>7</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 11

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 17.



now had an orientation—radical dependance upon the action of God as well as the authenticity of her own desire for union with Him. These developments would be given further specification when two additional truths came alive for Burrows. First, from Romano Guardini’s *The Lord*, she learned that it was possible for Jesus to inhabit her in real communion in the depths of her soul through grace. Her biographer comments, “the doctrine of inhabitation revealed to Burrows the stunning possibility of an ‘inside’ relationship with Jesus, the very type of relationship for which she had been searching.”<sup>10</sup> To this, Ruth Burrows would join her meditation upon Karl Adam’s *Christ of Faith*, wherein she encountered the full consequences of the kenosis of the Word in the humanity of Jesus. This text led her to realize her “inside” relationship with Jesus may well be one of union with His own experience of emptiness, as part of His taking on the human condition. Jones summarizes it thus: “Now Burrows realized that she could fulfill her longing and identify her own lived experience with Jesus’, her solitary, dependent, threatened existence with Jesus’ knowing ‘the sense of absence from God’.”<sup>11</sup>

Ruth Burrows’ reading led her to the conviction that her seemingly frustrated desires for union with God were not futile. Rather, she was being led by a path of radical reliance upon His goodness, lived out in stark nakedness of spirit, trusting that His grace was at work imperceptibly within. This teaching is not only St. Therese’s Little Way, but also permeates the spiritual doctrine of St. John of the Cross. Nonetheless, Burrows would never have countenanced the idea that she had been brought to any degree of mystical union had it not been for her friendship with a devout religious about whom she writes under the pseudonym “Claire”. Claire is a mystic in the sense conventionally understood. She possesses the very “exciting” spiritual life that

---

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 27.

Burrows eschews in the literature available in her early monastery years. And yet Burrows had to concede that this religious was authentic—for all she found artificial in theory and literature, Claire and her interior life were very much sincere. Burrows was even more bewildered when Claire, with all her spiritual intuition, shared a firm belief that Burrows was in fact a mystic as well. Claire perceived in Burrows a soul that, through deep suffering, had forged a heart which denied God nothing and desired to have no holiness apart from His own. Burrows recounts this without referencing herself, but rather projects this story onto a third person, “Petra”. Michelle Jones provides a lengthy but worthwhile summary of this revelation’s impact:

This effected the transformation in Burrows’ conception of mysticism. Specifying just what it was she came to perceive, she writes “If this ordinary woman [Petra, herself] ...had never known spiritual experiences, who was always in darkness and aridity, was a true mystic just as Claire was, then mysticism had nothing to do with ‘experiences’. What was mysticism? Surely Jesus living in one, self drained away.” Burrows expresses this same realization in a different way when she announces, “At long last all has fallen into place for me and been reduced to a beautiful simplicity that my deepest heart has always known” that Jesus is everything...Jesus first and last, Christ crucified, the wisdom and power of God.’<sup>12</sup>

Ruth Burrows quickly realized she had come upon something of critical importance for sincere Christians who take seriously a universal call to the mystical life. From thence her literary endeavors began. Although a circuitous journey, one sees the contours of Burrow’s spiritual doctrine that was previously articulated. Burrow’s relationship with Claire told her that while mysticism was not synonymous with “divine favors”, for some reason yet to be defined, the Lord was pleased to grant them. Such sensible graces, whether interior or exterior in manifestation, she would dub “light on” contemplation. Her own trial-ridden experience, and Claire’s revelation of her interior state, would form the basis of her teaching on “light off” contemplation. This latter

---

<sup>12</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 39.

category will be defined by the near absence of any tangible graces throughout one's spiritual journey.

### ***The Task at Hand***

From the outset we concluded the universal call to holiness must be synonymous with a universal call to mysticism. This was followed by the distinction that many Christians ostensibly fail to arrive at mystical union with God for one of two reasons: a timidity in the face of suffering and environmental factors over which they lack control. Ruth Burrows then posited an explanation for the dearth of mystics that could best be categorized as an environmental obstacle, albeit in her view a significant one: a fundamental misunderstanding of sensible grace. Ruth Burrows' categorization of mystics into the modes of "light on" and "light off" provides a helpful framework for earnest Christians to understand how grace is operative in their soul as God draws them deeper into union with Himself. It helps actualize the notion of a universal call to holiness—after all, implicit in the dilemma is the question, why joyfully proclaim as universal that which few are expected to attain? This distinction additionally serves as a corrective for the all too human impulse to measure one's spiritual progress, born from a spiritual insecurity that seeks assurances of one's holiness.

In what follows I will seek to provide a deeper analysis of Ruth Burrows' distinction between "light on" and "light off" contemplation. It will first be necessary to clarify how Burrows understands sensible mystical graces—those "light on" souls she was compelled to acknowledge in the person of her friend Claire. Burrows' distinction requires such graces to be *gratia gratis data* and serve a didactic purpose in the life of the Church as an aspect of the prophetic charism. We must also contend with why Burrows warns so ardently against presuming the bestowal of "light on" as normative, and her problem with popularizers of the

mystical tradition. Upon this follows an examination of the “light off” state—the mystical destination to which Burrows has placed most souls. To understand why “light off” might be possible, we will explore the unitive function of theological faith, perfected in charity, for achieving the mystical state. This is best done in conversation with both St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas. Finally, each analysis of “light on” and “light off” will conclude with an instantiation of these concepts in two saintly case studies from the Carmelite tradition. I propose that St. Elizabeth of the Trinity fits Burrow’s profile of a “light on” soul, while her beloved St. Therese offers an excellent instance of “light off”.

My intent is not to conduct a comparison between Ruth Burrows and the giants of the mystical tradition. These, as well as St. Thomas Aquinas, will be brought into dialogue with Burrows at various points in order to elucidate her thought. Otherwise, we will encounter Burrows in her own words. The exposition of “light on” and “light off” occurs primarily in her works *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer* and *Interior Castle Explored*, which will be my chief points of reference. The ideas contained in her work on St. John of the Cross, *Ascent to Love*, as well as her treatise on the primacy of Christ, *To Believe in Jesus*, and *Essence of Prayer*, will also prove helpful in probing her conception of the mystical life.

Already, the descriptors “sensible” and “tangible” have been used to describe graces some experience in the mystical life. The preference for these terms arises from the inconsistency of Ruth Burrows herself when speaking of diverse types of mystical experiences which some recount. Throughout her various books she speaks to us of “favors”, “experiences”, “extraordinary graces”, and “feelings”, yet these are not aligned with any particular prayer state. Underneath a myriad of terms Burrows is chiefly concerned with “felt” experience during prayer or “illuminations” received. Such experiences can be had in both the exterior and interior senses

and thus I've chosen to chiefly use the term "sensible grace" to capture both possibilities. Simultaneously, I aim to bracket out graces which are absolutely extraordinary, such as bilocation or the stigmata, which are outside the scope of Burrows' thesis. To avoid the monotony of repetition I may at times employ "tangible" or simply "mystical" to signify the same reality.

Finally, I acknowledge that some limitations will undoubtedly catch the reader's attention. First, we are faced with two problems of sourcing. Ruth Burrows is a contemporary writer whose reader base is growing but has yet to arouse considerable attention among scholars. Second, we must unfortunately acknowledge an impoverishment of spiritual theology in the post-conciliar years and the resultant lack of development in this field. These two limitations are arguably linked. The second major limitation harkens to an earlier observation that Ruth Burrows is not a trained theologian. She is much like her spiritual mother, St. Teresa of Avila, in that both women, being naturally gifted with keen intellects, applied themselves to ardent reading and conversation with wise priests. Burrows' ideas will at times raise epistemological questions that she herself is likely unaware of. While fascinating, such questions fall outside the scope of this analysis, which intends merely to situate and comprehend the "light on" and "light off" modes of mysticism within conventional spiritual theology.

## **Part II: When the Light is On: The Function of Mystical Phenomenon**

### ***The Problem of Progress***

Ruth Burrows' friendship with Claire put her in living contact with a soul touched by sensible mystical graces. As discussed, Claire provided not only a window for Burrows to see God's transformative work in her own soul, but also a framework for understanding why souls such as Claire would be gifted with tangible mystical graces in the first place. However, before unpacking the function of what Burrows has named "light on" mysticism, it is helpful to further understand why she believes the typical articulation of spiritual progress is so problematic. Having begun with a survey of the Carmelite's life, in which she expresses openly her disgust with and alienation from such literature, failure to explore her thoughts further could unfairly suggest the problems are solely a matter of psyche.

This issue is taken up as Ruth Burrows' preliminary task in her *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer*. She bemoans the following observation:

Almost at random I quote a writer typical of this view: "An exact notion of what the mystical life really is...it is the sensation which the soul feels of God's presence within it, a sort of feeling of God in the soul's center (cf Lejeune: *Introduction to the Mystical Life*). He quotes a range of authors to support his assertion--Gerson, St. Teresa, Lallement, Surin, Courbon, Poulain..."<sup>13</sup>

A survey of literature on the mystical life seems to confirm Burrow's observation, whether or not the authors hold this position formally. Jordan Aumann cites St. Teresa of Avila in describing the sleep of the faculties as producing cries of love, divine inebriation, and an intensity that bursts forth into external acts.<sup>14</sup> In his masterpiece, the *Three Ages of the Spiritual Life*, Reginald

---

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer: Prayer and Practice* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1978), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Continuum Press, 2006), 339.

Garrigou-Lagrange attests to St. Paul of the Cross' attainment to the transforming union at a young age—his basis for this claim lies in the accounts of apparitions of Our Lord and His Mother received by St. Paul, as well as the gift of a mystical ring.<sup>15</sup> A particularly illustrative quote can be found in Juan Arintero's *Mystical Evolution*, given in full:

Certain phenomena usually accompany the aforementioned grades of prayer. With the prayer of recollection there comes at times a delightful admiration which dilates the soul and fills it with joy and gladness at discovering in God so many wonders of love, goodness, and beauty. At other times a spiritual silence prevails in which the soul remains astonished, absorbed, submerged, and, as it were, overcome by such grandeur. When the will is touched and captivated and begins the prayer of quiet, then the happiness and joy of this admiration takes one of the two forms of the swoon of love, the one predominantly sensible and the other predominantly spiritual, wherein the soul, transported with enthusiasm and experiencing the ineffable taste of the sweetness of God, either melts away or jumps for joy and performs what is called the foolishness of love.<sup>16</sup>

This passage from Arintero is helpful in that it clearly presents the alignment of tangible graces—melting, swooning, and the like—with specific, progressive, stages towards union with God. Articulations such as these suggest a direct coincidence of the two. In other words, to grow towards union with God is inseparable from *experiencing* one's degree of union and thus the experience of union becomes a metric by which one measures one's growth.

Against this tendency Ruth Burrows raises two concerns: the temptation to pride and the temptation to despair, both of which are obstacles to union with God. A common theme for Burrows is the self-satisfaction one may experience in charting one's growth, especially if mystics are portrayed as a special or spiritually elite class. She states:

One of the main reasons why so few attain union with God is because people want these things and seek them and take a secret pride in them. God's touch always produces humility, always, automatically. But all too often these overflows are a source of secret

---

<sup>15</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life, Volume 2* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc, 1948), 506.

<sup>16</sup> John Arintero, *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, trans. Jordan Aumann (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co, 1951), 262-263.

complacency and self-esteem. In reality, they are no positive value. It is the state, not the awareness of the state that matters, and this is not so easy to assess as people think.<sup>17</sup>

One danger posed by aligning experience with gradation, for Burrows, is the tendency of human beings to take pride in their accomplishments. Specifically, the reception of mystical graces runs the risk of becoming a trophy in reward for calloused knees and countless purgations endured—the agony deserves its ecstasy! Though pride is always in search of goods to pollute, I believe such trophy-seekers to be the minority. Elsewhere, Burrows softens her tone and concedes that many well-meaning Christians fall victim to the all too human need for assurance along the way:

It seems to me that it is often those whose lives bear none of these supposedly authenticating experiences who are closest to God...alas though, because of the ingrained conviction to the contrary, people feel discouraged and 'left out' and therefore don't pray, don't surrender to God as he wants each of them to do.<sup>18</sup>

Earnest Christians working out their holiness over the span of years, perhaps even a lifetime, may look back and wonder what spiritual distance they have covered and conclude that their efforts are of no avail either because they are too sinful to become holy or, worst of all, that God has not chosen them. I believe this temptation to discouragement more common than the temptation to prideful self-complacency. To measure one's progress in any endeavor seems to be a fundamentally human inclination: to do so not only strengthens one's resolve, but also provides a sense of security. Yet human though it may be, it is this sense of security that the Lord often seeks to mortify. To these souls Burrows would restate what was quoted above, the reality of union with God, insofar as it is perceptible, is what matters, not the experience.

Lastly, Ruth Burrows points to the difficulty of distinguishing sensible experiences of the divine from psychological phenomena that may be self-generated. With a touch of humor,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored: St. Teresa's teaching on the Life of Deep Union with God* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2007), 20-21.



Burrows reflects on the problem of autosuggestion within the enclosed monastic tradition, stating that, “if an influential person within [the monastery]—a prioress or some other with a personal ascendancy—goes in for ‘experiences in prayer’, esteems and communicates her esteem, invariably you will get an outbreak of them.”<sup>19</sup> While not entirely comparable, one can see this tendency at work in the privileging of “spiritual victimhood” which prevailed in the Lisieux Carmel of St. Therese’s own time. Burrows’ concerns about the psychological genesis of mystical phenomenon does provide some initial insights into her conception of grace. We will quote her at length, then tease out two important observations:

We could call them psychic echoes. Basically, they are self-induced, not in the sense of self-deception though this is possible, but as rising out of the psyche under certain stimuli. They are not supernatural, not God nor from God. Anything that can be conceptualized or looked at is not God, not the mystical union...natural mysticism, as it is called, claims similar phenomena. Human nature, at least in some people, reacts like this...we could think of the recipients’ psychological make-up (and here environmental stimuli will play a vital part) as a channel: a deep straight canal, a rocky ravine, a shallow bed—whatever. The over-flow from this grace of union will flow into the channel that is there and take its character from it: phlegmatic, choleric, depressive—reactions will differ widely. What is being revealed is not the grace as such but the psychic ‘apparatus’ of the person and its reaction to stimuli.<sup>20</sup>

One may be relieved to learn that Burrows does not attribute charlatantry to those who claim mystical experience. A Christian who recounts the swoons of love and spiritual inebriation we sampled from the *Mystical Evolution* genuinely experiences what they claim, but that is all—they experience what they experience. The problem lies in the origins attributed to this experience, that they must be from God simply by their correspondence with acts of prayer, devout thoughts, or works of charity. Burrows recalls the four classic temperaments, and we are reminded that some personality types are more sensitive than others, more prone to emotional responses in general. This proclivity may be enhanced by environmental factors and, as a result,

---

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* 50-51.

Burrows observes that people at any moment of the Christian life may have “experiences” that, while purely natural in origin, are difficult to separate from spiritual activities in which they engage. One may think of the tangible zeal experienced by the recent convert, the profound encounter felt while on retreat, or the elevation of soul experienced by a moving piece of chant or polyphony. In such moments or states it is not uncommon for individuals to believe they have received a touch or word from the Lord. Such sensate experiences are real moments of affective beauty and may prompt the soul to greater conversion and love of God but are not necessarily from Him and certainly not indicative of one’s “spiritual state”.

Yet is it not a truism in the spiritual life that God at times grants spiritual consolations to souls for the purpose of encouraging them in a life of virtue? As we are hylomorphic beings, Burrows does grant that, at times when God touches the soul, the person’s psychic apparatus is stimulated. She uses the images of channels, ravines, beds—all natural conduits for water to move—to describe how differing temperaments might be psychologically “activated” by the divine touch. Nevertheless, Burrows firmly maintains that all felt spiritual experiences are material, essentially creaturely, and thus cannot be God Himself. Here, Burrows’ views stand squarely in line with those of St. John of the Cross. In treating of supernatural apprehensions presented to the senses, he similarly observes that “[i]t is an overflow from the affection and devotion of the sensible spirit, which individuals receive in their own way...it must be known that even though these apprehensions can come to the bodily senses from God, one must never rely on them or accept them.”<sup>21</sup> While not using the exact terminology, John reflects a similar understanding that experiences may be either an overflow of affection, in accord with the make-

---

<sup>21</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 180.

up of the receiver, or they may come from God. Yet in either instance, such experiences are to be denied for the same reasons given by Burrows:

It is noteworthy that among all creatures, both superior and inferior, none bears a likeness to God's being or unites proximately with him. Although truly, as theologians say, all creatures carry with them a certain relation to God and a trace of him...yet God has no relation or essential likeness to them. Rather the difference that lies between his divine being and their being is infinite. Consequently, intellectual comprehension of God through heavenly or earthly creatures is impossible; there is no proportion of likeness.<sup>22</sup>

St. John thus concludes, “everything the intellect can understand, the will enjoy, and the imagination picture is most unlike and disproportioned to God.”<sup>23</sup> While sense-apprehensions may comprehend the form of an object and know something of its essence, the essence of the formless God cannot be circumscribed in this way. Throughout the *Ascent*, John will proceed through all types of exterior and interior perceptions, negating each as a means to union with God. It is only supernatural faith, for St. John of the Cross and Ruth Burrows, that will achieve this union. As will be seen, the primacy of faith and the transcendence of God beyond human senses will form the backbone of Burrow's teaching on “Light off” contemplation. For now, we have addressed the reasons why Ruth Burrows critiques spiritual literature that betrays a favoring of sensible mystical experiences as a metric for spiritual progress. We are now ready to take a closer look at “light on” itself, insofar as is possible, and what function Burrows understands this gift to serve, when authentically present in a soul.

### ***Non-Conceptual, Yet Certain***

In venturing to define the experience of “light on”, we immediately come up against Ruth Burrows' own limitations. One is circumstantial, as she is not a trained theologian: at the outset, we stated that her ideas have been forged from deep reading, conversations with learned persons,

---

<sup>22</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 174.

<sup>23</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 175.

and her own lived experience, rather than a systematic formation. As a result, precision of language can at times be lacking. The second limitation is self-imposed. Burrows understands God's transcendence and, aware that she is speaking of things ineffable, refuses any effort to systematically "pin-down" that which eludes category or definition. What we can deduce from Burrows of the nature of "light on" is that it is non-conceptual yet certain. Its occurrence is rare and even rarer is its presence in a soul as a habitual state. We'll allow her to provide an initial explanation of the state:

The 'light on' experience is not the mystical grace itself, it reveals it. It seems we must say that it is supernatural in the strict sense, that is, that it is of God and not, in itself proper to the human experience of God in this life. That being so, it is wise to leave it in its mystery and concentrate not on its nature but on what it does. What it does is precisely to illuminate the mystical happening which, of itself, is a secret...what we have to grasp is that this gift puts a person in a class apart--their experience is fundamentally different from ours. It is a very rare gift and all of us do well to take for granted we are "light off" no matter how great our psychic perception and consequent 'spiritual favours'.<sup>24</sup>

Burrows will later add that "light on" defies categories of expression—all that can be said of it is the exterior manifestation and not the reality in itself: "It is a 'seeing' of the actual mystical happening, which, as said, is not perceptible to normal range of faculties. It seems it is a supernatural endowment which yet (possibly) calls for a natural foundation in which it can operate."<sup>25</sup>

To insist that the "light-on" experience is a non-conceptual one is important, for Burrows believes firmly that the union with God effected in the soul of a "light-on" is fundamentally the same as that present in those who are "light-off." In her critique of spiritual theology, we saw how her adamant opposition to any equivocation between God and the effects of God (when not of psychological origin) is rooted in the inability of God to be contained or adequately

---

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, 48-49.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, 121.

understood through human experience or faculties. Thus, for Burrows, whatever can be said of “light on” is its externalization and not the union between God and the soul essentially. When she speaks of “light on” as a class set apart, she means that in His providence, God uses some souls to manifest to others what He is doing within. She describes it thus:

it is possible for God to switch on a light, so to speak, then what is happening is “seen”. What this faculty is by which we “see”, I do not know. What I want to stress is that the fundamental happening is the same; the switching on of the light does not add to it or change it in any way. For this to be the usual mode of receiving the mystical embrace is exceedingly rare.<sup>26</sup>

If “light on” can be understood as something added to the soul, it would be as a graced mode of perception. Yet one might also conceive of it as an unveiling, the “pulling back” of human limitations to show what is present beneath. Burrows’ biographer, Michelle Jones, puts it succinctly:

[Light on mystics] are able to perceive God’s living presence within them. Given that it is impossible for humanity in itself to grasp divinity as it is in itself, Burrows understands those in the ‘light on’ state to be endowed with a supernatural mode of perception that somehow allows a non-conceptual awareness of God.<sup>27</sup>

It is this non-conceptual awareness of God’s presence in the soul that Ruth Burrows points to as an explanation for why many mystics resort to metaphor and allegory to explain that which is certain beyond doubt yet defies articulation.<sup>28</sup>

Here it is worth briefly identifying one of the epistemological dilemmas Burrows creates for herself, perhaps unknowingly. In her attempt to safeguard the distinction between Creator and creature, Burrows could be charged with a radical disjunct between perception and essence that leaves one bereft of any meaningful connection with God. If the experience can never be related to that which is perceived, what positive function can experience serve? At a certain

---

<sup>26</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 263.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 50.

point, a real bridge between the two must be achieved if the integrity of man as both physical and spiritual organism is to be maintained. Burrows does not provide us with an easy resolution to this problem, which we will attend to more fully when addressing other lacunae at the conclusion of our analysis.

### ***Illuminating the Way to God***

Thus far, Ruth Burrows has proposed that there are rare instances in which a highly sensate mystical life is authentically present. As opposed to easily excitable emotions or sensitive temperaments presenting as divinely favored souls, in authentic occurrences, a grace is given by which the recipient has an intuitive, yet certain, understanding of God's presence in the soul. This gift, as will be discussed, exists not for the recipient but for the instruction of the majority of spiritual persons who cannot perceive the Divine Action within. Indeed, Burrows stresses to her readers that when, in reference to "light on" she uses words like "experience" or "gift", this in no way refers to the psycho-somatic states which she admits may accompany this illumination.<sup>29</sup> Instead, such words point to the illuminative-instructive ability granted to those endowed with "light on". She provides a preliminary explanation of the instructive purpose of "light on":

[light on] has a prophetic character. The one so endowed understands beyond the ken of humankind and he or she must enlighten others. This light throws its beams on the ordinary way and enables us to understand it. Could we understand it unless 'light on' had lit it up for us? Teresa and John belong to this category of 'light on'. I say this not because of their intense, sublime, emotional states...but because of their ability to analyze spiritual states. They see what is happening.<sup>30</sup>

From this passage three observations can be gleaned for discussion. First, Burrows specifically chooses the descriptor "prophetic" for the grace of "light on". Second, she places the two giants of the mystical tradition, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, within this category. Last

---

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 46.

is the aforementioned ability to “see” what is happening and provide a confident analysis of the workings of grace.

When describing “light on” as prophetic, Burrows likely intends the basic scriptural sense of the word: one who speaks on behalf of God. Yet here again, Burrows places herself inside a theological question she is likely unaware of. In calling “light on” prophetic and insisting that the gift implies nothing inherent about the holiness of its recipient, Burrows de facto locates “light on” within the category of graces *gratis data*. St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that grace may be divided into sanctifying and gratuitous. Sanctifying grace works to unite the soul to God—something “light on” presumes. After all, how can “light on” illuminate the unitive work of God in the soul if the recipient is lacking sanctifying grace? Burrows’ definition of “light on” fits perfectly into Aquinas’ definition of gratuitous graces:

this gift is called “gratuitous grace,” since it is bestowed on a man beyond the capability of nature, and beyond the merit of the person. But whereas it is bestowed on a man, not to justify him, but rather that he may cooperate in the justification of another, it is not called sanctifying grace.<sup>31</sup>

Like Burrows’ “supernatural endowment” which allows the recipient to see the work of God “unveiled”, gratuitous graces are likewise granted beyond man’s natural capacity. In both the above definition and throughout our treatment of “light on” we’ve seen such gifts can never be merited. By definition they are about others, not oneself.

Not all theologians, however, would agree with our classification. Arintero, whose *Mystical Evolution* was quoted earlier, raises the following concerns with the *gratis data* designation:

It is true that these things are to a certain extent gratuitous gifts and that God gives them, as St. Teresa observes, to whom He pleases and when He pleases and all our efforts

---

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.111, a.1, in *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 1136.

would be insufficient to attain them. But they are not, as is often supposed, *gratiae gratis datae*. They are favors which God bestows only on the just, for God could not unite Himself and communicate Himself so intimately and in so friendly a manner with one who is not in His grace. These favors at basis are distinct types of divine touches because they are a consequence of the *sensus Christi* and of the gifts of the Holy Ghost which grow with Charity.<sup>32</sup>

Arintero observes that strictly speaking, mystical graces are not merited but rather bestowed by God according to His divine favor. Yet there is nonetheless a fittingness to the recipients of such a gift to possess sanctifying grace, if not to a high degree. We readily agree with this observation—the capacity to receive and properly respond to such a gift presupposes grace in the soul. Furthermore, we recall that “light on” is a gift which serves precisely to manifest God operative in the soul. Thus, “light on” requires a high degree of sanctifying grace in order for it to fulfill its prophetic purpose. However, we would caution against a blanket denial of the category *gratis data* on this account. Returning to Jordan Aumann we find a helpful distinction:

Infused contemplation is not a charism or ‘*gratia gratis data*’ but a grade of prayer made possible by the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to all souls with sanctifying grace... [it is] ordained to the spiritual good of the one who receives it, and it is also meritorious and sanctifying. And since all souls in grace possess the gifts of the Holy Spirit, their operation in mystical contemplation does not constitute a charism, *gratia gratis data*, or an extraordinary phenomenon of the spiritual life.<sup>33</sup>

All souls in the state of grace possess the gifts of the Spirit, which are generally accepted as the means by which one is brought to contemplative prayer. In this sense, we are reminded that contemplation ought to be a normal part of the soul’s growth into spiritual adulthood and thus cannot be an extraordinary mystical phenomenon. Aumann reminds us that infused contemplation, which cannot be a gratuitous grace, can exist apart from tangible graces, of which “light on” is a type. Again, it is this latter that is best understood as *gratia gratis data*.

---

<sup>32</sup> John Arintero, *Mystical Evolution*, 385.

<sup>33</sup> Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 330.



The phenomenon of “light on” is bestowed for the good of others and is thus gratuitously given. Ruth Burrows understands “light on” specifically to be an instructive gift—as we saw, God pulls back the veil to reveal his inner workings. Burrows believes souls in the “light on” mode can analyze spiritual states so that others might better understand the action of God within. For these reasons, we can further situate “light on” within the gift of prophecy. Drawing upon St. Thomas Aquinas’ treatise on this subject, we are easily able to align his description of this gift with the components of “light on” previously outlined by Burrows. To this end, we will examine three observations by Aquinas regarding prophecy.

The Angelic Doctor first tells us that prophecy consists in knowledge, specifically knowledge that is beyond the scope of human reasoning. This knowledge is intended for the instruction of others, and thus prophecy consists secondarily in speech: the communication of what was revealed.<sup>34</sup> The connection to “light on” is evident: God bestows upon the recipient deep insight into His action, which is then communicated, most commonly through writing, whether of spiritual autobiographies, formal treatises, or poetry. More interesting are the parallels between how Aquinas understands the mode of prophecy to take place and what has been said of “light on” already. Concerning the mode of prophecy, he states:

Prophecy requires an intellectual light surpassing the light of natural reason...the principle of things pertaining to supernatural knowledge, which are manifested by prophecy, is God himself, whom the prophets do not see in his essence although, He is seen by the blessed in heaven, in whom this light is by way of an abiding and complete form.<sup>35</sup>

We return once more to the belief that “light on” requires some sort of particular grace which would allow the soul to perceive God’s presence and activity within in a non-conceptual manner.

---

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.171, a.1, in *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes, vol. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 1883-1884.

<sup>35</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.171, a.2, trans. English Dominican Province, 1885.

Aquinas here confirms Burrows' instinct—if “light on” is a function of the prophetic grace then a particular illumination is indeed necessary by reason of the principal object of prophecy, God Himself. Next, St. Thomas sheds some light indirectly upon the question of concomitant psychic phenomena that may sometimes accompany the “light on” state:

Yet this abstraction from the senses takes place in the prophets without subverting the order of nature...this cause may be natural—for instance, sleep—or spiritual—for instance, the intenseness of the prophets' contemplation; thus, we read of Peter that while he was praying in the supper-room he fell into ecstasy—or he may be carried away by the Divine power.<sup>36</sup>

While Aquinas is chiefly interested in ecstatic instances of prophecy, being removed from one's senses, this passage remains insightful. We are reminded that grace never destroys nature, but rather respects its order. Thus, the state of “light on” may overflow from the soul into the body, producing effects that are in keeping with the psycho-somatic make-up of the individual recipient. Here we are reminded of Burrows' agnosticism towards tangible manifestations of grace—they may be the result of autosuggestion, an easily stimulated psyche, or the overflow of mystical grace. In none of these scenarios does she invite us to give attention to the felt experience.

### ***Prophets of the Inner Life***

We cited Ruth Burrows as identifying the ability to manifest spiritual states as the only significant favor granted to the “light on” mystic. This prophetic charism acts as a spotlight which illuminates for us traces of the steep and winding path as it ascends the mount of perfection. It is a sapiential gift, one that allows its recipients to give at least some concrete expression to that which is numinous, immeasurable, and unquantifiable. This “vision” includes

---

<sup>36</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.173, a.3, trans. English Dominican Province, 1898.

within it the impulse to communicate to others what the recipient has been granted to know.

Burrows describes it thus:

Genuine “light on” will always result in living wisdom. The recipients become teachers simply because they actually see what is happening and can tell us about it, thus lighting up what would otherwise lie almost obscured...There is nothing vacuous about this experience: note St. Teresa’s ability to analyze mystical experience; the confidence with which she writes and with which she acts. It is essentially transforming.<sup>37</sup>

Burrows mentions here St. Teresa of Avila, as she has previously mentioned both great Carmelite reformers as tokens of “light on” mysticism. Immediately one thinks of the great images employed by both saints—St. Teresa of Avila’s series of mansions which grow progressively more interior, or St. John of the Cross’ vivid poetry used to depict the progressive nights through which the soul ordinarily passes on the way to the perfect union.

In St. Teresa of Avila we find a woman who, though given to reading from a young age, received no formal theological training. A consequence of this is that St. Teresa, unlike St. John of the Cross, seems unable to articulate her spiritual doctrine outside of her own experience. A cursory scan through either her autobiography, the *Way of Perfection*, or even the slightly more formal *Interior Castle*, reveals this. Yet precisely in this the “light on” mode is perceptible in her ability to avoid abstractions and provide not only the schema of the mansions but also the absolute necessity of the humanity of Christ. Meanwhile, though St. John of the Cross’ formation at Salamanca lends scholastic precision to his teaching, one cannot help but read his own personal experience into the poetry from which he draws his analysis. How many souls, frustrated by aridity in prayer, have been given direction, either onward to the summit, or the naming of hidden attachments, through John’s graced perception of God’s invisible hand at work through successive dark nights.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, 122.

To this we could add other historical instances of “light on” contributions. Where would many Christians be without St. Ignatius’ insight into the patterns of consolation and desolation by which God often prompts the will? In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Church was gifted with St. Catherine of Siena’s image of the Christ-Bridge. In the modern period we could even single out St. Faustina Kowalska’s manifestations of Divine Mercy. In each of these we find a clear sense of certainty as to what has been received and an impulse to share it.

Nonetheless, the helpful images which accompany mystical teaching are also reflections of the non-conceptual nature of “light on”. Paradoxically, it is the inability to fully grasp what exceeds human constructs that produce the instructive images of mansion, ascent, or bridge. Ruth Burrows reminds us that even for the rare state of “light on” God remains ineffable:

But say a “light on” person wanted to describe as best he could what he saw of God holding the soul, even the first light holding we described, which the soul ordinarily experiences as aridity, then, profoundly moved by what he saw, he might pour out the most extravagant images, all the while knowing that his words were totally inadequate to give any ideas of this ineffable, non-conceptual reality.<sup>38</sup>

Expanding upon this seeming paradox, St. John of the Cross adds that not only does the mystical grace itself remain non-conceptual, but it has as its effect a more certain understanding of the very incomprehensibility of the divine nature. In his treatise on divine union, the *Spiritual Canticle*, he states, “One of the outstanding favors God grants briefly in this life is an understanding and experience of himself so lucid and lofty that one comes to know clearly that God cannot be completely understood or experienced.”<sup>39</sup> This is significant to note, because we are further cautioned by Jordan Aumann that for those who have not received this grace there is exists the risk of misinterpretation of these mystics.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 502.

<sup>40</sup> Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 334.

Before moving on to the examination of a particular modern case of “light on” mysticism, it is necessary to offer some thoughts on verification that are relatively lacking in Ruth Burrows’ works. For her, it is more critical that the difference between authentic “light on” and psycho-somatic stimulation be disentangled than providing guidance on whether one has been graced with this gift. We stated initially that Burrows believes “light on” to be rare: the vast majority of Christians will belong to the category of “light off” and should not readily conclude otherwise. To verify the authenticity of a “light on” mystic, it seems easy to identify the following criteria. Most obviously, such an individual ought to be one of profound virtue, especially humility. This humility ought to have a specifically ecclesial character. One thinks of the prefaces to St. Teresa and St. John’s writings which submit their experiences to the judgement of the Church, or the humility by which St. Faustina obeyed various authorities, despite their significant limitations. It must be re-emphasized that it is moral stature and not sensible graces which give credence to the mystic. After this, the illumination bestowed by “light on” souls is subject to the intuition of the *sensus fidelium*. While at times the assent of the faithful takes place during the mystic’s own lifetime—as with St. Catherine, or our two Carmelites—it may be that the “light on” gift was given in one time period for the benefit of another. To this must also be added the blessing of the magisterium upon the mystic’s teaching and this may happen in tandem with the *sensus fidelium* or later, as in the case of St. Faustina. While not absolutely necessary, magisterial assent is given most profoundly in those instances when she has declared these mystical teachers doctors of the church.

### *A Modern “Light On”: St. Elizabeth of the Trinity*

As a final exercise in consideration of the “light on” grace, we will identify traces of this gift in the life of a mystic less studied than our two Carmelite masters—St. Elizabeth of the Trinity. The mystic of Dijon offers a helpful case study in that her interior life was marked by profound illumination.<sup>41</sup> Anyone with even slight knowledge of Elizabeth’s life, which began in 1880 and ended so shortly at the age of 26, would expect her to be a prime candidate for what Burrows describes as an easily excitable make-up. Friends and family regularly recount her fiery passion and energy that made her at once both attractive and, at times, exasperating.<sup>42</sup> While virtue would temper the extremes of her personality, none of this seems to have passed over into her interior life, save a resolute desire for God and union with Him. In the mystical life of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity we find outlines of the “light on” gift—a certain perception of God’s work within, unveiled for her to see, and natural impulse to illuminate others by this gift.

Many themes echo across the spiritual corpus of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity—union, recollection, simplicity, predestination—but all of these can be unified under one conviction so dear to Elizabeth, that of the Holy Trinity and His dwelling within each soul by sanctifying grace. Indeed, if Elizabeth could be hailed by some as a sort of apostle of the Divine Indwelling, we must point to the gift of “light on” and conclude that it was this mystery of the faith which the Lord wished to unveil through her for the spiritual growth of the Church.<sup>43</sup> The moment of this illumination is recounted for us by Jennifer Moorcroft in her biography of the saint:

In the period leading up to her meeting with Abbe Vallee, she had been aware of a further development that she was at a loss to explain. She was practiced in keeping herself in the presence of God, of being aware that God was with her, but now she sensed a presence

---

<sup>41</sup> Luigi Boriello, *Spiritual Doctrine of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity*, trans. Jordan Aumann (New York: Alba House, 1986), 153.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Moorcroft, *He is my Heaven: The Life of Elizabeth of the Trinity* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2001), 9-10.

<sup>43</sup> Luigi Boriello, *Spiritual Doctrine of Blessed Elizabeth*, 135.

within her, as if she was being “dwelt in”. What did it mean? It meant, said Abbe Vallee, that she really was dwelt in. After explaining how God is in us by his essence, power, and presence, he went on to quote 1 Corinthians 3:16...this somewhat dry doctrinal explanation drew her powerfully and irresistibly within to experience the reality of what Abbe Vallee was describing even as he spoke.<sup>44</sup>

Elizabeth cannot account for how this came about, nor can she deny its reality: from that point on she lived in the certainty of her union with the Triune God.

If He dwells within the spiritual life becomes vastly simplified. One needs only to strive for interior silence, to live in recollection with the Divine Guest. Furthermore, one can joyfully proclaim that heaven has begun now in the “heaven of the soul”. The heaven of the blessed is not only a matter of passing from the realm of faith to that of vision, but the reality itself. This simple, profound, teaching of the young Carmelite caught the attention of no less than Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who is then able to expound upon what, for Elizabeth, was the intuitive grace of “light on”:

Elizabeth speaks of the ‘heaven of the soul’, and, in that connection, expresses two characteristics of the indwelling of God by grace. The first is that it is an anticipation of the next world in this, the one being the counterpart of the other even as regards the standpoint and occupation of their inhabitants, the only difference being that, in this world, direct vision is replaced by faith. The second is that the presence of God in the soul is without intermediary, and so fully deserves to be called immanent.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, for Elizabeth, each soul can confidently apply to itself all that St. Paul teaches of divine predestination. So strong was this certainty that Von Balthasar points out the instinct by which she places herself among the elect.<sup>46</sup> So certain was Elizabeth of these truths, and so eager was she to share them, that later in Carmel, a certain Sister Agnes would describe this continual refrain as “single-minded” and at times “tedious”, but also essential to who the saint was.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Jennifer Moorcroft, *He is my Heaven*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Elizabeth of Dijon: An Interpretation of her Spiritual Mission* (London: Harvill Press, 1956), 77.

<sup>46</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Elizabeth of Dijon*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Moorcroft, *He is my Heaven*, 106.

If she was tedious and recurrent in her themes, this must be the urgency of St. John of the Cross' *nada*, the admonitions of St. Catherine of Siena, or the anguish with which St. Faustina desired the Merciful Christ to be known. While never fashioning herself a teacher, Elizabeth understood she had a message, or what she would at times refer to as "a 'program of life', an 'ideal', even her 'recipe'. But also, her 'secret' and her 'testament', 'my doctrine' and even, indirectly, 'my grace'."<sup>48</sup> Whatever the title given to her message, it was certainly apostolic, as its audience extended beyond the cloister walls, chiefly to the laity. Indeed, forty of her fifty-nine correspondents were lay persons seeking holiness in the work-a-day world of marriage, family, and business.<sup>49</sup> To her sister Marguerite, a wife and mother, she spurs her on to live in this union and transcend the secondary causes of life: "Each incident, each event, each suffering, as well as each joy, is a sacrament which gives God to it; so it no longer makes a distinction between these things, it surmounts them, goes beyond them to rest in its Master, above all things."<sup>50</sup>

Here we should pause to remember that the "light on" grace is granted to illuminate, for the vast majority of Christians who will be "light off", what is taking place in the soul through sanctifying grace. If St. Elizabeth's acute awareness of the Indwelling leads her to revel in heaven's anticipation here below, we could easily overlook a more subtle teaching that is critical to our purposes—the unitive, yet obscure, function of faith. To cite one example, we return to her words addressed to Marguerite:

"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." That is, "faith makes so present and so certain future goods, that by it, they take on existence in our soul and subsist there before we have fruition of them." St. John of the Cross says that it serves as "feet" to go "to God," and that it is "possession in an obscure manner." ...and the soul must "choose it as the means to reach blessed union." ... "Thus, even in

---

<sup>48</sup> Conrad De Meester, *Elizabeth of the Trinity: Collected Works, Volume 1*, trans. Aletheia Kane (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1984), 29.

<sup>49</sup> Conrad De Meester, "General Introduction" in *Elizabeth of the Trinity: Collected Works*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, "Heaven in Faith" in *Elizabeth of the Trinity: Collected Works*, 97.



this life faith gives us God, covered, it is true, with a veil but nonetheless God Himself.”<sup>51</sup>

She goes on to compare unitive faith with Moses, who saw the invisible God, reminding Marguerite that it does not matter whether she feels God’s presence within or not. While graced with an interior perception of the Trinity’s indwelling, she understood that the darkness of faith was the ordinary path toward Him—in fact, it was the means by which divine union was affected and lived. Von Balthasar again observes, “Admittedly, her view involves walking in faith, the unseen, but none the less in the certainty that each step is that of a love entering the infinity of God.”<sup>52</sup> Like St. John of the Cross before her, no matter how exalted the vocation of each Christian soul, obscurity is the path forward in this life. The soul in “light on” is not spared this obscurity, as we saw, the unveiling of God’s handiwork within is always non-conceptual, leaving one grasping for handles by which the reality might be expressed.

On this point, it is worth addressing a claim that is not uncommon—the so-called lack of originality in St. Elizabeth’s writings. Some find off-putting the manner in which she strings together quotes now from St. Paul, then St. John of the Cross, and Ruysbroeck the next. In this, I would argue, we can see further traces of the “light on” grace. Much like St. Teresa of Avila, Elizabeth does not have the systematic framework of St. John of the Cross—thus, her own experience is the lens through which her message is communicated. We would rather point to this generous use of sources and note how her contemplative gaze allows each to be unified, giving clarity and voice to what she has been given to know by grace. We noted the non-conceptuality of the “light on” experience as the reason for the use of images and metaphors by mystics. Could it not be that for St. Elizabeth the resonances she experiences in the articulation

---

<sup>51</sup> St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, “Heaven in Faith” in *Elizabeth of the Trinity: Collected Works*, 101.

<sup>52</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Elizabeth of Dijon*, 61.

of St. Paul or other spiritual writers are precisely the “images” she employs to express the inexpressible? It would seem very much to be the case.

We have come covered quite a distance in our survey of what Ruth Burrows’ titles “light on”. These souls, with their gift *gratis data*, serve an invaluable role in guiding the many Christians who will walk the road of obscurity: “light off”. “Light on” may provide encouragement to the discouraged or correction to those ready to prematurely style themselves saints. This gift is a profound service to the Church and though it is not inherently related to the sanctity of the recipient, has nonetheless been found in some of the Church’s most beloved saints. Before proceeding to that broader category of “light off”, we will allow Hans Urs Van Balthasar to paint for us a final portrait of “light on” in its ecclesial function:

They are to be a city set on a mountain, to protect and guide those on the plains. They have to admit others to the light they receive from above, to look on the certainties given to them in regard to revealed doctrine as entrusted to them for the Church as a whole, not granted to them personally, but as to one member among the many with whom they are indissolubly linked. Their function is to exhibit love in its fulness, absolute trust and confidence, and to be, in union with their exemplar, the hand stretched out to help others to ascend.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Elizabeth of Dijon*, 51.

### **Part III: In a Mirror, Darkly: Perceiving God with the Lights Off**

#### ***Defining the Common Experience***

Treating of “light on” first allowed us to address the immediate question of how one ought to understand sensible mystical graces and thus to define the function of such gifts within the life of the Church. Doing so also aided our ensuing investigation of “light off” mysticism, as one recalls Ruth Burrows’ adamant that the fundamental experience of “light on” and “light off” are exactly the same. In both, the soul is truly united to God, yet this union escapes the grasp of both sensual and intellectual faculties owing to the inability of either to behold the divine nature in this life. Apart from the unveiling of “light on” as *gratia gratis data*, the mystical life is non-conceptual and obscure until the soul’s entrance into the beatitude of Heaven. This provides the basis of Ruth Burrows’ definition of “light off”:

when he would give himself to us as God, he must necessarily by-pass the ordinary routes into the self and create one for himself which only he can use, is at the same time saying that this visitation, this contact is, of itself, inaccessible to ordinary perception. By the very nature of things it must be secret, hidden. This normal, proper, obscurity I call ‘light off’. Something unspeakably wonderful is happening in the depths of self and the self cannot see it. No light shines on it.<sup>54</sup>

As we hope to demonstrate later, the “route into the soul” which God will create is none other than theological faith, the means by which union with God is achieved. This “route” goes beyond perception, as we have frequently noted before. In addition to the normativity of this state Burrows adds that it is proper—if she deems this obscurity to be fitting, it is because she understands all of the mystical life to serve a function in the Divine plan. Since the majority of Christians will walk this dark path of “light off” it is to our benefit to further understand this

---

<sup>54</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 46.

experience as best as possible. In what follows, we will allow Ruth Burrows to provide us with a more experiential portrait of the “light off” soul.

In the latter half of *Guidelines*, Ruth Burrows teases out the nuances of “light on” and “light off” through the correspondence between Claire and Petra—the pseudonyms of two nuns who belong to either mystical category. We recall that the latter is Burrows herself. In one letter, Petra describes the moment when she became aware of God’s union in her soul albeit in a mode proper to “light off”:

I was in the garden, and for a moment I seemed to be looking within and I saw or realized in a mysterious way that I was not there. There was no ‘I’. I can’t say more than that. I had gone. It wasn’t that I saw or felt God, but it was as if I were in a vast and lonely plain, far removed from everything...this state of bewildered happiness lasted a couple of weeks, and then I found myself in the wasteland. But the sense of estrangement continued to some extent and is with me still. I know that, in reality, I have died.<sup>55</sup>

In the experience Petra describes as “estrangement” she is certain she has received an obscure confirmation that God has united her with Himself. Yet this experience hardly approximates St. Catherine of Siena receiving a mystical wedding band or the exhilaration of St. Teresa of Avila at the moment of her nuptials. Rather, Petra struggles to describe it—her groping for words stands out immediately from the passage. In time, she returns to her normal state of non-experience though the certainty of union has remained. However, when recounting this event, Burrows observes that the experience carried no psychic reverberations, but a hidden yet profound insight into what God had done in her.<sup>56</sup> To this ambiguity, Clare will serve to provide confirmation and guidance to Petra, demonstrating an intuitive understanding of “light off” though her own reception of the mystical grace is “light on”:

This is really what joy means, isn’t it? Nothing but God—and God apparently not there...so that the whole soul is gift, is surrender...When I said that you were conscious of yourself, this is what I meant: that your experience is of what you are, that is, an

---

<sup>55</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 121-122.

<sup>56</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, 80.

emptiness God has filled. But you are never shown the fulness, God, the sole reason for your being emptied—all you see is the creature side.<sup>57</sup>

Here the didactic role of “light on” is displayed; though Petra’s experience is her own, does not Claire provide the clearer explanation of what has taken place? If Petra is aware of being empty, it is what fills that emptiness which cannot be perceived: the divinity itself. Through its non-experience of God’s presence, “light off” lives this state of union from the posture of surrender and dependence in the darkness of faith—what Claire calls the “creature side”—yet with the firmness of charity.

Can anything else be said of the “light off” experience? First, if obscurity and non-perception have been a constant throughout our analysis, we are finally in the ideal place to explore this theme in itself. Second, the exchange between Petra and Claire suggests two aspects of “light-off” that are in tension: Petra has certainty of her state, yet Claire has confirmed it for her. In other words, how does one know one has arrived? Furthermore, if “light off” is characterized by darkness all along the way, can one distinguish the end result from the antecedent purgation which has always been accepted as part of the path toward Christian perfection?

### ***Theological Faith: The Means to Union***

Throughout the preceding phases of our exploration Ruth Burrows has insisted that nothing psychological can be God in and of Himself. Nothing created, including human faculties, are capable of perceiving Him. We just read Burrows’ attestation that God’s path into the soul must be one which bypasses our faculties, ill-suited as they are to take in the Divine Transcendence. If one hears the echoes of St. John of the Cross it is indeed because Burrows’

---

<sup>57</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 122.

conception of “light off” is a consequence of the Mystical Doctor’s theology of faith, to which she readily ascribes. Drawing from her spiritual father, Burrows holds that the gift of theological faith is the only means by which union between God and the soul is attained. While this idea runs as a through-line across the entirety of John’s corpus, it is in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* that he makes his case for the unitive function of faith.

At the risk of oversimplification, St. John of the Cross’ argument could be summarized thus: Only faith is capable of presenting God to the soul in His essence, but in so doing the soul is blinded—brought into darkness—by the radiance of the divinity, which cannot be circumscribed by the human intellect. The Mystical Doctor explains:

Just as God is infinite, faith proposes him as infinite. Just as there are three Persons in one God, it presents him to us in this way. And just as God is darkness to our intellect, so faith dazzles and blinds us. Only by means of faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest himself to the soul. The greater one’s faith the closer one’s union with God.<sup>58</sup>

The necessity of this conclusion is derived from classical epistemology: when the intellect perceives an object, something of that object’s essence is internalized by the intellect and united with it. Since the Divine Essence exceeds the capacity of the human intellect, or any sense, to perceive it in its entirety, another manner of union befitting the divinity must be possible. It is theological faith which capacitates the intellect to receive God as He is, in a true habitual union, not merely through the proposition of the truths of faith for intellectual assent. While lacking the scholastic language of her Carmelite father, we see the exact traces of this teaching in Burrows’ own thought. One example serves to illustrate this:

Biblical faith is not a mere intellectual assent to this or that piece of information, it is an act of the whole person surrendering to the God who calls in love, or rather, offers himself in love...He can then communicate himself to us no longer merely through ideas and thoughts about him as hitherto, but inwardly, as his own self. The capacity to believe

---

<sup>58</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 177.

is energized from divine contact and is no longer ‘merely human’; it is now theological not just in its object but in its operation. There is a revelation from within, secret, obscure, that is not mediated through the senses...It is such an act of power that it goes beyond all distinct knowledge to the illimitable, to God himself.<sup>59</sup>

Burrows understands that theological faith includes but exceeds the bounds of articulated doctrine. It includes fidelity to these, and while faith perfects the intellect, it does so by enabling it to receive God Himself, rather than lofty notions or elated emotions. On this point, Burrows is likely unaware of the resonance between her conception of faith and that of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Angelic Doctor distinguishes between the complexity of faith, resulting from the discursive manner of human knowing, and the simplicity of faith’s object, God Himself. In Beatitude, propositional faith gives way to simple apprehension.<sup>60</sup> In the thought of St. John of the Cross and Ruth Burrows, this movement towards simplicity begins now, but will only be perfected in eternity.

Burrows prefers to speak of this unitive faith in terms of radical surrender and trust, often employing the image of being held. For her, faith is not only the necessary ontological condition for union with God but is also didactic in purpose. The concomitant darkness of faith strips us of our false notions of God and the self-fashioned sanctity which she believes to be a trap hindering so many souls of good will.<sup>61</sup> Rather, God would have us be divested of all handles to which we would cling, those things which suggest that we have become spiritual “somebodies”. In its place He gives the priceless gift of Himself—if we would have Him on His terms, which is in darkness and non-perception. When generously embraced, this faith “dilates the heart” and comes to radically know God as the “source of one’s living.”<sup>62</sup> For this reason the hiddenness and

---

<sup>59</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love: The Spiritual Teaching of St. John of the Cross* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books Inc, 1987), 70-71.

<sup>60</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.1, a.2, trans. English Dominican Province, 1164.

<sup>61</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 73.

<sup>62</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, 64.

darkness of theological faith is given more explicit attention in Burrows' work than its unitive function.

Nonetheless, faith is unitive for the same reason that it renders the intellect blind: faith communicates God to the intellect as He is. St. John of the Cross paradoxically employs the image of light to explain this. This same blinding brilliance, when passing through a window, will "so transform and illumine it that to all appearances the window will be identical with the ray of sunlight and shine just as the sun's ray."<sup>63</sup> The soul though faith is united to God yet simultaneously unable to articulate the reality of this union as a result of the darkness which brilliant faith imposes—no concepts are easily grasped, no sense experiences convey it. Here we have the basis of "light off" mysticism: it is Petra in her cloister garden, seized by a conviction that she has been "emptied" yet without knowledge of the divinity which has taken her place. She can only open her eyes to faintly perceive something of this great work of grace within. For Burrows this is the normative mystical experience, though many do not notice its actualization, to the detriment of their spiritual progress.

Before moving on to new considerations, it is important to address two questions of significance that arise if one accepts Ruth Burrows' proposition of "light off" mysticism. The harmony between Burrows and her Carmelite forefather regarding the nature of faith is evident as one can easily see how her doctrine of "light off" follows coherently from this same teaching. Yet, we must remember that for Burrows "light off" is a permanent state of union— "light off" souls maintain this same non-conceptual darkness even as they arrive at the heights of perfection. Thus, we are faced with two questions. First, would St. John of the Cross admit the "light off" distinction? Second, to what extent is it possible to distinguish between a Christian undergoing

---

<sup>63</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 164.



one of the classical purgations and one who has attained to divine union under the mode of “light off”?

### ***Mystical Union in St. John of the Cross***

If our foray into the writings of Ruth Burrows has simultaneously put us in conversation with St. John of the Cross to the neglect of other mystics, it is because Burrows has found in him not only a trusted guide through her own spiritual journey but also a towering voice of confirmation for her understanding of the mystical life. If Burrows’ conception of “light off” finds a solid foundation in John’s theology of faith, does this necessarily support “light off” as a permanent state as well? Is it reasonable to assume that the Mystical Doctor, who does not hesitate to describe the unitive way through highly sensual metaphor, would approve a view of that life wherein the Bride in his *Canticle* is devoid of any actual enjoyment of the Bridegroom? Ruth Burrows unhesitatingly believes the answer to be a resounding yes. Our view, however, is that it is not so obvious. As will be seen, it is possible to arrive at “light off” from a reading of his *Spiritual Canticle*, but one cannot as easily conclude that St. John of the Cross intends this.

Ruth Burrows does not set out to “prove” her argument for “light off” by situating it within the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross—rather, this assumption is already operative behind her engagement with his thought. When reflecting on the experiences of Petra in *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer*, Burrows cautions the reader not to quickly assume that tangible graces will accompany the life of union. Pointing to a passage from the *Canticle* in which the Mystical Doctor speaks of the soul’s awareness of its “emptiness” before God (one is reminded of Petra), Burrows observes:

A superficial reading of the *Canticle* can leave one with a haze over the eyes before the sheer joy of the illuminative state [but]...many passages lifted out of the *Canticle* could

be taken as coming from the dark night of the spirit. They are, in fact, one and the same state with a different emphasis.<sup>64</sup>

Setting aside the relevance of this passage for a later discussion of purgation, we instead note something peculiar about Burrows' use of the *Canticle*. In this part of her *Guidelines*, Burrows is drawing from stanzas twelve and thirteen, yet at the outset of both John makes clear that his Bride has not arrived at the mystical marriage. She is aware that she is like wax bearing an incomplete imprint<sup>65</sup> and suffers as she is *drawing* nearer to Him.<sup>66</sup> This seems an odd place to work from. Much better would be stanza twenty-two and beyond, at which point John's Bride has been united irrevocably to the Bridegroom through nuptials of the transforming union. Turning our focus then to stanza twenty-two and twenty-three of the *Canticle*, we'll see to what extent John lends a helping hand to Burrows' theology.

After the Bride has endured the long road of the purgative way, persevering generously through mortifications, both active and passive, she is brought to an illuminative, yet nonetheless purifying, phase of betrothal after which spiritual marriage takes place. We can piece together a more or less succinct definition of the spiritual marriage from stanza twenty-two of the *Canticle*:

It is a total transformation in the Beloved, in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life. And thus, I think that this state never occurs without the soul's being confirmed in grace...she finds in this state a much greater abundance and fullness of God, a more secure and stable peace, and an incomparably more perfect delight than in the spiritual betrothal; here it is as though she were placed on the arms of her bridegroom.<sup>67</sup>

The spiritual marriage is the furthest limit of union with God possible in this life and its marital quality is the result of a mutual surrender between bride and bridegroom. This surrender is

---

<sup>64</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 96-97.

<sup>65</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 515.

<sup>66</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 519.

<sup>67</sup> St. John of Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 560-561, 562.

divinizing and thus a confirmation in grace necessarily follows. Other defining qualities of the spiritual marriage stand out as significant: a resultant “security”, “stability,” and “peace”, which is symbolized by the bride’s repose upon the arms of the bridegroom. These themes recur throughout John’s treatment of the spiritual marriage. The Mystical Doctor tells us that the bridegroom’s arms signify God’s strength which now supplies for the soul’s weakness, sheltering and protecting her.<sup>68</sup> Spiritual peace, quietude, protection, and security recur throughout, always in the context of passive imagery—on the bed of flowers or ringed about by the den of lions, for example.<sup>69</sup> Spiritual espousal is characterized by an utter dependence upon the Bridegroom.

St. John of the Cross also frequently mentions divine communications and delights, which merit their own consideration later. For now, the face-value implication that such are necessarily mystical phenomenon can distract a reader from noticing the frequency of the descriptors identified above. If the basis of spiritual marriage is the mutual givenness between bride and bridegroom, resulting in peace, security, and the like, one can conclude a sort of fundamental “grounded-ness” as the basis of mystical union that is prior to any psycho-somatic overflow or “light on” experience which might occur. This certainty and rest one possesses from the knowledge of her unshakeable rootedness in God seems the proper place to situate “light off” as a normative state which persists into the mystical marriage. While Ruth Burrows is at pains to divorce mysticism from its psychic trappings, one should be careful not to conclude that she believes “non-experience” to be the definitive expression of “light off”. She provides her own portrait of the soul, mystically wed to God, which also includes divine communications:

Hers is an inviolable strength, not as from herself, but from the God who possesses her and communicates to her his own strength. She lives by his life, his virtue, his wisdom,

---

<sup>68</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 562.

<sup>69</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 566.

his love; hence her utter security. The bride can never be wrested from this absolute safety. She has chosen to abandon all for his sake, to lose her very self and live in deep solitude. So now God assumes full care of her, holds her in his arms, feeds her with all good things and takes her into his deepest secrets.<sup>70</sup>

The bride of the *Canticle* is unshakeable in her union with God because He is her sole foundation—the strong arm upon which she leans—and this conviction is, in fact, the basis of “light off” for Burrows. She only insists we never forget that, even here, God is communicated to the soul in the obscurity of faith. When discussing unitive faith, we noted Burrows’ preference for the image of being held by God. We can now add that this preference also signifies all she intends by the experience of mystical marriage. If we grant that the basis for union in the *Spiritual Canticle* is the bride’s nuptial grounded-ness, rather than the sensible experience of grace, Burrows conception of the experience is precisely the same.

Thus far we’ve argued for the consonance between “light off” and St. John of the Cross’ theology of faith and we have just claimed that both John and Burrows’ understand the basis of mystical marriage to be the same. Now we must ask: what do we make of the divine communications and spiritual delights, to which John refers with almost as much frequency as he does the stability and security of the bride? Does he use such language only symbolically or is Burrows projecting her own interpretation onto the Mystical Doctor? We will continue to examine John’s teaching in the *Spiritual Canticle* and allow Ruth Burrows to provide her thoughts where applicable. From this some more nuanced conclusion can be drawn.

One indicator that St. John of the Cross may not intend “delights” to be understood as felt experiences can be teased out of stanza twenty-five of the *Canticle*. Here, John distinguishes the love of beginners in the spiritual life to new wine and that of the spiritual marriage to old lovers, symbolized by well-fermented wine.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 116.

These lovers taste the sweetness of the wine of love, the substance of which is now well fermented, so their love is based not on sensible delights, as is the love of new lovers, but settled within the soul in spiritual substance and savor and sensory taste and truly good works, And these individuals do not want to be attached to this sensory taste and fervor nor do they desire to take pleasure in...these old lovers now lack the spiritual sweetness that has its roots in the sensory part, they do not have the anxieties or afflictions of love in the sense and spirit. These old lovers hardly ever fail God, for they now stand above all that would make them fail him, that is, above sensuality.<sup>71</sup>

While we are concerned with the experience of mystical marriage, we ought to remember that St. John of the Cross understands sensible consolations and the “felt” experience of God to be something granted chiefly to beginners setting out along the purgative way. Novices to the world of self-denial, these souls require the encouragement of God to persevere along this way and this encouragement comes to them in the manner they are best disposed to receive it—sensible consolations. Would the delights of the Bridegroom return to the realm of the sensible after the bride has passed through the various nights and been purged of her need for them? Perhaps one may argue that, having been perfected, the bride is now free to enjoy these divine touches without clinging to them or measuring herself by them. John does indeed say that these old lovers savor the sweetness of divine love, but it is “settled” deep within and as a result they hardly fail God. Note, again, the “grounded” language. John says these old lovers actually lack the sweetness that is experienced at the level of sense and spirit, or at least would not take pleasure in such sweetness if it was granted. We may stop for a moment and appreciate the reality of “old lovers” from which John analogizes. The elderly husband and wife who have persevered faithfully through the purifying “nights” that inevitably occur in marriage know far more about love than the giddy, impassioned, newlyweds. Yet in the ripened years of their life together, how sweet are their communications? How emblazoned is this love? It is indeed sweet and emblazoned, but in a manner transcending the passions, situated in the solid foundation of

---

<sup>71</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 573.

mutual trust and surrender. Thus, something deeper and more abiding may be meant here by the sweetness of the “old wine”, which John says has already fermented, that is, matured.

We now take a closer look at two other instances of divine communication received by the Bride of the *Canticle*. Returning to stanza twenty-three, St. John of the Cross begins by telling how the bridegroom shares with “ease and frequency” his secrets with the Bride. What is communicated in these secrets, “beneath the apple tree”? The mystical Doctor tells us: “He mainly communicates to her sweet mysteries of the Incarnation and the ways of the redemption of humankind.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, the Bride comes to a deeper and more abiding understanding of the Paschal Mystery. This need not take the form of any sense-experience, whether exterior or interior. John does not give his reader any direction on how to understand the manner of this deepened knowledge, but one need not automatically conclude it to be tangible. If the soul in the state of mystical marriage is aware of where she has arrived—and both John and Burrows will say this must be so—then it is entirely conceivable that this profound knowledge of the Paschal Mystery is born from the bride’s truly awe-filled awareness of that Paschal Mystery as enacted in her soul. Is there a devout Christian who has not had moments of lucid awareness of where God has brought him, even if much work remains to be done in his soul? The higher one ascends the more the distance traversed is appreciated, yet arguably less understood. The work of grace becomes more a marvel and stimulus to adoration as it carries out its deifying work within the soul. From this perspective, one is indeed initiated into a deeper knowledge of the paschal mystery that remains a “secret” to most.

Next, in stanza twenty-six, St. John of the Cross employs the image of a wine cellar to reiterate his teaching on the mystical marriage. Cellars are dark places, yet paradoxically John

---

<sup>72</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 563.

here introduces a second image, that of light through glass, to illustrate the soul brought into this innermost chamber:

What God communicates to the soul in this intimate union is totally beyond words. One can say nothing about it, just as one can say nothing about God himself that resembles him. For in the transformation of the soul in God, it is God who communicates himself with admirable glory; the two become one, as we would say of the window united with the ray of sunlight.<sup>73</sup>

At this innermost chamber we find a description of union with God that could easily be confused with St. John of the Cross' treatment of obscure faith. Indeed, we recall that previously we quoted Ruth Burrows, who claimed that the grace which affects the dark night and the spiritual marriage is one and the same. What God communicates to the soul in this stage is ineffable, because—as with theological faith—what is communicated is God Himself.

Returning immediately from the image of light to that of the cellar, John invites his reader to know how each of the Bride's spiritual faculties drink of the bridegroom. With the intellect she drinks wisdom and knowledge, charity with the will, and the memory slakes its thirst through the recollection of the goods it now possesses through union.<sup>74</sup> Again, while the image chosen may invoke passionate visuals such as St. Catherine drinking from the side of Christ, a "light off" interpretation could be made of these three drinks. St. John of the Cross tells us that the wisdom and knowledge gained is an utter forgetfulness of the world—such knowledge indeed becomes ignorance in light of her wisdom gained.<sup>75</sup> This is not owing to a state of habitual rapture, but that the soul's vision has been purified allowing it to see the world as God sees it. We recall St. Elizabeth of the Trinity's invitation for Christians to bypass secondary causes and live in the realm of primary causes. This habitual supernatural perspective

---

<sup>73</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 575.

<sup>74</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 576-577.

<sup>75</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 577.

would, in our view, be an appropriate interpretation of the divine wisdom and knowledge imbibed by the Bride's intellect. When the will drinks of love, the Mystical Doctor tell us that the Bridegroom "put his charity in order in me, making his own charity fit and suit me."<sup>76</sup> This suggests nothing of intense, sensate, experiences of divine love, but rather a right-ordering of loves as a result of the process of purification. By the intellect the Bride sees as God sees and with the will she loves as He loves. Lastly, when the memory drinks of the Bridegroom she recalls the goods possessed through union with Him. John does not elaborate on this as with intellect and will, but we may avert back to the soul's appreciation of the gifts of grace received and the humble recognition of its fruits cultivated within.

We may now draw out some conclusions. The definition of spiritual marriage supplied by both St. John of the Cross and Ruth Burrows suggest the essence of this nuptial union is the mutual surrender between Bride and Bridegroom. The total reception of the Bridegroom bestows upon the Bride an awareness of her union with him, in which she is established in spiritual strength and self-possession (in dispossession!). The soul is deified to the extent possible in this life and is thus united to God in its faculties of intellect, will, and memory. In none of these instances is a reader compelled to attribute a highly sensate component to the mystical marriage. This is a state akin to old spouses whose love is more intense and deeply abiding than the love of the newlyweds. It is at the same time a fusion of light with glass, the light remaining no less brilliant and blinding than when it purified its recipient—it unifies while bypassing the senses and placing the soul in the darkness of faith. Though John's use of images is consistent with what Burrows teaches of the "light on" grace, one can safely argue from St. John of the Cross for the existence of "light off" as a habitual expression of mystical marriage in his writing. We recall

---

<sup>76</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 576.



that Burrows believes this, yet staked her claim earlier in the *Spiritual Canticle*, during the betrothal. However, St. John of the Cross would likely be perplexed by the bifurcation of the mystical life into “light on” and “light off”. The saint’s tetralogy is saturated with cautions against extraordinary apprehensions in the faculties, both sensual and spiritual, and one wonders if John would take issue with the notion of “light on” as novel, much the way “light off” may seem innovative to some of Burrow’s readers.

### ***Purification, Perfection, and the Problem of Obscurity***

We again return to the observation made by Ruth Burrows in her *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer*, wherein the experience of the dark night and the mystical marriage is the same, yet under different aspects. In arguing for “light off” as a typical experience of the mystical marriage, we implicitly give assent to this observation. St. John of the Cross may be said to do likewise, based on the interpretation we gave to passages from his *Spiritual Canticle*. We take one additional sample of this from the *Dark Night of the Soul*, “This night, which we say is contemplation, causes two kinds of darkness or purgation in spiritual persons.”<sup>77</sup> Note the manner in which the contemplative gift which unifies is also what purifies. At this point we are faced with an epistemological question: how would one in the state of “light off” know she has attained to mystical marriage? Ruth Burrows adds to the difficulty of this question by asserting that each perfected soul is more individualized because of her union with God:

The more surrendered to and possessed by God, the more immersed in God, the more the self is self. This individualization at its highest peak means that there is no pattern of living on the third island. On the former islands there were patterns; to some extent one could generalize, but here hardly at all. Each inhabitant of this island is a world, a

---

<sup>77</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 375.

universe of her own. We can only listen to what each tries to tell us of her experience and see where other testimony agrees.<sup>78</sup>

Briefly, we note that throughout *Guidelines* Burrows employs the scheme of “islands” to explain the three ages of the interior life. This claim for authentic individualization rings true intuitively and it is not our intent to challenge it, but simply to acknowledge how such a claim begs the question of confirmation. We could compound this further by noting how elsewhere, Burrows asserts the details of the unitive way to be lived in the “ordinary texture of life.”<sup>79</sup> Yet returning to the *Guidelines* quote above, we read Burrows instructing us to listen to the testimonies of “light off” souls. Throughout her various works, Burrows is committed to the principle that a soul in the state of mystical marriage, including “light off” must have certain knowledge of her arrival. Earnestly she insists, “Could she be there and not know it? It would seem that we must affirm that knowledge of it is essential...it is hard to think that when the work is accomplished, when there is perfect union, we would not know it in some way.”<sup>80</sup>

We are once again faced with the challenge of obscurity. In obscurity we traverse our way to the summit of perfection and upon arrival our view seems to remain clouded. This is exactly as Ruth Burrows would have it. We recall from the outset that she finds the desire to measure one’s progress vain in both senses—by way of futility and also as an indicator of self-love. It is this desire to measure and typify the mystical journey that, in her view, has resulted in a historical over-emphasis on the reception of tangible graces. For these reasons we might not expect any help from Ruth Burrows in our current endeavor, save that she unavoidably gives it to us. She has told us that the soul has this certainty, at least upon the summit—though how this is so deserves fuller explication later. Additionally, although the dark night and mystical marriage

---

<sup>78</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, 45.

<sup>80</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 119.

are existentially the same, they differ experientially by reason of the recipient, who is changed by this obscure in-breaking of the divine. In seeking to understand how knowledge of both the journey and the arrival may be glimpsed, even if faintly, we will first look to the effects of the dark night. Afterwards, we will introduce a new yet critical aspect to understanding both the mystical marriage and the question of certainty: the role of theological charity.

### ***Passing though the Dark Night***

If Ruth Burrows understands the purifying nights to be the product of faith, she is chiefly concerned that one understands these nights to be instantiated in the tedium of work-a-day existence. We saw this in her passing comment that divine union is lived in the ordinariness of daily life. She provides for us a litany of purifying agents, “difficulties of temperament, ill-health, disappointments as well as the grievous sufferings of human beings”<sup>81</sup>, all of which she takes to be the dark night given incrementally to us weak souls. Such inescapably human trials are indeed purifying, insofar as they cultivate moral virtue. What Burrows describes, St. John of the Cross would call the active nights. These consist of the virtues one takes up, the mortifications actively undertaken, so as to be further disposed to receive God. It would seem Burrows understands these more mundane trials to be passively received and therefore a type of the passive purgation. Yet properly speaking, the Mystical Doctor understands both the passive nights of the sense and spirit to be initiated solely by God and distinguishable by particular signs.

To paraphrase the *Dark Night*, the soul being led into the purifying night finds itself unable to meditate, either by discursus or imagination. It may even find such efforts repugnant, though it loves God no less. Love though it does, this soul loses all savor in divine things, though not through any fault of its own. As a result, the soul becomes anxious—when comparing its

---

<sup>81</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 38-39.

present state to its apparently more fervent past, it begins to wonder if it hasn't become lax or halfhearted.<sup>82</sup> After years of active growth in virtue, the soul is now aided directly by God, who seeks to truly free it from the last vestiges of self-love, which subtly masqueraded as love of God. In the darkness of faith, the soul is initially confused and unsure of itself. At this point, John tells us, "The soul, with no knowledge of its destination, sees itself annihilated in all heavenly and earthly things in which it formerly found satisfaction."<sup>83</sup> Here it seems we cannot confirm the soul's state—it does not know how it came to be on the ascending path towards perfection, nor has it any notion that it is on such a path.

The purpose of these dark nights, according to Ruth Burrows, is to strip us of our own sense of spiritual and moral accomplishment so that we depend upon God alone—she names this as the first effect of the contemplative grace.<sup>84</sup> Yet in this dark ascent to mystical marriage, certain discernible traits begin to appear in the soul, which may go unnoticed: self-disregard, humility, devotedness, and increased service to others.<sup>85</sup> These traits are what St. John of the Cross calls the "benefits" of the dark night. Again, to paraphrase the Mystical Doctor, we can describe them as follows. First, the purified soul has a profound humility, whereby it "considers itself to be nothing"<sup>86</sup> Thus, the soul is no longer angry or frustrated with its own shortcomings, or those of others, because it recognizes its holiness to come from God alone. As a result, the soul lives in a habitual remembrance of God, whose service is not freed from spiritual avarice by which the soul subtly pursues its own gain. In this state one can finally be said to truly possess the virtues because they are entirely oriented toward the service of God.<sup>87</sup> Burrows states the

---

<sup>82</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 378-380.

<sup>83</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 378.

<sup>84</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 98.

<sup>85</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 98.

<sup>86</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 386.

<sup>87</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 385-390.

final product of the dark nights to be such: “Now we see ourselves as we really are. We see the hollowness of what we conceived of as our goodness, our truth, our virtues, generosity, and achievement. Here, on this hard terrain, we see in terror and dismay that every road to spiritual success and achievement is blocked.”<sup>88</sup> The obscurity of theological faith, blinding us even as it unites us to God, exposes the manifold ways that self-love has metastasized into all of our good works. The aridity which is the effect of obscure union also removes the cancer of self-love so that we might be capable of mystical marriage.

Can we know what is taking place as it unfolds? Though Burrows would like us to remain in obscurity, her position breaks down at various points. See above, where she states that we see ourselves as we really are. In this passage from *Guidelines*, Burrows is not speaking of the mystical marriage but a soul on the desolate island of purification. Even if we are uncertain of what lies ahead on the path of ascent, we can still compare our current state, when we see it, with our previous one—we must if we are to be moved to a radical embrace of God as our sole ground of being. Additionally, to have no disturbance at one’s shortcomings is either a lack of self-knowledge, indolence, or abandonment. By definition of the dark night’s criteria and purpose, the third option is the only viable one. Authentic abandonment is characterized by serenity in the knowledge that God can and will work out one’s holiness. Possession of this quality, joined to an awareness of the motives for one’s good deeds prior to the onset of mysterious aridity, suggests some comprehension of one’s progress.

Additionally, would these traits not be noticeable to those around us? Besides the potentially patronizing claim, “that’s what spiritual direction is for”, we recall Petra’s invaluable friendship with Claire. One finds throughout *Guidelines* that Claire has been an invaluable

---

<sup>88</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 90.

spiritual guide in Petra's life, beyond pin-pointing her moment of mystical union. Burrows maintains that certainty must be part of the mystical marriage, even in "light off". Can didactic "light on" reveal to a soul still ascending what is taking place within? It seems that it must, or for what other purpose does God bestow such a gift? This appears the sole purpose for works such as John's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* or Teresa's *Interior Castle*. Yet now we have come full circle back to the original problem. Such mystical texts inevitably get systematized, resulting in what Burrows decries as false expectations and a one-size-fits-all mysticism. This can be avoided when keeping in mind the existence of "light off" as normative—the chief oversight of spiritual guides, according to Burrows—as well as St. John's observation that how God affects the Dark Night is as highly individualized<sup>89</sup>, as Burrows believes the mystical marriage to be. Having probed whether or not one can gain genuine insight into his footing along the mount of perfection, we must conclude that this remains highly probably, if only sporadic.

### *As Certain as Love*

If Ruth Burrows would prefer our journey to proceed under the fog of uncertainty, she holds firmly to the opposite once the destination—spiritual marriage—has been attained. As always, we let her speak for herself:

It is only in this final stage that 'light off' can really know where she is and what has happened to her. Yes, she knows with deep certitude that she is intimately united to God, and this reality is shown by the way she lives... There is a constant certitude though nothing is seen and nothing felt. God alone is, filling the horizon and all else. She does not see God: what she does see is herself. Not God enfolding her, not what he is doing, but rather the effect of this in herself.<sup>90</sup>

As we established, the obscurity of "light off" remains, even while enjoying the profoundest union with God possible in this life. She sees only herself, and herself despoiled of self, yet this

---

<sup>89</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of Soul*, 394.

<sup>90</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 47.

is inseparable from an unshakeable certainty that she is one with the Beloved. Here, the soul incarnates the words of 1 Peter 1:8, “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.” Yet how does this certainty come about? Burrows elsewhere tells us that the soul does not know how but is able to look down from the heights and see that one has arrived.<sup>91</sup> It cannot be the absolute impeccability of the soul, as Burrows will point out that even in the mystical marriage there is still interior work to be done. The will is no longer at odd with God’s, but a deeper surrender always remains possible in this life. Among the objects of such surrender she names, “feelings of jealousy, annoyance, contrariness, but they are absolutely harmless, mere feelings, rather like those that remain when a limb has been amputated.”<sup>92</sup> Here she seems to say that while the soul is so united as to be unable to sin, the first movements remain and require vigilance even while they do not disturb the soul’s tranquility. So, what, then, is the basis of the perfected soul’s certainty? We agree with Ruth Burrows that certainty must exist, but its origins remain to be explored.

Through his works, St. John of the Cross tells us that the purpose of the diverse purgations is to “accommodate” the soul to God. The soul is “fitted”, so to speak, to receive God as He is in both intellect and will. Our excursus has centered chiefly on the purpose of theological faith insofar as it has helped us understand the necessity of obscurity in the mystical life. By now, one should readily grasp how theological faith accommodates the intellect to receive God as He is, but is this unitive faith sufficient to communicate to the soul how she stands before God? It would seem that faith is the necessary point of departure for union with God, but ultimately remains incomplete without the accommodation of the will to God through

---

<sup>91</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, 83.

<sup>92</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle explored*, 147.

theological charity. We find this clearly stated in the *Summa Theologica*, where St. Thomas Aquinas treats of the effects of faith:

Now it is evident that the rational creature is more excellent than all transient and corporeal creatures; so that it becomes impure through subjecting itself to transient things by loving them. From this impurity the rational creature is purified by means of a contrary movement, namely, by tending to that which is above it, viz. God. The first beginning of this movement is faith: since "he that cometh to God must believe that He is," according to Hebrews 11:6. Hence the first beginning of the heart's purifying is faith; and if this be perfected through being quickened by charity, the heart will be perfectly purified thereby.<sup>93</sup>

Herein lies a perfect summary of mystical theology. Faith inclines the soul toward what is above, while charity perfects the soul, vivifying it, as Thomas suggests, and removing any impurity from it. Charity is the capstone, the finishing touch, of the purgative process. We will first explore how this is and then why certainty must result.

To understand the relationship between faith and charity in effecting the spiritual marriage, we are assisted by two Polish theologians whose writings on faith will help us unpack St. Thomas' teaching. Notably, we turn to the doctoral thesis of St. John Paul II on faith within the writing of St. John of the Cross. We will place the great Polish pontiff in conversation with a contemporary compatriot, the Dominican Wojciech Giertych. Giertych echoes the Angelic Doctor by reminding us that theological faith is important as the catalyst for union with God:

Faith initiates the encounter with God, which is something more than just being dependent in one's existence on God the Creator. Faith, therefore, is not the final end, but the point of departure, which opens us up to a greater, deeper reality, leading to personal union with God.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.7, a.2, in *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes, vol 3. I*, trans. *Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 1197.

<sup>94</sup> Wojciech Giertych, *The Spark of Faith: Understanding the Power of Reaching out to God* (Irondale, AL: ETWN Publishing, Inc. 2018), 15-16.



Giertych does begin with an understanding of faith as doctrinal assent. Yet he understands that the ordinary spiritual maturation of the Christian always includes the orthodox faith, while finding its fullest expression in an absolute reliance upon God beyond the mere sustenance of one's being. Faith enables one to trust in God's goodness and so cast oneself upon Him when the weight of life's trials is keenly felt. As faith grows more perfect, this abandonment does not occur only in difficulties, but also in the ordinary affairs of life. God's will is desired in the mundane as the best possible good. This is where faith nourishes charity:

As a consequence of activated faith, in hope there is reliance on God while the future unfolds, and in charity the power of God's love is brought to bear, particularly in moments when human love turns out to be weak and needs internal supernatural reinforcement. Then, on the basis on this divine support, it is possible to love courageously and with tenacity, even in the face of adversity...the encounter with God that is the supernatural life of the soul takes place though these three theological virtues. But it is set in motion by acts of the first virtue, namely, faith.<sup>95</sup>

We could say that the virtue of faith fosters the soul's benevolence towards God by trusting in His goodness and assenting to His sovereignty. In so doing, God's loving kindness is poured out upon the soul through grace and providence. Here we already have faint traces of the mutuality which defines the spiritual marriage. Thus, St. John Paul II observes that not only does charity pre-suppose faith, but that charity is mediated to the soul through the virtue of faith.<sup>96</sup> Early in his dissertation, he observes:

The divine union or transformation of the soul by participation pertains directly and immediately to charity, and to faith as subordinated and joined to charity. The Mystical Doctor teaches that not only is there an intentional but imperfect possession of the divine object in the intellect through faith, but there is a vital, transforming union so intimate that it can be said that the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Wojciech Giertych, *The Spark of Faith*, 134.

<sup>96</sup> John Paul II, *Faith According to St. John of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 225.

<sup>97</sup> John Paul II, *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, 213.

As the dynamic of faith dispositive of charity persists, the latter “takes over” and is ultimately what effects the mystical marriage. Faith nonetheless remains, though its operations are embraced by charity and are included in it. For this reason, the bride in St. John’s *Canticle* can say, “All the ability of my soul and body moves in love and because of love.”<sup>98</sup> The foundational rootedness between Bride and Bridegroom, the essence of mystical marriage, has been achieved.

We insist on the certainty of the soul at this stage because, having been brought about by charity, this same virtue is what divinizes the soul. St. John Paul II again provides us with two helpful insights to this end. First, he reminds us that we become what we love. He tells us that “love creates likeness; now we see that love has a transforming power that is proper to itself.”<sup>99</sup> And the likeness in question here is none other than the divinity Himself, though the soul is made divine by participation and not in substance. This participation means that the desires of the will are perfectly attuned to that of the Divine Will and, as we saw in the *Canticle*, the soul begins to participate here and now in the perichoretic love of the Divine Persons. St. John Paul II describes it thus:

Because of the perfection of the transforming union, the will is constantly and solely occupied in the same thing as the divine will, namely, loving God and giving to him by its love that which it has by participation—God himself. Moreover, the soul does this not only with a loving will but in a divine mode, since it is under the impetus of the Holy Spirit.<sup>100</sup>

We echo back Ruth Burrows’ own response to the question of whether or not “light off” knows she has arrived at the summit of perfection: how could she not know? Based on the foregoing, this certainty must include, yet far surpass, the simple awareness that God has purged one of one’s sins and attachments. To love as God loves, to will as He Wills, to the degree outlined by

---

<sup>98</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 586.

<sup>99</sup> John Paul II, *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, 213.

<sup>100</sup> John Paul II, *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, 234.

St. John of the Cross and our two Polish theologians, it would seem fitting that on these grounds, the soul would know it had arrived. We have firmly established early on that this certainty does not necessitate a sensible experience of grace. Nor do we disagree with Burrows when she says “light off” does not know how she has arrived. Even in human loves, much transcends the demonstrable and can only be known by the intuitive gaze. Nonetheless the soul has arrived and knows that it loves God with the love of God Himself and marvels humbly at the fact.

***St. Therese of Lisieux, the Model “Light Off”?***

“Her battle is to wipe out the hard core of Pharisaism that persists in the midst of Christianity; that human will-to-power disguised in the mantle of religion that drives one to assert one’s own greatness instead of acknowledging that God alone is great.”<sup>101</sup> This warrior, on crusade against the ever-human effort to claim a holiness that is one’s own is not Ruth Burrows, though the quote could easily be predicated of her, but rather St. Therese of Lisieux. The easy application of Balthasar’s words to Burrows signals caution to us as we consider the Little Flower as one instance of mystical marriage in the “light off” mode.

We recall how from the outset Burrows’ encounter with the Little Flower was a spiritual flash point, igniting the English Carmelite with a new hope for holiness and an intuitive sense that the mystical tradition had somehow come off-balance. This debt of gratitude to her French predecessor at times becomes a veritable identification of the Little Flower’s doctrine with her own. In one place, Burrows observes of St. Therese:

[She] broke new ground, cutting through firmly established and firmly held positions in regard to the spiritual life. One might say with truth that she abolished the ‘spiritual life’ understood as it was (and, alas, still is), as a sort of specialized area of human life, particularly Christian life.<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 241.

<sup>102</sup> Burrows, Ruth, *Essence of Prayer* (New York: Bloomsburg Publishing, 2012), 120-121.

How sharp is the image of Burrows reflected back to us in this passage! Thus, while the Little Flower makes various debuts throughout Ruth Burrows' writings, we do well to set Burrows' voice to the side when it comes to an explicit mention of St. Therese. Does St. Therese offer us the profile of at least one "light off" mystic? We defined mystical marriage as being fundamentally a profound, mutual, grounded-ness between the Bride and Bridegroom, though experienced only from the "human side" in the case of "light off". Prayer remains unspectacular, yet certainty about one's state is present. We will thus seek to tease out these qualities in the inner life of the Little Flower.

First, is there ground to believe St. Therese arrived at the mystical marriage? Does her life provide any indicator of this? The most likely moment wherein we can situate this event would be June of 1895, only a few days after St. Therese made her oblation to merciful love. Praying the stations of the Cross that day, St. Therese describes being transpierced by a sweet shaft of fire. Later, she writes,

Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervor except the accomplishment of God's will in my soul without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way. I can speak these words of the Spiritual Canticle of St. John of the Cross: In the inner wine cellar I drank of my Beloved, and, when I went abroad through all this valley I no longer knew anything and lost the herd I was following.<sup>103</sup>

St. Therese now knows only love, manifest in the absolute conformity of her will with His, a union so close not even creatures can disrupt it. Biographer Peter-Thomas Rohrbach recounts this moment and notes that Therese herself seemed to know full well the significance of what took place: "Therese was well acquainted with the writings of this Doctor of the Church—she read nothing else for two whole years—and when she points out her own spiritual position in his

---

<sup>103</sup> Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, third ed. trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 178.

writings, we can only presume she knows what she is doing.”<sup>104</sup> Rohrbach assures us that the proof of St. Therese’s state lies not only in her own self-assurance, although we named this certainty as a necessary criterion, but it is also evident in her subsequent actions and convictions. Von Balthasar, too, corroborates this event as the climax of St. Therese’s descent into the abyss of trustful surrender.<sup>105</sup>

Lest brows be raised at this ostensibly “light on” moment in the Little Flower’s life, we emphasize that it is a moment, a singular instance, which would not remove her from the camp of “light off” by Burrows’ definition. Burrows tells us that it is possible for God to offer “light off” brief occasions of illumination, possibly to instruct or encourage the soul. However, she asserts that deeper obscurity could easily follow after such moments. As evidence of this rare occurrence readers are reminded of Petra, who had two such instances in her long life.<sup>106</sup> We recall our earlier analysis of Petra’s fateful day in the cloister garden, which Claire confirmed as the moment of her entry into mystical marriage. From then on Petra returned to the “human side” of the mystical experience—the obscurity of faith—and for St. Therese this will be no different.

More can be said of St. Therese’s mystical marriage, beyond the claim that she was granted a particular experience of its actualization. When situating “light off” mysticism into the framework of St. John of the Cross’ *Spiritual Canticle*, we concluded that the experience of mystical marriage was typified by the security, protection, and peace born from mutual surrender between bride and bridegroom. We called this a fundamental “grounded-ness”, which St. John illustrated by the arms of the beloved which hold the bride. How saturated is *Story of a Soul* with various notions of being held? As a vowed religious, St. Therese speaks of herself as the spouse

---

<sup>104</sup> Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, *The Search for St. Therese: A Study of the Life, the Legend, the Mystery of St. Therese of Lisieux* (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1961), 181.

<sup>105</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, 330.

<sup>106</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 47-48.

of Christ, yet more frequently she prefers to be the little child. In this vein we could say that beyond a spirituality of the ordinary, the little way of spiritual childhood signifies for St. Therese the reality of mutual surrender at the heart of mystical marriage. She tells us that that her little way is “the surrender of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father’s arms”<sup>107</sup> and that these arms are the “elevator which must raise me up to heaven.”<sup>108</sup> No less than the Bride of the *Canticle*, the Little Child has so given herself over in profound trust that to this same degree she might receive the love, security, and protection of the Father. The metaphors differ, yet the reality of mystical “grounded-ness” is the same.

Can we as easily argue that St. Therese’s prayer life was characterized by the obscurity of faith which chiefly defines the “light off” state? A superficial read would perhaps yield a negative answer, based on the readiness with which St. Therese points to little occurrences as divine interventions in her life: an unexpected snowfall on her clothing day, the coincidental reception of two hosts at Mass, or the dream of Mother Anne of Jesus. Ruth Burrows reminds us that these events, so exterior as they are, need not be supernatural in origin and are hardly what is intended when treating the interior experience of prayer as either “light on” or “light off”. When recounting the saint’s transpiercing we recall abandonment was the first effect she named. A more scrutinous read shows abandonment to be a through-line across her writings, typically coinciding with the experience of spiritual *non-experience*.

In her autobiography St. Therese reveals her inner state during the retreat she made in 1890, in preparation for her solemn profession. She describes it thus:

[retreat] was far from bringing me any consolations since the most absolute aridity and almost total abandonment were my lot. Jesus was sleeping as usual in my little boat; ah! I see very well how rarely souls allow Him to sleep peacefully within them. Jesus is so fatigued with always having to take the initiative and to attend to others that He hastens

---

<sup>107</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 188.

<sup>108</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of the soul*, 208.

to take advantage of the repose I offer to Him. He will undoubtedly awaken before my great eternal retreat, but instead of being troubled about it this only gives me extreme pleasure.<sup>109</sup>

Once more, a superficial read finds in the above a resigned acceptance of aridity in spite of the momentous occasion. Yet we note from her word choice that this retreat was simply par for the course—Jesus is asleep *as usual* and *perhaps* he will awaken *sometime* before the saint's entry into heaven. St. Therese welcomes this apparently habitual state as a means to offer Jesus rest from the multitude of noisy, clamorous, souls. Thus, she can later attest not only to the absence of consolations, but that it is her delight to have none.<sup>110</sup>

These sentiments are expressed even more clearly in an 1893 letter to her sister Celine, wherein she writes of herself in the third person:

[Jesus] is teaching her to play at the bank of love, or rather he plays for her and does not tell her how he goes about it, for that is his affair and not Therese's. What she must do is abandon herself, surrender herself, without keeping anything, not even the joy of knowing how much the bank is returning to her.<sup>111</sup>

Here again we find the conviction of the need for abandonment and surrender in the face of obscurity and unknowing. This theme plays out elsewhere when St. Therese describes her spiritual journey as passing through a subterranean tunnel whereby Jesus denies her clarity concerning his work in her soul.<sup>112</sup> In her letter to Celine, St. Therese explains her lack of experiences in prayer as proper to a lamb securely in the fold—consolations are but bands of love intended to draw back the stray. Rather, she has been brought into the cool valley where she

---

<sup>109</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 165.

<sup>110</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 187.

<sup>111</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux, *General Correspondence: 1890-1897 vol 2*, trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1988), 795.

<sup>112</sup> Therese of Lisieux, *General Correspondence: 1877-1890 vol 1*, trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1982), 652.

has been separated from “everything and from Himself”. She understands that “if He does lead them to Tabor, it is for a few moments, the valley is most frequently the place of His repose.”<sup>113</sup>

These brief glimpses reveal an interior life that is stable, self-possessed, and devoid of sensible graces. Such traits further substantiate the argument for St. Therese’s mystical marriage while also profiling a “light off” mystic who lacks the terminology to describe her state. On this point we note the surprise of Peter-Thomas Rohrbach at the serenity of the Little Flower despite living in a condition he insists must be purgative:

“We see that strange, almost incomprehensible situation of the dark night of the spirit: on the one hand there is dryness, aridity, weariness; and yet on the other, there is a peace and gentle tranquility beneath it all.”<sup>114</sup>

Ruth Burrows would point to this passage from Rohrbach to illustrate the dissonance which occurs when confronted with “light off” mystics. We know that St. John’s purgations are always characterized by a fear of backsliding, of not serving God sufficiently—anxieties abandoned by St. Therese after her transpiercing. Von Balthasar understood this and firmly rejects the application of “dark night” to St. Therese’s state of soul. He observes that the saint “has never heard the Lord speaking to her, yet she knows that he is dwelling within her. She prefers his silence to his speech.”<sup>115</sup> Balthasar chronicles how this preference for silence extends to the embrace of a choice neither to see nor feel her union with the Lord. Without Burrows’ framework, we could say St. Therese intuitively “light off” as the Lord’s choice for her soul and, in spousal abandonment, she joyfully chooses it as well. She is fully aware that in the darkness she nonetheless is held secure by the arms of the Bridegroom.

---

<sup>113</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux, *General Correspondence*, vol 2, 795.

<sup>114</sup> Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, *The Search for St. Therese*, 165-166.

<sup>115</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, 338-340.



## **Part IV: Concluding Remarks**

### ***A Brief Recapitulation***

From all I read it seemed taken for granted that unless one received mystical graces then one was a second-class citizen with a second-class ticket...that sort of experience [mystical favors] seemed a hallmark of God's favor and confirmed that one was pleasing to him. Later on common-sense came to my rescue, common-sense and faith...somehow I began to suspect that somewhere along the line was a big mistake, a big misunderstanding; I sought to find it.<sup>116</sup>

The opening pages of Burrows' *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer* return us to the origin of our exploration. After many anguished years in Carmel, caught between her own frustrated desires for union with God and the distasteful literature at her disposal, St. Therese came to the rescue and through the shadows traced out an alternate path. Encountering the little way of trustful surrender, as well as her providential friendship with Claire, Burrows came to suspect that the contributions of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila had for too long been used to clinically diagnose one's place in the spiritual life, with tangible grades of prayer as metrics. Aiming to correct this imbalance, she shifted the emphasis away from the extraordinary—“light on”—while simultaneously correcting our view of these gifts as being at the service of the great multitude of souls called to experience mysticism from the “creature side”—“light off”.

We sought to apply a systematic approach to Ruth Burrows' theology, grounding her chiefly within the ideas of St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas. In doing so, we found a place for “light on” mysticism within the category of graces gratuitously given, specifically as an expression of the prophetic gift. Such deeply ecclesial souls punctuate the history of the Church with clear insight into God's work within and we have been enriched through the centuries by their experiences. Yet we saw how these gifts were not the mystical grace in itself, as union with God is first affected through supernatural faith which is necessarily darkness and

---

<sup>116</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 2.

obscurity to the intellect. Thus, the recourse of these “light on” teachers to images and poetry to convey their insights.

Union through obscure faith is the foundation of all mystical union with God, regardless of its mode of expression, though this faith must be completed through the perfection of supernatural charity. Such charity is the basis for the certainty which both “light on” and “light off” mystics possess concerning the consummation of mystical marriage in their souls. This marriage itself is not necessarily sensate in expression, as a close analysis of St. John of the Cross showed us how the fundamental quality of this state is security and “grounded-ness” wrought by the perfect, mutual, surrender between bride and bridegroom. In an effort to incarnate the concepts under consideration, we sought in St. Elizabeth of the Trinity a profile of the “light on” mystic and of “light off” in the case of St. Therese of Lisieux. In sum, our purpose was to analyze how “light on” and “light off” might function when instantiated in the lives of the saints.

Throughout our analysis, we observed that the claims of Ruth Burrows sometimes raise questions which she either failed to notice or did not address. Before moving on to final conclusions, we would be remiss if we did not address three outstanding questions. We first wrestle with the issue of greatest significance: the place of the Spirit in Burrows’ theology. We will afterwards discuss the dilemma of “light off” didacticism as well as the topic of spiritual friendship.

### ***The Role of the Holy Spirit***

We return now to an issue raised earlier in part two: the disjunct between perception and experience created by Ruth Burrows in her attempts to both safeguard the transcendence of God and establish sensible graces as *gratia gratis data* rather than inherent signs of holiness. The

heart of this dilemma lies somewhere in how Ruth Burrows understands the role of the Holy Spirit in her schema of “light on” and “light off” mysticism. When reading her works, one may be surprised to find the specific function of the Holy Spirit is not clearly addressed. For example, the Spirit is almost entirely absent from her pivotal work, *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer*. One encounters the Holy Spirit in simply-stated Trinitarian formulas and general statements about sanctification.

*Ascent to Love* alone mentions the Gifts of the Spirit, only once, in reference to stanza thirty-five of the *Spiritual Canticle*.<sup>117</sup> St. John of the Cross tells us, “[the Bride] is settled in God, and God in her, with so much delight that she has no need of other masters or means to direct her to him, for now God is her guide and her light.”<sup>118</sup> This passage from the *Canticle* calls to mind the fundamental “grounded-ness” by which we defined mystical marriage, further arguing that “delights” are not necessarily sensible. However, the full text of the stanza makes no mention of the Spirit: it is Burrows who indicates for us that the Bride’s condition results from the Gifts. She tells us no more than this, which creates problems for her spiritual doctrine.

St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that by the Gifts “man is disposed to become amenable to the Divine inspiration...there is no need to take counsel according to human reason, but only to follow their inner promptings, since they are moved by a principle higher than human reason.”<sup>119</sup> Additionally, connaturality exists between the soul and the truths perceived under the operation of the Gifts. The foregoing implies one’s ability to have confidence in such promptings, whereas Burrows has argued for more-or-less indifference towards the “effects” of God. Further, could the apprehension of Divine truth through the Gifts, especially wisdom, be

---

<sup>117</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 116.

<sup>118</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 607.

<sup>119</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.68, a.1, trans. English Dominican Province, 878.

presented as an alternative explanation for “light on”? We recall St. Elizabeth of the Trinity’s abiding knowledge of the indwelling Trinity and the facility with which she invited others into this reality. Burrows would certainly be averse to this interpretation, as her preference for *gratia gratis data* essentially functionalizes sensible experiences and serves the recalibration of spiritual theology away from any emphasis upon them.

Burrows has taken pains to divorce sensible graces from guarantees of sanctity, and this split is not possible where the Gifts of the Spirit are concerned. Theological charity is the principal of union with God, yet as charity grows so also do the Gifts of the Spirit increase their operation in the soul. Thus, if sensible graces are actually the results of the Gifts, then they are simultaneously evidences of holiness. While this exploration sought to bring Burrows into dialogue with St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross, the development of clear criteria distinguishing “light on” as gratuitous grace, rather than the operation of the Gifts, is a necessary next step for anyone seeking to further systemize the spiritual doctrine of Ruth Burrows.

### ***Can there be a “Light off” Didacticism?***

Burrows’ system justifies the existence of extraordinary mystical illuminations by reason of their instructive function. As the name suggests, “light on” shines upon the darkness of faith to manifest what grace is doing within. Indeed, we accompanied her into the cloister garden as “Petra” when God filled her with Himself. We saw also how Claire, as a “light on”, not only confirmed but gave greater precision to Petra’s experience of mystical marriage. Yet looming in the background behind all of Ruth Burrows’ works on mystical theology is the question of “light off” didacticism. Does Burrows herself not shine a light upon grace working within, despite her tormented journey toward the realization of “light off”? This question likewise echoes in the case of St. Therese of Lisieux. Though we surveyed the little way insofar as it contained both the

fundamentals of mystical marriage and habitually obscure prayer, the little way was precisely that, a spiritual *way* by which St. Therese sought to instruct an army of “little souls” who could not see themselves reflected back in lives of extraordinary saints. In no place does Ruth Burrows seem to notice this discrepancy. Can “light off” souls also be spiritual teachers? If so, does this further sideline the experiences of those who are “light on?”

Both the Little Flower and Ruth Burrows found themselves placed in instructive roles within their community. As religious formators, each was expected to provide clear articulation of sound spiritual principals to the young nuns under their charge. Likewise, in both cases, each woman was instructed by obedience to write down their life’s story and spiritual doctrines. In the case of St. Therese, one wonders whether her little way would have spread beyond the walls of Carmel had she not been asked to compose the various manuscripts which comprise her autobiography. But here again, one must contend with the fact that arguably no spiritual work of the last century has been more influential on souls than this very autobiography. While St. Therese stands firmly in the tradition of St. John of the Cross, are they not legion who find her more accessible than he, or even than St. Teresa of Avila? Or could this not be further testimony to the claim that most souls are “light off” and thus find resonance with one like themselves? In the case of Burrows, she obviously intends to popularize her ideas, her intentions are unmistakable, yet we know this was also the fruit of her friendship with and guidance from Claire. If “light on” sees what is happening within, while “light off” only experiences the “creature side” of mysticism, then one potential solution to this question may be a distinction between what God is doing in the soul (the sphere of “light on”) from how man ought to respond (a domain open to “light off”). While this excursus sought to explain the existence of “light off”, the question of its function, should it have one, remains to be explored.

### *The Role of Spiritual Friendship*

Again, the dynamic of Claire and Petra poses the question: does Ruth Burrows' approach to mystical theology allow for a richer understanding of spiritual friendship? The attraction of a Jordan and Diana or Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal lies in the desire to have a companion along the way, between whom a relationship of mutual encouragement exists. However, as we saw between Claire and Petra, something much deeper was at work. We have already recollected the account of Petra's mystical union and the certainty she possessed concerning her interior state. Yet we noted that not only did Claire intuit what took place that day, she was able to articulate more precisely the inner workings of an experience that was not her own! Burrows presents a tension between her surety and yet the apparent need for external confirmation. We return to Michelle Jones, Burrows' biographer, in her comments on this dynamic:

Drawing together both her need for and her ultimate independence from Claire's confirmation of her own mystical knowing Burrows concludes, "It seems that it [certitude] comes from within, but yet needs or has needed outside affirmation...Claire is able to 'see' God in Petra in a way Petra cannot see herself." Living the transforming union from underneath, so to speak, Burrows is enabled by Claire's "light on" perception to claim confidently the undeniable certainty of God's intimate presence permeating her darkness.<sup>120</sup>

We must ask, what purpose does this double-confirmation serve? We raised this question early in part three of our analysis as an entry point into whether or not "light off" could have some sense of her place along the ascent to perfection. Here we pose it again as a question for further exploration, seeing as it demands epistemological explanations which fall outside the scope of our current venture. Namely, does the didacticism of "light on" function only on the "macro"

---

<sup>120</sup> Michelle Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, 222.

level, if this term may be applied to the contributions of figures like Saints John and Teresa? Or does “light on” also grant a more particularized insight into specific souls?

Elsewhere Burrows exclaims, “an outward voice, affirming a secret knowledge, how powerful an awakening this can be!”<sup>121</sup> Here we wonder whether the external confirmation somehow “actualizes” the internal conviction, allowing “light off” to live fully from the new reality within. Would this be an absolute necessity, given the rarity of “light on” souls? We struggle to find a potential “light on” candidate in the life of St. Therese, who would be a “Claire” to her. Furthermore, who possessed more interior certainty than the Little Flower? Did the fiery dart of 1890 serve this purpose? When we also consider Claire’s sense of finally being understood by Petra,<sup>122</sup> we suspect that a further study could be done on spiritual friendship precisely as *mystical* friendship, wherein a reciprocity between “light on” and “light off” exists.

### ***The Universal Call to Mysticism, Revisited***

We sought to demonstrate that the universal call to holiness reiterated by the Second Vatican Council was synonymous with a call to the mystical life, for all people, irrespective of their particular vocations. Married couples, whether changing diapers in the home or laboring in a cubicle, the diocesan priest busy about his many ministries, or the consecrated religious in the classroom, soup kitchen, or hospital, have every capacity for mystical marriage as the monk or nun called to a particular life of silence and enclosure. This truly good news we held in tension with the observations of many theologians: all may be called but, few set out along the way, and seemingly even fewer arrive at the destination. Without discounting the timidity of many in the face of renunciation and suffering, we peered into the second explanation for our dearth of

---

<sup>121</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 121.

<sup>122</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 114.

mystics—environmental factors—and among these we proposed a misunderstanding of mystical life, as defined fundamentally by union through obscure faith, as the primary environmental obstacle to union with God. At least among the devout, the problem is specifically an educational one, owing to the manner in which the spiritual life is portrayed as rigid and linear. If more Christians understood the purpose of “light on” and its attendant gifts, and, critically, the existence of “light off” as equally an expression of mystical marriage, Burrows tells us we could expect a “wonderful flowering of the mystical life in the measure that the conditions already present are understood and exploited.”<sup>123</sup> However, this requires some reappraisals.

Naturally, Burrows’ contributions necessitate a larger rearticulation of spiritual theology. This will logically include new critical examinations of the many wonderful contributors to the mystical tradition, such as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, among others. In this brief application of Burrows’ work to St. John of the Cross, we did not have to strain ourselves too hard to see that his inheritors are the ones who injected into his works, via their popularizations, things linear and tangible. Burrows never understood these saintly exemplars to be the source of the problem. Indeed, they are “light on” precisely because they have received a prophetic charism allowing them to be teachers of the ineffable. We see the wider recognition of “light off” as inviting a *ressourcement* of spiritual theology that would also extend to how we tell the tales of our forebears in grace, the saints. For the purposes of demonstrating both modes of mystical expression, we turned to St. Elizabeth of the Trinity and St. Therese of Lisieux, yet this could be done in the case of many others. If we accept that one does not become a saint save by the mystical path, then all saints may be understood as either “light on” or “light off” and we

---

<sup>123</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 6.



benefit from understanding to the extent possible, how each mode was incarnated in the lives of our spiritual role models.

Should the distinction between “light on” and “light off” become conventional, we could expect to see changes in the practice of spiritual direction. As we saw, typical literature on spiritual growth sets forward gradations of prayer that become de facto benchmarks for guiding souls to the heights. Burrows, unsurprisingly scoffs at this practice:

Those responsible for the guidance of others should be wary when appraising these accounts. How often we hear ‘she can spend hours before the blessed sacrament; God gives her great graces’ and the like, whereas sheer facts demonstrate the purely natural sources of these states of consolation. The less attention we pay to what is felt the less likely is delusion and its baleful consequences.<sup>124</sup>

We’ve already teased out the origins of sensible experiences of grace, concluding alongside Burrows and St. John of the Cross, that even those experiences which are concomitant with mystical grace do not merit a person’s, or their spiritual director’s, significant attention. While spiritual directors ought to help directees recognize God’s providential guidance throughout the day, we anticipate a greater emphasis on the cultivation of virtue alongside growth in prayer. In addition to the moral virtues, one could expect a deeper study and appreciation of the theological virtues, which are the sole means by which mystical marriage is achieved between God and the soul. Chiefly, spiritual directors will need to study and better understand theological faith and its attendant darkness so as to direct souls aright—not treating obscurity as momentary aridity or misleading directees to conclude every experience of darkness is necessarily a purgative night.

Lastly, from a greater awareness of “light off” we anticipate a growing mysticism of the quotidian. Devout as well as timorous souls may be spurred on by knowing that each foothold along the ascent of perfection is found in the ultra-mundane, work-a-day world. This is the world

---

<sup>124</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 53.

in which the incarnate Word took to Himself His bride, the Church—why would it not remain the context in which individuals are still mystically wed to Him today? Burrows points to this very observation and then looks back to us:

Through total acceptance of this human destiny Jesus was made perfect. The cost was bitter, ending in a cruel, humiliating death, but through it he was able to bring us all along with him to our fulfillment, provided we accept it as he did. For us, too, our fundamental obedience to God is to accept being human. There is only one path to glory and that is the way Christ took, accepting the pain of being human.<sup>125</sup>

From different vantage points we saw this in both St. Elizabeth of the Trinity and St. Therese of Lisieux. Proper to the grace of each was a desire to seek God in the now, peering through secondary causes in order to find the primary. Relinquishing the expectation that one should be able to tangibly experience progress in the mystical life, as well as the anxiety accompanying a misunderstanding of obscurity, “light off” serves to actualize the universal call to holiness.

While little scholarly attention has been paid to Ruth Burrows, we believe she currently serves as one of the few contemporary voices contributing to the domain of spiritual theology. Particularly in *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer*, Ruth Burrows offers a fresh re-appraisal of the traditional phases of purgation, illumination, and union. If there is one day a *ressourcement* of spiritual theology Burrows’ contributions will most certainly play their part. St. Therese wished to raise up an army of “little souls”—Ruth Burrows would seek to raise up an army of “light off” souls, in which the majority of us would be counted. For us, our task is to receive the hidden Lord as He comes in the ordinary, growing in humility, trust, and surrender. We choose to joyfully embrace what Burrow’s calls the “fast of faith.”<sup>126</sup> It is for us to make the painful renunciation of the desire for a “special” or “interesting” spiritual life—only then might grace really begin to take hold of us. When He brings about the marvelous feat of mystical marriage,

---

<sup>125</sup> Ruth Burrows, *To Believe in Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2007), 38-39.

<sup>126</sup> Ruth Burrows, *To believe in Jesus*, 69.

we will know it and exclaim in the words of the Canticle, “Let us rejoice, Beloved, and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty!”<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 476.

## Bibliography

- Arintero, John. *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*. Translated by Jordan Aumann. St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co, 1951.
- Aumann, Jordan. *Spiritual Theology*. London: Continuum Press, 2006.
- Boriello, Luigi. *Spiritual Doctrine of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity*. Translated by Jordan Aumann. New York: Alba House, 1986
- Burrows, Ruth. *Ascent to Love: The Spiritual Teaching of St. John of the Cross*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books Inc, 1987.
- Burrows, Ruth. *Essence of Prayer*. New York: Bloomsburg Publishing, 2012.
- Burrows, Ruth. *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer: Prayer and Practice*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1978.
- Burrows, Ruth. *Interior Castle Explored: St. Teresa's teaching on the Life of Deep Union with God*. Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2007.
- Burrows, Ruth. *To Believe in Jesus*. Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2007.
- De Meester, Conrad. *Elizabeth of the Trinity: Collected Works, Volume 1*. Translated by Aletheia Kane. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1984.
- Garrigou-Lagrange, Reginald. *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*. St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1954.
- Garrigou-Lagrange, Reginald. *The Three Ages of the Interior Life, Volume 2*. Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc, 1948.
- Giertych, Wojciech. *The Spark of Faith: Understanding the Power of Reaching out to God*. Irondale, AL: ETWN Publishing, Inc. 2018.
- John Paul II. *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1981.
- Jones, Michelle. *The Gospel Mysticism of Ruth Burrows: Going to God with Empty Hands*. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2018.
- Kavanaugh, Kieran and Otilio Rodriguez. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991.

- Moorcroft, Jennifer. *He is my Heaven: The Life of Elizabeth of the Trinity*. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2001.
- Rohrbach, Peter-Thomas. *The Search for St. Therese: A Study of the Life, the Legend, the Mystery of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1961.
- Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964). In *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*. ed. Austin Flannery. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Therese of Lisieux. *General Correspondence: 1877-1890*. vol 1. Translated by John Clarke. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1982.
- Therese of Lisieux. *General Correspondence: 1890-1897*. vol 2. Translated by John Clarke. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1988.
- Therese of Lisieux. *Story of a Soul*. Third ed. Translated by John Clarke. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996.
- Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*. Vol 1. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981.
- Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*. Vol 2. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981.
- Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*. Vol 3. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981.
- Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*. Vol 4. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981.
- Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Elizabeth of Dijon: An Interpretation of her Spiritual Mission*. London: Harvill Press, 1956.
- Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992.