

PART ONE:
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1. THE *MYSTICAL CITY OF GOD*, FRUIT OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

a) I confess to beginning this study with a profound sense of “reverential fear.” Given the importance and greatness of the *Mystical City of God* (abbreviated *MCG*)¹ as a work of theology and essay illustrating a “narrative mariology,” little cultivated since her time, I could not begin otherwise. This is a work born of intense interior life and singular experiences. Its object is eternal life, the mystery of God and Jesus Christ Redeemer, virginal Son of the Immaculate Virgin (cf. Jn 17:3), mysteries which transcend the range of ordinary historical knowledge and other criteria of evaluation. This fact commands respect.

D. Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, sensing the overwhelming power of the wisdom enthraling him – and precisely for this reason – experienced “religious fright” in contacting – “touching” he said – the canticles and poetry of St. John of the Cross, so “divinely” written; a poetry “so elegant and so exquisite in form, and among the finest fruits of the renaissance, so realistic and descriptive;”² a poetry,

¹ Hilda Graef, an historian of mariology, as a kind of appendix to the errors and equivocations which she commits in regard to Mother Agreda, grudgingly admits that the *MCG* is a *monumental work*, even if she considers it “unbalanced” (HILDA GRAEF, *María. La mariología y el culto mariano a través de la historia* (translated from the German), Barcelona 1968, p. 392. [English version: *Mary. A History of Doctrine and Devotion*. London 1963-1965, 2 vols.: here vol. 2, pp. 53-55. For a more sympathetic estimate in English cf. M. O’CARROLL, *Theotokos*, Wilmington DE 1983, pp. 235-236.])

² M. MENÉNDEZ PELAYO, *Estudios y Discursos de crítica histórica y literaria*, vol. III, Madrid 1941, p. 27.

whose rhythm and beauty transport us to the realm of the ineffable.

Each time I make contact with the work of Mother Agreda I experience something similar. I am not sure I am capable of interpreting this work with full objectivity, given its unique characteristics.³ Mother Agreda offers us a narrative mariology, an interpretation of the history of the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Virgin, the Mother of the Son of God, collaborator with Him in the work of Redemption.

Its “elegant,” yet “so exquisite” form, and its “figurative” and “realistic descriptions,” for all its baroque exuberance, are the covering hiding precious pearls and jewels, the mariological truths of the Church’s faith, and for that reason shade an abyss of light to our sight. But even more than this the fact that her mariology is for the most part fruit of her contemplative prayer and of her intense interior life linked to mystical experiences of the highest order, inspires in me even greater “reverential fear.”

It is not possible to place oneself on the same level as the Venerable Authoress, nor match her depth of comprehension in experiencing the mysteries of faith; nor can we enter the temple of these ineffable experiences. This would surely be necessary to resolve many of the problems arising in connection with the interpretation and evaluation of the *Mystical City of God*.

³ Today it is generally presupposed that the *MCG* is the fruit of meditation on the mysteries of the Mother of Jesus and of contemplative prayer, rather than of academic study, in the same way as the *Mansions of the Interior Castle* of St. Teresa of Jesus are. The *Qualificadores* (examiners; investigators) of the Inquisition, finding no grounds to suspect anything amiss in the *MCG*, declared and acknowledged in 1650 that Sr. Mary of Jesus was a woman most learned in “Sacred Scripture and had attained such knowledge *more by prayer and contemplation than by study*.” Because they did not grasp this crucial point, the accusers and enemies of the *MCG* during the 17th and 18th centuries were guilty of serious misjudgments.

By way of orientation I intend to explain here the thrust and content of the mariology of the *MCG*, in order to make, not a comparison, but a simple correlation with the principles and content of the mariology of Vatican II. The distance of three centuries is no obstacle to obtaining positive results, because to obtain such, nothing else is needed from the doctrinal point of view than an analysis and application of the common principles of mariological doctrine.

The *MCG* is not an easy book to read. It is the fruit of a profound interior life and of a high contemplation of the mysteries of the Trinity and of the Incarnation, of the place of the All Holy Virgin in the saving designs of God, etc.

The explanations of its ample content are on occasion given in the form of metaphor or via interpretation of symbols, or as accounts of intellectual and imaginary visions, and of phenomena radiating from the mystery.

The fundamental content of the work is not a history, nor is it a collection or source book of dates. It is a doctrinal exposition. It is the explanation of a life: the life of the Virgin Mary, of the Mother of the Son of God, who at the same time was collaborator with Him in the work of redemption. It is an explanation based not so much on signs and exterior manifestations as on the interior reality of that Mother's privileged and singular existence, and on the life of her heart, ever nourished by a most ineffable love. For this reason we are dealing with a theology, and in great part with a "mystical theology" born of the light of faith and of the warmth of the *flame of divine love*, that flame about which St. John of the Cross sang so marvelously.

b) Mother Agreda lived in an age when mariology in Spain had reached its highest peaks and most dazzling achievements: the 17th century, golden age of Spanish mariology.

In addition to exceptional personal endowments attested by the data of her biography and acknowledged by historical scholarship, she had benefited from informed lectures and instructions on the Virgin Mary by her confessors and other Franciscan religious, just as had the other members of her cloistered Community. Further, she had also read a number of books and treatises on marian themes, and was adequately informed on a variety of theories and approaches characteristic of different theological schools of her day.

Apart from this I presuppose here – because it is the truth – that she received much more understanding of mariological truths from another source: by way of and through the exercise of meditation and contemplative prayer. She attained a *sapiential knowledge* of the mystery of Mary, as souls attain this via contemplation, of the kind St. John of the Cross speaks in his *Spiritual Canticle*, and St. Teresa of Jesus in her *Mansions of the Interior Castle*.

This becomes so perfectly clear and so perfectly certain to anyone who reads the *MCG* objectively and without prejudice, that it constitutes the principle of enlightenment and interpretative key guaranteeing the correctness of whatever the Venerable Authoress teaches from a doctrinal point of view.

c) Mother Agreda wrote many pages of her great work while listening interiorly to the Word of God or to the Virgin Mary. During contemplative prayer she came to understand what she was obliged to say. On occasion, according to her own testimony – repeated often – the Virgin Herself ordered her to put in writing what she was being taught. In view of the high knowledge she had attained of the mystery of the Mother of God, she felt a strong impulse to make this known to others.

We are not, however, dealing here with a hearing of words in the formal sense or with hearing articulated sounds. Even less are we dealing with a formal or express command – with the exception of a few rare instances. Rather, what is involved is an interior sentiment experienced in moments of contemplative prayer, experienced while reflecting on how many souls might profit as much from reading about the mysteries of the Immaculate Virgin as Mother Agreda had in perceiving them. This is a sentiment connatural to souls who are blessed with profound mystical experiences. St. Teresa, in another style and in relation to a different proposal, tells us the same thing; but in part what she says is applicable here.⁴

I believe that the Venerable Mother for the most part composed the *MCG* as fruit of interior illuminations, which she had received during moments of her life given over to mental prayer and to loving reflection on the truths and mysteries of the Immaculate Virgin. It is quite natural that, feeling herself a spiritual daughter of the Immaculate Conception, and most devoted to this singular privilege she should attribute these illuminations to the Immaculate Virgin – sometimes also ascribing them to Jesus Christ, to God and to the Trinity, on occasion in the form of dialogue. But the words themselves were soundless; most of the time she heard them with the ear of her soul, but as distinctly as if she had heard them with her bodily ear. She experienced a phenomenon fairly similar to one experienced by St. Teresa of Jesus during that period when the Inquisition had prohibited the reading of many

⁴ ST. TERESA OF JESUS, *Life*, 16, 3. The Saint speaks of souls who have reached the third degree of prayer, or “third way of tending the garden.” God has done her such favors, that the soul desires everyone to understand her glory to the praise of God, desires to share her joy with all.

In our case Mother Agreda, a contemplative soul, desires to share knowledge of other gifts and wonders God had accomplished in the Mother of his Son, and which Mother Agreda had come to know by prayer.

spiritual books written in the form known as *romance*. This decision caused St. Teresa great pain, because it deprived her of reading books which benefited her. She appealed to the Lord; and “the Lord said to me, literally: ‘*Do not fret, because I will give you a living book.*’”⁵

This knowledge is attained in and received from the Spirit, when the soul reflects on the faith which works through charity, about which St. Paul speaks (cf. Gal 5:6), a reflection, therefore, activated by love. It is fruit of meditative and contemplative prayer, in so far as the intellect is not subject to the laws governing the natural mode of knowing, but rather receives both light and understanding according to the dispositions of the will in loving.

The style used by Mother Agreda in writing the *MCG* may be considered in itself as a literary genre, appropriate and adequate for a work on marian theology written by an authoress who is not a professional theologian. That notwithstanding, this work is a genuine mariology. For its contents are purely theological and spiritual rather than facts of history as such.

The Venerable Mother did not have a theological formation of the scholastic type. For that reason she could not write or compose a work of theological character on the basis of concepts or thematic expositions as this is done in scholastic treatises of mariology. It would have been extremely difficult for her to follow this method, or match the systematization generally cultivated by theologians of the school. She opted instead to follow other methods and

⁵ ST. TERESA OF JESUS, *Life*, 26, 6. The sorrow of the Saint consisted in this, that she was only permitted to read books in Latin which she did not understand. The classic style with few embellishments, typical of mid-16th century, reports exclusively what the Lord actually said. Mother Agreda, writing in the baroque age, embellishes and amplifies the words and phrases to express the interior locutions, embellishments not lacking in literary beauty.

employ other styles, as did St. Teresa in her book on *The Mansions*, included in her commentary on *The Canticle of Canticles*: the way of experience. In her *MCG*, in many passages, Mother Agreda talks of and expounds numerous questions on the basis of her extraordinary experiences.

In this case, the methodology most accessible to her and most appropriate for her project: viz., for the doctrinal development and explanation of the mysteries or events in the life of the Mother of Jesus, was to follow a chronological order, and so make known to others what she herself had learned by way of contemplative prayer.

Mother Agreda, therefore, had at her disposition an ample and precise theological knowledge in relation to the principal problems of mariology, a knowledge acquired in various ways: reading, conversations, listening to conferences and sermons, etc. What she surely did not possess, however, were the academic techniques and methods usually appropriate in composing an adequate exposition of all that she knew about the mystery of the Immaculate Virgin, collaborator in the work of Redemption.

This explains why she followed another method in her exposition, adopting the style of colloquy, characteristic of mental prayer. She set forth what she had learned in this way, in the same form in which the Virgin Mary, or Jesus Christ or the Trinity had revealed it to her.

Here knowledge acquired naturally via the daily reading of books and conversations with learned and devout men fuses with that sublime knowledge attained in discursive meditation and via loving contemplation of the mysteries of Jesus Christ and Mary Most Holy. It would not at all be easy to label each part and separate it from the others so as to identify what is the fruit of ordinary, contemporary erudition and what has its origin in an interior illumination,

fruit of contemplation and of the action of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is no doubt, however, that this fusion correctly describes the circumstances and interior state in which Mother Agreda composed the greater part of her work, and which in turn principally determined the particular style adopted for its composition: that of colloquy.⁶

d) I think we may identify this method of learning followed by Mother Agreda in questions of mariology with the “way of beauty,” the *via pulchitudinis*, as it has been called by Pope Paul VI. In so defining it the Pope indicated how it is “*accessible to all, including simple souls*,” distinct from the “way of truth,” or path generally trod by scholars and professors of theology.⁷

Great theologians and masters of the scholastic age recognize these two ways and teach the legitimacy and value of a theology and mariology of mind and heart: *mentis et cordis*. Some, however, have violently rejected this approach. The negative stance taken on this point by the famous Dominican, Melchior Cano, master of the great

⁶ No one should be surprised at the style adopted by Mother Agreda for her work. Since the middle ages spiritual authors had been employing the very same style, in greater or less proportions. To cite one example, which we will have occasion further on to examine, the Franciscan Ubertino of Casale employs this style in many places in his *Arbor Vitae*. On many occasions it is also the style of St. Teresa of Jesus. So also St. Brigit, St. Alonso de Orozco, recently canonized, and St. Teresa attribute to causes of an extraordinary kind: intellectual visions, interior locutions, etc, a great deal of knowledge acquired via contemplative prayer. It is necessary to take account of this key to the interpretation of mystical and spiritual literature. The work of Mother Agreda is a *Mystical City of God*.

⁷ “*How should Mary be presented adequately to the people of God, in such wise that an increase of marian devotion is fostered in them? To realize this there are two possible ways or approaches. In the first instance there is the way of truth, i.e., of biblical, historical, theological research... This is the way of the learned... But there is in addition to this another way, accessible to all, including simple souls: this is the way of beauty:*” PAUL VI, *Allocution at the close of the International Mariological-Marian Congress, Rome 1975* (AAS 64 [1975] p. 338).

theologians of the Salamanca school, is well known. Among his disciples were the Dominicans Juan de Orellana and Juan de Lorenzana of Jesus who rejected the teaching found in works of St. Teresa of Jesus, as well as those theologians who rejected the teaching of other spiritual masters of the same century.

During the 17th century the Venerable Mother Agreda fell victim to an essentially similar opposition and incomprehension on the part of some theologians who believed themselves in possession of all theological truth. This led them to interpret and condemn on scholastic criteria a hagiographical work filled with narrative theology, and in which on many occasions the authoress appealed to a teaching she had received by way of an interior and continuous communication with God. She was thus unfairly judged by the *Qualificatores* (examiners) of the tribunal of the Inquisition in Lograno.

These considerations reveal the character and the motive of the censure of a group of professors of the Faculty of Theology of the Sorbonne (Paris) in 1696. They were simply lacking in any appreciation of mystical and spiritual knowledge, and far too much under the influence of Jansenistic ideas concerning veneration and devotion to the Mother of God.

The theology of mind and heart, attempted by Contenson in the 17th century, with a distinctive kerygmatic orientation⁸ and rather less emphasis on spiritual and mystical theology, did not have anything in common either with the methodology or organization of theology during that epoch.⁹ The Church preoccupied at the moment with the juridical had given

⁸ V. CONTENSON, OP, *Theologia mentis et cordis, seu speculationes universae sacrae doctrinae, pietate temperatae...*: Tom. II, Liber X, *De Deo Conversante. Seu de oeconomia vitae, mortis et gloriae Redemptoris...* Diss. VI: *Mariologia*. Lugduni 1687, pp. 169-196.

⁹ The classic text-books on mystical-scholastic theology, like that of Fr. Joseph of the Holy Spirit, a Carmelite from Andalusia, did not see

no attention to the mysticism of St. John of the Cross and other masters of spirituality. The theologians too often were absorbed in cold and sterile speculation, wasting their energies on fruitless polemics among the theological schools, and preoccupied with thwarting the progress of currents and tendencies reflecting distinctively Protestant influences.

In such a context, made perfectly clear for us by the history of religion, what happened a century earlier to St. Teresa of Jesus, was, sadly and lamentably, repeated in the life of Mother Mary of Jesus of Agreda. The opinion of the censors and accusers of her writings prevailed, or more exactly the tribunal of the Inquisition gave ear to their uncontrolled foolishness. The root of the accusations was very similar in both cases. In the case of St. Teresa common sense eventually prevailed. Mother Agreda, however, was victim of the power and influence of certain theologians, who enslaved to an artificial academic system were simply mistaken about how to read and interpret her mariology. The error was one of perspective, stemming from intellectual myopia, in this case compounded by an anti-feminist obsession, similar to that under which Alonso de la Fuente and associates labored when censuring the books of St. Teresa of Jesus, now Doctor of the Church.

2. A BOOK DIFFICULT TO READ AND INTERPRET: CENSURES AND ACCUSATIONS

a) It is essential, not to say absolutely necessary, to keep in mind these principles and these events, and that from the start the reader of the *MCG* adopt a position enabling him to keep the work in proper perspective: the only vantage point

publication until well into the 18th century. So, too, other works of spiritual theology, mainly didactic in character.

from which he can read objectively, in the proper light, the pages of this work. Its history demonstrates clearly how the errors, which suspicious readers discovered within it, and censured with disproportionate rigor and harshness, were directly consequent on the fallacy of attempting to interpret a work as singular as the *MCG* outside its context, ignoring its hagiographical style and its distinctive features as a work of the baroque era.

Something similar has happened in the interpretation of books of other great mystical and spiritual writers. For example, books expounding the most sublime kind of mystical theology, those of the great Doctors, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Jesus, were accused before the Inquisition.

In regard to the censures and inquisitorial accusations, the *MCG* appears to be another chapter in the history of the accusations before the Inquisition against the books of the Mystical Doctor, with due allowance for differences in time.¹⁰ For us, this effectively constitutes a counsel to examine the facts from a different and appropriate perspective so as to avoid the mistakes of the accusers. To insist on their accusations today is an injustice and a failure in objectivity, an insistence without any foundation in reality.

It is well known that during her lifetime Mother Agreda was indicted and accused before the Spanish Inquisition in much the same way as was St. Teresa of Jesus. On more than one occasion the examiners of the Tribunal of Logrono visited the Conceptionist Monastery in Agreda to subject her to rigorous questioning in view of an informative judgment, whose purpose was to determine the character of her spiritual

¹⁰ See my studies: E. LLAMAS, OCD, *Santa Teresa de Jesús y la Inquisición española*, Madrid 1972; and *Teresa de Jesús y Juan de la Cruz ante la Inquisición: denuncias, procesos, sentencias...*, in *Cuadernos de Pensamiento* 7 (1993) 179-206.

comportment and the doctrine which she professed and imparted to her religious.

One of these visits was concluded by the examiner of the tribunal, Fray Antonio Gonzalez del Moral, a Trinitarian, on this occasion accompanied by the official Notary. At the end of their dialogue with the Venerable they confessed their “admiration” and recognized in her, as the official record records “*much virtue and great understanding of things pertaining to Sacred Scripture, acquired in prayer and continuous interior communion with God, rather than by study.*”¹¹

b) To put in perspective both the accusations against the MCG orchestrated outside Spain and in certain sectors of Spain itself from the 17th through the 19th century and the scant support given by the Church to her cause, one must remember that this work has been and still is today one of the most read of all Spanish literature, a fact amply demonstrated by its many editions and translations.¹²

The circulation which this work has won among those devoted to the Virgin Mary annuls the validity of the accusations. Simple folk who strive with love and without prejudice to approach the Immaculate Virgin via the *way of beauty* have discovered in this work the gospel image of Mary, that which the Church has offered us across the centuries, and have been able to relate spiritually to Her: to the Immaculate Virgin, the virginal Mother of the Son of God and collaborator with Him in the work of Redemption, the spiritual Mother of the Church and of each of the disciples

¹¹ See J. PÉREZ VILLANUEVA, *Historia de la Inquisición en España y America*, I (Madrid 1984) pp. 1072-1073. The officials of the Inquisition were so pleasantly surprised that they asked the Venerable Mother for icons and objects of devotion to take with them as souvenirs of the visit.

¹² See: MARÍA DE JESÚS DE AGREDA, *Mística Ciudad de Dios, Vida de María*, text edited in conformity with the ordinal autograph, Introduction, notes by Celestino Solaguren, OFM, Madrid 1970 (reprinted 1982), pp. CII-CIV. All references are to this edition.

of Jesus, model and exceptional exemplar of holiness for all the faithful. This is the image which in summary fashion the text of Vatican II, and the recent Popes who have interpreted it, present us.

The image of Mary, writes Pope Paul VI with the teaching of the Council in mind, is the *tota pulchra*, is the *speculum sine macula* (the “all fair” and the “mirror without blemish”), is the supreme ideal of perfection, which artists of every age have attempted to reproduce in their works, is the “Woman clothed by the sun” (Apoc 12:1) in whom the purest rays of human loveliness meet the heavenly, yet accessible rays of supernatural beauty... Mary is the “fullness of grace” (Lk 1:28); or we might possibly say: she is the “fullness of the Holy Spirit, whose light is reflected in her with incomparable splendor... We must admire Mary, fix our glance on her unsullied fairness, because all too often our eyes are bewildered and as it were blinded by illusory images of human beauty.”¹³

This is the precise, clear image of Mary which emerges from the pages of the *MCG*, and which illumines the texts of Mother Agreda. In such wise she admires the figure of Mary, fixing her eyes “on her unsullied loveliness,” on her immaculate purity since her predestination. This is no mere simple phrase, or pious figure of speech. It signals the method and the procedure which she has followed in the composition of her work.

For this reason the *MCG* has been a source of satisfaction for so many simple souls who have actually read it and encountered in it, with enjoyment and spiritual profit, the authentic image of Mary: the gospel image and the living image of Mary offered us by the Church.

¹³ PAUL VI, *op. cit.*, p. 338.