

## A RESPONSE TO JOHN HAUGHEY

It is my privilege to thank you, Professor Haughey, for inviting us to discern the implications for public life of doing theology with the assist of a charism. My task is to suggest additional approaches to tonight's theme, in order to promote further reflection. Thus, I am going to suggest two complementary resources for integrating holiness with public life understood as interaction beyond self, family, and friends. These powerful riches are mystical and monastic wisdom.

We short-circuit mysticism's power for integrating Christian holiness and public life if we approach mysticism with the recent tendency to view it as a matter of "higher consciousness" or as individual relationship to the Beloved.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, mystical refers to the unfathomable and now revealed divine love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. To what end is this encounter with God? For the sake of "good works, good works," Teresa of Avila says in *The Interior Castle*.<sup>2</sup> Traditional sensibility would support approaching mysticism within the contemporary image of a mystical-political axis in which one encounters God in the face of public life, that is immediately in the face of the suffering of the world. Here one could image holiness as "suffering unto God" as Johann Baptist Metz presents authentic spirituality as being toward God remembering others' suffering, expecting God's response and willing to act in solidarity with sufferers.<sup>3</sup> Or one could reflect on experiences of the sacred starting, as Ivone Gebara does in Brazil, facing her neighbors, poor women for whom the interconnected dominations of race, class, gender and the earth are the context for any consideration of holiness and its expression in theology.<sup>4</sup>

Continuing the focus on mysticism, we might explore just one tradition, for example John of the Cross's image of spiritual transformation, noting its intrinsic connection with public life. I find three interpreters of John of the Cross especially helpful for seeing this connection: Constance FitzGerald, Gustavo Gutiérrez and

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the meaning of mystical, see Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1991) 143-71. See also Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 265-343. On the relationship of mysticism to theology see Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Maiden MA: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle. The Seventh Dwelling Places*, chap. 4, #6.

<sup>3</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998); see James Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup>Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

Iain Matthew. Constance FitzGerald's exploration of impasse and darkness as the work of Holy Wisdom in relation to oppression and diminishment, especially the situation of women, has many implications for our convention theme. FitzGerald's most recent study of Edith Stein's mysticism of identification with her Jewish people continues this work.<sup>5</sup> Gutiérrez's address to the International St. John of the Cross Congress presents several features of John's teaching which "question us" about the depth of our love and help us with the dilemma of how to announce God's love in a situation where sixty percent of people live in dire poverty. What helps, Gutiérrez reminds us, is John's teaching on the gratuitousness of God's love, which supports our developing into being a living flame, having freedom for universal love as the goal of our detachment.<sup>6</sup>

A third interpreter, Iain Matthew, explains why John of the Cross regards prayer as a supreme value for the world. It is because, "it restores the right rhythm to the universe."<sup>7</sup> This rhythm begins with the impact of a self-lavishing God and the pulse continues in our receptive love, especially when this love is pure, that is detached from self-preoccupation and content with our incompleteness as actually being our dignity as hunger for God who alone can save. In *The Spiritual Canticle* John of the Cross is quite vigorous saying, "a little . . . pure love is . . . of more benefit to the Church, even though it seems to be doing nothing, than all . . . other works put together."<sup>8</sup> John's logic moves from his premise about love to its implications regarding prayer and what we might call public life. "Those who are very active and think that they are going to encircle the earth with their preaching . . . should realize that they would do the Church much more good, and please God much more . . . if they spent even half of this time being with God in prayer. . . ."<sup>9</sup> Iain Matthew synthesizes this theme noting the force of John's logic. Only God saves; pure love motivated by Jesus' crucified love opens the world to the gift of God; that love is at work in prayer. Thus prayer is *the* powerful agent of change.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Constance FitzGerald, "Impasse and Darkness," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1996) 410-57; and "The Conundrum of Suffering in the Carmelite Tradition," lecture at the Carmelite Forum, June 2000, publication forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "John of the Cross: A Latin American View," in *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1996) 320-27.

<sup>7</sup>Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995) 137.

<sup>8</sup>John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 29, #2.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., stanza 29, #3.

<sup>10</sup>Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 138.

Notice the implications for public life of John of the Cross's overall model of spiritual development. He begins with building a personal relationship to Jesus.<sup>11</sup> This first step, of course, raises the question of which Jesus one meets. Is it Jesus of Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*?<sup>12</sup> Is it Jesus of feminist biblical interpretation?<sup>13</sup> The next phase of spiritual development involves the dark night of the senses in which one receives what we might call the healing purification from consumerism, from instant gratification. Another phase of development, the night of the spirit, could be called healing purification from what means most to us, our sense of being an individual self, in order to love as widely as God loves in openness to all persons and the whole cosmos.<sup>14</sup> The implications for public life are obvious.

My second source for integrating holiness and public life is monastic wisdom. Its power is short-circuited by interpretations which stop with focus on its pertinence for a small, stable community. Consider instead the public implications of just Benedict's chapter on humility in the Rule. Here, in contrast to conventional notions of humility as self-effacement, is practical wisdom for public life. Can we listen to it as advice to us in our own public life, our own institutions? In summary, Benedict invites us to meet God here and now, accept God's will where our own control does not prevail, learn from others, see and accept ourselves for what we are and grow from that, live simply, respect and reverence others, trust our part of the world without having to wrench it to our own image, thus have the "perfect love that casts out fear."<sup>15</sup> Joan Chittister's commentary on the Rule maintains, "Humility, the lost virtue of the . . . century, is crying to heaven for rediscovery. The development of nations, the preservation of the globe, the achievement of human community may well depend on it."<sup>16</sup>

I hope these reflections on mysticism and monasticism, along with John Haughey's perceptive development of charism's influence on theology for public life, will stimulate lively discussion.

JOANN WOLSKI CONN  
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<sup>11</sup>John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book 1, chap. 13, #3.

<sup>12</sup>Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949).

<sup>13</sup>See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

<sup>14</sup>On the relationship between the dark nights of sense and spirit, John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, book 1, chap. 8.

<sup>15</sup>Summarized from *The Rule of Benedict*, chap. 7. See also Francis Kline, O.C.S.O., *Lovers of the Place: Monasticism Loose in the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup>Joan D. Chittister, O.S.B., *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 74-75.