

## **Avatar of the Impossible: Sor María de Ágreda and her *History of the Virgin***

This book does not lead to edification...It leads instead to the destruction of Christian piety; it resurrects the errors of Arius, Nestorius, Pelagius, Vigilantius, Photius, Baius, Jansen, and the Predestinarians; and its author is impudent, sacrilegious, blasphemous, idolatrous, a Pelagian, a Quietist, and a Lutheran.<sup>1</sup>

For any seventeenth century author to be compared to so many heretics by the theological faculty of the Sorbonne is quite extraordinary, and the same might be said for the provocative nature of the text being condemned by them. But for anyone so mercilessly reviled to be fast-tracked for canonization and proclaimed “Venerable” by the Catholic Church, and for that offensive text to receive an “Imprimatur” and a “Nihil Obstat” eventually is an even more astonishing achievement.

The author in question was a nun, and she was so anomalous in so many ways that escaping condemnation was only one of her many achievements. No stranger to controversy, María Fernández Coronel y Arana (1602-1665), abbess of the convent of the Immaculate Conception in Ágreda, Spain, can claim more unique distinctions than most other nuns of her era, as well as a wider and more impressive array of miraculous feats, most of which are considered ridiculously impossible in our day and age.<sup>2</sup>

Better known as Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda, or, simply as María de Ágreda, this Franciscan nun not only became an ecstatic levitating mystic at the age of eighteen, but also a bilocating missionary who – without ever setting foot outside her Spanish convent –

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<sup>1</sup>*Censura Sacrae Facultatis Theologiae Parisiensis*, quoted in Zótico Royo Campos, *Agredistas y Antiagredistas. Estudio Histórico-Apológico* (Murcia, 1929), p. 327.

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed account and analysis of Sor María’s miraculous feats see Carlos Eire, *They Flew: A History of the Impossible* (Yale University Press, 2023), chapters 6 and 7.

miraculously crossed the Atlantic Ocean and much of North America over five hundred times to evangelize the Jumano natives in the northern reaches of New Spain, in the present-day American states of Texas and New Mexico, where she is still remembered in local lore as *The Lady in Blue* or *La Dama Azul*, due to the azure cloak of her Conceptionist Franciscan habit.<sup>3</sup>

These impressive miracles, in turn, eventually earned her the right to claim yet another unique accomplishment, that of becoming a close confidant and advisor of King Philip IV of Spain, one of the most powerful monarchs on earth. Between 1643, when they first met, and 1665, when they both died, she and the troubled Hapsburg king would write over three hundred letters to each other, most of which dealt with intimate details of the king's personal life and his affairs of state.<sup>4</sup> Her influence at the royal court was surprisingly substantial despite her physical absence from it, for King Philip continually relied on her advice and her prayers, not just for personal needs, especially his chronic guilt and his mental and spiritual despair, but also for matters involving domestic and foreign policy. Moreover, the speed with which their letters were ferried back and forth was astounding for that day and age, proof positive of the significance the king assigned to this correspondence and to María's role at his court.

But, as if claiming mystical ecstasies, levitations, hundreds of bilocations to another continent, and obtaining a role as informal confessor to her king were not bold enough, Sor María also dared to claim an intimate relationship with the Virgin Mary and to assume the mantle

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<sup>3</sup>Sor María's definitive hagiography is that of José Jiménez Samaniego, *Relación de la Vida de la Venerable Madre Sor María de Jesús* (Barcelona, 1687). For the most recent biography see: See Marilyn H. Fedewa, *María of Ágreda, Mystical Lady in Blue* (University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> These letters were eventually published: *Cartas de la Venerable Madre Sor María de Ágreda y del Señor Rey Don Felipe IV*, edited by Francisco Silvela, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1885-86).

of a heavenly scribe, not much different from that of the four evangelists. Her *History of the Virgin Mary*, which she claimed the Mother of God had revealed to her was a very detailed biography nearly a quarter million words in length, nine times longer than the four canonical gospels combined. In this text, Sor María proclaimed that the Virgin Mary had been immaculately conceived, a hotly contested theological proposition that would not be declared a dogma until the nineteenth century. Sor María's text also proclaimed the Virgin Mary to be co-redemptrix, co-mediatrix, and co-judge of the human race –along with her son Jesus – and, in addition, presented her as the head of the infant Church during the interval between the resurrection of Jesus and the time of her own death. Needless to say, such a text could not help but be controversial.

### **The impossible autobiography of the Virgin Mary**

Sor María's *History of the Virgin*, published posthumously under a new title, *The Mystical City of God*,<sup>5</sup> enraged many theologians at the Sorbonne, principally because it was an impossible phenomenon that defied and contradicted ordinary expectations. In many ways, it was more shocking than levitation and bilocation, those two other “impossible” miracles attributed to her. Simply put, her *History of the Virgin* is an astounding miracle claim that tested the limits of reason and belief, for it required assent to the proposition that a cloistered nun in a remote corner of Spain had gained direct access to divine revelations that had never been made before. The challenge posed by Maria's claim that she was the Virgin Mary's scribe was

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<sup>5</sup>*Mystica ciudad de Dios, milagro de su omnipotencia y abismo de la gracia. Historia divina, y vida de la Virgen Madre de Dios y Señora Nuestra santísima, restauradora de la culpa de Eva y medianería de la gracia, manifestada en estos ultimos siglos por la misma Señora a su esclava sor Maria de Jesús* (Madrid, 1670)

anomalous, astounding, and unprecedented, unlike any other in Christian history. Its impossibility was not only historical, but theological, and it derived whatever credibility could be assigned to it from a crucial distinction made concerning revelations in Catholic teaching .

According to principles laid down in the second century by various Fathers of the Church, which were later elaborated upon and are still in place today, Catholics are to believe that revelations from God are possible indeed, but that there are two very different kinds of revelations: universal and private. Universal revelations are contained in the Bible and in the Apostolic tradition of the Church. Such revelations ended in the first century, with the death of Jesus's apostles, and have to be believed by all the faithful. Private revelations can in fact occur every now and then to rare individuals such as María, but to be considered of genuine divine origin these revelations cannot in any way contradict universal revelations or add significant new details to them. Consequently, since it is *impossible* for a private revelation to be genuine if any part of it is deemed to be in conflict with universal revelations, all private revelations need to be scrutinized by the Church.

Yet, even when officially approved, the faithful are not obliged to believe in them. The approval given, then, if given at all, is passive: all the Church can do is to say that approved private revelations contain nothing contrary to faith and morals and that the faithful are free to choose whether to believe them or not. And if anyone does believe in a private revelation, a further distinction is made, succinctly expressed by Pope Benedict XIV in the eighteenth century: "It is not obligatory *nor even possible* to give private revelations the assent of *Catholic faith*, but *only of human faith*, in conformity with the dictates of prudence, which presents them to us as

probable and worthy of pious belief.”<sup>6</sup> And it is precisely this subtle distinction that placed María’s revelations in her *History of the Virgin* in the realm of the impossible, due to how many of the revelations made in that text that could be interpreted as *new* or *additional* revelations. In other words, María’s private revelations could be definitely deemed *impossible*, and therefore heretical, fraudulent, or demonic. And this dark cloud of suspicion, which hung over her text from the start, never fully dissipated, despite all the efforts made by her devotees to defend its divine origins down to our own day. So, to some extent, the text has never ceased to be a riddle or to be deemed *impossible*, at least in some circles.

The riddle of María’s text is profound, for it is not just unprecedented, but also woven from paradoxical claims that determine its very structure. For starters, the book is a new revelation that is *not* equal to the gospels or intended to eclipse them, but actually renders them insufficient; its Virgin Mary is fully human, but substantially *different* from all other humans, born free of the stain of original sin and quasi-divine; and although she is *not* equal to her son Jesus, the Christ, María’s Virgin Mary is as indispensable as He is for salvation and intercession. In addition, its scribe, Sor Maria, is a poorly educated sinner and a “vile worm”, but she is capable of encountering the Holy Trinity and the entire heavenly court and of apprehending the deepest mysteries of existence. And these contradictions are only a thin layer of frost on the proverbial tip of the iceberg, so to speak; which in this case happens to be immense.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>*Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1911, “Private Revelations”, citing *De canon.*, III, liii,xxii, II.

<sup>7</sup>For a sympathetic analysis of María’s claims for The Mystical City, see Clark Colahan: “Mary of Agreda, the Virgin Mary, and Mystical Knowing,” *Studia Mystica*, 11.3 (Fall 1988), pp. 53-65.

### A Fifth Gospel?

María's text is undeniably unique in content and scope, but it is not totally unprecedented, much like her bilocations, which were an extension of an existing and growing trend. Texts that filled in the gaps in canonical New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus abounded in the early centuries of Christian history, and some details found in these texts had made their way into legends accepted into Catholic and Orthodox traditions despite the fact that such texts were deemed unworthy of inclusion in the Christian Bible. The cult of Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, which developed in Eastern as well as Western Christianity around the fourth century, is one of the most salient examples of the acceptance of extra-biblical narratives.<sup>8</sup> Much of the information on Saint Anne eventually accepted as "fact" in medieval Christendom came from a text known as the *Gospel of James* or the *Protoevangelium of James*<sup>9</sup> – which claimed to be as old as the canonical gospels – and Sor María undoubtedly drew from the legends engendered by this text. But Sor María did more than pass on these legends, she elaborated on them and went way beyond the details contained in them.

So, while there was precedent for adding historical details to the canonical gospels, Sor María truly broke with that precedent, insofar as her details were not ostensibly recorded in first century Palestine, but were being revealed fifteen centuries later, to a cloistered nun in a Spanish village. That enormous leap over time and space was something definitely unprecedented in

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<sup>8</sup>See: Virginia Nixon, *Mary's mother: Saint Anne in late medieval Europe* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); and Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, *Die Verehrung der heiligen Anna in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>See: *The Protoevangelium of James*, edited and translated by Lily C. Vuong, (Cascade Books, 2019); and her *Gender and purity in the Protevangelium of James* (Tübingen, 2013) /

Christian history, but it did have some recent late medieval and early modern antecedents, all of which it surpassed. Those antecedents can be found in certain strains of medieval piety and medieval mysticism, especially in the practice of meditating on the details found in the gospels, and in the intertwining of those meditations with mystical ecstasy. The most salient and most influential example of the sort of meditation that gave rise to the adding of detail to gospel narratives was *The Life of Christ*, a devotional text written by Ludolph of Saxony (1300-1377), also known as Ludolph the Carthusian, which was a commentary on the gospels heavily laced with patristic citations, moral and doctrinal lessons, and many prayers, all combined with meditative techniques through which readers could immerse and project themselves onto scenes and events in the life of Jesus, and especially his passion and crucifixion.<sup>10</sup> First printed in 1474, and translated into English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Catalan, Irish, and Swedish, this text had an immense influence on late medieval monastic and lay piety throughout Western Christendom, including Spain, where it inspired Garcia de Cisneros (1455-1510), abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat, to write his *Book of Exercises for the Spiritual Life*,<sup>11</sup> which marked the beginning of a century of Spanish predominance in the field of devotional literature, and, in turn, was the inspiration for Saint Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*,<sup>12</sup> as

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<sup>10</sup>*Meditationis Vita Christi*. See Sarah McNamer, "The Origins of the 'Meditationes vitae Christi,'" *Speculum*, 84 (2009), pp. 905-955.

<sup>11</sup>*Exercitatorio de la vida espiritual* (Montserrat, 1500).

<sup>12</sup>See: Rogelio Garcia Mateo, *El misterio de la vida de Cristo en los Ejercicios ignacianos y en el Vita Christi Cartujano* (Madrid, 2002 ); Paul J. Shore, *The Vita Christi of Ludolph of Saxony and its influence on the Spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola* (St. Louis, 1998); Charles Abbott Conway, *The Vita Christi of Ludolph of Saxony and late medieval devotion centred on the incarnation* (Salzburg, 1976).

well as for many similar texts and for the piety of countless male and female monastics, including Sor María herself, eventually.

Within the monastic environment, these meditations on the life of Christ quickly merged with ecstatic mysticism, giving the gospel details a new revelatory dimension, in which the text became “live,” and in which the ecstatic mystic could see and hear things not described in the text itself. In Spain, the prime exemplar of this new sort of ecstatic revelation was Sor Juana de la Cruz (1481-1534),<sup>13</sup> abbess at the Franciscan convent of Santa María de la Cruz, in Cubas, near Toledo, who would reveal the details of her intimate encounters with Christ and the Virgin Mary to audiences that included some of the most powerful elites in Spain while enraptured, laying prone and perfectly still, as if dead, with her eyes closed. Sor Juana, who was considered a living saint and was the subject of two published hagiographies even before her death, which would have been available to María.<sup>14</sup> Although Juana was never canonized and was largely forgotten by historians until the twentieth century, she was still extremely well known in María’s own day, especially in Spanish monastic circles, and should be seen as her precursor and role model.<sup>15</sup> Juana’s influence on other well-known saintly nuns will be analyzed in another chapter.

Sor María’s text is a historical narrative, but its context is theological and its intent and

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<sup>13</sup>See Ronald E. Surtz, *The Guitar of God: Gender, Power, and Authority in the Visionary World of Mother Juana de la Cruz*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup>Antonio Daza, *Historia, vida y milagros, éxtasis y revelaciones de la bienaventurada virgen santa Juana de la Cruz* (Madrid, 1610, 1614, 1617); and Pedro Navarro, *Favores de el Rey del Cielo hechos a su esposa la santa Juana de la Cruz* (Madrid, 1622).

<sup>15</sup>The parallels between Sor Juana and Sor María become clearly evident in Jessica Boon’s, “Introduction,” to *Mother Juana de la Cruz, 1481–1534: Visionary Sermons*, edited by J. Boon and R. E. Surtz, (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2016) pp. 1-33



horizon are quasi-apocalyptic: the title itself, *The Mystical City of God*, is an allusion to the New Jerusalem that descends from the new heavens to the new earth in the Book of Revelation 21:1-3, “God’s dwelling place with people.” The New Jerusalem, then, is a metaphor for the body of the Virgin Mary – a divinized human body which gave birth to the redeeming God incarnate– which makes her co-redemptrix of the human race, or, as the title of the book proclaims, the very “mystical” city of God herself, in whom God dwells in his fullness.

Moreover, the reason given by God and the Virgin to Sor María for suddenly revealing truths about the distant past sixteen hundred years after redemption was wrought by Jesus Christ is also apocalyptic in dimension: María’s world, God declares, is worse off than the world was when He became incarnate in the Virgin Mary’s womb: It is a world on the brink of annihilation and sorely in need of a new remedy. “For now this is the hour and the opportune time to let men know the just of cause of my anger,” says God to Sor María, “and they are now justly charged and convinced of their guilt... now that the world has reached this wretched century... when eternal night approaches for the wicked.”<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, the remedy proposed by God to María is not turning to Christ or paying closer attention to the gospels – as Protestants would expect to hear – but turning to the Virgin Mary and relying more intensely than ever on her intercession. Quoting God the Father directly, Sor Maria writes: “I want to make known to mortals how much her intercession is worth, who brought them redemption from their sins by giving mortal life in her womb to the immortal God.”<sup>17</sup> This is an aggressive Mariology, defiantly anti-Protestant even if it is not consciously so.

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<sup>16</sup>MCD I.1.1.9; (P1807, v.1, pp. 32-33)

<sup>17</sup>MCD, I.1.1.9; (P1807, v.1, p. 33)

It is an exaltation of the Virgin Mary that reflects her place in popular and monastic Catholic piety and also enhances it, providing a theological matrix for that enhancement. And it is a Mariology that springs from within, so to speak, from the very depths of female monastic spirituality and mysticism, rather than from the battlefield of scholarly male-dominated clerical polemics. This Mariology is theologically sophisticated, in its own way, but as Teresa of Avila might have put it, it is definitely not the work of *letrados*, that is, of learned men, although some critics would later contest the book's authorship, arguing that its handling of biblical texts and scholastic theology was far too dextrous for any woman.<sup>18</sup> Its wellspring is mystical rather than scholastic, and its conduit is a nun from the boondocks with no formal education. It matters little – or not at all – that she has never met a Protestant, much less debated with one. Her message is thoroughly Catholic and, whether she knows it or not, also incandescently anti-Protestant.

Sor María's message is at once historical and ahistorical. A post-Renaissance woman who has obviously received a good education beyond the confines of any school – although she was once described as a “simple rustic” by a dismissive priest – María shows ample acquaintance with the Bible, some apocryphal texts and some of the Fathers, some scholastic theology, and a fair amount of early church history, and she is acutely aware of how essential it is for her revelations to be set in a historical perspective. Nonetheless, she does so by denying one of the central tenets of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation: the privileging of the New Testament and the Apostolic Age. That was a special time, she admits, but so is her own day and age. Revelation is not limited to the Bible or the early church. God speaks to Sor María and she

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<sup>18</sup>See Benito Mendía, “En torno al problema de la autenticidad de la Mística Ciudad de Dios,” *Archivo Ibero-Americano* 42.165-168 (1982), pp. 391-430.

quotes Him:

I did not reveal these mysteries in the primitive Church because they are so magnificent, that the faithful would have been lost in scrutinizing and admiring them at a time when it was more necessary to establish firmly the law of grace and of the Gospel. Although all such mysteries and the Gospel are in perfect harmony with each other, human ignorance might have recoiled at their magnitude and suffered doubt, when faith in the incarnation and redemption and the precepts of the new law of the Gospel were still in their infancy....If the world was then not yet capable of fully obeying the law of grace and fully assenting to faith in the Son, so much less was it prepared to be introduced into the mysteries of His Mother and to faith in her. And now the need for these mysteries is so much greater, that I am compelled to reveal them.”<sup>19</sup>

Lest anyone doubt Sor Maria’s role in conveying previously hidden mysteries about the Virgin Mary’s role in redemption, God adds: “I do not intend that your descriptions and declarations of the life of the Blessed Virgin shall be mere opinions or contemplations, but certain truth.” To further confirm His message, God then repeats some key words of Jesus in the gospels, giving them a Mariological twist: “They that have ears to hear, let them hear. Let those who thirst come to the living waters and leave the dried-out cisterns; let those that are seeking the light follow it to the end. Thus speaks the Lord, God Almighty!”<sup>20</sup> And what is revealed by God and the Virgin Mary to María is astounding.

Relatively little of the narrative of María’s text –which begins before the birth of the Virgin Mary and extends past her life on earth– can be found in the New Testament. Needless to say, the amount of detail provided by María is startling, even overwhelming, but perhaps a clear reflection of how much of non-biblical tradition, and legends from apocryphal texts could be fused with biblical accounts and a lively imaginative piety in a convent. Throughout the entire

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<sup>19</sup>MCD I.1.1.10; (P1807, v.1, p. 34)

<sup>20</sup>MCD I.1.1.10; (P1807, v.1, pp. 34-35)

text, the main thrust of the narrative is to highlight the absolutely crucial role played by the Virgin Mary as co-redemptrix with her son, the God-man Jesus. To better understand why her dizzying *History of the Virgin* ranks alongside her levitations and bilocations as an extreme miracle, and as something seemingly *impossible*, one must grapple with the details of its major themes, analyzing the contents of each of its four sections one by one.

### **Part One: *The Conception***

That María should emphasize the Immaculate Conception of Mary in the first section is not surprising at all. This was a teaching staunchly defended by the Franciscan order, and since María belonged to the Conceptionist branch of that order, she was naturally devoted to promoting that teaching. What is surprising is the high level of divinization proclaimed for the Virgin Mary in María's revelations. The Virgin is not just conceived without original sin, but is actually raised above humanity in an unprecedented way. According to María's narrative, as the pre-ordained time for her conception by Ana and Joachim arrived --which was achieved through the kind of prelapsarian, passionless, rational, and lust-free sexual intercourse that Saint Augustine ascribed to Adam and Eve before their Fall -- the three persons of the Holy Trinity conferred with each and said:

Now is the time to begin the work we have approved and to create that pure creature and that soul, which is to find grace in our eyes above all others. Let us furnish her with the richest gifts and let us deposit in her alone the great treasures of our grace... Let us create this creature in total sanctity and perfection, so that the disorder of the first sin will have no part in her. Let us create a soul that we reflects our desires, which is a fruit of our attributes, a marvel of our infinite power, unsullied and without touch or blemish of the sin of Adam... Let her be the sole creature in whom we restore and execute that which humans have lost in their deviation from our original intention. Let Her be a unique image and likeness of our Divinity and let her be in our presence for all eternity the

culmination of our approval and delight.’<sup>21</sup>

The intimacy with the Trinity displayed in this passage is typical of the entire text, which continually expresses God’s thoughts or statements in great detail, with an air of authority. Moreover, what God has to say about the Virgin Mary makes her superhuman in many ways. As María puts it, the Virgin is “the most exquisite treasure of all in heaven and earth, a pure creature, inferior only to God and superior to all of creation.”<sup>22</sup> She is exquisite beyond compare, but not immune to pain, however. On the contrary, she is pre-ordained to suffer more than any other human being because her role is to share in the work of redemption, which involves sacrifice. But in every other respect, she is endowed “in a miraculous and supernatural way” that frees her from ignorance and many of the vicissitudes of fallen human nature. She is blessed with “an infused knowledge and habit of all the virtues and of all the natural arts,” and since this knowledge was infused directly by God, “she knew and was conversant with the whole natural and supernatural order of things.” From the first instant in the womb of her mother, we are told, “she was wiser, more prudent, more enlightened, and more capable of comprehending God and all his works, than all the creatures that have existed or ever will exist in eternity, excepting, of course, her most holy Son.”<sup>23</sup> We are also told that at the very instant of her birth, as she emerged from her mother’s womb, “she began to seek a remedy for humankind and commenced her work as mediatrix, advocate, and restorer.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> MCD I.1.14.191; (P1807, v.1, pp. 176-177); Blatter paragraph 192.

<sup>22</sup> MCD I.1.21.327; (P1807, v.1, p. 296); Blatter paragraph 328.

<sup>23</sup> MCD I.1.16.226; (P1807, v.1, p. 296); Blatter paragraph 227.

<sup>24</sup> MCD I.1.16.232; (P1807, v.1, p. 296); Blatter paragraph 233.

Given her supernatural talents, and her awareness of the role she is to play in human history, the Virgin Mary has a most unusual infancy and childhood: she was born with the power of speech, but declined to use it until the time when other children naturally begin to speak; she never once disobeyed her parents, or caused them any grief; at the age of two she began to engage in acts of charity to help the poor; and at the age of three she was taken to Jerusalem, to be educated at the Temple until she reached puberty. Once there, she immediately began to pray ceaselessly and to have constant mystical ecstasies and, not surprisingly, took a vow of celibacy. As one might also expect, she was assailed by the devil, but was also constantly guarded by a squadron of angels who helped her prevail against them; and, as is the lot of all mystics, she also went through a temporary dark night of the soul when God intentionally deprived her of visions. At the Temple she became thoroughly familiar with the Bible, as no other human being ever had before.

The Most High made known to her all its mysteries and sacraments; and she dealt with and discoursed about them in her conferences with her holy guardian angels...If this sovereign mistress had written what she understood, we would have many other texts of sacred Scripture; and we would also be able to reach a perfect understanding of the deep meanings and mysteries of those texts preserved by the Church.<sup>25</sup>

While still at the Temple, the Virgin Mary's parents both died, so, in essence, they played a very minor role in her rearing and education. But her bond to them remained deep. She not only knew when they were pre-ordained to pass away, but also received a special favor from God when the time came for her mother Anne's death: like Sor María herself, the Virgin was granted

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<sup>25</sup> MCD I.2.4.474; (P1807, v. 2, p. 50); Blatter paragraph 476

the ability to bilocate.<sup>26</sup> “That night, God commanded the guardian angels of the most Holy Mary to carry her really and personally to be with her ailing mother,” said María, “and for one of them to take her place, assuming an aerial body that looked just like hers.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Part Two: *The Incarnation***

The second section on the Virgin Mary’s role in the incarnation, birth, and early infancy of the Son of God is as full of startling details as all the others. Two such details are highly representative of the text’s penchant for revealing and emphasizing the constant interaction of the Virgin Mary with the supernatural realm. In the pregnant Virgin’s journey to Bethlehem with her ever-startled husband Joseph, for instance, we are told that God assigned thousands of angels to guide and protect them.

These heavenly squadrons marched along as their escort in human forms visible to the heavenly Lady, more refulgent than thousands of suns... Besides these ten thousand aforementioned angels there were many others, who descended from heaven as messengers of the eternal Father to his Onlybegotten made man and to his most holy Mother, and who ascended from earth as their ambassadors with messages and dispatches from them to the eternal Father.<sup>28</sup>

The details of the birth of Jesus, and of how his mother remained virginally intact are among the most graphic and supernaturally-charged in the entire text. About an hour before giving birth, we are told, the Virgin Mary went into an ecstatic rapture in which she “saw

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<sup>26</sup>Curiously, María’s description of this bilocation, which would be the first of many for the Virgin, differs from those she proposed in 1650 for her own bilocations. María herself would never explicitly claim that she was carried by angels to New Mexico, preferring to say that she did not know exactly how she got there, or whether it was a physical or spiritual phenomenon. In her *Mystical City*, however, the Virgin Mary is always transported by angels. See “Report to Father Manero, Colahan,” *Visions*, p. 127.

<sup>27</sup>MCD I.2.19.716; (P1807, v.1, p. 296); Blatter paragraph 719

<sup>28</sup>MCD II.4.9.456; (P1807, v.4, pp. 91-92)

intuitively the Godhead itself in such glory and fulness of comprehension as all the capacity of men and angels could not describe or fully understand.”<sup>29</sup> That ecstasy climaxed with the newborn Jesus “disengaging from and bidding farewell to the sacred bridal chamber” of Mary’s womb. Instead of this birth being excruciatingly painful, like all others since Eve’s expulsion from Eden, that moment caused inexpressible joy and delight in Mary’s “virginal body and soul,” along with “divine effects that exceed all human thoughts.” In addition, as Mary’s face “emitted rays of light, like a beautiful crimson sun” her body was so “spiritualized, beautiful and refulgent that she did not seem to be a human creature” and her soul was “elevated in the Divinity and she herself was entirely deified.”<sup>30</sup>

The birthing itself was totally miraculous, for the infant Jesus did not pass through his mother’s birth canal. Instead, he emerged suddenly, as the Virgin Mary knelt in ecstasy, with all the refulgence of his divinity “pure and disengaged,” unattached to a placenta or umbilical cord, thus “leaving unimpaired the virginal integrity” of his mother,<sup>31</sup> much in the same supernatural way as he would later enter any locked room— after his resurrection— without opening its door.

The infant God therefore was brought forth from the virginal chamber unencumbered by any corporeal or material substance foreign to Himself. But He came forth glorious and transfigured for the divine and infinite wisdom decreed and ordained that the glory of his most holy soul should in his birth overflow and communicate itself to his body, participating in the gifts of glory in the same way as happened afterwards in his Transfiguration on mount Tabor.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>MCD II.4.10.473; (P1807, v.4, p. 107)

<sup>30</sup>MCD II.4.10.475; (P1807, v.4, p. 109)

<sup>31</sup>MCD II.4.10.477; (P1807, v.4, p. 111)

<sup>32</sup>MCD II.4.10.479;l (P1807, v.4, pp. 113-114); On the Transfiguration see Matthew 17:2; on Jesus and his ability to get through locked doors and walls see John 20:19.



Her spouse Joseph was there too, watching in wonder, along with a throng of angels, two of whom – the archangels Michael and Gabriel– acted as heavenly midwives.

They stood by at a proper distance in human corporeal forms at the moment when the incarnate Word, exited the virginal chamber into the light, by his divine power, and they received Him in their hands with incomparable reverence. And, in the same manner as a priest holds aloft the sacred host to the people for adoration, so these two celestial ministers presented to the divine Mother’s eyes her glorious and resplendent Son.<sup>33</sup>

### **Part Three: *The Transfixion***

The third section on the Virgin Mary’s participation in the public ministry, passion, and resurrection of Jesus focuses on Mary’s crucial role in the redemption of the human race. This role extends far beyond conceiving and giving birth to Jesus, rearing him, preparing him for his ministry, and aiding him in myriad ways; it also involves sharing in her son’s redemptive suffering. The extent to which this sharing is emphasized is extreme, for it begins at her birth, intensifies with her pregnancy, and continues unbroken through the passion and death of Jesus.

The presence of Christ in her body, we are told, helped her bring to fruition “the impetuosity of her desire to assist and save mankind,” which was present in her from infancy. Filled with this love and charity, she would, have delivered herself an infinite number of times to the flames, if necessary or feasible, or to the knife, or to the most unbearable torments, or to death for their salvation....And whatever all men have suffered from the beginning of the world until now, and whatever they will suffer until its end, would have seemed a trivial matter for this most merciful loving Mother. Therefore, let mortals and sinners recognize what they owe to most holy Mary.”<sup>34</sup>

The Virgin Mary’s role in redemption is not simply pre-ordained, since she is conceived free of original sin in order to bring God the Son into the world as a man, but paradoxically depends

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<sup>33</sup>MCD II.4.10.480; (P1807, v.4, p. 115)

<sup>34</sup>MCD II.3.3.32; (P1807, v.3, p. 24)

upon her free will, which she employs to counterbalance and undo the misuse of free will by Eve in the garden of Eden. On this point, Sor María's text displays an impressive level of theological sophistication, beyond what some male clerics would think possible for any cloistered nun.

A great wonder, indeed, and worthy of our admiration, that all these mysteries...should be entrusted to a humble maiden by the Almighty and made wholly dependent upon her *fiat*... He could not proceed without the most holy Mary's cooperation and without her free consent. For He wished to achieve the culmination of all His external works in Her and through Her and He wished that we should owe this benefit to this Mother of wisdom and our Reparatrix.<sup>35</sup>

Devotion to the Seven Sorrows of Mary --the *Mater Dolorosa*, or Sorrowful Mother-- was extremely popular in Spain, where images of Our Lady of Sorrows abounded, and María's text is in many ways an extended meditation on this tradition of affective piety and the iconography that accompanied it.<sup>36</sup> The Virgin's suffering is constant and carefully detailed throughout the narrative of *The Mystical City*, adding texture to events in the childhood of Jesus narrated in the gospels, such as the flight to Egypt,<sup>37</sup> or the panic created by him when he chose to remain behind at the Temple in Jerusalem without telling his family.<sup>38</sup> María's text makes it clear that Mary's suffering surpasses that of ordinary mortals. Concerning the episode at the Temple, for

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<sup>35</sup>MCD II.3.10.136; (P1807, v.3, pp. 98-99)

<sup>36</sup>This devotion was extremely popular throughout the Hispanic world. For a representative example see the anthology of José Vidal, *Memorias tiernas, dispertador afectuoso, y devociones practicas con los Dolores de la Santissima Virgen* (Mexico, 1686; Antwerp 1695).

<sup>37</sup>Matthew 2:13–23. This story can also be found in some apocryphal texts such as the *Protoevangelion of James* (2<sup>nd</sup> century) and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (7<sup>th</sup> century), which indirectly influenced medieval legends and iconography.

<sup>38</sup>Luke 2:41-52. This story is also found in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (2<sup>nd</sup> century), which also influenced medieval legends and iconography.

instance, which was the third of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, she had this to say: “Not even all the pain suffered by all the martyrs ever reached the height of the pain endured by the most holy Mary in this trial.”<sup>39</sup>

In addition to focusing on the Virgin’s suffering, *The Mystical City* also stresses the intensively active and pivotal role played by her in the public ministry of Jesus. While she hardly ever appears in the narratives of the canonical gospels during the adult life of Jesus –save for her dramatic participation in the wedding at Cana,<sup>40</sup> her attempt to visit Jesus while he was preaching to a large crowd,<sup>41</sup> and her silent presence at the crucifixion<sup>42</sup> – the Virgin Mary is constantly at Jesus’s side in María’s text, including major events such as the Transfiguration at Mount Tabor, to which she was ferried by angels, along with Elijah and Moses.<sup>43</sup> And whenever she is not present physically, she knows exactly what is transpiring and is there by his side mystically, as at his baptism,<sup>44</sup> his temptations in the desert,<sup>45</sup> and his Last Supper.<sup>46</sup> She also instructs the Apostles,<sup>47</sup> and receives constant revelations from God.

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<sup>39</sup>MCD III.5.4.752; (P1807, v.5, p. 46); Blatter paragraph 41

<sup>40</sup>John 2:1-11

<sup>41</sup>Mark 3:31–35; Matthew 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21

<sup>42</sup>John 19:25

<sup>43</sup>MCD III.6.6.388-391; Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36

<sup>44</sup>MCD III.5.25; Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34

<sup>45</sup>MCD III.5.26; Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13

<sup>46</sup>MCD III.6.9-11; Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–39; John 13:1–17:26

<sup>47</sup>MCD III.6.3

The most significant feature of this part of *The Mystical City* is its constant focus on the immersion of the Virgin Mary in the passion of her son, which is described in such abundant detail that it served as the template for Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ," which created a firestorm of controversy with its graphic and bloody depiction of the abuse and torture endured by Jesus. Without a doubt, María's passion narrative draws upon, reflects, and expands upon a genre of devotional literature and affective piety that became increasingly popular in the late middle ages and captured the early modern Spanish imagination with great intensity. Two obvious medieval sources of inspiration for this piety were the rosary, especially its five "sorrowful mysteries," and the stations of the cross, which focus entirely on the suffering and death of Jesus.<sup>48</sup> In addition, passion treatises that paid equal attention to the physicality and sufferings of Jesus and his mother – "the passion of the two" – began to flow from Spanish presses in the early sixteenth century and remained in high demand for several generations, well into the eighteenth century, reaching their peak during María's lifetime. Treatises of this sort emphasized not only the Virgin Mary's emotional suffering, but also her physical pain, along with its redemptive value.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, this intense focus on the passion of Christ and his mother transcended the rosary, the stations of the cross, and the literature in which it was featured and promoted. During

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<sup>48</sup>See Nathan Mitchell, *The mystery of the rosary: Marian devotion and the reinvention of Catholicism* (New York University Press, 2009); Herbert Thurston, S.J., *The stations of the cross: An account of their history and devotional purpose* (London: Burns & Oates, 1914).

<sup>49</sup>See Jessica Boon, "The Agony of the Virgin: The Swoons and Crucifixion of Mary in Sixteenth Century Castilian Passion Treatises," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 38.1 (2007), pp. 3-25. See also Boon's "Introduction" to her *Mother Juana de la Cruz, 1481-1534: Visionary Sermons*, esp. pp. 10-11 and 20-24.

the seventeenth century, especially, interest in the passion permeated Spanish religious life and was reflected, expressed, and magnified very physically in ritual and sacred art, through the production of life-like paintings, statues, and effigies of the suffering Jesus and Virgin Mary,<sup>50</sup> and the elevation of Holy Week into the most significant sacred time of the year and of Good Friday as the supreme feast, not only in the liturgical calendar, but also in the public ritual life of communities large and small.<sup>51</sup> Graphic as much of this art was, sometimes it could be outstripped in devotional treatises, where meditations on the sufferings of the Virgin Mary could suggest images that no artist would dare to depict and no church could ever display, in which Mary herself ends up being crucified. One such text was Francisco de Osuna's immensely popular *Spiritual Alphabet*, which contained the following meditation: "If we desire to contemplate the passion of the Virgin, let us consider that of Christ as though the Virgin suffered it herself. You may contemplate her crowned with thorns, nailed through her hands and feet, and her side torn open, dismembered and full of the same torments endured by her son, since the mother's soul was in the son's body."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>See *The sacred made real: Spanish painting and sculpture 1600-1700*, edited by Xavier Bray (Yale University Press, 2009); Carlos Alberto González Sánchez, *Espíritu de la imagen: arte y religión en el mundo hispánico de la Contrarreforma* (Madrid, 2017); Agathe Schmiddunser *Körper der Passionen: die lebensgrosse Liegefigur des toten Christus vom Mittelalter bis zum spanischen Yacente des Frühbarock* (Regensburg, 2008)

<sup>51</sup>See Timothy Mitchell, *Passional culture: emotion, religion, and society in Southern Spain* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and ritual in Golden-Age Spain : Sevillian confraternities and the processional sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton University Press, 1998); Juan Antonio Martos Núñez, *Pasión de Cristo en la Semana Santa de Sevilla* (Sevilla, 1994); María Sancho Menjón Ruiz, *Semana Santa en Aragón* (Zaragoza, 2000).

<sup>52</sup>Francisco de Osuna, *Primer abecedario espiritual*, letter Y, 1.562; Boon, "The Agony of the Virgin," p. 22, n. 89.

One of the most significant claims made in Sor María's *Transfixion* – that the Virgin Mary shared totally and “to the fullest”<sup>53</sup> her son's physical pain during his passion – flows directly out of this devotional tradition, which she obviously knew quite well. Of course, in María's text, the claim comes straight from the Virgin Mary, ostensibly, rather than from María or any other text she might have read. “Knowing how highly the Lord valued the labors, passion, and death of my Son,” says the Virgin Mary, “I not only freely offered to deliver Him to His passion and death, but I beseeched Him to make me a companion and partaker of all His sorrows, sufferings and torments, and the Father granted this request.”<sup>54</sup> The Virgin's suffering is as intense as that of Jesus throughout the passion, even when she is not physically present at every moment of the entire ordeal. She suffers with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, as he agonizes over his impending passion, even to the point of sweating blood herself.<sup>55</sup> She feels every blow from his scourging, “which she felt in all the parts of her virginal body, in the same way as they were felt by Christ.”<sup>56</sup> The same is true of the crucifixion, which she not only witnesses physically, but actually undergoes, along with her son. Then, as “Coadjutrix of his Passion,” she also shares in his dying. “She now felt and suffered the pangs of death, though she remained alive, and this last pain was more intense and vivid.” In sum, then, “all the suffering of all the martyrs and of the men sentenced to death have endured since the beginning of the world cannot

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<sup>53</sup>MCD III.6.12.1219; (P1807, v.6, p. 229): “el sumo padecer.” Blatter paragraph 508.

<sup>54</sup>MCD III.5.22.960; (P1807, v.3, p. 24); Blatter paragraph 249.

<sup>55</sup>MCD III.6.12.1220; (P1807, v.6, p. 230); Blatter paragraph 509.

<sup>56</sup>MCD III.6.20.1341; (P1807, v.6, p. 383); Blatter paragraph 630.

equal what the blessed Mary suffered during the Passion.”<sup>57</sup>

#### **Part Four: *The Coronation***

All of the Virgin Mary’s suffering in the *Transfixion* makes her co-redemptrix of the human race, along with her son Jesus, a point that María’s narrative emphasizes over and over in the the following section, the *Coronation*, which deals with the Virgin’s life after the passion and her exaltation into a quasi-heavenly being and the true head of the infant church that Jesus’ apostles begin to establish. In the final chapter of the *Transfixion* we are told that the Virgin receives titles of “Queen of all created things in heaven and earth, Protectress of the Church, Mistress of creatures, Mother of piety, Intercessor of the faithful, Advocate of sinners, and Mother of beautiful love and holy hope.”<sup>58</sup> And just before Jesus ascends to heaven, while she is in the Cenacle - the room where the Last Supper took place - she is summoned by the Trinity, and is “raised up and placed on the throne of royal Majesty with the three divine Persons.” When this occurs, “new admiration was caused in the saints to see a mere creature exalted to such dignity.” God the Father then says: “My daughter, to you I entrust the Church founded by my Only-begotten, the new law of grace He taught to the world, and the people He redeemed: to you I consign them all.”<sup>59</sup>

In the *Coronation*, the emphasis on the Virgin Mary’s exaltation is so overwhelming that her humanity is eclipsed. Constantly surrounded by angels, frequently ecstatic, taken up to heaven repeatedly, and granted intimate access to the Trinity, her knowledge of divine mysteries

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<sup>57</sup>MCD III.6.22.1398; (P1807, v.6, p. 451); Blatter paragraph 630.

<sup>58</sup>MCD III.6.28.1501; (P1807, v.6, p. 570); Blatter paragraph 790.

<sup>59</sup>MCD III.6.28.1500-1501; (P1807, v.6, pp. 568-572); Blatter paragraphs 789-790.

places her far above the apostles, who constantly depend on her guidance. As the Virgin is constantly surrounded by angels, so is she always battling demons, everywhere, on sea, land, and air, rescuing the infant Church from their hellish aggressiveness.<sup>60</sup> Simultaneously, she also begins the work of undoing paganism by destroying the temple of Diana at Ephesus.<sup>61</sup> Her mystical wisdom is her greatest strength. “The knowledge of Mary,” says María’s text, “was the knowledge of a supreme teacher, governess and mistress of the Church, which the Almighty had placed in her hands.” Most significantly, she reveals herself as the ultimate mediatrix between God and the human race, since “no one was to receive any blessing or favor from the hands of her son except through that of his Mother.”<sup>62</sup> The Virgin’s power extends beyond mediation, too, for she can dispense judgment as well as mercy. “The Almighty wishes it to be understood,” we are told, “that she possesses full power of judging all the children of Adam and that all should honor her, just as they honor her son and true God.”<sup>63</sup>

Sor María’s quasi-divine Virgin Mary is also very much in charge of the Church during her remaining time on earth. The Virgin, for instance, not only wrote the first Creed, which she asked angels to deliver to the apostles,<sup>64</sup> but was also directly involved in the writing of the gospels<sup>65</sup> and the governance of the nascent Church, always kept informed by angels of

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<sup>60</sup>MCD IV.7, chapters 9, 15, 16; MCD IV.8, chapters 3-8.

<sup>61</sup>MCD IV.8.4

<sup>62</sup>MCD IV.7.13.233; (P1807, v.7, p.280)

<sup>63</sup>MCD IV.8.3.420; (P1807, v.8, p.54)

<sup>64</sup>MCD IV.7.13.222-223; (P1807, v.7, pp. 268-269)

<sup>65</sup>MCD IV.8.9.557 -574; (P1807, v.8, pp. 178-196)



everything the apostles were doing, and constantly interceding with God on their behalf, as “the instrument and mediatrix of all the miraculous favors” showered on them.<sup>66</sup> Her human body defied localization. She was drawn up to heaven so often that “in fact she seemed more at home in heaven than among the apostles and disciples on this earth,” as one modern biographer put it.<sup>67</sup> She is also whisked from her house in Ephesus –where she lived with the apostle John – directly to places where her presence was needed, in the grandest miraculous way possible, as when the apostle James was about to be martyred in Jerusalem. “The holy angels placed their great Queen and Mistress upon a most refulgent throne,” we are told, “as they had done on other occasions, and ferried her on it to Jerusalem and to the place of execution” where she comforted James.<sup>68</sup> At the gathering of the apostles known as the Council of Jerusalem,<sup>69</sup> she guides them and determines its outcome while shuttling back and forth from heaven through bilocation.<sup>70</sup>

As “the true Mother of the apostles,” she was also involved in even the smallest details of their ministry, furnishing all of them with tunics woven by angels that were identical to the one worn by Jesus, and a life-size cross (much like the one dragged around the house by María’s father), which they were to carry everywhere. She also provided each of them with a metal box containing three precious relics: thorns from the crown worn by Jesus during his passion,

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<sup>66</sup>MCD IV.8.1.381 (349); (P1807, v.8, p.17)

<sup>67</sup>T.D. Kendrick, *Mary of Ágreda: The Life and Legend of a Spanish Nun* (London, 1967), p. 86.

<sup>68</sup>MCD IV.8.2.399; (P1807, v.8, p.33)

<sup>69</sup>Acts 15:6–29

<sup>70</sup>MCD IV.8.6.490-493; (P1807, v.8, pp. 120-124)

fragments of the swaddling clothes in which she had wrapped the infant Jesus, and of the linen with which she had wiped his blood at his circumcision and passion.<sup>71</sup> In addition, she also designed “ornate and mysterious” vestments for the celebration of the eucharist and provided the apostles with them, “thus originating this custom and holy ceremony of the Church.”<sup>72</sup> Naturally, in this task, as in so many others, she was assisted by angels. In addition, “she commenced to practice by herself many of the holy days, ceremonies, rites, and exercises which were afterwards introduced in the Church,” including a celebration of her own Immaculate Conception and the Nativity.<sup>73</sup>

When all is said and done, the status of the Virgin Mary one encounters in *The Mystical City* is sometimes difficult to distinguish from that of the three persons of the Trinity. “Instead of being judged with the rest of humanity at the final judgement,” we are told, “she shall be seated at the right hand of her most holy son, as co-judge of all of humankind.”<sup>74</sup> And her power to judge all humans is derived from her unique participation in divinity:

The most holy soul of Mary was raised to sit at the right hand of her son, at the same royal throne of the most holy Trinity, which no humans, angels, or seraphim have ever reached or will ever reach for all eternity. This is the highest and most exalted preeminence of our Queen and Mistress, that she is seated on the throne with the three divine Persons and holds her place as Empress, while all others in heaven are but servants and ministers of the highest King.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>MCD IV.7.13.237; (P1807, v.7, pp.283-284)

<sup>72</sup>MCD IV.8.10.586; (P1807, v.8, pp. 207-208)

<sup>73</sup>MCD IV.8.12.613; (P1807, v.8, pp. 230-231)

<sup>74</sup>MCD IV.8.21.762; (P1807, v.8, pp. 373-374)

<sup>75</sup>MCD IV.8.21.763; (P1807, v.8, pp. 374-375)

Finally, then, the Virgin Mary's death is a joyful transition in which she is taken to heaven permanently, to sit beside her divine son. Her closing message is intensely anti-Protestant, though not consciously or overtly so. It is simply a summation of the Mariology expressed throughout the book, which could enrage any Protestant. "The value of my intercession has never been ignored by the Church," she says. Then the Virgin proclaims herself "Mother, Advocate, and Protectress" of all of humanity.<sup>76</sup> Then, she lets it be known that "it is a great cause of sorrow" to her that mortals "force" her to be idle, "and that, for want of calling upon me, so many souls should be lost." Her "just complaint," she adds, is that "humans load themselves with eternal damnation and refuse me the glory... of setting them on the right path to eternal life."<sup>77</sup>

Such extremes would cause her trouble among Catholics too.

### **Reception of *The Mystical City of God***

In 1668, three years after the deaths of María and King Philip IV, King Charles II – Philip's severely handicapped son – took a significant step in the promotion of María's canonization by asking two prominent theologians to review *The Mystical City*. One of them, Bishop Diego de Silva said he "marvelled at its excellence," confessing "I began as a critic, but I finished as an admirer." The second examiner, Andrés Mendo, a Jesuit, was equally enthusiastic: "Sor Mariá's writing," he said, "enlightens the mind with a knowledge of the most sublime

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<sup>76</sup>MCD IV.8.22.784; (P1807, v.8, p. 395)

<sup>77</sup>MCD IV.8.22.783; (P1807, v.8, p. 394-395)

truths, and inflames the heart with divine love.”<sup>78</sup> Their opinions helped launch the publication of the book in 1670, a mere five years after María’s death. This first edition included the biography of María written by José Ximénez Samaniego, along with all the requisite ecclesiastical permissions, and lavish praise from several theologians, including Fathers Silva and Mendo. The process of canonizing María began in earnest in 1673, when Pope Clement X declared her “venerable” and called for the creation of a commission to handle her case.

María’s canonization seemed assured to her devotees, especially because her corpse –like those of many saints – including Teresa of Avila – refused to decompose. But her *Mystical City*, which had to be taken into account for her canonization, proved to be a polarizing text, evincing praise and veneration from some readers and vitriolic opposition from others.<sup>79</sup> Objections to its publication were numerous, not just because of its central claim of being a special revelation from the Virgin Mary herself, but also because of specific historical and theological details in the text itself, including the one found most offensive by many theologians – especially Dominicans– who were opposed to accepting the Immaculate Conception as sound doctrine. These “Maculists,” as opponents of the doctrine were known (as opposed to the “Immaculists” who promoted it), wasted no time denouncing María to the Inquisition.

In 1672, about the same time as her canonization process was launched, the inquisitor

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<sup>78</sup>“Historical Notice” appendix to *The Admirable Life of the glorious Patriarch Saint Joseph: taken from the Cité mystique de Dieu* (New York, 1860), pp. 320-321; English translation of José Jiménez Samaniego’s *Life of the Venerable Mary of Jesus of Ágreda* (Evansville, 1910), pp. 144-145.

<sup>79</sup>For a thorough *Agredista* summary of the polarization see: Benito Mendía and Antonio M. Artola Arbiza, *La Venerable M. María de Jesús de Ágreda y la Inmaculada Concepción: El proceso eclesiástico a la "Mística Ciudad de Dios* (Ágreda, 2004).

General in Spain ordered that all copies of *The Mystical City* be removed from circulation. At the same time, Maculist opponents of the book denounced it to the Roman Inquisition as well, setting yet another investigation in motion outside of Spain.<sup>80</sup> The end result of this Roman inquiry was a huge setback for María's cause: in June 1681 Pope Innocent XI condemned *The Mystical City* and placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. The response from Spain was predictable. Thanks largely to the efforts of María's hagiographer Ximenez Samaniego, who defended the text's orthodoxy, and to the pressure put on Pope Innocent by the court of King Charles II of Spain, the book was removed from the *Index* a few months later. But the damage inflicted on María's reputation was difficult to ignore, especially because a version of the *Index* printed in Venice continued to include her book in it until 1713, when the lapse finally caught Rome's attention, and the publisher was forced to retract its inclusion.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, after 1681, the Supreme Council of the Inquisition in Spain and the Roman Inquisition continued to receive denunciations about *The Mystical City*'s content and pleas to stop its circulation on the grounds that there were "impediments" to consider. These impediments fell into two categories. The first were *reparos*, that is, questions about specific doctrinal issues in the text; the second were *fundamentos*, or objections to its claim of being a revelation written by a divinely-chosen nun. Unsurprisingly, most of the *fundamentos* were issued by Dominicans who objected to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Nonetheless, in late December 1685 the Spanish Inquisition decreed that *The Mystical City* was free of error

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<sup>80</sup>Mendía and Artola Arbiza, *La venerable M. María de Jesús de Ágreda*, p. 66; Nogar, *Quill and Cross*, p. 252, n. 15.

<sup>81</sup>Nogar, *Quill and Cross*, pp. 55-56, notes 75 and 82

and could be circulated and read as a “private revelation,” the contents of which no faithful Catholic was obligated to believe.<sup>82</sup> As the Supreme Council put it, “the work is judged to be worthy of being read, as are others of a similar quality and those that treat the private revelations of men of exceeding virtue.” And when it came to the author herself, the Council ruled that María was “incapable of active or passive deceit, due to the worthiness of her many virtues.”<sup>83</sup>

Having been removed from the Roman *Index* and approved by the Spanish Inquisition, publication of new editions of *The Mystical City* intensified, along with translations, but the text continued to be closely examined by clerics in Spain and elsewhere as well as by several prominent theological faculties. The French translation, in particular, gave rise to a heated discussion at the Sorbonne in Paris, which led to a vote on its orthodoxy. In 1696, a majority of those who examined it (102 out of 152), voted to condemn it. This condemnation stressed eight points: 1) that it gave too much weight to the revelations ostensibly received by its author;<sup>84</sup> 2) that many of its revelations were new and contrary to what the apostles of Jesus would have supported; 3) that it upheld the “adoration” of the Virgin Mary, which should only be given to God, rather than the “veneration” which is proper to human saints; 4) that it referred all of the Virgin Mary’s virtues and graces to her Immaculate Conception; 5) that it attributed too much power and control over the Church to her; that it overstressed her role as Coredemptrix, Mother

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<sup>82</sup>See Luis Villasante, “La *Mística Ciudad de Dios* y el problema de la revelaciones privadas,” *Scriptorium Victoriense* 19 (1972), pp. 35-62.

<sup>83</sup>Andrés Ivars, “Expediente relativo a los escritos de la Venerable Madre Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda,” *Archivo Ibero-Americano* (1917), p. 132. In addition, the Inquisition decreed that only the first edition of 1670 was acceptable, since all others lacked the proper permissions.

<sup>84</sup>On this point see: L. Villasante, “La ‘Mística Ciudad de Dios’ y el problema de la revelaciones privadas,” *Scriptorium Victoriense* 19 (1972), pp. 35-62

of Mercy, and Mediatrix of grace; 6) that it gave too graphic and “indecent” description of the sexual intercourse between the Virgin Mary’s parents; 8) that it contained too many other imaginary and scandalous details.<sup>85</sup> “This book does not lead to edification,” complained the Sorbonne theologians, linking it to heretics old and new. “It leads instead to the destruction of Christian piety; it resurrects the errors of Arius, Nestorius, Pelagius, Vigilantius, Photius, Baius, Jansen, and the Predestinarians; and its author is impudent, sacrilegious, blasphemous, idolatrous, a Pelagian, a Quietist, and a Lutheran.”<sup>86</sup>

In contrast – and in response to such charges – several universities approved the text, including those of Salamanca, Alcalá, and Oviedo in Spain, Louvain in the Spanish Netherlands, Coimbra in Portugal, and Toulouse in France. One of the closing statements in its defense by the Louvain faculty in 1715 echoes the previous approvals by other universities and sums up its position by simply emphasizing the heroic virtues of Sor María rather than her theology: “Finally, this text cannot be attributed to the devil because from start to finish it breathes nothing but humility, patience, love, and the suffering of hardships.”<sup>87</sup>

Despite the weight carried by all its supporters, the text’s opponents could not be silenced, however, and it continued to elicit condemnations, especially because of its claims about new private revelations and its strident confirmation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which was attributed to the controversial medieval Franciscan theologian John Duns

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<sup>85</sup>Nogar, *Quill and Cross*, p. 57, n. 90.

<sup>86</sup>Quoted in Royo Campos, *Agredistas y Antiagredistas*, p. 327.

<sup>87</sup>MCD; P1807, v.1. The first 72 unnumbered pages of the 1807 Pamplona edition contain various approbations of *The Mystical City*, including those from the universities of Salamanca, Alcalá, and Louvain.

Scotus rather than to María herself.<sup>88</sup> Some critics even argued that María could not be the sole author of the text, due to its theological sophistication. No woman could ever handle complex subjects so expertly, they argued. It was simply *impossible*.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, *The Mystical City* was denounced in myriad ways, aptly abridged into a single paragraph by a modern biographer of Sor María:

False, erroneous; presumptuous; scandalous; containing matter contrary to the Church's teaching; fostering heterodoxy; in part downright heretical...derogatory to the Church's authority; betraying anachronisms in religious thought; telling of revelations contradicting those of other mystics; and also revelations that are demonstrably improbable; smelling of legendary nonsense; disfigured by passages offensive to chaste persons...<sup>90</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century, bickering over Sor María's texts had created two opposing camps within the Catholic Church, each equally tenacious in its support or condemnation, but also equally unable to achieve total victory. And this fracturing had a negative effect not only on the status of the text – despite its many editions and translations – but also on the cause of María's canonization.<sup>91</sup>

The Sorbonne theologians were not alone. There was much in *The Mystical City* that

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<sup>88</sup>See G. Calvo Moralejo, “El Escotismo de la Mística Ciudad de Dios y su influencia en el proceso de beatificación de la M. Ágreda,” in *Giovanni Duns Scotus. Studi e ricerche nel VII Centenario della sua morte* (Rome, 2008) , Vol II, pp. 257- 278; and Alessandro Apollonio, “The Decisive Contribution of Blessed John Duns Scotus to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Objections, Old and New,” in *Blessed John Duns Scotus and His Mariology* (New Bedford, 2009), pp. 43-71.

<sup>89</sup>Benito Mendiá, “En torno al problema de la autenticidad de la Mística Ciudad de Dios,” *Archivo Ibero-Americano* 42.165-168 (1982), p. 405.

<sup>90</sup>Kendrick, *Mary of Ágreda*, p. 80.

<sup>91</sup>For a very detailed, but partisan summaries of the arguments pro and con over three centuries see Royo Campos, *Agredistas y Antiagredistas*; and also the more recent work of Fathers Mendiá, Artola Arbiza, *La Venerable Madre María de Jesús de Ágreda*



worried clerics and theologians in Spain itself and the rest of the Catholic world. Four years before the Sorbonne's condemnation, as part of the procedures for the cause of María's canonization, Pope Innocent XII had already ordered a review of the condemnation issued in 1681 by his predecessor Pope Innocent XI. Then, in 1729, those in charge of María's canonization erred on the side of caution by requesting yet another review of *The Mystical City*, hoping a new positive verdict would clear the path for her cause definitively. Their plan backfired, however, due to constant turnovers on the papal throne, which kept extending the review indefinitely.<sup>92</sup>

Meanwhile, the bitter squabble between supporters and opponents of María and her text intensified, and the ceaseless printing of *Agredista* and *Antiagredista* texts only served to place *The Mystical City* in a poor light. What is arguably the most ardent and influential of all *Antiagredista* texts appeared in 1744. "On Private Revelations, Visions and Apparitions," written by German theologian Eusebius Amort, eviscerated María's claims of private revelations and stirred up a torrent of responses from *Agredistas*.<sup>93</sup> In return, Amort continued firing away at

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<sup>92</sup>Three popes—Benedict XIII, Clement XII, and Benedict XIV—would start reviews in quick succession between 1730 and 1747. The findings of these reviews were published. See: *Sacra Rituum Congregatio, Examen responsionis ad Censuram olim editam super libris mysticae civitatis Dei* (Rome, 1730); *Synopsis observationum et responsionum super libris ven. abbatissae Mariae a Jesu de Agreda* (Rome, 1737); *Super examine operis a Maria a Jesu de Agreda conscripti* (Rome, 1747)

<sup>93</sup>Eusebius Amort, *De revelationibus, visionibus et apparitionibus privatis regulae tutae ex Scripturâ, Conciliis, Sanctis Patribus aliisque optimis auctoribus collectae, explicatae atque exemplis illustratae* (Augsburg, 1744). See: Royo Campos, *Agredistas y Antiagredistas*, pp. 373-391

the Agredistas,<sup>94</sup> and they kept firing back at the Antiagredistas, in a seemingly endless polemical cycle.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, as Benedict XIV's review crawled forward, new issues intensified the controversy, including the question of whether or not María was the sole author of *The Mystical City*. This question was raised by critics who found it totally "impossible" for an uneducated nun, or any woman whatsoever, to engage in sophisticated theological arguments in favor of the Immaculate Conception. The text, they charged, surely must have been authored -- at least in part -- by some male theologian familiar with scholastic theology and the work of John Duns Scotus.<sup>96</sup>

In 1757, the outcome of Benedict XIV's lengthy review process was a disappointment to Agredistas. Even though it decreed that María was indeed the sole author of this text and others attributed to her, it failed to settle the issue of its orthodoxy conclusively. Even worse, shortly before he died in 1758, Benedict XIV wrote a confidential "Judicium." or judgment, which was to be passed on to his successors. In this document, Pope Benedict advised future pontiffs to withhold approval or disapproval of *The Mystical City* and to keep closed the cause of María's canonization. In 1773, Pope Clement XIV -- a Franciscan and staunch supporter of the Immaculate Conception -- made one more attempt to dispel all suspicion about María and her book by appointing yet another commission to examine the text, but its members could not agree

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<sup>94</sup>See: Eusebius Amort, *Controversia de Revelationibus Agredanis Explicate Cum Epicrisi Ad Ineptas Earum Revelationum Vindicias* (Augsburg, 1749); and *Nova Demonstratio de Falsitate Revelationum Agredanarum cum Parallelo Inter Pseudo Evangelia et Easdem Revelationes, Adita Nova Defensione Agredana a R. P. Dalmatius Kick* (Augsburg, 1751)

<sup>95</sup>For examples, see Dalmatius Kick, *Revelationum agredanarum iusta defensio* (Regensburg, 1750); *Excussio novae defensionis agredanae* (Augsburg, 1751); *Continuatio iustae defensionis revelationum agredanarum* (Madrid, 1754).

<sup>96</sup>Mendía, "En torno a la autenticidad," pp. 417, 421.

on a verdict. Consequently, Clement XIV chose to reiterate the advice given by his predecessor Benedict XIV, ordering that total silence be observed on the issue of María's *Mystical City* and that her canonization process be halted indefinitely. Ironically, several witnesses reported that Clement XIV was visited and comforted at his deathbed in Rome on 22 September 1744 by Alphonsus Liguori, founder of the Redemptorist order, who on that day also happened to be in ecstasy at the episcopal palace of Sant'Agata de'Goti, in Campania, about 120 miles to the south, in the presence of several other witnesses. In other words, the dying pope who consigned Sor María's canonization to limbo was supposedly visited by a bilocating saint who would be canonized ninety-five years later.<sup>97</sup>

Unwilling to abandon their cause, María's devotees challenged this papal decision. King Charles III of Spain and the Franciscan order pressured Rome to keep the canonization process alive and to separate it from the seemingly endless bickering over *The Mystical City*, but Pope Clement's successor, Pius VI, refused to cave in to their demands. In 1778, the Spanish ambassador to Rome reported that Pope Pius found such a suggestion illogical, for the "two branches," that is, the text and its author, were "indivisible" and "in and of themselves should be seen as essentially connected."<sup>98</sup>

Skepticism about María's *impossible* claims was inevitable, even among people of faith, due to their enormity. But by 1778, Sor María's devotees had plenty of reason for viewing Pope Pius VI as an ally rather than an enemy. His skepticism was tame, compared to that of all sorts of irreligious materialists who considered María's claims absolutely impossible. Such skeptics

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<sup>97</sup>Montague Summers, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (London, 1950), p. 61.

<sup>98</sup>Nogar, *Quill and Cross*, p. 59, n.99.

could do much more than simply poke fun at the simple-minded credulity of Agredistas; they could also denounce their beliefs offensive, or even dangerous. One such skeptic who had once embraced a clerical career – Giacomo de Casanova – gives us a good glimpse into this new world.

When the Venetian Inquisition hauled in the infamous womanizer Casanova in 1755 for his offenses against religion and common decency, the jailers handed him copy of the first volume of Sor María's *Mystical City*, hoping it would help him see the error of his ways. Although he was a former seminarian, Casanova had never heard of this book or its author, but he was curious enough to read some of it. After escaping from prison, he would say that it gave him nightmares, and that all he could find in it was "everything that could be created by the extravagant and overheated imagination of an extremely devout Spanish virgin who was given to melancholy, trapped in a convent, and guided by ignorant and flattering confessors." Not only that, he added: "she tried to pass off all of her chimerical and monstrous visions as *revelations*."

Oddly enough, a few years later, the coach he was riding on his way to Madrid unexpectedly made a rest stop in Ágreda. But this unplanned visit to María's hometown did nothing to make him change his mind about her or *The Mystical City*. Instead, he simply chuckled. "The Spanish woman's book is just what is needed to drive a man mad," he said. "Far from increasing or exciting in my mind a fervor or a zeal for religion, the work tempted me to regard as nonsense everything that pertains to mysticism, and to dogma too."<sup>99</sup>

Casanova and many of his contemporaries now weighed all impossible claims on a

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<sup>99</sup>Giacomo Casanova, *Histoire de ma Fuite des Prisons de la Republique de Venise, qu'on Apelle Les Plombs* (Lepizig, 1788), pp. 39-43. English translation: *History of My Life* (New York, 1986), pp. 484-85,

different scale, for faith itself was under siege. Yet, attempts to restart the cause for María's canonization continued for many generations beyond Casanova's. And resistance to them within the Catholic Church continued to be driven by the same internal skepticism as before, now more intense and painfully aware of the possibility of ridicule as Western culture became less and less receptive to religion. Unsurprisingly, all subsequent attempts to resurrect the cause for María failed, even after 1854, when Pope Pius IX proclaimed the Immaculate Conception to be a dogma that all Catholics should believe. Much to the dismay of María's devotees, the next pope, Leo XIII, continued to insist that no pronouncements should be made about María and her *Mystical City*, and as pleas for a re-opening of her case intensified, he doggedly renewed that same ban in 1887.

In the twentieth century, despite continued papal opposition to María's canonization, devotion to her continued to increase, worldwide.<sup>100</sup> In 1912, the publication of George Blatter's English translation of *The Mystical City* sparked a revitalization of interest in María's cause among Catholics in the United States. By 1954, on the one hundredth anniversary of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception, some dedicated American Agredistas began to push aggressively for a reopening of her case. These efforts received a boost in 1992, when John Duns Scotus – who had always been linked to María and her *Mystical City* – was beatified by Pope John-Paul II. Emboldened by this turn of events, Agredistas in the United States and Spain, especially, redoubled their efforts to move forward her canonization and the recognition of her *Mystical City* as thoroughly orthodox. These efforts have yet to succeed. The cardinal in charge

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<sup>100</sup>María de Agreda and her *Mystical City* had a profound impact on Spanish America, especially colonial and post-colonial Mexico. For this dimension of the cult of Sor María, see the definitive study of this subject: Nogar, *Quill and Cross*, chapters 3-6.

of canonizations at that time, Joseph Ratzinger, who would go on to assume the papacy as Benedict XVI, issued an ambiguous ruling in 1999, requiring further review of the case. Since canonizations can move at a glacial pace – especially if they involve anyone who might spark controversy – not much has happened since, despite many renewed efforts by Agredistas.<sup>101</sup> The review, it seems, never seems to end.

### **The King's Impossibly Unique Spiritual Advisor**

King Philip IV would be enthralled by Sor Maria in a profound way, and he established a most unusual relationship with her, turning her into a non-sacramental confessor. Though she could not absolve him of his many sins, she became a therapist of sorts, a compassionate listener, a wise, yet powerless and totally unthreatening advisor. He poured out his heart and soul to her; she counseled him, and assured him of her constant prayers. He would leave a wide blank right margin in his letters. She would fill in that margin with her response and send the letter back to him. Over and over.

As Philip neared death, he inserted into his will the following instructions about the book into which all the letters were bound:

Since I maintained a long-term correspondence with Mother Sor María de Ágreda, finding in her venerable letters immense consolation and perhaps discovering through them things unattainable by human intelligence...I entrust as much as possible to my successor the protection and conservation of the said book wherever it may be, for it is full of sacred doctrine, love, wisdom, advice, and celestial documents.<sup>102</sup>

No one has ever considered it an exaggeration to say that Sor Maria had the best

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<sup>101</sup>See Marilyn Fedewa, *María of Ágreda*, pp. 258-273.

<sup>102</sup>Text available in Luis Villasante, "Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda a través de su correspondencia con el rey." *Archivo Ibero-Americano* 25.98-99 (1965), p. 149. Also available in Anna Nogar, *Quill and Cross*, p. 47.

connections possible. Her relationship with King Philip IV not only ensured that the Inquisition would approach her with great caution, but also gave her an aura of credibility that no other nun could claim. Ultimately, she could nudge the king into pressuring Pope Alexander VII to issue a decree defending the Immaculate Conception in 1661. Ultimately, she could act with the utmost daring in the spiritual realm, and claim that she was the conduit for special revelations from the Virgin Mary, especially concerning that much-contested issue of the Immaculate Conception. Her biography of the Virgin Mary – ostensibly a revelation from on high – could have easily been interpreted as a fifth gospel and the ultimate affront to Catholic orthodoxy. But it was not. Instead, when all was said and done, her impossible claims were deemed possible, despite the many questions they raised.

And that has made all the difference, down to our own day, when numerous editions of her *Mystical City of God* are available in various languages, with the ultimate seals of approval some deemed impossible for it to obtain: the *Imprimatur* and the *Nihil Obstat*.