

spiritual life/Online

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Holy Family by Michelangelo (1475–1564)

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THE MERCY OF GOD is shown to us in the birth of Jesus Christ, God made man. And in this merciful love we are made sisters and brothers of Christ, and heirs with him of God's heavenly kingdom. This is what Christmas is all about, a feast of mercy and love.

Now we know why we sing "Joy to the World" this time of year, why we echo in song the proclamation of the Angels, "Glory to God in the highest." We are rejoicing in the wondrous awareness that God's gift to us in the Incarnation of the Son of God is not a one-time event. Born in Bethlehem, Jesus also lives in our midst and in our lives in every age and time. He is "incarnated," made one with us in every way but sin and is with us in all the events of our lives.

Living the Christian life means to live with Christ and allow his gentle love to inundate our lives, to fill up with his loving mercy all the areas of our lives that are hurting and filled with pain. A deep awareness of the Incarnation makes us realize that we are called to live in Christ and be embraced by him. There is nothing in our lives that is removed from the loving influence of Jesus.

Jesus tell us of his enduring love for us: "Behold, I am with you every day, even unto the end of time" (Mt 28: 20). Jesus is truly "Emmanuel," God with us.

Edward O'Donnell

Teresa of Jesus: Her Wit and Wonder

The woman, whom Carmelites call Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus—the mystic and spiritual teacher of the ways of contemplative prayer—excelled in two mutually enriching human qualities: wit and wonder. She boldly humored her friends with witty jabs, such as, “Oh, how vain you must be now that you are a semi-Provincial!” (to Mother Maria of San Jose), and,

“How amused I was to read that off-hand remark of yours: ‘Enclosed herewith are some couplets sent by the sisters when you yourself must have been at the bottom of it all. I don’t think it will be a bad idea if I tell you what I think of them here, as you say there is no one who will do so at Seville: otherwise you may grow conceited. But, at the very least, you won’t say or do anything foolish—it would not be at all like you if you did.’”

She explains herself with, “I am laughing at myself now—here I am, overwhelmed with letters, starting to write you irrelevant things like this, as if I had endless leisure!”¹

Teresa’s letters to Mother Maria of San Jose Salazar usually were lengthy and frequent. We have

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some seventy-five letters written to her. Of Mother Maria herself, Teresa says:

“The worst of it is, (when I write to you) I can never stop. God grant you are not going to start casting spells over people like our Father (Gracian). May God cast one over you and enrapture you in Himself! Amen. Amen.”²

In the same letter 175, when speaking about Isabel Dantisco, Jerome Gracian’s sister, and comparing Isabel to herself, Teresa writes:

“But I must tell you that, if this Bella of mine (her term of endearment) had Teresa’s natural graces, and the supernatural gifts through which we have seen God working in her, she would be the better of the two for she is her superior in intelligence and ability, and has such a gentle disposition that one can mold her as one likes. The child’s ability is extraordinary.”

Teresa could marvel at the beauty of God’s work in each person and with true humility rejoice in what others have received.

In her very personable style, Teresa speaks ardently from the heart. She experiences, in delightful humor, the uncanny ways of human nature with its potential for exploring mystery and its limited ability to understand God’s ways. She recognizes the insatiable desire within us to see God and also the extreme poverty that is ours to attain that vision:

Teresa of Jesus: Her Wit and Wonder

“O my Hope, my Father, my Creator, and my true Lord and Brother! When I consider how You say that Your delights are with the children of the earth, my soul rejoices greatly.... Oh, what extraordinary mercy and what favor so beyond our ability to deserve! And that mortals forget all of this! Be mindful, my God, of so much misery, and behold our weakness, since you are the Knower of everything.”³

With splendid sagacity, she experiences in wonder the awesomeness of divine beauty, the extreme longing of the person to see God:

“O my delight, Lord of all created things and my God! How long must I wait to see You? What remedy do You provide for one who finds so little on earth that might give some rest apart from You? O long life! O painful life! O life that is not lived! Oh what lonely solitude; how incurable!”⁴

Alonging, so revelatory of mystery, consumes Teresa.

Humor and Wonder

Humor and wonder were for Teresa two marvelous avenues for exploring mystery. They allowed her to taste and see the goodness of God in the mundane as well as in the sublime. Is there not a fine line between the sublime and the humorous when one considers the tremendous condescension of God in bestowing such gracious gifts on us, who

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have nothing except what we have received from God? All is gift! All is God's work!

Teresa's humor carried her through some troubled times. Once she traveled a long way in heavy rain to see a bishop about founding a new house. When she arrived at the bishop's residence, he had changed his mind, saying to her she was not welcome in his diocese. He left her outside in the downpour. Without missing a beat, Teresa said with a light heart, "And the weather so lovely too!"

Her ability to wonder at the marvelous workings of God beyond human limits unfolds in praise of the gracious mercies of the Lord:

"Hope in God, for even now I will confess to Him my sins and his mercies. And putting these all together, I shall make a song of praise with perpetual sighs to my Savior and my God."⁵

Who other than Teresa knew so intimately the mercies of the Lord, which she sings throughout her multiple writings? The book we call her autobiography, Teresa named *The Book of God's Mercies*. As she said, she would long to be all one tongue with which to praise the Lord.

Our Discovery

While exploring these marvelous qualities in St. Teresa, we may discover in ourselves the place of

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beauty, wonder, and humor on our own spiritual journey. Humor and wonder enable us to recognize the awesome duality of human weakness and divine munificence, both working together toward that holiness which is a share in God's life. God seems to reveal the divine ways within the context of human weakness, contrasts readily creating more sharp discoveries. Power is made perfect in weakness.

Teresa saw the absurdity of human foibles and the awesomeness of divine blessings; the folly of human misery and the amazement of Divine empowerment; herself as a sinner and God as merciful Redeemer; and uncanny human misery and gracious munificence from the heart of God. Nothing was foreign to her discovering the beauty and goodness of God within all of reality.

What greater contrast could there be than that of sinful humanity and the all-perfect divinity? How unlike the two are. Yet, God in all wisdom chose to send his Son to take on human nature, immersing the divine life within the human condition. Wonder of wonders. When Teresa chided God for having so few friends because God treated them so badly, was she not acknowledging, cryptically, how true a friend she wanted to be to this gracious God?

"Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1Cor 2:7-10).

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God has revealed this wonder to us through the Spirit. Would that wit and wonder would emerge from our spiritual lives as doorways to God's all-pervasive beauty, truth, and goodness. How we would wonder with humor.

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NOTES

1. *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Avila*. Vol. 1. Letter no. 175, pp. 465–470. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD (ICS Publications, 2001: Washington, DC 20002).
2. *Ibid*.
3. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*. Vol. 1. *Soliloquies*, no. 7, p. 449. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (ICS Publications, 1987: Washington, DC 20002).
4. *Ibid*. no. 6, p. 448.
5. *Ibid*. no. 17 par. 6, p. 463.



St. John of the Cross on How to Attain Perfection in the Life of Prayer

THE *Counsels to Religious on How to Attain Perfection* by St. John of the Cross may sound strange to modern ears, but they provide a perennial guide to the life of prayer.... St. John wrote the Counsels at the request of a religious superior to teach her and her sisters the art of abiding always in God's presence, whatever the external circumstances of one's life may be. He wanted the sister to have a better idea of why the peaceful reception of God's word would lead her along the way of the Cross.

Part 2.

Third Counsel

The third counsel pertains to the practice of virtue. Of it St. John says:

“You should be constant in your religious observance and in obedience, without any concern for the world, but only for God. In order to achieve this and avoid being deceived, you should never set your eyes upon the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the work at hand as a motive for doing

St. John of the Cross...How to Attain Perfection

it or failing to do it, but upon doing it for God. Thus you must undertake all things, agreeable or disagreeable, for the sole purpose of pleasing God through them.

“To do this with fortitude and constancy and acquire the virtues quickly, you should have care always to be inclined more to the difficult than to the easy, to what is rugged rather than to what is soft, to what is hard and distasteful in a work rather than to its delightful and pleasant aspects, and do not go about choosing what is less a cross, for that is a light burden, and the heavier a burden is, the lighter it becomes when borne for Christ.”

Again we may be tempted to say that this *Counsel* applies to a cloistered contemplative but not to us. She knows on the day she enters those convent walls that she must begin to forsake the concerns of the world and strive to center her life on the sole purpose of pleasing God. We may think to ourselves:

“It is not so difficult to scrub the floor or answer the door for Jesus. Away from the complications of the modern world, one can more easily live in prayerful detachment, but how does one manage to do so in the world?”

What, then, does this practice of virtue imply that is pertinent to anyone seeking a life of prayer? It

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directs us not to vital pleasure or ego satisfaction, but to transcendent joy. We do what we do not because it is pleasant or unpleasant, but solely for the love of God. St. Thérèse of Lisieux exemplifies this attitude in an outstanding way. In her *Story of a Soul*, she writes about an act of charity that offers a concrete illustration of this third counsel that applicable to all. She tells us:

“Each evening when I saw Sister St. Pierre shake her hour-glass, I knew this meant: Let’s go! It is incredible how difficult it was for me to get up, especially at the beginning; however, I did it immediately, and then a ritual was set in motion. I had to remove and carry her little bench in a certain way, above all I was not to hurry, and then the walk took place. It was a question of following the poor invalid by holding her cincture; I did this with as much gentleness as possible. But if by mistake she took a false step, immediately it appeared to her that I was holding her incorrectly and that she was about to fall. ‘Ah! My God! You are going too fast; I’m going to break something.’ If I tried to go more slowly, ‘Well, come on! I don’t feel your hand; you’ve let me go and I’m going to fall! Ah! I was right when I said you were too young to help me.’

“Finally, we reached the refectory without mishap; and here other difficulties arose. I had to

St. John of the Cross...How to Attain Perfection

seat Sister St. Pierre and I had to act skillfully in order not to hurt her; then I had to turn back her sleeves (again in a certain way), and afterwards I was free to leave. With her poor crippled hands she was trying to manage with her bread as well as she could. I soon noticed this, and, each evening, I did not leave her until after I had rendered her this little service. As she had not asked for this, she was very much touched by my attention, and it was by this means that I gained her entire good graces, and this especially (I learned this later) because, after cutting her bread for her, I gave her my most beautiful smile before leaving her all alone.” (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 247–248)

Thérèse’s motivation to practice the virtue of charity was not self-gratification but the sheer joy of pleasing God in every small act of love and service. St. John promises us that if we act in this way we shall acquire other virtues, like fortitude and constancy rather quickly.

The key to Christian living is behavior in which the exalted shall be humbled and the humble exalted. This is the spirit of imitation that Christ seeks to find in us. When St. John tells us to follow the difficult rather than to easy road, he anticipates the fruits of prayerful living. To follow Christ is to tread the way he took. It was rugged not smooth, distasteful not delightful. Heavy burdens become light when they are borne for Christ.

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Fourth Counsel

The fourth counsel concerns solitude. St. John says:

“You should deem everything in the world as finished. Thus, when (for not being able to avoid it) you have to deal with some matter, do so in as detached a way as you would if it did not exist.

“Pay no heed to the things out in the world, for God has already withdrawn and released you from them. Do not handle any business yourself that you can do through a third person. It is very fitting for you to desire to see no one and that no one see you.

“And note carefully that if God will ask a strict account from all the faithful of every idle word, how much more will He ask it of the religious who has consecrated his entire life and all his works to Him. And God will demand all of this on the day of reckoning.”

This counsel on solitude is as basic as the previous three. It reminds us that the world is passing. We cannot make its goods exclusive. We must use them wisely as gifts but release our frantic grasp of them.

To be in the world but not of the world in an exclusive sense is to become more mindful of the need to take Father’s will into account as Jesus did. We grow to love by finding the time and the place to

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talk to Jesus wherever we are, be it in a busy bus depot or in the midst of a meeting. We quiet ourselves inwardly and listen to his voice. Spiritual solitude means having a center within us to which we can go and be with God in prayer. As St. John says:

Prayer is as necessary to the spirit as breath is to the body.

“You should consequently strive to be incessant in prayer, and in the midst of your corporal practices do not abandon it. Whether you eat, or drink, or speak, or converse with lay people, or do anything else, you should always do so with the desire for God and with your heart fixed on Him.

“This is very necessary for inner solitude, which demands that the soul dismiss any thought that is not directed to God. And in forgetfulness of all things that are and happen in this short and miserable life, do not desire to know anything in any way except how better to serve God and keep the observance of your institute.”

Prayer is as necessary to the spirit as breath is to the body. St. John is not speaking of occasional prayer—we don’t just breathe occasionally—but of ceaseless prayer, the lifting of our hearts and minds always and everywhere to the Master we love.

Conclusions

St. John concludes his *Counsels* with this short reminder:

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“If Your Charity observes these four counsels with care, you will reach perfection in a very short time. These counsels are so interdependent that if you are lacking in one of them, you will begin to lose the profit and gain you have from practicing the others.”

In truth, these four counsels are totally intertwined. Losing one, we lose the others; gaining one, we gain the others. It is the longing for God in our soul that gives us the courage to empty ourselves over a lifetime of those obstacles that block the fullness of God’s presence. These *Counsels* are the conditions for growing in genuine humility, inward solitude, and joy. Our whole being becomes a vessel emptied of self and full of Christ’s light, love, and life. These precious gifts radiate through us and overflow into the chalice of our heart and from there into the hearts of all with whom we come in contact this day, revealing to them the beauty, the wholeness, and the serenity of Christ’s peace, which nothing can destroy.

* * * * *

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contribution made to the ministry of renewal modeled by Pope St. John XXIII. Dr. Muto is a single laywoman living her vocation in the world and doing full-time, Church-related ministry in the Epiphany Association. This article draws upon insights found in her book *Words of Wisdom for Our World: The Precautions and Counsels of St. John of the Cross*.

NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, Harvest Book, 1981.
2. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).
3. *Ibid.*

* * * * *

St. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, 6, 19

“Though I am but dust and ashes, suffer me to utter my plea to Thy mercy; suffer me to speak, since it is to God’s mercy that I speak and not to man’s scorn. From Thee too I might have scorn, but Thou wilt return and have compassion on me. ... I only know that the gifts Thy mercy had provided sustained me from the first moment. ... All my hope is naught save in Thy great mercy. Grant what Thou dost command, and command what Thou wilt”



The Smog of Denial

The author of the mystical classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* instructs his 24-year-old disciple to put a “cloud of forgetting” between himself and creatures when practicing contemplative prayer, which should become nothing but a naked yearning of intent for God.

Forgetfulness is a common teaching of Christian mystics. For example, St. John of the Cross says that the theological virtue of hope purifies the memory, so the soul remains forgetful of all created things and is occupied solely with loving the Beloved. On the other hand, St. Teresa tells us to enter the room of self-knowledge. There we recall the grandeurs and mercies of God and strive never to forget who God is and who we are.

I do not think the author of the *Cloud* would quarrel with her doctrine. He states that reflecting on the mysteries of faith and on God’s mercies is essential to Christian life. In the Carmelite tradition, we meditate to stir up love. However, a time comes when God wants our full attention, when—to paraphrase a line from *Much Ado About Nothing*—God

The Smog of Denial

“stops our mouth with a kiss.” You don’t yammer when you kiss. You can’t meditate when your whole being has become longing for the Beloved. It doesn’t do to be a self-conscious lover.

Our Memory

The role of the memory in prayer deserves some attention. Memory is more than a faculty that allows us to recall past sensations, thoughts, and events. It is the record of our history as persons. Memory orients us in space and time and keeps us rooted in reality. We might want to locate memory, but we cannot reduce it to a function of the soul or of the nervous system, or to organ systems—though all of these have their memory. Memory is an integrating function that occurs in every part of the human person. As our theology of the body progresses, we understand that we are an integrated entity that is more than the sum of body and soul and spirit. Memory helps to make our bodied-forth life the life of the whole person.

This broader view of memory tells us that “forgetting” is mainly a mental function—as when I forget the day’s worries by leaving them behind at work. However, even when our minds let go of memories, the rest of us remembers. If that were not the case, something forgotten could never be recalled again. This fact is important for contemplative prayer,

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for even though we consciously forget something, it remains unconsciously with us and forms part of that naked yearning of intent of which the author of the *Cloud* writes. So though we may forget with the conscious memory, the memory of the body and soul turn us toward God's love that, after all, is impressed on our very being.

Engaging in Denial

Human beings often play tricks on memory by engaging in denial. This behavior represses from conscious thought unpleasant or inconvenient truths so that we do not have to deal with them. In everyday life, we relegate things to the subconscious because we can keep only a few things in mind at a time. Denial, however, drives them so far into the unconscious that they seem unconnected to our will and to our intentionality, as if they had nothing to do with who we are.

Denial is like a blinding cloud of smog. When the smog of denial blinds us to realities around us, we increase the chances of being hurt by them. People often say, "I should have seen it coming." Denied or repressed memories also have a peculiar power to influence and manipulate us. Sometimes the cloud of denial keeps from our awareness things outside of us that we ought to consider and make decisions about. From a purely psychological point of view,

The Smog of Denial

then, denial is bad for us.

The smog of denial chokes us, too. We spend so much energy on keeping things repressed that, like people who cannot breathe, we have less strength for engaging what is most necessary and valuable in life.

Denial hurts us psychologically, but it is equally damaging spiritually. Things held in denial stand outside our will and our intentionality. The naked yearning of intent cannot take them up. It is as if we had checked some of the most essential elements of our lives outside the door when entering the inward sanctuary of prayer. We thereby exclude from prayer our deepest spiritual needs and most of the hurts of the world around us. Moreover, choked by denial, we struggle to “breathe in” the life the Spirit has to give.

Darkness Enlightened

Fortunately, God loves us as we are and not as we imagine ourselves to be. The light of God’s love dispels the darkness of denial by making us aware of the dark things lurking within us and by reminding us of the suffering of the world around us. It hurts, but then we can see more clearly and choose more freely. We ask ourselves, “What is the truth here?” We must both pray to the Holy Spirit and seek wise counsel to discern the truth rightly. We

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ask ourselves, “What is God’s gift here? What does God make possible for me? What is God’s life-giving will?” Then, with the help of God, we can set out to follow that course.

Because denial represses things so that they seem not to relate to who we are, we cannot bring them to awareness by simply wanting to. Psychotherapy and spiritual direction may indirectly access them. God’s love, ultimately, reveals their dark shadows within us and gives us the courage to confront them by taking them up in loving choices. Through these choices, we integrate them into ourselves, loosen their compulsive grip on us, and make them part of our naked yearning of intent in prayer. Unhampered by denial, we go to God in prayer and cover over with conscious forgetting everything but the Beloved, knowing that he has all in his care.

Denial, of course is not simply about personal fears of our own darkness. There is also the terrible fear that we may disintegrate beneath the realization of just how much evil and pain there are in the world. This is perhaps a fruit of the contemplative’s growing awareness that we are one creation. So we find hope in the realization that we are but creatures. We cannot fix the problems of the world. They are not “all my fault.” Instead, by trusting in a God of Mercy, the enormous fears that would cause us to retreat into denial lose their hold over us. We

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find the strength to love what God sends our way, for God's mercy hold us all in being.

Forgotten memories often come during prayer when God dispels the cloud of denial. Let them be. Cover them with a cloud of forgetting as you yearn for God's love. Later, outside of prayer, there will be time for discerning and for choosing in love. Meanwhile, occupy yourself solely with loving the Beloved, whose mercies are without end.

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* * * * *

BULL OF INDICTION OF THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF MERCY FRANCIS, BISHOP OF ROME

Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. The Church "has an endless desire to show mercy." Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy. The temptation, on the one hand, to focus exclusively on justice, made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step. But the Church needs to go beyond and strive for a higher and more important goal. On the other hand, sad to say, we must admit that the practice of mercy is waning in the wider culture. In some cases the word seems to have dropped out of use. However, without a witness to mercy, life becomes fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a barren desert. The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters. Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope.

Book Notices

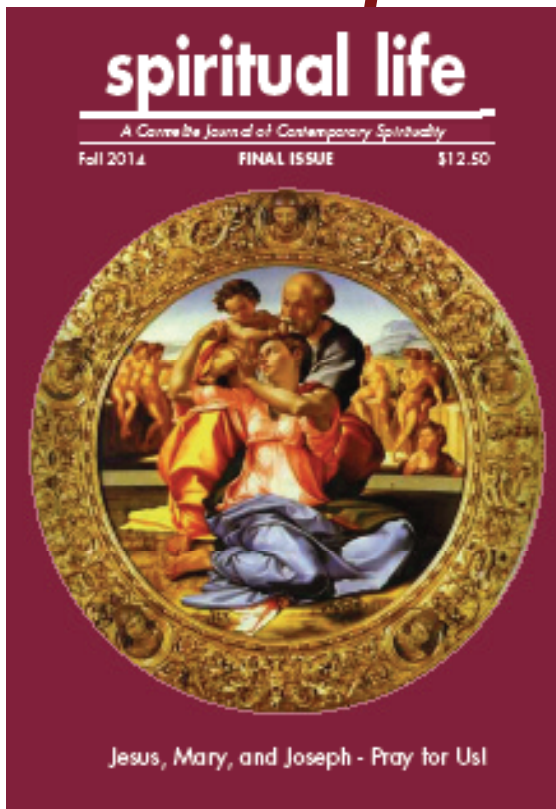
***Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life.* By Cardinal Walter Kasper**

Paulist Press Hardcover \$29.95 eBook 23.96

Pain and suffering have been universal human experiences since our beginning. All religions ask, in one way or another, where suffering comes from, why it exists, and what it means. They ask where we can find the strength to endure. They ask for deliverance from it. This is no less true today. The twentieth century saw brutal totalitarian regimes; two world wars; as well as the genocide, concentration camps, and gulags, all resulting in the death of tens of millions of people. In the twenty-first century we have the threat of ruthless terrorism, outrageous injustice, abused and starving children, millions of people in flight, increasing persecution of Christians, and devastating natural catastrophes. With this in mind, it is difficult for many people to speak of an all-powerful and simultaneously just and merciful God. Why does God permit all of this?

In *Mercy*, the important new book praised by Pope Francis, Cardinal Walter Kasper examines God's mercy while holding these devastating facts and questions in hand. He looks at empathy and compassion as a starting point for theological reflection on the topic. He continues by reflecting upon the following: What does it mean to believe in a merciful God? How are divine mercy and divine justice related? How can we speak of a sympathetic—that is, a compassionate—God? Can undeserved woe and divine mercy be brought into harmony with one another? He likewise seeks to address the ethical questions that similarly arise: How can we measure up to the standard of divine mercy in our own actions? What does this message mean for a new culture of mercy in our society? These considerations of mercy lead to the fundamental questions of theology. In this work, Kasper combines theological reflection with spiritual, pastoral, and social considerations on this essential topic at a crucial time.

Back Issues of *spiritual life*



- 1. Fall 2014:** Witness to Suffering, Teresa of Avila, Evelyn Underhill, John Henry Newman, Thérèse of Lisieux.
 - 2. Spring 2014:** Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Confronting an Experience of Diminishment, To Love as Jesus Loves
 - 3. Fall 2013:** John XXII-Mystic Pope, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Beauty—The Forgotten Attribute.
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The Divine Adventure: St. Teresa of Avila's Journeys and Foundations

Tomás Alvarez, OCD and Fernando Domingo, OCD
With an Introduction by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD
Translated by Christopher O'Mahony
With additional translation and adaptation
by Patricia Lynn Morrison

With lively details, Teresa recounts her travels and the events and people connected with them in her classic book *The Foundations*. *The Divine Adventure*, produced to celebrate St. Teresa's 500th birthday in 2015, is a fascinating armchair pilgrimage to each of these foundations and more, in full color.

Filled with hundreds of color photographs, maps, charts, and historic artwork, this unique book lets the reader walk with Teresa and see the places touched by her life and holiness. Visit some of Spain's most breathtaking sites and also get a rare glimpse into the cloistered monasteries she founded, still extant today.

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