

God the 'Mother' and the Imagery of 'Womb' In the Writings of St. Teresa of Avila

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Savia Thattamparmpil argues that a feminine perspective of God can contribute a new dimension to our present understanding of Divinity which has a macho touch to say the minimum. She opines that for a creator-sustainer God the title mother is more apt and fitting than the title Father. She claims that the rediscovery, projection and promotion of the feminine nature of the Holy Spirit can bring about a better balance to the Trinitarian concept of God in Christianity. She explores the contributions of St. Teresa of Avila to resuscitate a God with feminine face, heart, and womb. -
Editor

Introduction

Men and women approach religion and God differently. Caroll Gilligan, in her work *In Different Voices*, observes that men tend to make moral choices based on individual rights emphasizing separation, autonomy, competition, intrusion and outer space; while women tend to make choices based on maintaining a net work of relationships, connectedness, relativity and inner space and so on.¹ Naturally all these gender characteristics will influence on their understanding of God as well. Since religion was mostly under the control of patriarchal culture throughout history, ideas concerning God developed in masculine terms and images, than in female imageries. Consequently in the male dominated world the transcendence of God as the one who is 'out there' got precedence.²

However if we glance through the Bible, we notice besides those predominantly masculine metaphors and imageries of God, certain metaphors like *ruah*, *shekinah*, *hokmah* and *Sophia* which are either female or gender non-specific to represent the Spirit of God. The notion of a feminine Holy Spirit persisted and continued to re-emerge down through the centuries. Whatever be the pros and cons of the above vision, the point is that the

neglect of the feminine indicates the repression and marginalization of women into a faceless, nameless situation in every field, especially of the Christian worship, and theology.³ This article is an attempt to look for the maternal imagery of God found in the Bible as well as in the Christian tradition, especially in the writings of St. Teresa of Avila,⁴ who is a well known representative of woman's perspective and experience of God.

Divine Mother Imagery in the Bible

The Biblical God exhibits numerous feminine qualities such as nurturing, caring, and loving in his relationship with his people. In the book of prophet we encounter God the Father behaving like a 'Mother' who clothes her children (Neh 9:21). Yahweh who heals the wound and feeds the hungry child, displays the quality of *rehammim* (compassion) a word that is derived from the Hebrew word *rehem* meaning: 'movement of the womb.'⁵ The Psalmist reflecting on the life while in his mother's womb writes, "Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast ..." (Ps 22:9). The imagery of God as a loving and comforting mother is used repeatedly in the second and third Isaiah (Isa 42:14; 49:15; 66: 9, 13). In the *Song of Moses* (Deut 32: 11- 18) the image of a mothering God is expressed vividly. God is likened to 'an eagle that stirs up its nest, and fluttering over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions.' The book of *Numbers* speaks of God as one who gives birth, breast feeds, and carries the child in his bosom (Num 11:12).

When we speak of God, we should avoid depicting him in patriarchal terms. God is equally a father and a mother to us. Jesus opted to address God using the term "*Abba*" which is a very intimate and personal term as opposed to the distant patriarchal image of God which was common in his period. We can come across instances in which Jesus used feminine imagery to describe his heavenly Father. In the gospel we have three parables on the merciful forgiving nature of God which could be ascribed as feminine imageries (Lk 15:8-10; Mt. 23: 37; Mt 13:33). In Jesus too we observe the unqualified acceptance of the parental care. It is through this unconditional and unqualified love and acceptance that we achieve a wholesome growth in the physical, mental and spiritual levels. Jesus was fully aware that he was the beloved son of the Father. From this awareness came the spontaneity of Jesus' relationship with the heavenly Father and this made Jesus free for all times.⁶

The parenting qualities like compassion, caring, nurturing and loving, which are obvious in the Biblical God, are cultural and human qualities essential for societies in general. So the issue is not whether God is male or female, but a God who transcends and reintegrates 'male and female' concepts. There are biblical analogies presenting God not only as father and mother, but also as brother, sister and friend to us.⁷ In all these we realize that God loves us dearly. No analogies can exhaust God. As there are many ways to understand love, so also there are many ways to understand what God does to us.

Feminizing the Spirit in Christian tradition

Another strategy for balancing the male overtone in the Christian Trinitarian concept is to emphasize symbolically the feminine characteristics of the Holy Spirit which is not something new to the Christian tradition. We could readily uncover the maternal aspect of the Holy Spirit such as brooding, nurturing, and bringing forth new members of the Church through baptism. The earliest appearance of this concept is found in Paul's citation from Greek *Epimanander*, "In God, in whom we live, move and have our being" - God as pregnant mother.⁸ In the Christian tradition, the baptismal font⁹ is referred as a womb. German Mystic Meister Eckhart explains the indwelling of the Trinity in our soul as 'birthing of God in the soul.'¹⁰ This birthing of God within the soul is first of all a cosmic event. From this spiritual perspective, an individual soul is called a spiritual virgin to be impregnated by the divine Spirit, so that the Divine can give birth to itself in the human soul, which means we, the human souls are all 'mothers of God,' since God always needs to be born.¹¹ Interiority or inwardness is the most fundamental presupposition in all spiritual growth according to Eckhart.

There is also an early Syriac tradition of presenting the Holy Spirit as feminine, following the female gender of the noun in the Semetic languages ('ruha' in Syriac and 'ruah' in Hebrew). Susan Ashbrk Harvy points out that Syrian Christians did not posit a female deity alongside or in distinction to a male, though such concrete identities were available in the pagan deities of the Syrian Orient, where 'a triad of mother, father, and son were a common configuration of divinity.'¹² Some attempts in this direction have been taken by feminist theologians during the last few decades. Yves Congar considers its implications in her writing as follows:

The part played in our upbringing by the Holy Spirit is that of a mother – a mother who enables us to know our Father, God, and our brother Jesus ... He (the Spirit) teaches us how to practice the virtues and how to use the gifts of a son of God by grace. All this is part of a mother's function.¹³

In this connection, Elizabeth Johnson notes the effort made in the traditional Trinity to align the *Logos* as the masculine aspect of God with order, novelty, demand, agency, and transformation. The feminine aspect of God was ascribed to the Kingdom or Spirit which is linked with receptivity, empathy, suffering, and preservation.¹⁴ While the Spirit was styled as feminine, and occasionally identified with the Wisdom figure, the feminization was drawn across to all three persons of the Trinity. From this point of view, *The Odes of Solomon*, probably from the second century C.E. has a claim of 'maternal Spirit' but also a 'maternal Father':

A cup of milk was offered to me, and I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness. The Son is the cup, and He who was milked is the Father; and the Holy Spirit is She who milked Him; because His breasts were full, and it was undesirable that His milk should be ineffectually

released. The Holy Spirit opened Her bosom, and mixed the milk of the two breast of the Father.¹⁵

Both the Spirit and the Father - mother feeding the Son, and the Christians are offered milk from the same cup, asking to partake of the same understanding. Here, Susan Harvey highlights not only the wealth of the bodily and gendered metaphors, but also the way in which they are layered in paradoxical and conflicting sequences. She describes:

Roles are reversed, fused, inverted: no one is simply who they seem to be. More accurately, everyone is more than they seem to be – Mary is more than a woman in what she does; the Father and the Spirit are more than one gender that can convey in the effort to glimpse their works. Gender is thus shown to be important, even crucial, to identity – but not one specific gender.¹⁶

In this rhetorical excess, more than about the gender of God, the main concern is about our human experience of 'gender and physicality' that really points out. Christian women's common view is that this kind of feminizing rhetoric does nothing to counteract the genuine neglect of the Spirit in modern theology, in which the Spirit appears as a sort of edifying 'appendage' to the real persons those who have faces: the Father and the Son. According to them, we must avoid subordinating the Spirit to a Father who as "cause and source" of the other two persons that remains as a 'masculine' stereotype with the theological upper hand.¹⁷

God the Mother in the Writing of Julian of Norwich:

A striking medieval instance for all three persons of the Trinity that styled in the imagery of the human masculine and the human feminine is found in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*. Here we find a better play of gendered imagery that keeps in place the symbols of desire, fecundity, and parental love while destabilizing any over-literalistic reading. So much has been made of Julian's dramatic styling of Christ as mother, which we almost fail to notice due to the work's splendour as a piece of Trinitarian theology. However, Julian makes it clear at the very outset that it is the triune God whom she wishes to speak throughout; and it has been suggested that since Julian clarifies to avoid accusations of heresy, her Trinitarian aspect seems genuine.¹⁸

She confidently sports with threefold title throughout the work. She addresses God as Mother: "God all wise our kindly Mother ... The Second Person is our Mother, Brother and Savior; what does Jesus our true Mother do?"¹⁹ In placing great emphasis on Christ as our Mother, she is at once provocative and altogether orthodox: Jesus was indubitably male, yet, if he is to be the perfection of our humanity, he must also be the perfection of female humanity. She is willing to style all three persons as Mother. God is as really our Mother as he is our Father. He showed this throughout, and particularly when he said that sweet word, "It is I."²⁰ Jesus is our mother because he made us, but all making, redeeming and sustaining is the work of the triune God:

I came to realize that there were three ways to see God's motherhood: the first is based on the fact that our nature is made; the second is found in the assumption of that nature – there begins the motherhood of grace; the third is the motherhood of work which flows out over all by the same grace – the length and breadth and height and depth of it is everlasting. And so is his love.²¹

Julian follows the route not of displacement but excess, complementing the gendered Scriptural terms of divine Fatherhood and Sonship with maternal and functional imagery (God is our Maker, Keeper, and Lover). Yet, just as God be our Mother as well as Father, Christ is our Maker as well as Lover, our Keeper as well as Maker; the threefold term revolves in the text. Julian styles the human soul as triune: "... Man's soul is God's creation, and possesses similar properties (only they are created) and it always does what it was created for: it sees God, it gazes on God, and it loves God. And God rejoices in his creature; and his creature in God eternally marveling."²²

Femininity of God in the Teresian Spirituality

Teresa's writings²³ engender a radical spirituality, challenging in its nature with a realistic view of life. While remaining a cloistered nun she became a great reformer of the Church of her times. Teresa was a typical woman of activity, practical and vigorous, humorous, witty and attractive and a born leader and organizer. At the same time she was a contemplative saint whose writings on the spiritual life stand high in the mystical literature. For her, sanctity lies in complete conformity of our will to the will of God, which is the true aim of Christian life. She writes, "The highest perfection clearly lies not in the interior delight, nor in great raptures or visions, nor in the spirit of prophecy, but in that our will is so conformed to God's will."²⁴

Teresa attached great importance to the humanity of Christ in particular to his passion, and her keen sensitivity to everything that pertains to the bodily sufferings of the Lord. For her, mysticism is the highest human experience (in the deepest sense of the word human) of wo/man, a comprehensive awareness of the eternity. Teresa's writings on the feminine / mothering / nurturing aspect of the Divine are highly imaginative and creative attempt to shed light on the subtle spiritual experiences of the soul's encounter with God from a woman's perspective. As an expression of the feminine imagery of God, She writes, "since we [women] have no learning, all of this imagining is necessary that we may truly understand within us lies something incomparably more precious ... let's not imagine that we are hollow inside;²⁵ "if I had understood as I do now that in this palace (womb) of my soul dwelt so great a King."²⁶

Very artistically Teresa mentions "prayer" as the gate-way to enter into the soul, in order to have a personal experience of God, and the indwelling presence of the great King – Christ Jesus. Another time she writes, "We women are not so easy to be known thoroughly ... one day you are surprised at having understood us so little."²⁷ The appreciation of her feminine quality,

the womanhood is implicit in this remark. By feminine, she means a 'refined sensitivity and delicate tenderness of heart.' Teresa daringly described her God experience: the familiar or intimate friendly relationship of her soul with God, by using symbols and images, especially the usage of feminine imageries in the human sexual language that helps in understanding the maternal aspect of the Divine.

During a time when the 'Index of Valdes'²⁸ prohibited the reading of Scripture in vernacular, Teresa's main anxiety was that if the reading of the Bible written in Spanish was forbidden to her, how to nurture herself on the Word of God. God apparently disagreed with this gross injustice done to the devout, by opening to her the pages of the Sacred Scripture in a vision and helping her to understand the 'Faith content of the whole Bible.' Besides, God commanded her to write on certain Biblical themes with a special mention of *Song of Songs*, by applying her own (feminist) hermeneutics. Eventually spiritually empowered Teresa, wrote a commentary *Meditations of the Song of Songs*: an experiential knowledge of the love affair between God and her soul in the context of prayer; and thus challenged the traditional church-view: 'women are not to write, teach or preach in the Church.' Unfortunately her first draft of it was burned under holy obedience, because the women of her times had no right to write on a Love Poem!²⁹

Teresa, the first woman Doctor of the Church says that in contemplative prayer we seek contact with God by letting ourselves hypnotized by the eyes of the Father who sees the innermost part of self. Hence the prayer begins with the awareness that 'God does not cease watching us.' Here we experience the unconditional nurturing parental love of God, for who we are, not for the attributes we bear. In prayer, Teresa realized the conscious presence of God that had happened in every aspect of her life, including her life in her mother's womb. Teresa, a pioneer in producing images, symbols and categories,³⁰ tried to express her God experience through the usage of 'womb' or the maternal imagery.

Soul: the 'Womb' of Spiritual Birthing

It is interesting to speculate whether Teresa's Jewish ancestry might have influenced in forming the mothering: nurturing/caring aspect of Divine in her writing.³¹ The earliest form of Jewish *Merhabah* mysticism consisted in a perilous journey outward through the seven *Hakhaloth* halls into the presence of the throne of God. Yet a later development would reverse the direction to a descent inward into the soul in comparison with the womb would become the throne.³² Teresa's suggestion is that God dwells in the inner part of our soul that is seen as 'womb,' in contrary to the traditional use of Epimanander's sense soul dwells within the womb of God. If she limited her presentation of symbol of this one exposition, then her theology might have been faulted.³³ Here is a possibility of making an interconnection between Teresa's feminine or mothering imagery of God and that of Meister Eckhart's description of the Father [Godhead] who gives birth to the Son into the depth of the soul ... and this birthing process takes place through the power of the Holy Spirit."³⁴

Teresa used the imagery of 'union of the mystical marriage' to explain the relationship of soul and God. She taught that God dwells in the deeper and innermost center, 'the superior part' of the soul, translated as "womb" where "the soul is made one with God."³⁵ Teresa marvels at God's action in the soul saying, "He wanted to enclose himself in something so small, and so He enclose himself in the 'womb' of his most Blessed Mother; and since He is Lord, he is free to do what he wants; and since "He loves us he adapts himself to our size."³⁶ Teresa looked at Mother Mary as the model in search of pure motherhood. In Teresa's description of 'Prayer of quiet,' Teresa explicitly expresses the nurturing dimension of God, using the simile of a 'little baby feeding joyfully at its mother's breast':

The Lord desires that the will, without thinking about the matter, understand it is with him and that it does no more than swallow the milk His Majesty places in its mouth and enjoy that sweetness ... If the will goes out to fight with the intellect after itself, it cannot do so at all; it will be forced to let the milk fall from its mouth and lose the divine nourishment.³⁷

Water: a symbol of the Divine 'Womb'

Teresa often used water - feminine symbol, to speak of the Divine. Water as mothering /nurturing imagery of the divine is not anything unique to the Christian literature. In every religion, for example, in the Indian mythology water has functioned frequently as a source of 'Life'.³⁸ Rivers such as Ganga, Yamuna are depicted holy and as mother goddesses. The belief is that having dipped in the holy water of these rivers people receive salvation. Water is used in the religious ablutions to achieve physical and spiritual purity. There are numerous Biblical imageries drawn from water. Water is presented as the source of life and salvation (Isa 35:7; 41:18). Yahweh is depicted as the source of living water (Jer 2;13; 17;13). Jesus applies the same simile to himself, promising to give living water which is eternal life who come to him (Jn 4; 10,13ff). The eschatological Jerusalem cannot be conceived without its stream of living water (Apo 22:1; Ezek 47;1).

Coming to Teresian writing, in *the Interior Castle*, the masterpiece of her works, Teresa portrays the soul's intimate communications with God as an inward journey. In the imagery of Castle, soul is compared to a crystal diamond globe or castle with seven mansions or dwelling places (within them having numerous other imageries such as water, journey, serpent and devil, butterfly, marriage presenting a theater within a theater) that corresponds to seven grades of prayer, passing from the stage of purgation to illumination and to the last stage of transforming union.³⁹ Teresa tells her life story of spiritual journey through the castle imagery, and she, the engaging story teller invites us into her life with God by stirring our imagination, and the story involves a series of transformation culminating in a growing union with Christ. Prayer is the door to castle, and the same time prayer is also depicted as the activity that allows one to be drawn to God at its center. *Castle* gives a survey of the contemplative life of a soul in the fuller form.

One of the basic ideas of the *Castle* is the indwelling presence of God within the soul. She narrates the whole spiritual life as a friendship with the indwelling God present in the soul through a process of 'human interiority,' becoming deeper and reaching its climax in the union with the One who is at the innermost centre. Teresa describes in terms of romance and trials a soul in search of the Divine spouse culminating in the 'spiritual marriage' in the seventh mansion. She claims to have reached a state of spiritual union with God in spiritual marriage. Here the soul is always in habitual union with the beloved, because, real love is a 'becoming one,' a process of arising from the fusion of consciousness.⁴⁰ In the presence of the Beloved, the human soul feels happy and fulfilled since happiness is always the outcome of union. Her consciousness merges into the divine consciousness, the merging of the one into the other. This fusion of consciousness and this becoming one is what happens in the mystical marriage which is a state of bliss, "the heaven on earth." This is the climax of the soul outlined in *Interior Castle*.

The spiritual marriage may be compared to rain falling into a river when the waters are united and can no more be separated, or like a stream falling into the sea which can no longer be distinguished, and a similar comparison is seen in Indian Scripture, "These Rivers, my dear, flow, the eastern toward the east, the western toward the west. They go just from they know not 'I am this one', 'I am that one' (Chandogya Upanishad 6:10, 1)." Yet Teresa is careful to say that the divine marriage cannot be consummated in perfection while we live here below, for we can still separate ourselves from God and lose that supreme blessing. However, in this life, it is impossible to say more than this, so far as the soul can be understood, "I mean the spirit of this soul becomes one thing with God."⁴¹

Teresian mysticism teaches a union of love which always retains the distinction between the Creator and the creature. Trinitarian conceptions of God have enabled Teresa to speak of union without identity, and the emphasis upon loving relationship reinforces this. Christ is both the partner of mystical union and the prototype of union with the Father. She feels that the prayer of Our Lord in the Last Supper is literally fulfilled here: he asked they might become one with the Father and with Him, even as Jesus Christ Our is in the Father and the Father is in Him (Jn 17:26). Here this union signifies oneness of mind, of heart, of will and of ideal.

Her womanly intuition regarding the experiences of divine communications in the soul impelled her to use a feminine imagery - 'water' to depict her awareness of the hidden riches and depths of the deep interior communicative presence of God in the soul. Symbols would always be necessary to explain her ineffable experiences of God. Teresa has such an attraction for water, and she finds nothing else more appropriate than 'water imagery' to explain the entire life that happens in the experiential realm of her soul.⁴² Even in her earlier work *Life*, she compares the four degrees of mystical prayer with four ways of 'watering the garden.' Water becomes her expression of a fundamental distinction between the 'two types of prayer' that experienced in her soul.

The first type is the active meditation, prayer of the first three dwelling places. The second type is a supernatural / passive contemplation or infused prayer,⁴³ the characteristic of the prayer of the last three dwelling places. The middle dwelling place, the fourth the prayer of quiet, is the place of transition. It is in this fourth dwelling place where Teresa locates her example of the 'two fountains with two water troughs.'⁴⁴ In the first type, the trough that is filled by aqueducts represents prayer that begins with person and ends in God. Here the person with God's grace initiates the effort and sustains it through a controlled use of imagination, memory, thought and prayerful expression. Here water represents the consolations (*contentos*) i.e., joy and peace of the natural effort.

In the second type of prayer, the trough that is filled directly from the spring represents prayer that begins with God and ends in the person.⁴⁵ God is the source of this water and it represents the spiritual delights (*gustos*) that are passively received. The effects of such prayer in an individual are lively faith, confidence, and freedom in the service of God. She writes this water overflows through faculties and reaches the body, meaning, the fourth dwelling place is the beginning of true mystical prayer that deepens and expands through the remaining dwelling places. While Teresa describes the experience of the sixth dwelling place, the fountain waters have become an ocean moving into the soul's union with God.⁴⁶

A comparison between Teresa's feminine imagery, divine 'water' within the castle (soul); and the biological / physiological growth of an inborn child (foetus) in the womb or uterus of a pregnant woman is interesting. From the conception onwards the foetus grows in the uterus, from one stage to another, floating in a fluid 'liquor-amine' (life giving source to the inborn); and when the inborn is formed into a fully developed child by the seventh month, then the inborn child descend inward and get fixed in the deeper inner superior part of the womb that is in tune with Teresa's understanding of the simile - 'the union of God with the soul' in the seventh dwelling place, at the inner most centre part of the soul.

Teresa learned that although soul's union with God is a gift, it is not necessarily achieved overnight or a permanent possession, just as the child once conceived still takes up nine months to become a viable person, so does the divine-human relationship require sometimes a lengthy period of careful nurturing. The point of *Castle* is that the nurturing process is a shared responsibility of God and human being. Union remains a gift, not a reward for good behavior,⁴⁷ yet a fragile gift unless properly appreciated and handled with care, it can be damaged or even destroyed. That is why Teresa could wonder after the years of intimacy with God, whether she was in fact doing well enough! Achieving the proper balance between 'doing and simply being,' so that one might become is a task even Teresa had difficulty in mastering. Hence it is a reassuring message for the contemporary women and men torn between so many needs and concerns.

Nada: the 'womb'

It is fascinating to compare the *nada*⁴⁸ concept of John of the Cross, the contemporary of Teresa of Avila with the Teresian view of the divine 'womb'. Alex Kurian, in his work *Ascent to Nothingness*, presents *nada* as the 'womb' of the 'awakened self'.⁴⁹ John considers the experience of *nada* as an 'awakening' to a supernatural way of seeing things.⁵⁰ *Nada*, in its true sense is a *kenotic* or self emptying process. It is the living of nothingness, and not the absence of being. However, the driving force behind John's self-emptying process is love. John equates true love with the effort made towards self-purification or self-emptying.⁵¹ The *Kenosis* or the self emptying of Jesus found in Phil 2:6-8 is the basic pattern for every Christian kenosis. In this pattern of Kenosis or self-emptying, we lose our own centre to fill into that deeper centre which is the Word of God living in us. Through overcoming one's egoism, a seeker of God gets filled with the divine. Through *nada* one starts transmitting the indwelling divine light. In the voluntary embracing of *nada*, a person washes away all the impurities. Once the old self dies and is buried, a new self emerges from the womb of *nada*. Only a person thus liberated has the ability to see and enjoy life in its fullness. John's entire pedagogical effort was to convince the seeker of the need to experience *nada*. A total self-emptying is an absolute requirement for a true awakening to the Absolute.⁵² In line with John's *nada*, Teresa too speaks of detachment and self mortification.

St Teresa's writings had the practical aim of teaching how to pray. Her description of the stages of prayer elaborates the soul's ascent to God. According to her there is a two-layer world – a 'this world' and a 'that world'.⁵³ This world must be left behind by an act of self mortification-detachment. Death and dying are words found often in her writing of prayers. "Let us practice penance and mortification; let the silk-worm die when its work is done. Then we shall see God and ourselves shall be as completely hidden in his greatness as this little worm in its cocoon."⁵⁴ The man-God relationship is an either or - to be filled with God is to be empty of creatures. Teresa always emphasized the Incarnation – the corporeal aspect in contemplation. It demands a radical purification and a sensory adherence to the Passion of Christ and the human side of his mystery.⁵⁵ She also affirms that 'trying to do God's will is the beginning and end of the road to spiritual perfection.'⁵⁶ The final union of the soul is celebrated with Christ, the Bridegroom and the Incarnate Word. Centering our life on God does not degrade our personality but guarantees it. Teresa describes the *Castle* as the journey of soul in prayer which is ultimately the work of God's love in human person.⁵⁷ Though divine communications at the experiential realm in one's spiritual life is purely a gift from God, Teresa suggests few tips in preparing the soul to achieve intimacy with God in prayer. Along with the practice of Prayer of Interiority, she gives emphasis to do good works, especially the practice of three virtues namely 'charity, detachment and humility' as pre-requisites to prayer. Basically 'moral integrity' is a condition - *sine qua non* for spiritual growth and divine union. Pondering into her own spiritual life and the intimacy with God in prayer, Teresa affirms that an

intimate union with God in prayer will normally be granted to all who duly prepare themselves for it.⁵⁸ So as a preparation, she insists on the above said virtues.

The Creative Potential of the Womb

Womb is the creative potential of the universe. It is also a harbinger of new, powerful and harmonious human identity. It nurtures and protects human life. From the womb of women life emerges. Women are conscious about their reproductive system which is the seat of their primal energy. Mother symbol of the Divine reclaims the significance of the female body and its life cycle: menstruation, pregnancy, child-birth, and menopause express the creative endeavor of God. Woman's bodily ability and resistance are remarkable. Women are biologically strong enough to carry out any type of tasks, especially work demanding great precision and skill. They can endure all sorts of devitalizing conditions. This underpins the fact that the females are not weak, fragile and emotional beings as traditional society labels them. They can change the face of the country today.

However in today's world most women are socially conditioned to discount or even hate their own bodies as polluted. This situation demands a rediscovery of the God-image inherent in the female body. On account of menstruation and childbirth the androcentric world denied female bodies their temple status (cf. 1Cor. 3: 16-17). The life of Teresa is a paradigm or model for the empowerment of women. Her positive image of women's body; their gender and motherhood inspires women to accept their bodies and womanhood positively. As a teenager Teresa was very much beauty conscious and took care of her body using cosmetics and perfumes. She even used to pluck her eyebrows. Later Teresa appreciated her womanhood based on the 'feminine imagery' of the Divine.⁵⁹ Teresa was marked for her simplicity and love. Her life and writings prove that she was truly womanly, and maternal.⁶⁰ Teresa used maternal imagery in her relationship with the Carmelite nuns for whom she wrote regularly calling them 'daughters'⁶¹ or 'my daughters.'⁶² Teresa as a prioress was 'Mother' to her nuns.⁶³ This proves that her religious life rejecting marriage was certainly not a rejection of family life and maternal values. She spent her life and energy tirelessly on behalf of women: religious and lay, even to the point of hastening her own death.

Teresa also can be a model for establishing gender justice in Indian Church and society. She mentions the attitude of the parents of Teresa de Layz, the patron of Alba convent, in chapter twenty of the book *Foundations*. It reminds us of the 'violent realities of women's life prevalent during her days. The present situation in India and the sexual discrimination we experience in our society are not far removed from her own experiences. Teresa was upset about the negative attitude and the ill-treatment inflicted on the infant girl Layz.⁶⁴ Against the gender injustice, she proposed the axiom: 'the girls are divine gifts to the parents, just as the boys.' Teresa holds the view that parents has to accept girls also as a source of blessing to them as boys, and to accept that fact as the true will of God for the parents.⁶⁵

It is not right for one sex to claim superiority over the other. Man is not superior to woman nor woman to man. They are distinct images of God, with complimentary roles to play. When the second person of the blessed Trinity took a human nature, he became a man. But he chose to be born of a woman. In this manner he ennobled both sexes. Though God did not make men and women identical he endowed them with equal dignity and similar destiny. He gave them distinctive attributes fitting them for their specific functions. The sphere of man is fatherhood and that of woman is motherhood.⁶⁶

Conclusion

According to Teresa mystical experience is not the sign of Christian perfection. However, God is always willing to impart his mystical gifts to the souls who are prepared for it.⁶⁷ Teresa's intimate relationship with God was alive in her and it grew throughout her life: in the time of peace, tension, fulfillment, emptiness, and transition. She expressed it through her writings by using of feminine imageries. Since these imageries are pregnant with meaning they still remain living symbols. Using her imagination, she developed various imageries which simultaneously acted as vehicles for Teresa to enter more deeply into her spiritual experiences. Therefore, they can also become vehicles for others as well.⁶⁸ She believed that her God-experience contained in *Life, Way* and *Castle* would profit many souls.⁶⁹ She wrote even those things which were of no benefit to her since they can help others in their spiritual journey.⁷⁰

End notes

¹Cited in Mathew Maniampra, *A Spiritual Vision to Wholeness*, (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2001), p. 36.

²Ibidem.

³Nicola Slee, "The Holy Spirit and spirituality," in Susan Frank Parsons, ed., *Feminist Theology* (New York: Cambridge university press, 2002), pp.171-172.

⁴Teresa of Avila is the name by which she is best known in the world. Her family name was Teresa de Ahumada. As a discalced nun, she took the name Teresa of Jesus, renouncing her family name in the egalitarian spirit that characterized the reform. She always insisted on being called Teresa of Jesus because Jesus was her very source, center and finality of her life. There are various ways to spell this Greek name. In Spanish, Italian and English, it is spelt 'Teresa'. In French, German and Latin it is spelt 'Theresa.' In the article, hereafter I will be using Teresa in general. For further details, cf. J. Bosco, "A la recuperacion de un nombre perdido: Teresa de Jesus", in *Monte Carmelo* 90 (1982), pp. 266-304; J. Mary Luti, *Teresa of Avila's Way*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), note no.1, p. 33.

⁵Marianne Katopo, *Compassionate and Free*, WCC (1979), pp. 65-66.

⁶Mathew Maniampra, *A Spiritual Vision to Wholeness*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁷Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1973), p. 20.

⁸Sonya Quitslund, "In the Image of Christ," in *Women Priests*, Leonard and Arlene Swidler, eds., (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 262.

- ⁹Walter Bedard, *Symbolism of the Baptismal Font in Early Christian Thought* (Ph. D. Dissertation submitted to Catholic University of America, 1951); Sonya A. Quitslund, "Elements of a Feminist Spirituality in *Teresa the Woman*, *Carmelite Studies* 3, John Sullivan, ed., (Washington: ICS Publications, 1984), note no. 80, p. 48.
- ¹⁰Robert K. Forman, *Meister Eckhart* (New York: Element Inc., 1991), pp.216-217; Richard Woods, *The Way of the Christian Mystics*, Vol. 2 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1941), p.110.
- ¹¹Cf. Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality* (Cleveland, Ohio: Bantam Books, 1989), p. 195.
- ¹²Susan A. Harvy, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: the Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and early Syriac Tradition," in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37:2&3 (1993), p.114.
- ¹³Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* Vol. III (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), p.161.
- ¹⁴Eleizabeth A. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," in *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), p. 459,
- ¹⁵This passage taken from the Odes of Solomon, a collection of Syriac texts and the present-day edition is known as *The Earliest Christian Hymn Book*, cited in Lavinia Byrne, *Women before God* (New York: Mystic-Connecticut, 23rd Publications, 1988). p. 21.
- ¹⁶Susan A. Harvy, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: the Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and early Syriac Tradition," *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- ¹⁷Janet M. Soskice, "Trinity and Feminism," in Susan Frank Parsons, ed., *Feminist Theology*, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144; Sarah Coakley, "Femininity and the Holy Spirit," in Monica Furlong, ed., *Mirror to the Church* (London: SPCK, 1988).
- ¹⁸Janet M. Soskice, "Trinity and Feminism," in Susan Frank Parsons, ed., *Feminist Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
- ¹⁹Cf. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (London: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 165,169.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, p.157.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, p.168.
- ²²*Ibid.*, p.130.
- ²³Throughout this article, regarding St. Teresa of Avila, the quotations are taken from Teresa's writings, K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* Vol. 1, 2, and 3 (Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing House, 2001). Similarly of St. John of the Cross, citations are taken from Peers, E. Allison, Tr., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, 3 Vols.*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1946). For the sake of simplicity, we cite title of Teresa's books in an abbreviated form followed by the chapter, paragraph number as they appear in the translation of Teresa's Collected Works. For the *Letters*, unless mentioned, we cite the two-volume translation by E. Allison Peers. Citations will appear as *Letter* number, year, to whom it is addressed. Regarding citing the title of her works, the following abbreviations such as: *Life* - *The Book of Autobiography*; *Song* - *Meditations on the Song of Songs*; *Testimonies* - *Spiritual Testimonies*; *Way* - *The Way of Perfection*; *Castle* - *Interior Castle*.

- ²⁴Trueman Dicken, *The Crucible of Love* (London: Darton, 1963), p.39.
- ²⁵*Way*, 28:10.
- ²⁶*Way*, 28:11. Here the 'palace' of the soul is imagined as 'womb,' to bring about the insight of Teresa that is implicit in this passage.
- ²⁷*Letter* (121), to P. Ambrose Marian, October 21, 1576.
- ²⁸According to the *Index* of Valdes that appeared in 1551, 1554 and 1559, only the Latin version of Bible and the Latin spiritual books were permitted to be read. Since the clerics alone were the highly educated in those times, they only could afford to read and write Latin. Teresa refers to many books existing in both Spanish and Latin, and about the prohibition of circulating the Spanish editions. She provoked in saying, it was wrong to prevent women from enjoying the richness contained in God's words and works. Cf. Introduction to *Way of Perfection*, p. 23; *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, 1: 8; Ciriaco Moron-Arroyo, "I will give you a Living Book": Spiritual currents at work at the time of St Teresa of Jesus," in *Teresa the Woman, Carmelite Studies* 3, *op. cit.*, p.96.
- ²⁹In 1580, a confessor ordered her to burn it because it was not right for a woman of her times to write on a theme of Love, as the *Song of Songs*. Cf. Introduction to *Meditation on the Song of Songs*, p. 209.
- ³⁰John Welch, "Jungian Readings of Symbols in the Interior Castle," a paper presented in Washington (February, 1982).
- ³¹Jewish mysticism was almost exclusively masculine, perhaps with the exception of the maid of Ludmir. However the high percentage of Spanish mystics with Jewish blood remains is a remarkable fact to remember! Cf. Stephen Clissold, *Wisdom of Spanish Mystics* (New York: New Direction Books, 1977), p. 6.
- ³²The idea of the seven heaven through which the soul ascends to its original home, either after death or in a state of ecstasy, while the body is still alive is a very old concept; and this idea is already to be found in the old apocrypha such as the Fourth Book of Ezra or the Ascension of Isaiah, which is based on a Jewish text. Such descriptions of the seven heavens are come down to us from the school of the Merkhabah mystics of the post-Messianic period. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941), pp. 49-54.
- ³³Teresa claims that this insight came not from her, but in a vision granted to her by the Lord. Cf. Sonya A. Quitslund, "Elements of a Feminist Spirituality in *Teresa the Woman, Carmelite Studies* 3, *op. cit.*, p.36.
- ³⁴Cf. Bernard McGinn, tr. and intro., *Meister Eckhart, op. cit.*, pp. 38ff; S. Painadath, collation and tran., *Sermons of Meister Eckhart*. (1260-1328), paper presented on the occasion of "Indian Religious Dialogue and Ashrama Aikya Meet," at Ashirvad - Bangalore on 26-3-2006.
- ³⁵*Castle VII*, 2:3. Emphasis of [womb] is mine.
- ³⁶*Way*, 28:11.
- ³⁷*Way*, 31: 9.
- ³⁸Cf. John L. Mckenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1983), p. 922.
- ³⁹Benedict Zimmerman (Revis, ed.), *The Interior Castle of St Teresa of Jesus* (London: Stanbrook Abbey, 1971), p. 59; John Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims, op. cit.*, pp.15-20.

- ⁴⁰Francis Vineeth Vadakethala, *Call to Integration* (Trichur: Jyothi Centre, 1979), p.41.
- ⁴¹E. Allison Peers, ed., *The Interior Castle*, p.264.
- ⁴²*Castle IV*, 2:2.
- ⁴³It is the eruption of the supernatural prayer that flows from high; it is the prayer that is received, and almost forced upon from above - the very terminus of all prayer. It is a kind of contemplation in which the acts of the mind and of the will have become simplified under the influence of a special grace that takes hold of the soul and causes the soul to receive light and affection that God produces in us without our concern. Cf. Thomas de la Cruz, *La Oración, Caminar a Dios*, in *Ephemerides Carmeliticæ*, XXI / 1-2 (1970) p.117; Tanqueray, *The Spiritual Life, A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* Part II, tran., Herman Branderis (Tournai: Desclee & Co., 1930), p.606; Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1993), pp. 330-337.
- ⁴⁴*Castle IV*, 2:3.
- ⁴⁵*Ibidem*.
- ⁴⁶*Castle IV*, 5:3. Cf. also John Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims, op. cit.*, p. 63-64.
- ⁴⁷In *Castle* she explicitly says that God is not obliged to give the mystical gift and nothing can be done by our will to produce the gift, but we can prepare ourselves for receiving it by prayer and good works. Cf. *Castle IV*, 2: 9. However, we can find exceptions, in saint like Catherine of Genoa, claiming it occurred at the moment of her conversion and continued for the rest of her life.
- ⁴⁸*Nada* in Spanish means "nothing" or "nothingness".
- ⁴⁹Alex Kurian, *Ascent to Nothingness: The Ascent to God according to John of the Cross* (United Kingdom: St. Pauls Publications, 2000),p.187
- ⁵⁰John of the Cross, *Living Flame*, sta.4, 6.
- ⁵¹John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book two, 5A.
- ⁵²J. Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, Faith meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), p.70.
- ⁵³E. Allison Peers, ed., *The Way of Perfection*, p.27.
- ⁵⁴E. Allison Peers, ed., *The Interior Castle*, pp.255-256.
- ⁵⁵Edward Malatesta, *Jesus in Christian devotion and contemplation* (England: Anthony Clarke, 1974), p. 96.
- ⁵⁶*Life*, 40: 21.
- ⁵⁷Introduction to *Interior Castle*, p. 278.
- ⁵⁸*Way*, ch.17.
- ⁵⁹*Way*, 28:10.
- ⁶⁰Among the scholars, there are different opinions regarding the use of paternal and maternal images by Teresa. According to B.Lorenzo, paternal images were rather stronger in Teresa. He observes, it is Jesus who initiated her into the joys and sorrows of Mary, which could be in view of providing her with a feminine role model, but the same time she also had a special devotion to St. Joseph from her childhood onwards. Lorenzo explores in detail the paternal image she received from her father in her school life: while she was sick in the convent school, he brought her back home and cared her well. Cf. Bernadette Lorenzo, "Le

statut corporel de la femme mystique et la relation a Marie chez Therese d' Avila," an unpublished paper delivered at the eighth International Mariological Congress (Zaragoza Spain, 1979), pp.5-6. But Sonya A. Quitslaud's view is that after the death of Teresa's mother, she transferred her need of mother's love to Mary and even called St. Ann as her grandmother. In 1571, at the age of sixty, Teresa had a vision of Mary that lasted for several days (*Testimonies*, 12:6). Moreover, while she was appointed as prioress of the convent Incarnation, she placed a statue of Mary in the prioress' stall. So as a concluding remark we observe that she had more of maternal and protective images in her relationship with others. If Teresa identified more of her father – the masculine quality, it was more to do with her 'temperament,' due to the fact that male were the achievers and doers in sixteenth-century Spain, for e.g., observation into her own family makes clear that where all the important decisions were taken exclusively by her father, with mother being only the faithful executive of his wishes.

⁶¹Way, 4:1; 9:3.

⁶²Way, 2: 5, 9.

⁶³Constitutions, Peers ed., 3, p. 229.

⁶⁴Foundations, 20:4, 2.

⁶⁵Foundations, 20:3.

⁶⁶M. Genevieve, "Prayer and the Feminine" in *Dhyana, op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁶⁷Cf. Way, 28:12.

⁶⁸Reflecting upon images we might grow in understanding and insight; the images lead us more profoundly into our experiences and allow that experience to enter into meaning of our lives. Our experience produces feelings; the feelings reveal images; the images lead us to understanding and responsible living. Cf. John Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims, op. cit.*, pp.3, 21.

⁶⁹Letter (78), to M. María Bautista, August 28, 1575.

⁷⁰Testimonies, 48.