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## Diving into the Deep: A Mystical-Contemplative Leap of Hope from the Pew

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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

## **Diving into the Deep: A Mystical-Contemplative Leap of Hope from the Pew**

By Lori A. Stanley

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the intersection of the mystical and the contemplative by engaging *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* with Dr. Barbara A. Holmes' *Every Shut Eye Ain't Sleep: The Inner Life During Slavery*. The conversation reveals their perspectives on the role contemplative practices have in building and sustaining community. Contemplative prayer, like God, is no respecter of status or position and encounters souls where they are. The mystical-contemplative dimension of my paper is to see whether these two works in conversation would be able to address concerns I have about anti-black narratives in my present location as an African American Catholic woman. These two authors' works are foundational to my proposal and are the genesis of my hope for the Church's handling of issues involving biases and racism. My hope is that this conversation would stimulate leaders of the Catholic Church to have a deepening awareness to effectively acknowledge the incarnational aspects of human life in a way that extends dignity to all--inside and outside of the womb. Both authors diligently chronicle the contemplative practices of two culturally distinct groups of people who were able to embody the mystical presence of God in such a way that it preserved them in the midst of society's external threats. Detachment and humility are essential to pursuing inner freedom. Both the sisters under Avila's care and the Africans under extreme duress pursued contemplation to survive.

**Keywords:** Africans, African American, Incarnation, Mystical-Contemplative, Roman Catholic Church

In *A Long Loving Look at the Real*, Walter Burghardt, S.J. reflects on the adventure of contemplation and one's capacity for it. He notes "true contemplation does not always summon up delight. The real includes sin and war, poverty and race, illness and death. But even here the real I

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contemplate must end in compassion, and compassion that mimics Christ is a synonym for love.”<sup>1</sup> Burghardt’s perspective demands peering through the lens of love to encounter the oneness of the other. Contemplative prayer, like God, is no respecter of status or position and encounters souls where they are. This was poignantly revealed after reading *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D.; and *Every Shut Eye Ain’t Sleep: The Inner Life During Slavery*, by Dr. Barbara A. Holmes. In putting these two bodies of work in conversation with one another, I uncovered a well of deep solace and hope for humanity. Both authors diligently chronicle the contemplative practices of two culturally distinct groups of people who were able to embody the mystical presence of God in such a way that it preserved them in the midst of society’s external threats.

“The perfect soul can be detached and humbled anywhere,” notes St. Teresa as she hones in on the importance of detaching from external concerns to pursue inner freedom.<sup>2</sup> The Africans on the slave ships were indeed detached and humbled as they were stripped of everything previously known to them. Once taken from their homeland, Holmes reflects that their talents, gifts, high-ranking positions, family wealth, prestige, and influence were left behind. However, their survival leaned on their intracommunal spiritual linkages.<sup>3</sup> The connection to the Divine was an integral part of their culture and was now in high demand. Throughout the years of slavery, the practice of going within to encounter the Divine was a lifesaver in discovering another way of being while imprisoned on the slave ship and on the plantation in North America.

While Teresa wasn’t physically bound, she was tethered to Spain’s societal stipulations, status, and religious traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. In response to church politics, she sought safe harbor in contemplative prayer; and it was in her innermost dwelling where she experienced one Divine encounter after another filled with light, love, and ecstasy. She was asked by her Superior to record her spiritual fruit to share with her sisters as a way to cultivate a healthy community of faith within the

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1. Walter Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real,” *Church*, no. 5 (Winter 1989): 14-17.

2. Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 2017), 83.

3. Barbara Holmes, “Every Shut Eye Ain’t Sleep: The Inner Life During Slavery,” in *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 64.

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congregation. Holmes offers the belly of a slave ship as the genesis of a reimagined African community who relied on contemplative practices as a means of survival and called this crisis contemplation.<sup>4</sup>

According to Teresa, there is no need for the intellect when one is seeking God in this deep, still place. "In this His dwelling place, He alone and the soul rejoice together in the deepest silence."<sup>5</sup> Holmes agrees. The Africans delved interiorly out of necessity as they were stripped bare. The "loss of ego and sense of self was irrelevant."<sup>6</sup> Strangers to one another due to language, culture, and tribe, the African captives shared a belief of the seen and unseen; and this provided a liminal bond between them.<sup>7</sup> Crisis contemplation carried them past the restraining shackles and into the deep abyss of God's presence. Teresa's tenets of detachment, humility, and love of neighbor were essential pillars to establishing a healthy community, while Holmes maintains contemplative prayer for Africans "was a refuge, a wellspring of discernment in a suddenly disordered life space."<sup>8</sup> The Africans' belief in life continuums, their ritual expertise, and their spiritual resilience allowed them to "absorb all of the pain without destroying joy."<sup>9</sup>

During Teresa's life, the worldwide slave trade was being led by her country, Spain, and its neighbor, Portugal. According to historian Dr. Shannen Dee Williams, "the Catholic Church was not an innocent bystander in slavery. It was the first and largest Christian practitioner of slave holding and of segregation."<sup>10</sup> This is notable as it explains the segregation that my family and I have continued to experience as Catholics.

George Floyd's murder in 2020 served as a horrifying litmus test for the generational wounds of families. As a lector, I got a birds-eye view of where the Catholic Church stumbles on the Gospel when dealing with racism. The indifferent responses about "black lives mattering" were deafening. I did not

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4. Barbara Holmes, "Every Shut Eye," 46.

5. Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 442.

6. Barbara Holmes, "Every Shut Eye," 48.

7. Holmes, 46.

8. Holmes, 48.

9. Holmes, 65.

10. Shannen Dee Williams, "Why Black Catholic History Matters: An Interview with Dr. Shannen Dee Williams," Villanova University, The Center for Church Management: Villanova School of Business, August 8, 2020, video interview, <https://villanovachurchmanagement.com/home/webinars/why-black-catholic-history-matters-an-interview-with-dr-shannen-dee-williams-creator-of-blackhistoryiscatholichistory/>

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hear preaching or teaching about imago Dei, baptismal promises, and how these beliefs relate to what we were seeing play out publicly before us. I lectured at my local parish for a few months after the murders of Floyd and numerous African American men and women. Unfortunately, the prayers of the faithful and homilies did not address the unfolding of the grave matters that were being reported in the media. Instead, generally noted intentions similar to “for world peace” and “for our US governing officials” dotted the pages of communal prayer.

It is my broken heart of this generation, calling out from the pew of the Catholic Church to address these communal ills. My plea is to silence the wailing of my African American brothers and sisters, whose families are still being torn apart by the hands of authorities just as makeshift slave communities on the plantations were ripped apart at the auction block. These scenarios carry haunting underpinnings of slavery and violent racism that cannot be ignored by Catholic social teaching. My proposal is one of spiritual activism supported by 1 Corinthians 12:26, which reads if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. This mindset involves doing the inner work that contemplative prayer demands as Teresa and Holmes illustrate. Contemplative prayer is the love language of my soul at every level. I’ve practiced contemplation under duress and through seasons of peace. I believe this way of proceeding will serve to dismantle the anti-black systems that are stubbornly situated in all corners of our Catholic Church. These unattended corners are preventing solidarity on a communal level. The simplest and most consistent way to facilitate love of all life is through the part of the Mass where we are meant to pray for others—the prayers of the faithful.

The sacramental character of our Catholic tradition is unifying and illustrates the Gospel of Christ where each human being is uniquely created in the image of God. The seven Sacraments engage and enfold me on such an intimate level with God and others. They are what keep me anchored as a Catholic and fuel my perseverance to encourage reconciliation truthfully, so that true Eucharistic solidarity can be realized in our Church. When celebrated publicly, the Sacrament of Baptism is a powerful sign of communion with God and others because we are witnessing a new generation of life and responding as Church. In *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Fr. Bryan Massingale illustrates the impact baptism can have on church communities. He notes that “one of the most powerful contributions the Christian community can make toward the goal of racial justice is to celebrate the sacrament of baptism regularly, publicly, and well. For when the community reverently washes the body, lathers it in oil, and lovingly swaddles it in new garments, it communicates a belief about the

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reverence of life regardless of color on a level that cannot be addressed by legislation or social policy.”<sup>11</sup> As a permanent deacon, my father baptized all of his grandchildren and many of our relatives, friends, and parishioners. I have vivid memories of the prayers of this sacrament; resounding with such inclusivity and hospitality; and clarity about whose we all are.

Catholic means “universal,” “applicable to all,” and “inclusive”—the locus where hospitality is extended without distinction. Teresa agrees and exclaims, “Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord...and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat.”<sup>12</sup> To be able to receive who we are and become what we receive is a profound way to view the Eucharistic feast of the Mass. For many years, my cradle Catholic parents could not approach seats in the front of the church and were refused communion for being African American. Throughout most of their formative and young adult lives, my parents endured being relegated to the back of the church at Mass. During communion, the priest would pass the patent over the heads of African American men, women and children until white parishioners were served first. Even if my parents were one of the first to arrive at the altar railing, there were times when they would return to the pew without receiving the Eucharist because the hosts had been consumed by white congregants.

When I recall these experiences, it’s heart-wrenching and so confusing. The duplicitous nature of our church’s history points to the lukewarm attentiveness shown to social teaching regarding anti-black racism today. We refer to our Catholic Church in the feminine, and when I think of our Catholic Church in this way, I attribute the qualities of a mother to this institution. Mothers are life-giving and empowering. Mothers are known to feed everyone first before they eat. It would be unconscionable for my mother to show preferences and feed only some of her seven children who are seated at the table. We, the Church, must take heed of Teresa’s message: so much could be accomplished for God if we worked together and viewed each other as a valuable part of the body of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Pastors, those wading in the waters of indifference, and those who have unresolved guilt from being complicit in systemic racism are all invited to the table. Let us come to practice examining our consciousness of God’s presence in our lives. When we intentionally write prayers of the faithful to

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11. Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (New York: Maryknoll, 2010), 123.

12. Teresa of Avila, “The Interior Castle,” 448.

13. Teresa of Avila, “The Way of Perfection,” 56.

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reflect the true “signs of the times,” may this inform and develop self-awareness and humility among the congregation. May the homilies come alive as we’re encouraged to practice imaginative contemplation with the Word. May the pastors and their brother priests assume the role of initiating spiritual conversations by sharing their stories and their prayer practices. May we all seek the desire to go within so that we’re able to grow in love with being loved by God. Holmes confirms my desired goal of this spiritual activism as she notes, “Through ritual, the things that were survived are offered to God in the unspoken belief that reflective and evocative faith practices create a healing space for broken hearts and resilient spirits.”<sup>14</sup>

If Africans were able to create bonds of community with members of varying tribes in the deplorable conditions they were in, surely there is grace for different ethnicities to move in unimaginable ways, contemplatively and collectively in the name of the Gospel. Teresa reminds us to not get stuck in one familiar place of being and feeling: “The soul is capable of much more than we can imagine, and the sun that is in this royal chamber shines in all parts. It is very important for any soul that practices prayer, whether little or much, not to hold itself back and stay in one corner.”<sup>15</sup> We’ve been denied entrance into Catholic congregations and religious orders, and yet Black Catholics are still here. We’re praying that social teaching courses are taught throughout seminary along with contemplative practices. We’re petitioning Heaven to lessen delays in canonizing six holy Black men and women who are currently up for sainthood. Holmes contends, “The slaves were not free, but neither were the people charged with the responsibility of enforcing oppression” or injustice at any level.<sup>16</sup> And we, the Catholic Church, won’t be free to love one another unless we work to understand the damaging effects of anti-black narratives that continue to contaminate the body of Christ. May we go within, do the contemplative work, and find the love of God in all of it.

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14. Barbara Holmes, “Every Shut Eye,” 58.

15. Teresa of Avila, “The Interior Castle,” 291.

16. Barbara Holmes, “Every Shut Eye,” 54.

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