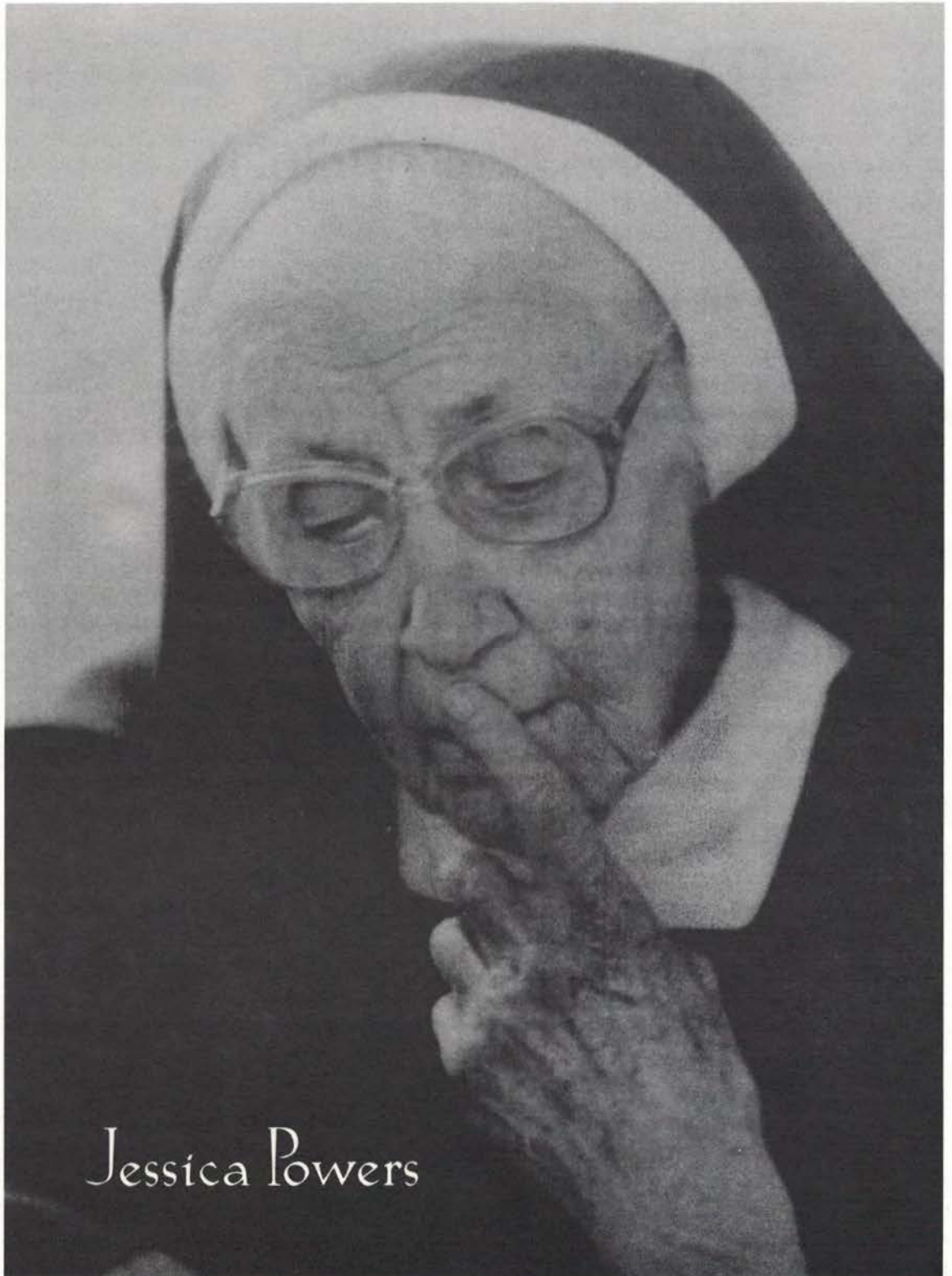




CARMEL CLARION

Discalced Carmelite Secular Order

Washington, D.C.



Jessica Powers

April –
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CARMEL CLARION

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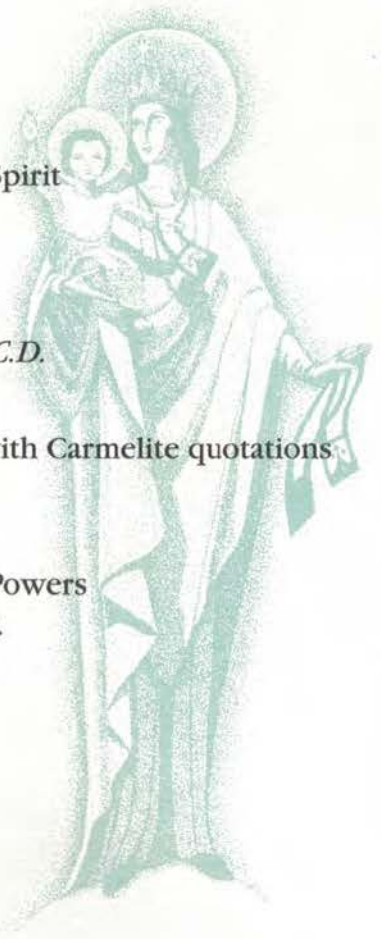


CARMEL CLARION

Discalced Carmelite Secular Order, Washington, D.C.

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Note from the Editor

In an upcoming issue of the *Clarion*, we would like to feature the apostolates of our Secular Discalced Carmelite communities. In order to do this, we need your assistance! Please send articles about the apostolates of your communities, so that we can share with and inspire each other as we embark on this new phase of growth as Carmelites. Please send the articles to the *Clarion* office in Washington, DC or to the editor via e-mail at OCDSwash@juno.com. Thank you.

*All day and when you wake at night
think of that place of living light,
yours and within you and aglow
where only God and you can go.*

—Jessica Powers

With this *Clarion* I begin my tenure as editor. The first thing I want to do is thank Fr. Ted Centala for his many years of service as editor of the *Clarion*. I hope that I shall be able to carry on what he spent so many years forging.

A change of editor will inevitably mean change. Change, I hope, for the better. The first change you will notice will be a

change in the themes of each issue. Instead of liturgical themes, such as Advent, Lent, etc., we will now feature broader themes, such as our Saints, their teachings, or some other aspect of Carmelite spirituality, history and tradition. We will continue our monthly calendars, news of Carmel, both here in the U.S., our Kenyan community, and around the world. We will also continue to keep you up-to-date on books and materials on Carmelite subjects being offered by various Carmelite authors and publishers.

The theme of this issue of the *Clarion* is Jessica Powers (Sr. Miriam of the Holy Spirit) already known to you through her poems, which Fr. Ted included with each of his editorials. I thought it would be very appropriate to feature Sr. Miriam, her life, work and spirituality.

I personally knew Sister. When I was stationed at Holy Hill in the late 70s and early 80s, I went every week to the Pewaukee Carmel to give the sisters classes on various topics. I found Sr. Miriam to be a very kind, gentle and unassuming person, who was always attentive and interested in whatever we were studying. Despite the fact that she had many more years in Carmel than me, she was open to new views and opinions regarding religious life.

I hope that this issue of the *Clarion* featuring Sr. Miriam will help you to come to know and appreciate this wonderful woman religious and her poetry in a more profound way.

Fr. Regis, O.C.D.

Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit

(nee Jessica Powers) February 7 1905 – August 18, 1988

Sisters of Pewaukee



Sister Miriam was born Jessica Powers on February 7, 1905, the third of the four children of John Powers and Delia Trainer Powers. When she was just 11 years old, her older sister Dorothy (whom she liked to say was “prettier” and more helpful to their mother - Sister Miriam said that she was the “dreamer”) died at 16 years of tuberculosis. Then, two years later her father died of a heart attack while hauling coal for the parish priest. These deaths, particularly as they occurred so close in time, had a deep effect on the sensitive young Jessica Powers.

From 1922 to 1923, Jessica attended Marquette University, Milwaukee, in the School of Journalism. From 1923 to 1924, she worked as a secretary in Chicago, returning to the farm in 1924, shortly before her mother’s death in 1925. She remained on the farm until 1936, after both her brothers, Johnny and Danny, had married and needed her no longer.

First she moved to New York City; then, in 1937, she went to live with Jessica and Anton Pegis in Tuckahoe, New York. These good friends provided her with rich opportunities for

contact with the academic world and, perhaps even more importantly, with time to concentrate on poetry which she had been writing since grammar school days. Her first book of poetry, *The Lantern Burns*, was published privately by Clifford Laube, suburban editor of *The New York Times* and associate editor of *Spirit*, as well as fellow member of *The Catholic Poetry Society of America*.

On June 21, 1941, Jessica Powers entered the Carmel of *The Mother of God* in Milwaukee, WI, becoming on April 25, 1942 (her clothing day), Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit. She was perpetually professed on May 8, 1946, the same year that her second book of poetry, *The Place of Splendor*, was published. In 1955, the year she was first elected Prioress (she served three terms in all), her charming children’s book, *The Little Alphabet* was published.

During Sister Miriam’s second term as Prioress (1958-1961), her doctor sent her to *The Sands*, a tuberculosis sanatorium. While she wrote no poetry during this period, she worked assiduously (to the concern of the medical-staff) on *The Spiritual Realism of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, polishing the English of the sister translator and laboriously checking every word in a French dictionary to ensure accuracy (Sister did not know French).

In 1972, the Reno Carmel printed an artistic edition of *The Mountain*

Sparrow and in 1980, Sister printed a small Advent collection entitled Journey to Bethlehem. The year 1980 also brought out the Carmelite supplement of Proper Offices for the Saints and Blesseds of our Order for which Sister Miriam had worked hard on the appendix of hymns: collecting, editing, and contributing.

Sister Miriam began seeing her poetry in print as early as 1925, having begun her writing in 1916 under the encouragement and tutelage of Dominican Sister Lucille Massart at the "Sisters' school in Mauston."

These bare chronological facts hardly capture the delight of Sister Miriam's personality, or the depth of her spirituality, as those who had the joy of her friendship know. She was full of fun, loving to tell jokes (of which she had a good stock) and telling them extremely well with her Irish sense of humor and her twinkling eyes.

Nor can the facts convey the importance of her influence on this Carmel and on the sisters whom she helped train as a member of the novitiate team. For example, one of her most often repeated words was "sure" as she immediately responded to any request for her help, no matter how busy or how deeply engrossed she was in her own project. She was generous to a remarkable degree. Again, her observance of the vow of obedience was also of high order as she strove to fulfill as perfectly as possible her obligations to the Church, the Pope, and her Prioress.

We admired, too, her humility which is somewhat reflected in the telling, above, of her admiration of Dorothy at her own expense. More difficult to convey is the sweetness of her acceptance of that which came her way, yet her calm dignity as a child of God.

An experience that Sister Miriam sometimes shared with us at recreation seems especially to disclose her own innocence and goodness that gave her great rapport with children and, of more concern here, that may have been a source of her strength.

Once, when she and Jessica Pegis were traveling with two of the Pegis' children, Jessica Pegis was walking ahead with her baby

daughter in her arms. Jessica Powers and Richard, four years, followed along the tracks in Grand Central Station, hands firmly clasped. Trains roared and noisily spurted steam close beside them. Glancing down, Jessica Powers saw Richard marching bravely, but with large tears pouring silently down his cheeks. For more than 50 years Sister Miriam treasured and shared this memory as an example of courage in the face of fear. A look at her poems "Millet's 'Feeding Her Birds,'" "The Cedar Tree," "This Trackless Solitude," and many others contain further comment on this trait of such significance for her.

Sister Miriam loved not only children, but all people and, further, found much food for her soul in nature, too. How she loved trees and birds, as one can see in even a brief scanning of her poetry. She would be as mesmerized by one of the birds that appear on our grounds: a yellow finch, or kildeer, or thrush, or cardinal, or hawk, or bluejay. And the trees on our grounds always received her concerned attention, being regarded as old friends who had grown in age along with the monastery itself.

Again, her observance of the vow of obedience was also of high order as she strove to fulfill as perfectly as possible her obligations to the Church, the Pope, and her Prioress.

On August 18, 1988, at approximately 9:50 a.m., our beloved Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit peacefully died in the arms of Sister Bernadette, Prioress of the Carmel of the Mother of God, who had accompanied her to the hospital in an ambulance on the previous afternoon. Also with Sister Miriam were Sister Mary Agnes and Cecilia Ok-Hee Kim, our postulant who is a nurse, as they had joined Sister at the hospital shortly after their arrival there.

While waiting for the ambulance to come, all the sisters, alerted that Sister Miriam was slipping into a coma, had surrounded Sister Miriam's bed in the infirmary. Although none of us was willing at the time to admit that this illness would be her final one (we did not yet know that Sister Miriam had suffered a massive stroke), we remained at the bedside, praying and just simply being with our dear sister.

The sisters who were at the hospital stayed with Sister Miriam throughout that day (Wednesday) until the next morning when she followed Jesus in the final steps to her home with Him. Although Sister Miriam was in a coma for most of the time, the few instances of seeming consciousness were of great consolation. The sisters kept in constant touch with the monastery, relaying to us each development and each word of the doctor.

Of much comfort to us also was that Sister Miriam had been able to be anointed just before leaving for the hospital because Father Bill Healy, O.C.D., who was our retreat master this year, was to give the last conference during which he planned to anoint the sisters; thus, he had the holy oils in his pocket when we learned that Sister Miriam's condition had become so serious. Additionally, Sister had had the privilege of the sacrament of reconciliation the previous day and had also received Holy Communion at Mass that morning.

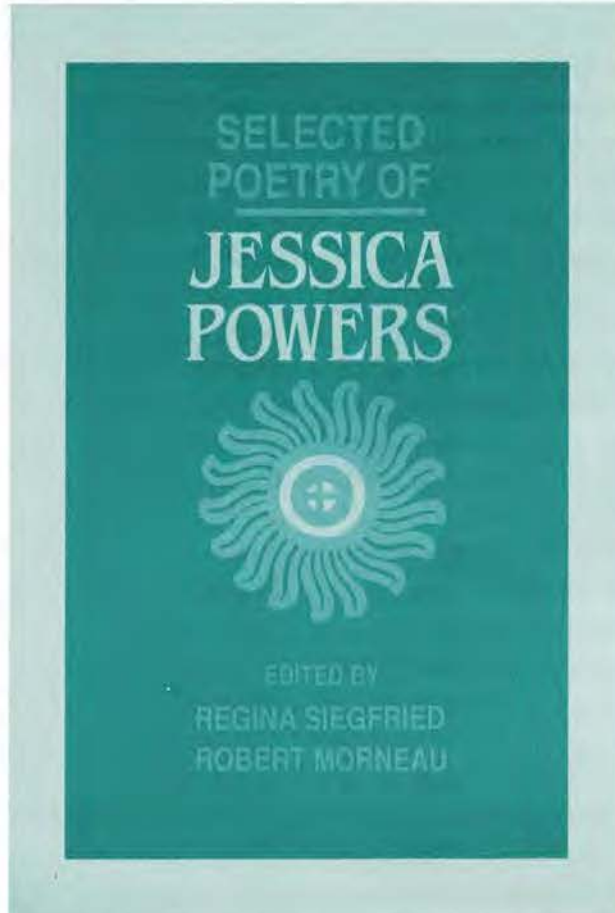
Sister Miriam had been failing slowly over the past two years, from osteoporosis, from a hiatal hernia, and from a number of other complications. In spite of some pain and much dis-

comfort, she participated with some heroicity in community events, attending Mass regularly; coming to meals, recreation, and Chapter; and, even, fulfilling tasks of her Carmel Guild work and of business connected with The House at Rest. She was particularly interested in the last two years in working with Bishop Robert F. Morneau, Auxiliary of the Green Bay Diocese, and with Sister Regina Siegfried, ASC, on a book of selected poetry that will now be published posthumously. Sister remained alert mentally, although she complained of her memory's not performing as she wished; only her body seemed to be giving out.

That Sister Miriam through her life and, widely, through her poetry touched hundreds of lives in meaningful ways was witnessed at her funeral. The chapel and the choir were filled with relatives and friends. Fourteen priests concelebrated the Mass with the principal celebrant Bishop Morneau, assisted by our Chaplain, Father Dennis Klemme. Among the concelebrants were

two of Sister Miriam's cousins; Father Bernard McGarty of the LaCrosse Diocesan Communications for Press, Radio, and TV, and Monsignor Francis E. Doherty, Pastor Emeritus of the Madison Diocese.

The eulogy rendered by Bishop Morneau was beautiful in its simple depiction of Sister Miriam with whom the Bishop had a rich spiritual friendship. Then, at the grave side ceremony, officiated at by Father Klemme, Father's remarks again revealed a deep understanding of and love for Sister Miriam as Carmelite and as



child of God. Both Bishop Morneau and Father Klemme included masterfully chosen excerpts from Sister Miriam's poetry to reveal the loveliness of her friendship with God - and with people, as well as her influence - on us. The graveside rite ended with a beautifully sung Solemn Salve, led by Father Denis Read, O.C.D.

After the ceremony, many returned to the monastery to share a delicious meal prepared and served by Joanne and Joe Kane, good friends of the monastery. How much this meal sharing meant to those of us who love Sister Miriam was expressed by Sister Eileen Surles, RC (a friend from the New York and the Poetry Society Days), who said that those who had enjoyed Sister Miriam, without knowing certain others whom Sister might mention in conversation, had the joy of meeting each other. That they could meet and exchange reminiscences was especially precious on that day that, many said, should be a feast of joy for Sister Miriam, rather than of sadness for ourselves who have had to part from her for a time.

We of her little community know well how much she loves us, as we love her. Sister Bernadette tells that, during that last week (the days of our retreat), Sister missed being able to "talk with the sisters." While we have deep regrets, too, at having missed those final days of conversation, we are consoled to know that Providence ruled all and - more - that Sister Miriam has not really gone from us, but remains in important ways.

The very night before Sister went to the hospital, she said to one of the sisters that she was quite ready to "go home," except that she would like first to see the final manuscript of the new book. When the sister remonstrated "What about the community?" Sister Miriam replied, "Oh, I can do more for the community afterwards." We believe with all our hearts that she spoke the absolute truth and that she does remain with us in more ways than through her indelible influence. While we certainly pray for her, thus avoiding presumption, we also pray to her, asking her Intercession. Please join us in both prayers. ■

*15th Annual Seminar on
Carmelite Spirituality for Life and Ministry*

Theme for the Year 2003:

**Contemplative Prayer
in a Time of Crisis**

June 22-28, 2003

Seminar 2003 explores how Carmelites and their texts have responded in prayer to times of crisis such as that faced by Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross in the 16th century. In our own time of crisis in society and church, this seminar offers numerous opportunities to renew one's life, prayer and commitments.

Center for Spirituality at
Saint Mary's College Notre Dame, IN

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| Keith Egan, T.O. Carm. | Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D. |
| Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. | Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm. |
| Vilma Seelaus, O.C.D. | John Welch, O. Carm. |

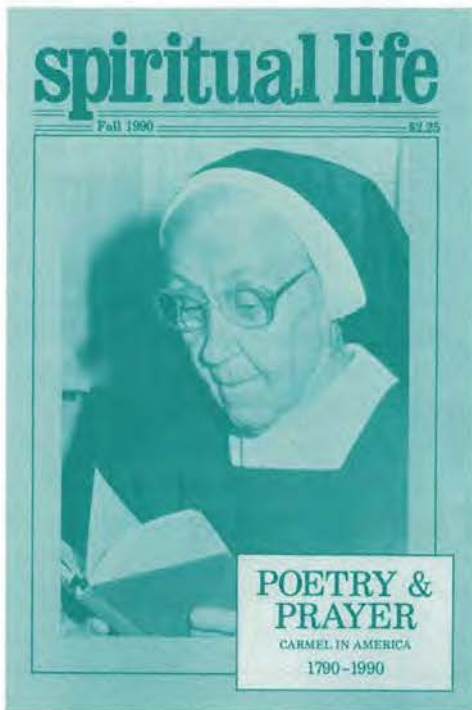
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\$480 Total

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Jessica Powers

Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D.



Jessica Powers was small in physical stature. If you had met her without knowing of her renown as a poet, your impression would be of a Carmelite nun remarkably unassuming. You would go away not knowing that she was a poet worthy of acclaim. Nor would she care much for the praise I am going to heap upon her in this talk.

When asked to speak about Jessica Powers, my first thought was will there be enough material in her poetry for a talk? What I discovered is that in one talk, I can only skim the surface of all the treasures lying there both hidden and in plain sight.

Most of you know, I am sure, that when Jessica Powers entered Carmel in Milwaukee, WI, she received the name Sr. Miriam of the Holy Spirit, although she continued to publish her poetry under the name Jessica Powers. Since we are gathered here as a part of the family of Carmel, I have decided to refer to Jessica Powers throughout this talk as Sr. Miriam.

In the biography *Winter Music* by Dolores Leckey we learn about Sr. Miriam's training and experience as a poet before she entered Carmel. She thoroughly learned what anyone aspiring to write poetry should know about the technical requirements.

She then gained proficiency through the practice of her craft and the critique of other poets in New York City. I think that, in addition to the technical requirements and the properties of beauty, two other elements play an important role in a work of art. They are simplicity and elegance. Were you to ask me what two qualities I find striking in the lyric poetry of St. John of the Cross, I would say simplicity and elegance. Were you to ask the same about Sr. Miriam's poetry, I would give the same answer. Another quality important for bestowing on a composition an unfading value is depth of content. Surely we find this in St. John of the Cross; just as surely we find it in Sr. Miriam,

My Approach

I do not plan to discuss the technique, beauty and literary merits of Sr. Miriam's poetry. My focus will be its content, chiefly the spiritual content, the depth of insight into our human nature and our relationship with God. Of course, Sr. Miriam has been notably and deeply influenced by our Carmelite saints, especially St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, and St. Thérèse. Nonetheless, at the end of her life, as we read in the introduction to the *Selected Poetry*, by Bishop Morneau, she wrote:

"My poetry department hasn't been tended to in years and is in disorder; I haven't found time to straighten it out, nor the ambition right now. My only purpose in writing is that these are things I would like to say to everyone, especially those who are turning from God" (p. xxi). The intended audience is clear, not for Carmelites but for "everyone, especially those who are turning from God." Be that as it may, you will find, in fact, all of Carmelite spirituality expressed in her poems.

Outside The Castle

Where shall we begin? Let's begin where St. Teresa did. And then follow the journey of a soul to God as presented to us by Sr. Miriam. To provide a framework, I will link her thought with the thought of our saints in their outlines of the spiritual journey.

St. Teresa, we know well, began her *Interior Castle* with those outside the castle, all who don't know what a precious treasure they bear within. She says of them: "They are now so used to dealing always with the insects and vermin that are in the wall surrounding the castle that they have become almost like them." The condition of sinners in need of conversion is not apparent either to the sinners themselves or to other sinners. Of course, there are degrees in this, and we are all sinners in need of ongoing conversion. We can all be blind in one way or other to our faults. The point is that there are those who have decided to enter the Castle. They have taken the initial steps and are on their way. They have begun their spiritual journey.

Does Jessica Powers speak of those outside the Castle? If she does, what image does she use? I think she has a stirring little poem in which we find the answers to these two questions. The title of the poem is "Cabaret." Today you might be inclined to think in terms of a disco, but Cabaret suits Sr. Miriam's age and poetry better. And, incidentally, the date of publication shows that the poem was written long before a well known musical by that name. Anyway, in the poem she brings us into the world of the Cabaret:

*I shall spend a penny . . . for song,
wine that is red, wines that are purple and
white;
I shall find a place in the dazzling room of life,
and sit on a chair and sip my wine all night.*

*We can all be blind in one way or
other to our faults. The point is that
there are those who have decided to
enter the Castle. They have taken the
initial steps and are on their way.
They have begun their spiritual
journey.*

We observe that the cabaret here is a place of escape. The escape consists in trying to get a feeling of life, to find a place in the "dazzling room of life." All the other sights and sounds and tastes contribute to this false feeling of life: the song, the colors of the wine, and the sipping of the wine. The feeling of life increases when the dancers come "like red and gold leaves blown over a crystal floor." There is a lot of laughter and flattery going on and kisses. They are all comforting for the time you are in the cabaret. But there is something terrifying about all of this! We begin to see it in the last stanza when the time is over. No means we use for escape really lasts long. The end comes, and then what? Something so unpleasant that we at once have to look for some other escape.

*The Keeper comes to say
that my hour is done, and he drowns each glaring
light
in endless black . . . and the dancers go away . . .
and I stumble out alone into the night.*

That's a powerful expression of the pitiful condition of someone who has not entered the castle where true, endless light and life are given to us. Outside the dazzling cabaret, which has its closing hour, we are alone and it is night.

Sr. Miriam expresses a similar thought in another poem called "Vision" Here the image is a dark city but the people don't know they're in the dark:

*I came to a dark city where nobody knew
that there was darkness,*

...
*People moved to the loveless embrace of folly.
They ate her gourmet foods; they drank her wine,
danced to her music that was crazed with
rhythm,
were themselves discord though they knew it not,
or if they knew cared less (p. 2).*

She leaves the city and wanders through a desert and finds a little sage bush "where a fire was burning." "There was no darkness that could put it out. Again we have the false feeling of life and light that sin can give us preventing us from knowing or finding true life and light,

All Things Are Passing

The poet though catches on to this deception, sees the quickly passing vanity of all this escape and renounces it. We find this in the poem "No One Can Stay":

Your invitation is with fraud extended
...
*No one can stay in any golden moment, and no
more
will I let any trick of light betray
me to a house that is nothing but a door (p. 98),*

St. Teresa understood well the trick of the door behind which stood no house. When she was a little girl, she and her brother used to repeat over and over the words forever and ever and ever, so impressed were they with the thought that the glory of heaven would last forever. Teresa says: "The Lord was pleased to impress upon me in childhood the way of truth." Throughout her writings, Teresa urges us to consider how quickly all things come to an end and that only the things that last forever should really stir us.

Christ The First Lover

In Carmelite spirituality it is Christ who takes the initiative. Our saints understood deeply the truth that Christ has loved us first. Those who live in the Cabaret will meet Christ begging them to come and enter into the true light. Sr. Miriam pictured this moving truth for us in her poem "The Master Beggar."

*Worse than the poorest mendicant alive,
the pencil man, the blind man with his breath
of music shaming all who do not give,
are You to me, Jesus of Nazareth.*

*She saw in her vocation as a poet a sharing in
the work of the Master Beggar:*

*I too would be a beggar. Long tormented,
I dream to grant You all and stand apart
with You on some bleak corner; tear-frequented,
and trouble mankind for its human heart.*

The Journey Must Begin

The shaming music reminds us that shame is the experience of being exposed first and foremost to self; it is an experience of self-knowledge. If we then respond to the Master Beggar's plea of love, the journey must begin and Sr. Miriam exhorts with these words:

Turn from the earth as stranger and begin
...
*O Little One, believe that earth is alien.
Let its concerns all unremembered lie.
Say to the storm or sweetness passing by:
My soul is out on paths that have no ending
God speaks to me. Earth has no more to say
(p. 84).*

Both St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross found it necessary to temper the enthusiasm of beginners. Beginners, as you all know from experience, are apt to do foolish things because of the consolations of the new wine. The real motivation, without their realizing it, is their desire for the taste of fervent love. This kind of love prompts the beginner to service and good works and prayer; but also toward overdoing it,

with unhappy consequences. Such fervor cannot remain because it is too superficial, or as John would say, the love is of the sense and not of the spirit. And when the fervor goes so may go the prayer and good works. Teresa advises beginners that they shouldn't fear that their devotion will be taken away if they become a little distracted, that it is necessary to have some recreation.

In Sr. Miriam's technique we often find that the poem builds in crescendo toward the final line. And in that line she socks it to us; she hits us between the eyes.

But there is a poem of Sr. Miriam's that does not deliver this punch at the end; it raises us up and then leaves us there without resolution. It is about the beginner's dreams and enthusiasm for magnificent heights, all of which flow from the heady effects of the new wine. The dreams go nowhere really; they just leave us there, up in the air. These verses come at the end of "This Paltry Love."

*This puny spark I scorn, I who had dreamed
of fire that would race to land's end, shouting
your worth,
of sun that would fall to earth with a mortal
wound
and rise and run, streaming with light like
blood,
splattering the sky
soaking the ocean itself, and all the earth (p. 48).*

Where To Begin

The question then is, how or where do we begin? St. Teresa was convinced that she and her nuns should begin by trying to live the life they had committed themselves to as faithfully as they could; not by new undertakings. As for the laity, Vatican Council II transposes the substance of this thought of Teresa's for them, saying that lay people while meeting their human obligations in the ordinary conditions of life, should not separate their union with Christ from their ordinary life; that through the very performance of their tasks, which are God's will for them, they should actually promote the growth of their union with him

(*Apostolate of Lay People*, no. 4).

In "My Heart Ran Forth", Sr. Miriam reflecting on this question (how must we begin?) discovers her response in what is "near-at-hand." The enthusiastic beginner tends to run forth, singing and proclaiming and going far afield. Wisdom must come to the rescue:



But wisdom halted it, out far a field,
*asked: did you sow this seed
around your house, or in the neighbor's garden
or any nearby acreage of need?
No? Then it will not grow in outer places.
Love has its proper soil, its native land;
its first roots fasten on the near-at-hand.*

In the seventh dwelling place of her *Interior Castle*, Teresa cautions "Sometimes the devil gives us great desires so that we will avoid setting ourselves to the task at hand." Teresa, again, expresses the same truth with her often quoted and charming words: "Well, come now, my daughters, don't be sad when obedience draws you to involvement in exterior matters. Know that if it is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans helping you both interiorly and exteriorly."

Sr. Miriam uses the words "ubiquity" and "everywhere" to assert a similar discovery. What happens in the poem, "The Hidden Christ" is that she goes into the Christmas cave, and to her shock does not find Christ there.

*Filled with my Father's words, I cried
"Where have You hid Yourself?" and all
The living answered to my call.
I found Him (and the world is wide)
dear in His warm ubiquity.
Where heart beat, there was Christ for me.
I went back to the Christmas cave,
glad with the gain of everywhere.
And lo! the blessed Child was there (p. 80).*

Who Is God?

Sr. Miriam, as we've seen, has Christ out on the street corners begging for our love. Although we start to respond to this love, set out on our journey, and seek to express our love through the near-at-hand, we remain human and never break free of the human tendency to commit countless foibles. St. Augustine once asked a heart-stirring question. "What do I love when I love my God?" Sr. Miriam answers the question although it can never really be answered adequately. Whereas Christ stood before the sinner begging for love, now in "Repairer of Fences" God walks behind the converted sinner picking up after him, or as she puts it repairing the fences.

*I am alone in the dark, and I am thinking
what darkness would be mine if I could see
the ruin I wrought in every place I wandered
and if I could not be
aware of One who follows after me.
Whom do I love, O God, when I love Thee?
The great Undoer who has torn apart
the walls I built against a human heart,
the Mender who has sewn together the hedges
through which I broke when I went seeking ill,
the Love who follows and forgives me still.*

...
*I sing to the east; I sing to the west:
God is my repairer of fences, turning my paths
into rest (p. 14).*

There is another way in which Sr. Miriam answers Augustine's question. Her answer reflects what every Carmelite comes to realize sooner or later: God is a desert. St. Thérèse of Lisieux came to understand this truth sooner. So soon that she

was no more than 9 years old. In her Story of a Soul she tells of her feelings about Carmel at that age, after her sister Pauline had decided to enter the Lisieux Carmel:

"I shall always remember, dear Mother, with what tenderness you consoled me. Then you explained the life of Carmel to me and it seemed so beautiful! When thinking over all you had said, I felt that Carmel was the desert where God wanted me to go also to hide myself. I felt this with so much force that there wasn't the least doubt in my heart; it was not the dream of a child led astray but the certitude of a divine call; I wanted to go to Carmel not for Pauline's sake but for Jesus alone."

Actually the word Carmel does not mean desert in its origins but garden. In "Not a Garden Anymore" Sr. Miriam has this to say:

*God is not garden any more, to satiate the sense
with this luxuriance of full exotic wilderness.
Now multiple is magnified to less.
God has become a desert now, a vast unknown
Sahara
voicing its desert cry.
My soul has been arrested by the sound
of a divine tremendous loneliness.*

*I write anathema on pool, on streams of racing
water.
I bid the shoot, the leaf, the bloom no longer to
intrude.
Beyond green growth I find this greater good,
a motionless immensity of oneness.
And Him I praise Who lured me to this edge
of uncreation where His secrets brood,
Who seared the earth that I might hear in silence
this infinite outcry of His solitude (p. 18).*

Prayer and Silence

"To hear in silence the infinite outcry of His solitude." Isn't this prayer? Prayer is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is a time for opening up and listening, it is a secret place. This is a beautiful time, this last age, the age of the Holy Spirit.

*He is crying to every soul that is walled:
Open to Me, My spouse. My sister.*

*And once inside. He is calling again:
Come to me here in this secret place (p. 27).*

Or in another poem about the Paraclete and the soul as the Spiritus Sancta along these same lines:

*Nor do you know your dwelling
for dark is your retreat,
and who would guess that
darkness
could hold the Paraclete?*

*Measure your love by stillness.
He waits; do you as well
give to His infinite patience
your finite parallel.*

*God Himself is a silence,
seeking a soundless will.
O Spiritus Sancta,
be very still.*

*When quiet has possessed you,
and dark has fled with dim,
you on a mount of morning
will be aware of Him (p. 29).*

These are the important elements of the life of prayer in Carmel: to be silent, to be still, to listen:

*To live with the Spirit of God is to be a listener.
It is to keep the vigil of mystery,
earthless and still.
One leans to catch the stirring of the Spirit,
strange as the wind's will.*

*The soul is all activity, all silence;
and though it surges Godward to its goal,
it holds, as moving earth holds sleeping noon-
day,
the peace that is the listening of the soul (p. 38).*

In saying that this silent stillness is all activity, Sr. Miriam had gotten a profound insight into what some theologians are now discussing in the wake of the thought of Hans Urs Von

Balthasar that receptivity contrary to what was the common belief is actually a perfection of being. Thus a contemplative in the posture of receiving expresses act rather than potency. The philosopher W. Norris Clarke writes: “. . . the open, welcoming, grateful attitude involved in receptivity is at its best not simply a mere passive potency enabling one to receive, but is an active positive disposition. This is a part of the wonder and splendor of being, revealed in the unique gift of women in their ability to be actively open, welcoming, and grateful in the receptivity that is so deeply inscribed in their natural being” (Communio, Spring 1994, pp. 167-68).

Prayer as Place

When St. Teresa chose the image of a castle, with its many rooms or dwelling places, to present her teaching on prayer, she was viewing prayer in terms of place. “Let us consider that this castle has . . . many dwelling places: some up above, others down below, others to the sides; and in the center and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place.”

At the end of this work, looking back over the material she had covered, Teresa suggests to her sisters that in view of their strict enclosure and their limited chances for entertainment, they should find their consolation in the inner life with its spiritual expanses, where they can walk whenever they choose.

It seems that Sr. Miriam at times found the strict enclosure a burden, and she had to come to grips with it.

*Gypsy by nature, how can I endure it
This small strict space, this meager patch of
sky?
What madness once possessed me to procure it?
And deed it to myself until I die?*

*What could the wise Teresa have been thinking
to set these bounds on even my little love?
This walling, barring, minimizing shrinking—
how could her great Castilian heart approve?*

The poem continues by her telling about her discovery in which she came upon the clue and learned the secret to outwit enclosure. Instead of using, as Teresa did the image of a castle, she finds within herself Mount Carmel.

*Its trails outrun the most adept explorer,
outweigh the gypsy's moat inordinate need.
Its heights cry out to mystic and adorer
Oh, here are space and distances indeed
(p. 128).*

In the "Trackless Solitude" she refers again to the large expanse she finds within herself and through which the Spirit leads:

*Deep in the soul the acres lie
of virgin lands, of sacred wood
where waits the Spirit. Each soul bears
this trackless solitude (p. 6).*

The truth is that she encountered, as Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, heaven within her soul. There she had whatever relief she needed.

*All day and when you wake at night
think of that place of living light,
yours and within you and aglow
where only God and you can go.*

...
*But there are days when watching eyes
could guess that you hold Paradise.
Sometimes the shining overflows
and everyone around you knows.*

She misses walking in the woods and listening to the song of the hermit thrush, but then:

*Yet past all loss, heaven leans down to argue:
ah, in love's denser wood and far more fair
sings the more hidden soul its purer music.
Enter, it says, oh, go and listen there.*

The Need For Christ In Payer

She is authentically a daughter of St. Teresa in her contemplation of Christ in his sufferings, how his lovers must desire a life like his.

*The lovers of Christ lift out their hands to
the great gift of suffering.
For how could they seek to be warmed and
clothed
and delicately fed,
to wallow in praise and to drink deep draughts
of an undeserved affection,
have castle for home and a silken couch for bed,
when He the worthy went forth, wounded and
hated,
and grudged of even a place to lay His head?*


You all know it well! St. Teresa for a period in her life thought wrongly that to grow in union with God, you must give up the presence to Christ in prayer. In regretting her mistake she insists that the Lord is the way and the light: "If they lose the guide, who is the good Jesus, they will not hit upon the right road." Sr. Miriam says:


*Late, late the mind confessed:
wisdom has not sufficed.
I cannot take one step into the light
without the Christ (p. 162).*

Purification

In January 1993 the Carmelite nuns in Concord, New Hampshire, went through a frightful, desolating experience. While they were at Mass in the morning a fire got started in the monastery and advanced to a dangerous degree by the time Mass was over and it was noticed. The monastery had to be evacuated at once. None of the sisters was burned, but their beautiful monastery was a wreck. What was not destroyed by fire was ruined by the smoke that poured through all the corridors and into every room. They experienced collectively a dark night of the soul. When I heard about this, I could not help thinking of Sr. Miriam's poem:

*Nobody lives in this shining house but God,
though shadowy figures tremble to and fro.
Over these cool grey stones that suffering made
only the pierced feet of the Master go.
A fire went through this place and gutted it;
over the ruins a fog of silence spread.*

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|---|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| | | <p>1 <i>Bl Nuno Alvares Pereira, O. Carm., 1360-1432</i> We are responsible for our own salvation. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i></p> | <p>2 <i>St Francis of Paola</i> Once and for all we must trust God and abandon ourselves to God alone. <i>Brother Lawrence</i></p> | <p>3 <i>St Teresita of the Andes was beatified in 1987</i></p> | <p>4 <i>St Isadore</i> A good person is like clean air; we draw breath from it though it cannot be seen. <i>St Raphael Kalinowski</i></p> | <p>5 <i>St Vincent Ferrer</i> The all-merciful love can bend toward everyone. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i></p> |
| <p>6 Fifth Sunday of Lent Strive in your prayer for a more pure conscience. <i>St John of the Cross</i></p> | <p>7 <i>St John Baptist de la Salle</i> Fill Carmel always with members able to praise and serve You. <i>Bl Mary of Jesus Crucified</i></p> | <p>8 We urgently need saints. Without them poor humanity will perish. <i>St Raphael Kalinowski</i></p> | <p>9 <i>Therese enters the Carmel of Lisieux in 1888</i> I am in Carmel forever. <i>Therese Martin</i></p> | <p>10 Whoever seeks peace let her observe, accept, and be silent. <i>St Teresa Margaret Redi</i></p> | <p>11 <i>St Stanislaus</i> The soul has its senses by which it feels its solitude and understands... <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i></p> | <p>12 <i>St Teresita of the Andes dies in 1920 after 11 months in Carmel</i></p> |
| <p>13 Palm Sunday ...to walk at the hand of God... <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i></p> | <p>14 Prefer to be taught by all rather than desire to teach even the least... <i>St John of the Cross</i></p> | <p>15 But, alas my God, how can I know for certain I am not separated from You? <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i></p> | <p>16 What helps is that the person embraces the good Jesus with determination. <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i></p> | <p>17 Holy Thursday <i>Bl Baptist Spagnoli, O.Carm., Priest 1447-1516</i></p> | <p>18 Good Friday <i>Bl Mary of the Incarnation, OCD 1566-1618</i></p> | <p>19 Holy Saturday Remain in me permanently, make me your abode. <i>Bl Elizabeth of the Trinity</i></p> |
| <p>20 Easter Sunday The one who loves God is always mindful of God. <i>St Teresa Margaret Redi</i></p> | <p>21 <i>St Teresa Benedicta makes 1st Profession in 1935 and Final Profession in 1938</i></p> | <p>22 Before the image of the Infant Jesus of Prague...is not this the "hidden emperor"? <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i></p> | <p>23 Only faith, hope and charity are needed to become united to the will of God. <i>Brother Lawrence</i></p> | <p>24 Lord, make everyone to burn like the candles of the sanctuary. <i>Bl Mary of Jesus Crucified</i></p> | <p>25 Keep the presence of God. It encompasses the whole spiritual life. <i>Brother Lawrence</i></p> | <p>26 The more the angel revealed to her (Mary) the more she humbled herself before God. <i>Bl Mary of Jesus Crucified</i></p> |
| <p>27 Divine Mercy Sunday Whoever flees prayer, flees all that is good. <i>St John of the Cross</i></p> | <p>28 <i>St Louis de Montfort St Peter Chanel</i> Inner maturity does not always have to do with age. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i></p> | <p>29 <i>St Catherine of Siena</i> Pope Pius XI beatified Therese of the Child Jesus in 1923</p> | <p>30 <i>Pope St Pius V</i> There is no worse thief than the one inside the house. <i>St John of the Cross</i></p> |  <h1 style="font-size: 2em; margin: 0;">April 2003</h1> | | |

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|---|--|--|---|---|--|---|
|  <h1>May 2003</h1> | | | | 1 St Joseph the Worker <i>Pope John Paul II beatifies Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in 1987</i> | 2 St Athanasius All praise of God is through, with, and in Christ. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i> | 3 Sts Philip & James, Apostles I feel the vocation of the apostle. <i>St Therese of Lisieux</i> |
| 4 Third Sunday of Easter I have offered myself to Jesus to please Him... <i>Little Therese</i> | 5 Christ has built a temple of living stones: the communion of saints. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i> | 6 Moreover, the true lover loves everywhere and is always thinking of the beloved! <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i> | 7 Without making his voice heard, Jesus teaches me in secret. <i>St Therese of Lisieux</i> | 8 Carmel is a community of human beings who reveal God to other human beings. <i>Pere Jacques</i> | 9 I thank You for making me pass through the crucible of suffering. <i>St Therese of Lisieux</i> | 10 Bl Damien Joseph de Veuster of Moloka'i We are pilgrims on the way to our eternal home <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i> |
| 11 Fourth Sunday of Easter He has never failed me. <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i> | 12 Sts Nereus & Achilles, St Pancras To fulfill our Rule: make ourselves like Him. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i> | 13 Therese is miraculously cured by the smile of the Bl Virgin in 1883 | 14 St Matthias, Apostle The finger of the Almighty writes the lives of His saints. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i> | 15 St Isidore the Farmer Glorified souls... contemplate God in the simplicity of His essence. <i>Bl Elizabeth of the Trinity</i> | 16 St Simon Stock, O. Carm., Priest 1200-1255 ...all souls are capable of loving. <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i> | 17 Pope Pius canonizes Therese of the Child Jesus in 1925 Mary is more Mother than Queen. <i>Little Therese</i> |
| 18 Fifth Sunday of Easter The person lives where he or she loves. <i>St John of the Cross</i> | 19 He shows no partiality. He loves everyone. Nobody has any excuse, no matter how miserable he may be. <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i> | 20 St Bernardine of Siena He will tire more quickly of making me wait than I shall tire of waiting for Him. <i>Little Therese</i> | 21 In my opinion, where there is no obedience there are no nuns. <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i> | 22 St Joachina de Vedruna de Mas, OSC 1783-1854 We can never finish studying the Gospels. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i> | 23 When we contemplate our eternal predestination, visible things seem so contemptible. <i>Bl Elizabeth of the Trinity</i> | 24 I hold that love, where present, cannot possibly be content with remaining always the same. <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i> |
| 25 Sixth Sunday of Easter St Mary Magdalene de'Pazzi, O. Carm., 1566-1607 | 26 St Philip Neri The science of love, ah yes, I desire only this science. <i>St Therese of Lisieux</i> | 27 St Augustine of Canterbury This self-reliance is what destroyed me. <i>St Teresa of Jesus</i> | 28 What is then this descent which is required of us, if not to enter all the more deeply into our innermost being? <i>Bl Elizabeth of the Trinity</i> | 29 Ascension of the Lord The Spirit of Truth had to come first to open their eyes. <i>St Teresa Benedicta</i> | 30 I want to do my duty, no matter what the cost and Our Lord has given me the grace to face everything. <i>St Therese of Lisieux</i> | 31 Visitation of the Bl Virgin Mary to Elizabeth |

*Nobody comes here but the pale young Christ
Who loves a shelter uninhabited (p. 24).*

This is what all purification is about. A fire goes through and guts us so that Christ may find his home in us, a shelter uninhabited. Even more, as Sr. Miriam puts it, so that Christ may be our identity. In one of her poems she speaks of purification as death worked in us and leading us to new life, which is Christ; she addresses death:

*Eat your cold way into my self-esteem
till even the deep subtle root has died.
Wrest from my mind the crowns of which I
dream*

*...
Tear out impatience by the handfuls-so.
Grab, if you can, my pride*

*...
Come death, my friend, my friend.
I know the good your coming works in me.
Shape me to Christ before my journey's end;*

*Hack me and hew me till Christ comes to be
my dear identity*

*With you as guest beside me all is gain
You slay me, death, but then I rise to live
and you yourself are slain (p. 105).*

The work of purification uncovers faults and selfish tendencies never before noticed, which were obstructing a life of full union with God. In one poem Sr. Miriam uses the cowbird's egg to tell about the revelation of a dark force within. In our Desert in West Virginia I had a bird feeder outside my hermitage window and I watched the many kinds of birds feeding there throughout the winter, but when spring came, a new force of birds arrived which I learned were cowbirds. The male is all black with a brown head and the female is grey. In the May, 1994 issue of *Wonderful West Virginia*, there was an article entitled "Nature's Freeloader." The reason for such a title is that cowbird females do not build their own nests but lay their eggs in the nests of other perching songbirds. These other

birds do not seem to know the difference and incubate and raise the cowbird's young. The cowbird's incubation period is usually shorter than a host species and its larger, more aggressive and faster growing. It often starves members of the host's brood by consuming their share of food. Learning this, helped me to understand the meaning of Sr. Miriam's poem "Wanderer" in which the spiritual wanderer was in error and feeding something that was destructive within her:

*Two nestlings vied for life in me: I fed
the greedy one whose talent was to beg
(no one had warned me of the cowbird's egg)
I let the little one grow thin and pale
and put a blame on life that she was frail (p. 124)*

Although the lives of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross come through to us as lives of great drama and spectacular experience of God, their teaching demands humility and love for one another. The humility arises out of the purifications. Sr. Miriam continues in this same poem:

*How did I ever come then to the light?
How did I ever, blind with self, discover
the small strict pathway to this shining place,
I who betrayed the truth over and over,
and let a tangle of dark woods surround me?
Simple the answer lies: down cliffs of pain,
through swamps and desert, thicket and terrain,
oh. Someone came and found me (p. 124).*

EFFECTS OF PURIFICATION

Humility

Humility, the hidden life, and poverty of spirit, in addition to love for one another, are virtues characteristic of Carmel. In the midst of his discourse on extraordinary experiences, St. John of the Cross has some exceptional words about humility ". . . all heavenly visions, revelations, and feelings or whatever else one may desire to think on-are not worth as much as the least act of humility."

St. John of the Cross also points out that where there is humility there is quiet and rest. Sr. Miriam, too, in her poem "Humility" sees

humility as accompanied by stillness and union with God's will.

*Humility is to be still
under the weathers of God's will.*

...
*Humility is to have place
deep in the secret of God's face*

...
*It is to have a place to hide
when all is hurricane outside (p. 92).*

Another stirring little poem on humility is "This May Explain" in which Sr. Miriam describes the door to God as "very little, very ordinary."

*Those must remember who would gain the place
This rule that does not vary:
all truth, all love are by humiliation
guarded, as One has testified before.
This may explain why the serf finds salvation,
and kings and scholars pass the little door (p. 95).*

The Hidden Life

In humility the Carmelite embraces the hidden life, or at least always keeps alive a love for what is hidden. The thought of the hidden life is particularly attractive to the Carmelite nun who does have a special call to it. However, the world, also, is inhabited by people who largely live a hidden life, lost in the multitude. In heaven surely we shall come to know about most extraordinary saints who were completely hidden from our gaze, even after their deaths. Sr. Miriam sings of the hidden life in her poem "Obscurity."

*Obscurity becomes the final peace.
The hidden then are the elect, the free.
They leave our garish noon and find release
in evening's gift of anonymity.*

*Lost, not in loneliness but in multitude,
they serve unseen without the noise of name.
Should you disdain them, ponder for your
good:
it was in this way that the angels came (p. 108).*



The clue to the meaning of the last line, "it was in this way that the angels came" lies in the word multitude. At the birth of the Lord the shepherds saw a multitude of angels praising God.

An awakening that humility affords is an understanding that in fact we have nothing to give to God since every good we have belongs to him and has been given to us by him. Going through a humbling, purifying experience is like going through a war. Sr. Miriam paints it vividly for us in "Israel Again" where we behold the consequences experienced by Israel after a battle:

*Here I am, Israel dragging home from battle
with neither horse nor soldier at my side,
Where are the troops with which I sallied forth
and all the bright insignia of my pride?
I did not call on the Lord God of Hosts
but rushed forth in my strength to meet the foe.*

*Here I lag home, a spectacle of wounds,
stripped of my armor, moaning as I go.*

*When will you learn, O witless Israel,
that he who clings to God in his distress
wins with the weapons of his nothingness (p. 93)?*

St. Teresa was always very convinced that if we have any virtues they have been given by God and can be taken back by him. She writes in the *Way of Perfection*:

“Now since this is true, who will be able to say of them that they are virtuous or rich? For at the very moment when there is need of virtue one finds oneself poor. No, Sisters; but let us always think we are poor . . . if this poverty of spirit is not genuinely present at every step . . . the Lord will abandon us. And this abandonment by the Lord is one of His greatest favors, for He does it so that we might be humble and understand in truth that we have nothing we haven’t received.”

Poverty of Spirit

Being poor in this way, we have nothing of our own to give God and must live in abandonment to Him. St. John of the Cross in one of his Sayings also expresses this thought asserting that “The humble are those who hide in their own nothingness and know how to abandon themselves to God .”

St Thérèse in her classic “Act of Oblation to Merciful Love” poignantly summed up this profound insight of Carmel: “In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands.”

In light of this spirituality of Carmel, with the results of purification in mind, we can understand a remarkable little poem of St. Miriam’s, which I will quote in full, so simple yet so deep and beautiful: “If You Have Nothing”

*The gesture of a gift is adequate.
If you have nothing: laurel leaf or bay,
no flower, no seed, no apple gathered late,
do not in desperation lay
the beauty of your tears upon the clay.
No gift is proper to a Deity;*

*no fruit is worthy for such power to bless.
If you have nothing, gather back your sigh,
and with your hands held high, your heart held
high,
lift up your emptiness!” (p. 91).*

The state of spiritual poverty, the result of humbling purification, accompanies Sr. Miriam in her waver. It is what enables her to live in total trust in the Lord’s mercy rather than in herself. In God’s mercy she found rest. Her poem “The Garments of God” sketch a moving picture of her experience of contemplative prayer:

*God sits on a chair of darkness in my soul.
He is God alone, supreme in His majesty.
I sit at His feet. a child in the dark beside Him:
. . .
He is clothed in the robes of His mercy. Volumi-
nous garments—
not velvet or silk and affable to the touch,
but fabric strong for a frantic hand to clutch,
and I hold to it fast with the fingers of my will.
Here is my cry of faith, my deep avowal to the
Divinity that I am dust.
Here is the loud profession of my trust.
I need not go abroad
to the hills of speech or the hinterlands of music
for a crier to walk in my soul where all is still.
I have this potent prayer through good or ill: here
in the dark I clutch the garments of God (p. 21)*

The Blessed Virgin Mary

We wouldn’t be true to Carmel without a word about the Blessed Virgin Mary who accompanies us on our journey. There’s not time to mine the treasures in Sr. Miriam’s poems on our Lady, so I’ve just chosen one. It is entitled “The Cloud of Carmel.” In this poem she selects different symbols that “image the immaculate” to her, but not so much as the little white cloud rising from the sea that Elijah saw; this little cloud in the Carmelite tradition images Mary.

*I who bear God in the mysteries of grace
beseech her: Cloud, encompass God and me.
Nothing defiled can touch the cloud of Mary.*

*God as a child willed to be safe in her,
and the Divine Indweller sets His throne
deep in a cloud in me. His sanctuary.
I pray, O wrap me. Cloud, . . . light Cloud of
Carmel*

*Say to my soul, the timorous and small
house of a Presence, that it cannot see
and frightened acre of a Deity;
say in the fullness of your clemency:
I have enclosed you all.
You are in whiteness of a lighted lamb wool;
you are in softness of a summer wind lull.
O hut of God, deepen your faith anew.
Enfolded in this motherhood of mine,
all that is beautiful and all divine
is safe in you (p. 56).*

Union

The attribute of God in the experience of union that Sr. Miriam highlights is mercy. St. Teresa wrote her *Life* mainly to set it forth as a dark backdrop to the glorious contrasting light of God's mercy. For her mercy pervades the

divine attitude, reaching out toward every soul; infinite divine mercy, persistent and inexhaustible. Our other saint who wrote for us the story of her soul, also viewed hers as a story of God's mercies. We remember the tender, one line paragraph of *Story of a Soul* by St. Thérèse of Lisieux:

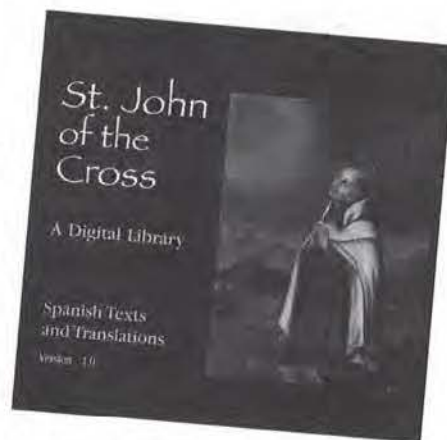
"It is to you, dear Mother, to you who are doubly my Mother, that I come to confide the story of my soul. The day you asked me to do this, it seemed to me it would distract my heart by too much concentration on myself, but since then Jesus has made me feel that in obeying simply, I would be pleasing Him: besides I'm going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: "The Mercies of the Lord."

Sr. Miriam similarly looked at union in her contemplative life as an abiding in the mercy of God, which she saw as a wilderness we can never exhaust. To understand her poem on this subject, it helps to remember the former practice in Carmel of virtue beads by which you keep count of your daily practice of virtue. She

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wanted her poem *The Mercy of God* to appear as the leading one in her *Selected Poetry*, but in the first printing the editors made a mistake and placed another poem first. This was corrected in later printings. Let us bring our reflections to an end now by listening to the poem Sr. Miriam wanted us to begin with. It is like a little summary of all the verses we have been pondering. I will quote it in full:

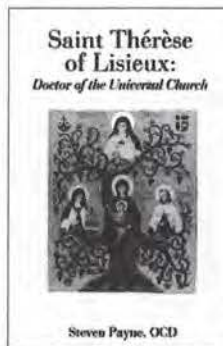
The Mercy of God

*I am copying down in a book from my heart's
archives
the day that I ceased to fear God with a shadowy
fear.
Would you name it the day that I measured my
column of virtue
and sighted through windows of merit a crown
that was near?
Ah, no, it was rather the day I began to see truly
that I came forth from nothing and ever toward
nothingness tend.
that the works of my hands are a foolishness
wrought in the presence
of the worthiest king in a kingdom that never
shall end.
I rose up from the acres of self that I tended with
passion
and defended with flurries of pride;
I walked out of myself and went into the woods
of God's mercy,
and here I abide.
There is greenness and calmness and coolness, a
soft leafy covering
from the judgment of sun overhead,
and the bush of His peace, and the moss of His
mercy to tread.
I have naught but my will seeking God; even love
burning in me
is a fragment of infinite loving and never my
own.
And I fear God no more; I go forward to wander
forever
in a wilderness made of His infinite mercy alone
(p. 1). ■*

All page references are from *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, ICS Publications, 1999.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux:

Doctor of the Universal Church
Steven Payne, O.C.D.



On World Mission Sunday, October, 1997, Pope John Paul II declared St. Thérèse of Lisieux a "Doctor of the Universal Church." This event marked not only the culmination of an unprecedented series of honors bestowed on "the greatest saint of modern times," as

St. Pius X called her, but it also represented a watershed in the evolution of the understanding of this ecclesiastical title bestowed on only thirty-three saints in the history of the Church.

Certainly, at the time of her death in 1897, no one would have guessed that this 24-year-old Carmelite nun, with such a limited education and imperfect literary style, who never wrote a treatise or published an article and who died virtually unknown in an obscure French Carmel, would one day come to be ranked alongside such eminent personalities as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas as a doctor ecclesiae. Her selection did not come about in a vacuum, nor did it happen easily.

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The Spirituality of Jessica Powers

Rev. Robert Morneau, D.D.



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Introduction

Our spiritual journey is shrouded by a number of factors that conceal rather than reveal our relationship with God: the inarticulate workings of grace, the inherent mystery of our personality and the infinity of the Deity, the subtleties of God's call and the mixed nature of our response. Yet, through the cracks and crannies, God's indwelling love and mercy break forth, and something is revealed of God's grandeur in "the shining from shook foil," even in "the ooze of oil crushed."

Jessica Powers' spiritual life received its first impetus in her family home near Mauston, Wisconsin, was nurtured by friendships, studies and work in Milwaukee, Chicago and New York, and gained rich maturity through her forty-seven years as a Carmelite religious. Clues to her relationship with God and how that relationship influenced her daily life can be found in her correspondence, her numerous friendships (within and outside the community), and in a special way, in the poetry that rose from the depth of her heart. Jessica Powers' poetic inspiration was grounded in a rich, earthly humanness and yet soared to the heights of prayer and contemplation. Emerson's words could well apply to her. He said, "The poet, like the lightning rod, must reach from a point nearer the sky than all surrounding objects down to the earth, and into the dark wet soil, or neither is of use."¹

In the final analysis, spirituality contains two essential ingredients, relationship and revelation. Spirituality is about God's decision to establish a relationship with humankind through creation, covenant and, for us as Christians, through the paschal mystery – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are all called to holiness and to intimacy with God and union among ourselves. To understand the nature of friendship, its intimacy, duties and commitment is to understand the essence of spirituality.

As I read the poetry of Jessica Powers, review her correspondence, talk with those who have known her, four themes emerge that speak of her friendship with God and therefore of her spirituality. These are: presence, creaturehood, love/mercy and virtue. In making this somewhat arbitrary se-

lection I regret that, because of space constraints, I cannot include humor, suffering, nature, fear and hope. I would like to let the poet speak for herself, and so I will share two poems that illustrate each of the themes. Around these I will wrap a brief commentary.

Presence

St. John Baptist de la Salle, founder of the Christian Brothers, dedicated his community to the mystery of the holy presence of God. Novices are instructed to say upon entering a room: "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." Though of a different religious tradition, Jessica Powers was keenly aware of God's abiding and providential presence in her life. In a poem entitled "The Garments of God" (p.21),² she describes her relationship with the God of mercy.

*God sits on a chair of darkness in my soul.
He is God alone, supreme in His majesty.
I sit at His feet, a child in the dark beside Him;
my joy is aware of His glance and my sorrow is
tempted
to rest on the thought that His face is turned
from me
He is clothed in the robes of His mercy, volumi-
nous garments—
not velvet or silk and affable to the touch,
but fabric strong for a frantic hand to clutch.
and I hold to it fast with the fingers of my will.
Here is my cry of faith, my deep avowal
to the Divinity that I am dust.
Here is the loud profession of my trust.
I need not go abroad
to the hills of speech or the hinterlands of music
for a crier to walk in my soul where all is still.
I have this potent prayer through good or ill:
here in the dark I clutch the garments of God.*

Even in the dark night of the soul and of the senses. Jessica held tenaciously to the faith conviction that God was present in her soul. To believe that God abides in the deepest recesses of our being when there is no vision or when we know that we are morally unworthy of God's love is a supreme act of trust. In this poem Jessi-

ca Powers shares something of her heart. It is not the prayer of high praise or lowly contrition, nor one of joyful thanksgiving or humble petition, but rather the simple prayer of a child in the dark frantically clutching the garments of God's voluminous, merciful robes. She feels no need for assurance for her senses or intellect; she is firmly convinced that God will not abandon her. "I hold to it fast with the fingers of my will", she says. Jessica, by means or an act of volition, is united to a God, hidden, obscure, but there. Eudora Welty comments: "I had come unprepared for the immediacy of poetry."³ A theology of presence is about immediacy. Our Catholic tradition is rich in sacramentality. God often mediates divine love and mercy through scripture and sacraments, through community and nature, daily joys and sorrows. But for the poet and the mystic, the presence of God is direct, immediate, intense. Nor must we think that this presence is either a "cheap" or even a "delightful" grace. It is costly and piercing, cutting like a two edged sword. To enter the presence of Truth and Love causes the soul both to tremble and to be fascinated. Jessica Powers tasted the mystery of God's immediacy and wrote of it often. In her poem, "This Trackless Solitude" (p. 6), we are given a glimpse of God's "hereness and nowness:"

*Deep in the soul the acres lie
of virgin lands, of sacred wood
where waits the Spirit. Each soul bears
this trackless solitude.*

*The Voice invites, implores in vain
the fearful and the unaware;
but she who heeds and enters in
finds ultimate wisdom there.*

*The Spirit lights the way for her;
bramble and brush are pushed apart.
He lures her into wilderness
but to rejoice her heart.*

*Beneath the glistening foliage
the fruit of love hangs always near,
the one immortal fruit: He is
or, tasted: He is here.*

*Love leads and she surrenders to
His will. His waylessness of grace.
She speaks no word save His, nor moves
until He marks the place.*

*Hence all her paths are mystery,
presaging a divine unknown.
Her only light is in the creed
that she is not alone.*

*The soul that wanders, Spirit led,
becomes, in His transforming shade,
the secret that she was, in God,
before the world was made.*

To take the radical stance that one is not alone is to believe in presence. Nor was this some nebulous, amorphous awareness. Jessica Powers could have identified with Karl Rahner's personal prayer: "Your grace comes to us not in the 'always and everywhere' of Your all-pervasive Spirit, but in 'here and now' of Jesus Christ."⁴ Certainly Jessica Powers faced days and even whole Seasons in which God's absence was almost tangible. Yet she held fast to her only light, namely, the creed that she was not alone. In a world obsessed with loneliness, we have a teacher that reminds us that, in faith, beneath our loneliness is relatedness and divine presence. In yet another poem, Jessica Powers startles us with the naked question: "Child, have none told you? God is in your soul" ("The Place of Splendor," p. 123).

Creaturehood

The Dominican priest Gerald Vann asserts that two things are necessary for human happiness: creativity and an appreciation of our creaturehood. To the extent that we give life through the whole range of creative expressions, and in the measure that we know ourselves to be creatures of a loving, providential God, will happiness be realized. Jessica Powers was a creative woman: her witness, her wit, her poetry gave life to so many of us. Her poetic creativity is captured well in a remark by T.S. Eliot: "Poetry takes something we know already and turns it into something new."⁵ Jessica was constantly taking some-

thing known – a passing comment at table, a refrain from scripture, an insight given in a homily – and turning it into verse with new colors and shades of meaning. She could transform a common sparrow into a mystical bird, Abraham's test into a searing question about her own call, the experience of homelessness into the mystery of loneliness. She took seriously her baptismal call to live life to the full. If creativity was embraced as an essential part of her vocation, at an even deeper level was her identification with the sense and grace of creaturehood. Surely it was her radical, daily dependency upon God that filled her soul to the brim and brought her home daily to the pain and ecstasy of being a creature. In her poem "Creature of God" (p. 88) Jessica Powers' spirituality comes into sharp focus:

*That God stands tall, incomprehensible,
infinite and immutable and free
I know. Yet more I marvel that His call
trickles and thunders down through space for me;*

*that from His far eternities He shouts
to me, one small inconsequence of day.
I kneel down in the vastness of His love,
cover myself with creaturehood and pray.*

*God likes me covered with my creaturehood
and with my limits spread across His face.
He likes to see me lifting to His eyes
even the wretchedness that dropped His grace.*

*I make no guess what greatness took me in.
I only know, and relish it as good,
that I am gathered more to God's embrace
the more I greet Him through my creaturehood.*

The soul that experientially knows the mystery of being created is overwhelmed by the contrast between its own finite being and the infinity, the immensity of a Creator-God. When such a sensitive soul becomes conscious of the extravagance of grace and the wretchedness caused by sin, it is difficult to describe the shame and the guilt. Is not the secret of sanity and sanctity at this

junction to refuse to become fixated upon one's own inadequacies, be they spiritual or moral, and turn instead to the greatness of God's love and surrender to God's merciful embrace? Creaturehood allows us to make the choice in grace and enables us to avoid the dead-end road of pride. By contrast, acceptance of one's limits draws us into the land of humility where we live in the truth of our being, i.e., Cummings states, "I am a little church, no great cathedral."

*That God stands tall, incomprehensible,
infinite and immutable and free
I know. Yet more I marvel that His call
trickles and thunders down through space for me;*

A word that emerges frequently from the lexicon of St John of the Cross is "nothingness." Jessica Powers, following closely the thought and spirit of this great mystic, identified with this mystery and often spoke of the emptiness and poverty that characterize the human journey. At the natural level we reject emptiness and seek physical sustenance, psychological consolation, spiritual riches. We yearn to have something for ourselves and, in faith, something to give back to God. Jessica's sense of creaturehood reached full bloom when, at some point in her journey, she realized that her nothingness, her emptiness, her poverty could be a "gift." In her poem "If You Have Nothing" (p. 91) she writes:

*The gesture of a gift is adequate.
If you have nothing: laurel leaf or bay,
no flower, no seed, no apple gathered late,
do not in desperation lay
the beauty of your tears upon the clay.*

*No gift is proper to a Deity;
no fruit is worthy for such power to bless.
If you have nothing, gather back your sigh,
and with your hands held high, your heart held
high,
lift up your emptiness!*

Love/Mercy

In the late 1930s Jessica Powers lived in New York. She tells how she sat on a New York park bench arguing with an editor for over two hours as to whether or not truth or beauty was the greater attribute in God. The editor aided with truth; she, with beauty. Several months before she died, she told me that perhaps both she and the editor were wrong. "In the end," she said, "all we have is the mercy of God. That is God's greatest attribute." It is not surprising, then, that Jessica asked that her poem "The Mercy of God" (p. 1) be given prominence in her volume of selected poetry.

*I am copying down in a book from my
heart's archive
the day that I ceased to fear God with a
shadowy fear.*

*Would you name it the day that I measured my
column of virtue
and sighted through windows of merit a crown
that was near?
Ah, no, it was rather the day I began to see truly
That I came forth from nothing and ever toward
nothingness tend,
that the works of my hands are a foolishness
wrought in the presence
of the worthiest king in a kingdom that never
shall end.
I rose up from the acres of self that I tended with
passion
and defended with flurries of pride:
I walked out of myself and went into the woods
of God's mercy,
and here I abide.
There is greenness and calmness and coolness, a
soft leafy covering
from judgment of sun overhead,
and the hush of His peace, and the moss of His
mercy to tread.
I have nought but my will seeking God; even love
burning in me
is a fragment of infinite loving and never my own.
And I Fear God no more; I go forward to wander
forever
in a wilderness of His infinite mercy alone.*

Spirituality deals with that radical move from the acres of self into the circle of God's love and mercy. We call this conversion, metanoia. Through the action of grace, the soul now has a new center of consciousness, and directs its activity in accord with God's will. Discernment and obedience become a way of life. Conversion is a gift of God's mercy and once it is experienced, there is no longer any enduring fear. Mercy is one facet of love. In the face of sin, mercy is called forgiveness; in the face of affliction, mercy was called compassion. Jessica Powers understood that mercy was truly an aspect of love and thus a large volume of her poetry centers on love with a capital "L" (referring to God) as well as love with a small "I" (referring to ourselves). In her poem "Letter of Departure" (pp. 43-44) she makes two references to this important distinction in her spiritual understanding:

*... We knew too much of the knowable dark world,
its secret and its sin,
too little of God. And now we rise to see
that even our pledges to humanity
were false, since love must out of Love begin.*

And later in the same poem:

*Love, tho divine, Love, the antiphonal,
speaks only to love,
for only love could learn that liturgy.
since only love is erudite to master
the molten language of eternity*

This same distinction is made in the poem "Come, South Wind" (p. 37) where she writes: "I am saying all day to Love who wakens love: rise in the south and come!" What is said specifically of love in reference to God and the soul can be said of mercy. The mercy of God speaks to the mercy that lies dormant in the human heart. In the end, all we have left is the mercy of God.

At her funeral liturgy Jessica's community distributed a small card containing a poem entitled "The Homecoming" (p. 53) that gives the experience of love and mercy that were central to Jessica's spirituality:

*The spirit, newly freed from earth
is all amazed at the surprise
of her belonging: suddenly
as native to eternity
to see herself, to realize
the heritage that lets her be
at home where all this glory lies.*

*By naught foretold could she have guessed
such welcome home: the robe, the ring,
music and endless banqueting,
these people hers; this place of rest
known, as of long remembering,
herself a child of God and pressed
with warm endearments to His breast.*

Virtue

In the first chapter of his Confessions, Augustine identifies and articulates the basic longing of the human spirit when he says our hearts are restless until they rest in God. George Herbert, a seventeenth century poet repeats that theme in his poem "The Pulley." There he reminds us that one gift has been held back from the human heart: rest. The deprivation of that gift acts as a pulley to draw us into the divine presence. In Jessica Powers' privately published volume *The House at Rest* (1984), the lead poem, from which the volume receives its name, identifies the fundamental reality that haunts the one who searches for God; what is it that puts our house at rest? The scripture scholar, Fr. Barnabas Ahern, once said, "Virtue it is that puts a house at rest." Jessica took his insight and transformed it into poetry and into a theology of life. She writes (*Selected Poetry*, p. 122):

*On a dark night
Kindled in love with yearnings —
Oh, happy chance! —
I went forth unobserved,
My house being now at rest.
— St. John of the Cross*

*How does one hush one's house,
each proud possessive wall, each sighing rafter,
the rooms made restless with remembered
laughter*

*or wounding echoes, the permissive doors,
the stairs that vacillate from up to down,
windows that bring in color and event
from countryside or town,
oppressive ceilings and complaining floors?*

*The house must first of all accept the night.
Let it erase the walls and their display,
impoverish the rooms till they are filled
with humble silences; let clocks be stilled
and all the selfish urgencies of day.*

*Midnight is not the time to greet a guest.
Caution the doors against both foes and friends,
and try to make the windows understand
their unimportance when the daylight ends.
Persuade the stairs to patience, and deny
the passages their aimless to and fro.
Virtue it is that puts a house at rest.
How well repaid that tenant is, how blest
who, when the call is heard,
is free to take his kindled heart and go.*

Virtue and intimacy are so closely linked together that one is not present without the other. Vice means enslavement and causes chaos and disorder. Unless God's grace is received in the Spirit and transforms our hearts through the theological and moral virtues, restlessness endures. St. Teresa of Avila explicitly links authentic prayer to the virtuous life. Jessica Powers saw the same connection and knew from experience that the level of our freedom is proportionate to the level of virtue.

In his biography of Thomas Merton, *The Human Journey*, Anthony Padovano writes: The meaning of a poem is not in the information it provides. A poem is rich in its associations and in the resonance it affects. It puts things together, even contradictory things, not so that they can be grasped but so that we might see that they belong. A good poem, like an effective prayer, invites one to give attention and affectivity to life that might otherwise have been neglected.⁶

We might add that, together with attention and affectivity, poetry can move us to action, indeed, to a virtuous life. I sense that one of the reasons why the poetry of Jessica Powers has

touched so many hearts is precisely because of this tripartite integration. Beyond drawing us to ponder the mysteries of God and life, beyond arousing our deepest emotions as she describes the joys and sorrows of the human condition, her poems inspire us to action, to those kinds of actions whereby we exercise our freedom creatively in our response to God's call. To put it simply, her poetry calls us to virtue so that our house might be at rest.

*The spirit, newly freed from earth
is all amazed at the surprise
of her belonging: suddenly
as native to eternity
to see herself, to realize
the heritage that lets her be
at home where all this glory lies.*

Among all the virtues, there seems to be one closest to her heart and most descriptive of her spirituality, i.e., obedience. Simone Weil claims that obedience is the most perfect way of life and Jessica would surely agree. To be obedient is to become a listener and a lover; it is to live with the Spirit of God. Obedience is that disposition that both hears God's call and responds to it with generosity and courage. In her poem "Yes" (p. 137) we come to know what Jessica understood by heaven and beatitude:

*Yes to one is often no to another
here walks my grief and here has often been
my peak of anguish yes is the one need
of my whole life but time and time again
law forces no up through my heart and lips
spiked leaden ball rending as it arises
leaving its blood and pain yes is the soft
unfolding of petals delicate with surprises
curve and caress and billowing delight
out to the one or many I would guess
heaven for me will be an infinite
flowering of one species a measureless sheer
beatitude of yes*

Conclusion

Jessica Powers lived within a rather limited external geography. Her natural habitat was interior, in those thousands of acres where God lay waiting. Perhaps we can apply what Richard Sewall says of Emily Dickinson likewise to Jessica Powers:

"There is a paradox here, of course. She [Emily Dickinson] knew very well that the landscape of the spirit – the inner life – needed a tongue, and no one surpassed her in getting at its truth. She is simply saying, 'There's no need to tell you I love you; while I breathe, I do.' It is when she says, 'I tell you what I see,' that she describes her purpose as a poet of both lives, inner and outer. As the poet of the inner life, her dedication to this kind of truth led her to insights of the most penetrating kind, epiphanies of the moral and spiritual life; as poet of the external world, she caught its evanescence and its permanent realities with matchless precision."⁷

Perhaps Jessica Powers does not match Emily Dickinson in capturing the mysteries of the external world. But then, Emily Dickinson is no match for our Wisconsin poet in plumbing the depths of the spiritual world. The trackless solitudes and mountain peaks and acres of meadows that Jessica traversed are in the realm of mysticism. Many do not travel this terrain and few who do can articulate what is found there.

Indeed, Jessica Powers' natural habitat was the interior domain. Her choice – her being chosen for the cloistered life – indicates as much. But hers was an integrated spirituality. Prayer was supplemented by asceticism, asceticism by a movement outward in care and concern for others. Though lacking a specific geographic apostolate, her evangelization found expression in sharing her poetic gift with the world. Her poem entitled "The Uninvited" (p. 10) demonstrates her love and concern for all of humanity:

*There is a city that through time shall lie
in a fixed darkness of the earth and sky,
and many dwell therein this very hour.
It is a city without seed or flower,*

estranged from every bird and butterfly.

*Who walked these streets of night? I know them
well.*

*Those who come out of life's sequestered
places:*

*the lonely, the unloved, the weak and shy,
the broken-winged who piteously would fly,
the poor who still have starlight in their faces.*

*They are the outcast ones, the last, the least,
whom earth has not invited to her feast,
and who, were they invited in the end,
finding their wedding clothes too frayed to
mend,
would not attend. ■*

Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited, with a biographical introduction by Brooks Atkinson (New York, NY: Random House, 1940). 1984, p. 80.
2. All quotations from Jessica Powers' poems are taken from *Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, edited by Regina Siegfried and Robert Morneau (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1989); page references given in the text are to this volume.
3. Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 80.
4. Karl Rahner, *Encounters With Silence*, translated by James M Demske (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963), p. 69.
5. T.S. Eliot, Quoted by Madeleine L'Engle in "Walking on Water."
6. Anthony Padovano, *The Human Journey – Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1982), p. 97.
7. Richard B Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), p. 611.

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