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A Committed Life

By Barbara Mujica

I began my professional life full of illusion. I had written my dissertation on Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Golden Age Spain's greatest Catholic playwright, and although I was a committed atheist, Calderón's message of personal responsibility, commitment to others, and service to a greater cause resonated with me. I wanted to share his vision with my students, and during my first years at Georgetown, I did. We sifted through Calderón's florid metaphors and obscure allusions to find a philosophy of life as valid today as in the 17th century. And then came postmodernism.

The new religion that engulfed academia in the late eighties and nineties disparaged text-based criticism and any notion of universal truth. Religion – hence, Calderón's Catholicism – became obsolete. Canonical works such as the masterpiece *La vida es sueño* [*Life Is a Dream*] were labeled elitist, and canonical writers such as Calderón were depicted as agents of a decrepit monarchy whose discriminatory policies marginalized alternate views. The new critics stressed relativity, subjectivity, and alterity. Some scholars followed the high priests of postmodernism – Foucault, Derrida, Said, Barthes – with slavish devotion. They warned graduate students to stay away from “old-fashioned” approaches that would make them unmarketable.

I read the critics then in vogue and found much to admire. I expanded my reading lists to include women authors and non-canonical works. Many of the “new” theories hardly seemed new to me at all, though, as the perspectivism of writers such as Rojas, Cervantes, and Calderón had much in common with postmodern notions of subjectivity. What appalled me was the fervor – and, yes, even viciousness – of some proponents of the dogma in fashion. I heard candidates for academic positions belittled because they did not work in the “right critical mold” and the research of more traditional scholars dismissed as “fluff.”

Eventually, conflicting views, combined with combustible and incompatible personalities, led to an explosion in my department. One colleague filed a law suit against another. Faculty meetings became a nightmare. Former friends became enemies as colleagues split into camps. I no longer taught with enthusiasm. I wrote articles that got published but seemed like mere academic exercises. And then the brochures started to arrive.

The first time I received a brochure for an Ignatian retreat, I threw it away. I was an atheist. But the brochures kept coming, and the idea of five days of silence was beginning to sound attractive. Imagine, I thought, five days without screaming! One evening in 1997 I was preparing a class on a play about the conversion of a gay playwright with AIDS by the 20th-century Jewish Venezuelan writer Isaac Chocrón. Although I am not a weepy person, I burst into tears. As though in a dream, I went to the trash, fished out the brochure, and filled out the application.

When I arrived at the retreat house in Wernersville, I was terrified. The retreat group consisted (I thought) of young Catholics who knew what they were doing and did not seem intimidated by the enormous, labyrinthine building. William Watson, S.J., the retreat director, was welcoming and encouraging, but I felt completely out of place. And when he made the announcement that we would all have spiritual directors, I balked. I had come for the silence, not to dissect my atheist soul with some priest. When I found myself face to face with my new spiritual guide, I was so frightened that I once again burst into tears. Unflustered, he handed me a Kleenex.

Through the course of the week, something extraordinary began to happen. Through the Spiritual Exercises

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I gained a heightened awareness of things I had always felt but never before articulated – a sense of mystery and transcendence; a connection to other people, even those I found most problematic; a commitment to teaching that went beyond covering certain works and authors; a desire to serve God and be “a woman for others.” All that in a week? Well, yes. An Ignatian retreat is an intense experience. By the time I returned home I know I wanted to be baptized.

Every morning at the retreat a chaplain gave a short talk about some personal experience. Something one of them said triggered a fleeting recollection of St. Teresa of Avila, whom I taught in my literature surveys. When I mentioned to my spiritual director that I couldn’t find any of her books in the retreat library, he suggested I try the Jesuit library, describing the maze of hallways and stairs I would have to take to get there. It sounded too complicated, so I decided not to go.

“Come,” he said, “I’ll take you.”

The guy’s a mind reader, I thought. It was eerie.

I found a copy of *The Interior Castle* in English. As I started to read it, I trembled. Every image that had come into my head

while doing the Spiritual Exercises, Teresa explained. Back in Washington, I began to read Teresa obsessively – every treatise, poem, and letter I could get my hands on. I read for enlightenment and guidance. I read for sheer enjoyment, not to write research papers. I had always associated Catholicism with mysterious rites and rituals, genuflections and abracadabra. The Spiritual Exercises taught me to look for God within the movements of my own soul. Teresa taught me to find God through interiority, rather than in empty, mechanically recited prayers. She enriched my understanding of what the spiritual life could be.

In order to deepen my understanding, I expanded my readings. I delved into studies on mysticism. I reread

Calderón from a different angle. I scrutinized the feminists on Teresa’s rhetorical strategies. I became a member of Catholic Studies and discovered Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich. I audited a course on European women mystics. Suddenly, I realized that the

culture wars going on in my department no longer affected me. Perhaps by focusing on a woman writer, I had made myself “acceptable,” or perhaps I just was too engrossed in what I was doing to notice the turbulence around me.

I wanted to share Teresa’s insights with others, and so I began teaching courses on the Spanish mystics. Drawing on our rich resources at Georgetown, I have brought Jesuits to class to speak about the Spiritual Exercises and guide the students through them. I have invited historians and theologians, and, most recently, the campus imam to explain similarities between Sufism and Teresian spirituality. My classes have visited the local Discalced Carmelite monastery to meet present-day Carmelite friars, the Whitefriars’ library, the National Basilica, and a nearby convent. I have had students of all faiths in this course, and many tell me this is the first time they have felt free to



Saint Ignatius Loyola by Hieronymus Wierix.

examine their own spirituality and discuss it openly.

My commitment has enriched my research as well. I have published several articles on St. Teresa as well as two scholarly books, the most recent an in-depth study of her letters entitled *Teresa de Ávila, Lettered Woman*. In 2010 I curated an exhibition called “Portraits in Piety” at Georgetown University’s Lauinger Library. I have also organized two symposia and, with Ángel Gil-Ordóñez of the Music Department, am planning another for 2015 to celebrate Teresa’s quincentennial. Working with material that is personally meaningful and that resonates with people of different backgrounds and scholarly interests has invigorated my academic life.

I have always written fiction, and my desire to share

Teresa's spirituality beyond academia led me to write a novel, *Sister Teresa*, based on her life. Last November a stage adaptation called *God's Gypsy* by Coco Blignaut opened in Los Angeles to rave reviews. Ms. Blignaut has come to Georgetown and performed scenes for students and faculty, sharing the amazing story of how her encounter with St. Teresa changed her life.

But these years have brought terrible challenges as well. On September 11, 2001, while sitting in his Georgetown dormitory room, my son Mauro heard an airplane fly directly into the Pentagon. Mauro had attended Georgetown Preparatory, a Jesuit high school, and he was committed to becoming a man for others. This had led him to become a Marine Corps officer candidate in order to serve the nation. Now he was ready to drop his studies to take up arms. Fortunately, the officers at Quantico advised him to finish his degree first. He was commissioned in Georgetown's Dahlgren Chapel the day after he graduated.

The four years Mauro was on active duty were the worst of my life, especially his two deployments in Iraq. I cried and prayed constantly. Jesus, Mary, St. Teresa, and St. Ignatius were my constant companions. Georgetown's Nineteenth Annotation Retreat and later our Living the Ignatian Charism group helped me enormously, but most of the time I felt as though I were buried in a bottomless tar pit. I rarely slept, and when I did I had nightmares. Without the discipline of writing and teaching, I might have had a breakdown. When Mauro returned home safe and sound in the spring of 2008, I felt as though I owed God a really big favor.

It seemed to me that the best way to serve was to help our returning soldiers transition to civilian life. Mauro's integration into student life at the Kellogg School of Management, which he attended after his final deployment, was quite smooth, as Kellogg has an efficient system set up for veterans. However, when I looked around for programs serving veterans on the Georgetown campus, I found very little. I started out by meeting with administrators on veterans' issues and compiling information for a web page. Shortly afterward, I joined forces with U.S. Air Force Major Erik Brine, then a part-time graduate student, who was organizing the Georgetown University Student Veterans Association (GUSVA), of which I became faculty advisor.

That first year, the GUSVA made extraordinary strides. Yellow Ribbon benefits were raised from \$1000 to \$5000 a year, and student health insurance was guaranteed for all undergraduate veterans. Also, Georgetown hosted the national SVA convention, which drew over 300 participants from around the country and featured



Saint Teresa of Ávila by Peter Paul Rubens.

an address by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki. Every year since then, the GUSVA has organized an elaborate Veterans Day ceremony with a lovely reception.

The veterans have galvanized the administration and faculty. In 2010 Todd Olson, Vice President for Student Affairs, created the Veterans Support Team (VST), a coalition of administrators, faculty, and students concerned with veterans issues. Co-chaired by Mary Dluhy and me, the VST and the GUSVA have lobbied for the creation of a Veterans Resource Center on the Georgetown campus. The first step was the establishment in 2012 of a veterans office with a full-time coordinator, Army veteran David Shearman. Working through these organizations, individual veterans have been able to improve services for their peers by generating their own new initiatives. For example, Anthony DeMarino created a program that enables veterans to meet on campus once a month with representatives of the V.A., who assess their eligibility for medical benefits and schedule doctor's appointments. Another, initiated by James Sutton, created a new veterans' residence.

Working with veterans has been time-consuming and challenging, but also meaningful and rewarding. The veterans I have worked with are mature, articulate, hardworking, focused, and resourceful. Making Georgetown a more veteran-friendly campus has become a true mission for me, and I consider the hours I have devoted to it well spent. Both St. Ignatius and St. Teresa understood that faith galvanizes. It gives us energy and vision. Thanks to them, my mature years at Georgetown have been filled with joy. ■