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the issue of gender**

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DECLARATION

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Theology (Christian Spirituality), in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation/thesis is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, a woman of faith. She has always been a loving and caring mother to me. Thank you mom, I love you.

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I would not have written this thesis all by myself if not for the grace of God and for the help, assistances, guidance and encouragement of many people and for their prayers. I, therefore in the first place, am extremely grateful to the Almighty God for his grace and blessings during the course of my study and research.

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ABSTRACT

Mysticism is a broad concept in a diversity of traditions. Our study focuses on Christian mysticism in the Catholic Church tradition). This concept is shortly a special relationship with God that translates into observable behaviours that impact on the other people. Mysticism itself is for everyone regardless of their perceived spiritual connectedness with God. In other words everyone can be a mystic. However, in the Catholic Church it would seem that the decision regarding who is a mystic is done by the leadership of the Church which comprises of all-male clergy. As a result, those who have been considered mystics in the Catholic Church were predominantly male with significantly few women.

Mysticism cannot but be seen through the lens of gender. Gender equality in the Catholic Church or lack of, is then a yardstick through which mysticism should be scrutinized. This analysis should be done by studying the Catholic Church's teaching on gender from the past eras to the present. An attempt should be made to look at the esteemed doctors of the church who have influenced the Church's attitudes towards women. Not only should these attitudes be explored, but also their influence on the discipline of the Church or the way the Catholic Church carries its mandate in as far as gender is concerned. The Church's mandate includes but not necessarily limited to its laws (canons). The mandate is also found in its declarations which are found in the Church's documents. These will be analysed to arrive at a conclusion whether the Catholic Church has established gender equality in its teachings and practices. The analysis should also compare the teaching on gender and its translation into observable, real formal equality and substantive equality when it comes to gender. Formal Equality means the same formal legal rights and status while Substantive Equality means the same material and effects between men and women in the Catholic Church.

Gender equality then or lack of, will be used in exploring the subject of mysticism in the Catholic Church. This study will attempt to explore how gender equality in mysticism can impact on the Church's endeavour to establish gender equality so that there is authenticity in its teaching and practice. That alignment is necessary to bring to life the scriptural dimension of the Church.

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Chapter one

Introduction

This thesis examines the meaning of Christian mysticism and analyses the teaching of the Catholic Church on the issue of gender as a background to establishing the contribution of women mystics and the role played by women in the Church.

The central argument of this study is that because studies in Catholic Christian mysticism have focused more on men, more women mystics, were mostly overlooked except a few. This gender bias has resulted in sexism in the Catholic Church teaching and practices. The study will show that if women mystics were recognised and acknowledged, that would have impacted on gender equality in the Catholic Church.

This thesis examines how Christian mysticism relates to the issue of gender equality in the Catholic Church. The hypothesis is that although both men and women mystics have made tremendous contributions to the life of the Church, the literature of Christian mysticism has focused more on male models than women. If the contributions of women mystics are taken seriously gender equality and gender equity may be a reality in the Catholic Church.

1.1 Background in regard to mysticism

What is the meaning of mysticism? What does Christian mysticism mean? Is it something concrete or is it just an abstract concept or a mere speculation? How does it relate to concrete life situations? Who is a mystic and what are the criteria for qualifying as a mystic? These are challenging questions, difficult to answer adequately, but very important and crucial for understanding whether or not we are dealing with concrete reality that can be realized and manifested in ordinary life situations or not. These questions demand careful research and systematic arguments to establish the qualifications and steps required to reach the stage identified as mysticism.

William McNamara is among many others who have raised questions about mysticism. He asks: „Is mysticism for everyone or only a select few? Is it a special kind of experience or an experience more familiar to us all? What constitutes a good environment for the mystical life?’(McNamara1991: ix). Like McNamara, Grace Jantzen wonders about the meaning of

mysticism, whether is an experience of direct communion with God or just a human thought which has nothing to do with God. She also wonders if it is available for all religions (Jantzen1995:1).

As will become evident in the course of this study, the precise definition of mysticism is rather complex and elusive indeed. It has been noted that: „Mysticism is one of those often misunderstood words in English usage’ (Maloney 1974: 7). It is against the background of such pertinent, yet challenging questions, that we are going to attempt to understand the meaning of mysticism in order to determine whether its meaning is applicable to all or merely for a select few.

After a careful perusal of related materials, this study argues that there are various interrelated meanings of the term none of which is completely satisfactory on its own.¹ If we look at the exact origin of Christian mysticism we find that it is shrouded in obscurity; available data on the origin of Christian mysticism lacks accuracy or precision. It would seem that Christian mysticism has its roots in the biblical call to seek God above everything, a call which is understood as coming from Jesus Christ himself who calls his disciples to be perfect as God is perfect (Mt 5:48). Further, it would seem that the profound desire to seek and find God by following Jesus’ teaching- his words, deeds, and Gospel- furnishes a useful basis for the Christian life of faith (King 2001:25). Therefore, in my opinion, the scripture suffices as a plausible basis for Christian mysticism.

From history, one can glean the fact that the formulation of a common Christian belief system and the important institutions and practices of the Church came into existence during the second century. According to Ursula King, the beginnings of Christian mysticism occurred during the second century C.E. in North Africa which was a flourishing centre of Roman culture. She notes that: „During the second and third centuries C.E., outstanding members of the Christian community at Alexandria- Clement and Origen- developed a synthesis between the true knowledge of God and the Christian faith. They asserted that God, the Unknown, can be apprehended by following the threefold path of purification, illumination and union achieved through loving contemplation’ (2001:27-28).

¹ Underhill 1955, Maloney 1974, Jantzen 1995, King 2001, Rakoczy 2006.

1.2.1 Preliminary Literature Review on Mysticism

Jantzen poses many questions about mysticism such as:

What does mysticism have to do with justice? Is mystical experience private and subjective, or does it have political and social implications? Is mysticism related to gender, perhaps especially available to women? Or is feminist mysticism impossible; is mysticism essentially patriarchal? (Jantzen 1995:1).

This study will attempt to answer some of these questions. Jantzen further considers mysticism as a product of social constructionism which has been constructed in different ways at different times. She also argues that: „the current philosophical construction of mysticism; and, like the others is implicitly bound up with issues of authority and gender’ (:12). For her, mysticism involves power and is gender related and this contributes in gender inequality in the Church.

Many writers about mysticism, including contemporary writers, seem to agree that mysticism is a rather difficult word to define. Johnston defines mysticism as a mystery of love and God’s gift: „This mystical love is a great mystery which no human mind can fathom’ (Johnston 1995:194). Here mysticism is understood as a gift from God, and God gives it to all categories of people irrespective of their status or sex. In essence mysticism is about love and union with God.

McGinn has underscored three elements of mysticism: (1) religion, (2) a process or way of life, and (3) a direct consciousness of the presence of God (McGinn 1991: xv-xvi). Another writer, King notes that Christian mysticism can either be Christocentric, theocentric or both. It is observed that because of the limitations of language, Christian mysticism would describe God in terms of the *via negativa* (by way of the negative) or by affirmation. The way of negation is sometimes called the *apophatic* way. In this way things that are said about God are things that are actually not God. For example, to say God is a rock needs to be interpreted. „This is why Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of the “divine darkness” God, and an unknown medieval mystic refers to the cloud of “unknowing”” (King 2001:21). The affirmative way is called the *kataphatic* way. This is the way of affirming God’s divine perfection. In this way the goodness and the beauty of creation is positively attributed to God and it can be used to „seek, praise and find God’ (King 2001: 22).

Mysticism is equally related to the unity of the love of God which goes together with the love of neighbour (Underhill 1961, McGinn 1991, Callahan 1992, Rakoczy 2006). Some of the

Christian mystics, such as Catherine of Siena and Evelyn Underhill, contend that the love of neighbour should also take into consideration the critical issues of social justice and gender issues (Jantzen 1995, Johnston 1995, Rakoczy 2006).

To be sure, mysticism is practical and active. „Underhill states that true mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect holds an opinion’ (Rakoczy 2006:11). The entire person is engaged in the life of prayer which leads to union with God and that experience affects the totality of their life experience, „As one believes, so one acts’ (Rakoczy 2006:11).

Underhill emphasises four characteristics of mysticism: Firstly, mysticism is something practical and active not merely theoretical or speculative: it is not passive but dynamic- and couched in action. In her words:

Over and over again the great mystics tell us, not how they speculated, but how they acted. To them, the transition from the life of sense to the life of spirit is a formidable undertaking, which demands effort and constancy. The paradoxical “quiet” of the contemplative is but the outward stillness essential to inward work. Their favourite symbols are those of action: battle, search, and pilgrimage (Underhill 1955:83).

True mysticism is characterized as practical and active with actions having an edge vis-à-vis speculation. Secondly, mysticism appertains to spiritual things: thus it is not only confined to the material world but also transcends mundane experiences. Mysticism can also be understood as a spiritual activity. „Mystic possesses God, and needs nothing more’ (:84). Mystics are content with God’s presence in their lives; they focus their interest and energy on union with God.

Thirdly, mysticism is a personal experience, involving love: it is meant to be lived. „True mysticism achievement is the most complete and most difficult expression of life which is as yet possible to man. It is at once an act of love, an act of surrender, and act of supreme perception; a trinity of experiences which meets and satisfies the three activities of the self’ (:84). It is a unique experience which, once experienced can never be substituted but can only be lived by the one who experiences it. It is an expression of God’s love to a particular individual. We can conclude that it is a gift from God, needing only a disposition of heart from the recipient.

Lastly, mysticism is associated with the ultimate union with God- a union that is obtained by God's grace and not by any human attempt, neither intellectually nor emotionally. In addition Underhill asserts:

Mysticism, then, is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge. On the one hand it is not merely the power of contemplating Eternity: on the other. It is not to be identified with any kind of religious queerness. It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or, if you like it better- for this means exactly the same thing- it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute (:81).

The entire process is God's initiative which originates from the love of God that leads to union with God. Nobody can initiate this process but God alone. It is not just a doctrine to be taught nor can it be linked to any religion but requires the ability to contemplate deeply. It is neither a fantasy nor ecstasy but a conscious relation with God.

1.2.2 Literature about understandings of gender

The study of Christian mysticism is about human experience (irrespective of sex or gender) in relation to God. In the eyes of God both men and women share the same human dignity (*Mulieris Dignitatem*: # 6). In Galatians 3: 28, we read: „In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus’.

From the ancient era there was an analogy made between the female body and the earth. Pythagoras held that the soul was immortal while the body is subjected to corruption (Jantzen 1995:31). Plato identified women with earth and men with spirit. He thought bearing children was the *raison d'être* for women whereas for men, it was thinking (:35). Plato's understanding of mysticism is gender-related. Jantzen argues that „Christianity had absorbed from its Jewish heritage a large measure of misogyny’ (:43).

Philo, in trying to unite both Jewish and Hellenistic thought in the development of Christian theology, writes:

The male is more complete, more dominant than the female, closer akin to causal activity, for the female is incomplete and in subjection and belongs to the category of the passive rather than the active. So too with the two ingredients which constitute our life-principle, the rational and the irrational; the rational which belongs to mind and reason and is of the masculine gender, the irrational, the province of sense, is of the feminine. Mind belongs to a genus wholly superior to sense as man is to women (quoted in Jantzen 1995:43).

This kind of understanding can be misleading because it implies that men are more important than women.

1.2.3 Literature about gender inequality in the Catholic Church

The struggle for power appears to be the casual basis of gender inequality in the Catholic Church. As this study explores the relationship between gender and mysticism, it is paramount to distinguish between sex and gender. Sex relates to biological differences between males and females. These differences are informed by both internal and external sexual organs, chromosomes and hormonal profiles. Gender on the other hand, relates to the process of socialisation. World Health Organisation describes gender as „the socially constructed roles, behaviour, activities, and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for men and women. The distinct roles and behaviour may give rise to gender inequalities i.e differences between men and women that systematically favour one group. In turn such inequalities can lead to inequities between men and women’.²

Gender Equality then means „measurable equal representation of women and men. Gender equality does not imply that women and men are the same, but that they have value and should be accorded equal treatment’ (International Planned Parenthood Federation).³ Amuluche Nnamani observes that „inequality increases when men cling to power and when women have been so socialized to give up power’ (Nnamani 2005:22). Furthermore, some of the official statements of the church confirm that there is gender inequality in the Catholic Church.

Pope John Paul II in a Letter to Women in 1995 said: „Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented: they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude’ (#3). The pope affirms that sometimes women’s dignity has been desecrated. Further writing to the laity he says: „The contribution of woman is indispensable for the fullness and harmony of the church’s life. It is understandable that many women suffer from certain forms of paternalism and discrimination. The Christian community must enhance the value of the contribution and the responsibility of women, and be grateful to them for it’ (*Pontificium Consilium Pro Laicis*: 98).

² Www. World health Organisation- gender equality-2011.

³ Www. International planned parenthood federation. Gender equality -2011.

Nnamani argues that, „The question should rather be what is being done to make people, men and women, recognize the fact and importance of gender equality’ (Nnamani 2005:33). He believes that gender equality can only be attained if both men and women are jointly involved in the attempt to recognize and restore the true nature of feminine dignity (:22). It is instructive, he notes, to understand that both men and women are equal; what may differ are their functions. He emphasises that men must release their tenacious grip on patriarchy and monopoly of power to stop gender inequality. Women, on the other hand, must start seizing power by empowering themselves (:38-39). He further espouses that „Gender equality is not gender uniformity. Equality can accommodate differences even in roles, but it abhors discriminations, subjugation, exploitation and disparagement in the exercise of the same’ (:24).

It seems that since far back from the early centuries of Christianity, the fathers of the church had a negative attitude towards women. The image of God was said to be exemplified by men in contrast to women. Tertullian (160-225) wrote:

You are the Devil’s gateway. You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine Law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die (*De Cultu Fem* 1, quoted in Rakoczy 2004:30-31).

Johannes Tauler (1300-1361) and Richard Rolle (1300-1349) in the medieval era seem to have adopted a derogative and subservient stance towards women. Rolle considered women a great danger, deceitful, foolish and weak in reasoning. Tauler too, though he viewed them as created in God’s image, and seeing in Mary humankind being brought back to the likeness to God which was lost in Eden, recognized Eucharistic piety as one of women’s outstanding characteristics, but he was still disparaging about women. He wrote:

We are all women in our frailty, a man like me, no less than you women; giddy we are, and unstable. But I have been in countries where they act like men, showing great strength in their conversions, and great steadfastness. The word of God produces greater and finer fruits there in a single year than in ten whole years with us. Miracles and great grace are to be seen there among such blessed people. In other countries they all behave like women. Whatever their opportunities they make nothing of them. I know that you will not like to hear me speak in this way about women, but, my dear children, we must all become men and use our strength to turn to God, if we are to be of any use (Quoted in Bynum 1987:106).

According to Rolle, men in their weakness are like women and women are strong only when they are like men. The implication is that women can convert to God and be helpful only if

they become like men. How realistic are these statements and where did this understanding originate? The essence of these statements assert the thinking of that era, that demonstrates clear absence of gender equality in the Church. One could go as further as reaching a bold conclusion that the exponents of these statements based their thinking on the ideology of male superiority.

1.3 The objectives of this thesis

The central aim of this thesis is to answer the following key questions: What is Christian mysticism? What do modern theologians say about Christian mysticism? What is Catholic social teaching on gender? What are some of the causes of gender inequality in the church? What is the role of Christian mysticism and how does gender inequality affect it? How can the contribution of women mystics such as Thérèse of Lisieux, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa of Calcutta contribute to gender equality? Subsequently, this study identifies and analyses the contributions made by selected women mystics in the life of the Catholic Church and examines the implications of focusing more on male models than women's experience in the Christian tradition.

This thesis will use a theology of Christian mysticism and feminist social construction of mysticism as its analytical tools. A theology of Christian mysticism will help us to crystallize the reality of God's relationship with the whole creation or God's creatures. In this theology we are presented with images of God both in the Old and New Testaments. For example, in Old Testament, Jacob's vision of a ladder present to us the connection between heaven and earth, Moses on Mount Sinai encountering God in the burning bush, and the Song of Songs with its use of erotic and sexual imagery illustrates the relationship between a person and God. In the New Testament, in John's Gospel we are presented with God who lives in us and Jesus who teaches that all humanity should strive for holiness and perfection and also with St. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus which challenged him to change from being a persecutor to a disciple (King 2001: 12-13).

The feminist social construction of mysticism argues that gender inequality is a socially constructed phenomenon which can socially be deconstructed. The work of Grace Jantzen (1995) is the most important resource on this feminist social construction of mysticism. This tool will help this study to analyse the role of power in gender inequality discourse in the Catholic Church. This thesis focuses and limits itself on the discussion about Christian

mysticism and gender. It particularly focuses on the contribution of women mystics in the Catholic Church.

1.4 Structure of the dissertation

Chapter one serves as the introduction to this thesis. Chapter two discusses the historical meanings of Christian mysticism according to the different periods beginning from the patristic era, through the medieval period, the early modern period and contemporary meanings. Chapter three critically examines the teaching of the Catholic Church on the social issue of gender with particular reference to pre-Vatican statements, Vatican II and other important Church documents. Chapter four discusses some aspects of the mystical life and the contributions of the following modern mystics: Thérèse of Lisieux, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Chapter five evaluates the position of the Catholic Church on Christian mysticism in relation to the issue of gender and the role of women in the Christian tradition. Chapter six draws conclusions from the study and summarises it.

Chapter two

The meaning of Christian mysticism

2.0 Introduction

This chapter explores the various definitions of Christian mysticism. It highlights some of the meanings of mysticism according to the understandings of the different times and circumstances. It undertakes an examination of the patristic, medieval, early modern and contemporary meanings of mysticism. In addition, it explains the various meanings of mysticism by way of definitions and by the way in which mystics express themselves in their relationships with God and the evidence of their own lives. Mystics such as Origen, Augustine of Hippo, Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Evelyn Underhill, and Thomas Merton shall be discussed. The chapter concludes with a survey of how mysticism has been understood in history up to the 20th century.

2.1 Mysticism in the Patristic Era

It is argued that Christian mysticism came about as a result of the experiences of ascetics and monastics, who after they had been influenced by Clement and Origen, withdrew to the desert to devote themselves to the contemplation of God (King 2001:28).

2.1.1 Origen (185-254)

Origen was born in Egypt most probably in Alexandria around the year 185 CE. He was born into a Christian family and he was the eldest son of Leodnidas who died as a martyr during the persecution of Septimius Severus in 202. Origen wanted to die with his father but was saved by his mother who hid his clothes so he could not go with his father (Healey 1990:18). He considered martyrdom as „the perfection of Christian wisdom’ (Egan1991:19). He almost equalled martyrdom to the incarnate Word of God.

Origen is considered as one of the most influential and controversial theologians of the early Church. He had a significant influence on Christian spirituality and mystical piety. He is sometimes called a “master mystic”. He is the first teacher of the Church to come from a Christian background. „His mysticism is deeply nourished by biblical thought, and much of his life’s work was concerned with drawing out the allegorical and spiritual meaning of scriptural texts’ (King 2001:33). At one point in his life, as a young man, he took literally the biblical words of Matthew 19:12, where it speaks about those who made themselves eunuchs

for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and had himself castrated in order to be sure of complete chastity, but he later regretted this and condemned himself for that misunderstanding. For Origen, the Bible is the best place where one can search for the secret and hidden things of God. Origen was inclined to the allegorical interpretation of scripture. He believed that beyond the literal meaning of the texts there are other spiritual meanings that need to be discovered in order for humankind to understand God's message. He used the Bible as the basis for his other writings (Healey 1990:19-20).

He was the first one to describe the three fold path to mystical life of purgation, illumination and union. He argued that these stages represent what is found in the three books of the Scriptures namely, the book of Proverbs, that teaches morals and virtues and prepares one to understand; the second book which is Ecclesiastes, that teaches about how to attain natural contemplation and proper attitude towards this world. These two books prepare one to be able to contemplate about the third book which is the Song of Songs. For Origen contemplation is about knowing God and being known by God (Egan 1991:20).

Inspired by the word of God, especially the first commandment, he emphasized the love of God. For him, charity belongs to God and we are all bound to love God with all our heart, our soul and our strength. He argued that even the power of loving God is from God (Origen 1957:35). Since God is Love itself, God gives us power to love God. Love is only for God and godly things such as human beings and virtues. He believed that it is human's nature to love. However, it is important to learn to love rightly by loving what should be loved as opposed to loving what should not be loved (:36).

Origen's mystical theology focuses on the human soul which is created in God's image. „Fundamental to Origen's mystical theology is the idea that the soul's beauty consists in being created in the image of God so that there exists a kinship between the human mind and God. There is a progressive revelation of God in the bible and a progressive growth of the spiritual life in the believer' (King 2001:35). He sees the mystery of the union of the soul with God and of the Church and God as being symbolically and most beautifully expressed in the Song of Songs (:36). Against this backdrop, we may submit that it was through the teachings and example of Origen that Christian mysticism was helped to take its roots and to establish itself. For him, mysticism is about loving God above everything else.

2.1.2 Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Augustine was born in Tagaste, North Africa in 354. His father (Pastricius) was a pagan Roman official and his mother (Monica) was a Christian. He was raised in the Christian faith which he later abandoned in his mid-teens. He studied law, literature and philosophy at the city of Carthage at the age of sixteen and seventeen. He took a mistress whom they stayed together for seventeen years and who bore him a son (Adeodatus) in 372.

Augustine had a burning passion for knowledge. As a result he became attracted to the Manichean heresy which „explains material phenomena and the existence of evil by denigration of both the creator God and of creation’ (Aquilina 1999:179). His mother Monica never ceased to pray for him and to urge him to return to the Christian faith. Finally, he was baptised by Bishop St. Ambrose in Milan (387). His mother died later the same year and two years later in 389 his son also died. On his return to North Africa the Christians of Hippo urged Augustine to be ordained a priest. In 395 he was ordained the bishop of Hippo. He is considered one of the great fathers and doctors of the Catholic Church and some of his writings include *Confessions*, *The City of God* and *On the Trinity*. He died in 430. (:180-181).

An observation that has been advanced is that the development of Christian mysticism both in the East and the West was greatly influenced by Neo-Platonism. Augustine was also influenced by Neo-Platonism in his explanation of the gradual ascent of the soul away from the distractions of the material world to union with God. Eventually Augustine was convinced that „The true philosopher is the lover of God’ (King 2001:50).

For Augustine, a true and meaningful life is only led when the soul is in union with God. It is only in God that true joy subsists. „Thus will their souls live, for living in the delights of the world is death. But you, Lord are the delight of the clean of heart’.⁴

Augustine believed that God was at very centre of everything. He argued that what is uttered should always be something coming from God; even what is said to God in prayer should also be what comes from God. He wrote: „My God, let my confession before you be both silent, with no shouting, and not silent, with an interior din of emotions. I will not say to people anything that you have not heard from me first, and you will not hear anything from

⁴ Book XIII. XXI. 2. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Translated and annotated by Silvano Borruo, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008, 280.

me that you have not said to me first'.⁵ This implies that what is said in prayer should actually come from God. Our prayer to God is silent because it does not say anything new which was not known to God before. Prayer itself comes from God; otherwise it would not be prayer at all. The person depends totally on God for everything.

St. Augustine's mystical theology emphasizes that God is the source and summit of our being, because without God all our efforts are in vain. It is only in God where our souls can find peace. He noted in *The Confessions*: „It is you who stir [a person] into taking pleasure in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is not at peace until it rests in you'.⁶ We come from God and have our end in God. We will eventually return to God. In essence God is our destiny.

To summarize the foregoing, it would be well placed to say that according to Augustine, Christian mysticism is about the relationship between God and human beings. The human soul is made for God and the person becomes a mystic if he/she has a deep relationship with God, a relationship that is lived and finds its meaning in the expression of God's love. We can therefore, conclude that mysticism is about a very deep and profound relationship of love between God and the human soul.

2.2 Mysticism in the Middle-Ages

The Middle-Ages are considered as the high point of Christian mysticism, although it remained a period characterised by the mysticism of monastics and celibate clerics (King 2001:63). This era informs us that Christian mysticism is about a profound devotion and authentic encounter with God and is open to everyone (:65). This will be demonstrated in the lives and writings of Meister Eckhart and St. Catherine of Siena.

2.2.1 Meister Eckhart (1260 – 1328)

Eckhart was born around the year 1260, in a village in Thuringia called Hochheim, in the eastern part of Germany. He was born of a noble family. He joined the Dominican Order at Erfurt in 1275 when he was about eighteen years old. He received his early training in the Arts at Paris (Davies 1991: 22-23). As a Dominican, Eckhart served as Prior and Vicar to the Order. He was a highly respected theologian, preacher and director. He taught as Magister in

⁵ *The Confessions*, 10. 2.1, 176-177.

⁶ *The Confessions*, 1.1.1,13.

Paris, Strasbourg and Cologne. He also preached sermons to Dominicans, Benedictines and Cistercians nuns, which were deeply theological in nature.

According to Merton, „He is above all a brilliant mind, a genius in speculative theology, but one who was not careful to moderate his language by prudent discretion’ (Merton 2008:199). As a result, on March 27, 1329, Eckhart was condemned by Pope John XXII, because of controversial elements in his theology. However, this „did little to hinder the considerable influence that he continued to have on the piety of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries’ (Eckhart 1981: xvii). Moreover, with regards to McGinn, Meister Eckhart is the most influential and controversial mystic in the history of Western Christianity. In fact he is the „only medieval theologian tried before the Inquisition as a heretic’ (McGinn 2001:1).

Many of his works have been lost. However, some have survived. One of his first German works that has survived is the *Spiritual Counsels or Talks of Instruction* (*Rede der unterscheidung*) (Davies 1991:24). Some of his works include: *The Prologue to The Book of Propositions*, *Commentary on Genesis*, *Commentary on the Books of Wisdom*, *Commentary on Exodus* and *Commentary on the Gospel of John* which is considered his longest work (McGinn 2001:7). In 1313 Meister Eckhart was named the first Provincial of Saxonia Province (Davies 1991:25). He died in the Dominican house at Avignon in 1328 (:30).

2.2.1.1 His mystical theology

Eckhart emphasised three points in his mystical teaching: namely, the theory of exemplarism, the doctrine of Immediacy and the doctrine of the return to God. Firstly, Eckhart's mystical teaching is that all creatures have their true being in the Word. As a result, to know themselves they have to go to the Word, the Word is their destiny. The Word is the Son of God whom he called an „exemplar', the one who transcends all sensible image, sign and concept. This theory is called exemplarism (Merton 2008:200).

The Word of God is the medium of creation. All things are created through the Word of God and human beings are the closest creatures capable of knowing God and can hear God's Word and live by it. According to Eckhart, the divine Word is essentially Trinitarian and human beings can also participate in the Trinitarian life and experience (Davies 1991:4). Human beings can experience God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, not as three distinct persons but one God.

Secondly, Eckhart taught that God creates and sustains all beings. Nothing exists outside God, although creation remains distinct from God's being. Human beings are endowed with grace which transcends nature. He identified this grace with the Son of God who has been incarnated in the human soul. Eckhart argued that „Grace comes from God alone for the same reason that existence itself does' (Eckhart 1986:220). Grace is God's gift to the human soul for existence and sustenance. The union with the Son of God is the union with God. When human beings have been stripped of anything that is not God and the Son, they are united with God in the Son through the Holy Spirit. He termed this doctrine Immediacy or the “Spark of the soul” (Merton 2008:200).

Thirdly, he taught that the world is born in the soul; therefore the soul has to return to God by stripping itself of anything that is not God. „Eckhart insists that perfect union with God is attained only on the level of the “noble” man, the interior man who is one with God above all works and virtues' (2008:201). This is not to disregard the importance of good works and virtues but he insisted on the abandonment of oneself to God. Total surrender and obedience to God are very important for Eckhart and he called this “the return to God”.

Davies notes that for Eckhart the mind is very important in the Christian mystical life. Davies further argues that Eckhart's central position is that „it is necessary to strip away all knowledge of created things in order to release that part of the mind (which he calls the

„spark’) which is capable of knowing God as God. (Davies 1991:5). Eckhart himself argued that: „With the power of intellect the soul works in nonbeing and so follows God who works in nonbeing’ (Eckhart: 1986:28). Our intellect helps us to work like God. For Eckhart, God and the soul are grounded in the centre of the human soul and it is this spark that helps a person to realize union with God. For the mind to know God it has to be naked, empty and detached of any other knowledge or concepts.

McGinn further notes that in one of his latest sermons Eckhart summarized his preaching under four themes: first, detachment, that one should be free of all things; secondly, that one should be reformed into the goodness of God; thirdly, that one should reflect a noble life which is God’s gift into the human soul; and fourthly, that God be understood as the pure divine nature which is beyond description by words because „God is a word, a word unspoken’ (McGinn 2001:11). Eckhart emphasised that one of the essential aspects of theological doctrine is prayer „that in prayer the contemplating soul can be one with God, as the Son and his Father are one, beyond perception of difference’ (Meister Eckhart 1981:23). Prayer thus is an important vehicle for the soul in attaining union with God. However, unlike the three known paths of union with God namely, purgation, illumination and union, Eckhart emphasised a four-fold path:

1. *Via positiva, the path that explains the being of God and God’s creation. He argues that: ‘Every creature is a word of God’ (Downey 1993:124). God reveals God’s being through creation.*
2. *Via negativa, where union with God is by letting go and letting be by letting God to be God. He says: ‘There, where clinging ends is where God begins to be’ (:124). God is experienced by letting go of everything else.*
3. *Via creativa, which he describes as birthing. He argues that: ‘What does God do all day long? God gives birth’ (:124). Our union with God is our birth. All creation is God’s gift.*
4. *Via transformativa, the experiencing of God’s love that re-creates.*

2.2.1.2 Conclusions

From the preceding description of Eckhart's doctrine we can conclude that Eckhart's contribution towards the understanding of Christian mysticism is his views that mysticism is meant for all believers and sinners and that it is about a deeper and authentic inner union with God. It has been noted that Eckhart inspired many women mystics in the late medieval era by his preaching and teaching of mystical piety (McGinn 2001:10).

Resonating with McGinn, we therefore conclude that according to Eckhart union with God is the whole purpose of all existence: „Every desire and its fulfilment is to be united to God' (McGinn 2001:147), and everything he taught was about union. In addition, for Eckhart there are two aspects to union: „The pre-existing essential union that is God's abiding distinction from all things as their true reality; and the union to be achieved by our becoming “aware” through “unknowing” of that presence by the process of detaching, birthing, and breaking-through' (:147). The whole of creation is called to union with God and that awareness is vital, especially for human beings. Eckhart's mysticism is grounded in the theology of Creation and Incarnation, the theology of the Cross, the theology of the Resurrection and the theology of the Holy Spirit and the theology of transformation (Downey 1993:124-5).

2.2.2 St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Catherine was born a twin in 1347 (her twin sister did not survive) in Siena. She was the twenty-third born in the family of twenty-five. Her father, Giacomo Benincasa, was successfully running a cloth- dyeing business. From an early age, Catherine had shown signs of deep piety and around the age of seven, she received her first vision of Jesus. She then took a vow of virginity for the rest of her life. Her parents were not interested in her spiritual aspirations but wanted her to get married (Harpur 2005:134).

When she was about eighteen years old, she became a Dominican Tertiary (Mantellate), a group of third order Dominican laywomen in Siena. She was a member of this order bound by simple vows and living outside the convent. She lived a life of silence and solitude in her room and devoted herself to prayer and fasting. She practiced severe asceticism and was admired for her holiness. In her early life she experienced visions, ecstasies, even a mystical espousal to Christ and felt a call to serve others (Healey 1990:189). As Woods states it,

„After experiencing a vision in which Christ espoused himself to her and commissioned her to carry his love to the whole world, she emerged from her seclusion and began to tend the poor and wretched of Siena’ (Woods 1998:94). She was therefore a spiritual guide, reformer and visionary (:94).

She is considered one of the most gifted and extraordinary women of any time. „She wrote, preached, prayed and pushed herself beyond the limits of even her formidable energies’ (Woods 1998:96). She did not know how to read and write for most of her life, but her literature productivity is enormous by any standards (:97). There are 382 letters attributed to her, the *Book of Divine Providence*, commonly known as *The Dialogue*, and 26 prayers (:97).

She died in 1380 and was canonized in 1461 and later made a Doctor of the Church, one of the first and few women to be admitted to that position. „...in 1939, Pope Pius XII declared her with St. Francis of Assisi co-patron of Italy. In 1970, she and St. Teresa of Avila, whose life and achievements so greatly resembled hers, were declared the first women Doctors of the Church by Pope Paul VI’ (:96). Thérèse of Lisieux was also declared the doctor of the church in 1997 (Frohlich 2003:11).

2.2.2.1 Catherine’s love for God, the church and others

Catherine had a tremendous love and concern for the Church and she showed much involvement in the Church’s affairs. She understood the Church as the kingdom of God on earth. Further, she worked for peace for Florence with pope, Gregory XI. She travelled to Avignon to plead with the pope and to persuade him to return to Rome. She also worked hard for the unity of the Church by writing many letters urging bishops and monarchs to obey and unite with Pope Urban VI (King 2001:84).

For her the Eucharist was the acme of God’s love to human soul, „because in communion the soul seems more sweetly bound to God and better knows his truth. For then the soul is in God and God in the soul, just as the fish is in the sea and the sea in the fish’.⁷ In the Eucharist the human soul and God’s love are indivisible. She also had a profound dedication to the sick and the poor of Siena; she was called, „Our Holy Mother’. She believed that „there is no perfect virtue-none that bears fruit-unless it is exercised by means of our neighbour’ (King 2001:84). For her, love of God and neighbour are coterminous. From her dialogue with God, she

⁷ Catherine of Siena: *The Dialogue*, Translation and introduction by Suzanne Noffke, New York, Paulist Press, 1980. *The Dialogue*, 2, 2, 27.

instructed, „if you do not love me you do not love your neighbours, nor will you help those you do not love’.⁸

Woods summaries her very well that: „Catherine’s life and teaching focuses on the overwhelming immensity of God’s love for all creation. The redeeming passion and death of Jesus, the Incarnate truth, the Bridge between God and humanity and the ardent love of the soul; and the response of self-transcending love by God’s friends, expressed in the service of truth and justice, particularly towards the poor and suffering’ (Woods 1998:97). In the light of the above, we can conclude that Catherine’s spirituality and her mystical life were based on love of God, the church and love of neighbour.

Egan summarises well her contribution towards the understanding of Christian mysticism that: „Hers is a mystical contemplation in action, a mysticism that expressed and fulfilled itself sacramental in social and political activity’ (Egan 1991:356). For Catherine, Christian mysticism is not only about union with God but also about daily charitable activities towards one’s neighbour. She taught that Christian mysticism is about knowing God as the First Truth whose essence is love. God loves the creation and wants us to share this love for all eternity. This love is manifested in Christ by taking our human nature through the incarnation (:355). She teaches that Christ is married to the entire human race. We may therefore conclude that her mysticism is not only concerned about individual union with God but also interested in the salvation for all (:355).

In this era both Meister Eckhart and Catherine of Siena lead us to conclude that the love of God is central to humanity. The person is made to love and seek nothing other than union with God. The person is purified in the love of God and is fulfilled when conforms to God’s will. For them everything comes from God through the Son. For both, the theology of creation and incarnation as well as the theology of transformation is vital in the understanding of Christian mysticism.

2.3 The Early Modern period

The early modern period is characterised by the contributions of two mystics: Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. What follows is a brief account of their backgrounds and contributions with regards to mysticism.

⁸ *The Dialogue*, 6, 2, 33.

2.3.1 St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Teresa de Ahumada was born on 28 March 1515 in the city of Avila, in Spain. She was the daughter of Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda and Beatriz de Ahumada. She was the fifth child in a family of twelve, three girls and nine boys. Two of the offspring were from her father's first wife who died (Teresa of Avila 2003:9).

Teresa came from a mixed Jewish and Christian background. She lost her mother while she was still young. At about the age of twenty-one she entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation at Avila. Her father did not approve of this decision. There she took the name of Teresa of Jesus. Soon after entering the convent she fell seriously ill and for many years she remained an invalid. „It was during this time that she developed a great love of mental prayer' (King 2001:149). She probably got her inspiration from reading Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. After her recovery from her illness she stopped praying and for about twenty years she struggled with finding a balance between her relationship to the world and God. Eventually, she experienced a dramatic conversion which brought her back to an intense journey of prayer and active religious reform (:149).

Teresa had no theological training but she astonishingly had natural administrative and literary skills. Her contribution to spiritual literature is highly appreciated. Her works include her *Life*, *The Way of Perfection*, the *Foundations*, *The Interior Castle* and many poems and letters (King 2001: 150-151).⁹ She died in 1582. In 1622 was canonized a saint by Pope Gregory XV (Teresa of Avila 1991:42). In 1970 she was pronounced a doctor of the church by Pope Paul VI (Woods 1998:96).

2.3.1.1 Prayer and Jesus Christ

For Teresa, daily activities and prayer life were inseparable. Indeed she maintained in her life an appreciable unity between the two dimensions (Teresa of Avila 1991:54). Her life was orientated towards God, her daily activities and prayers were meant to respond to God's love. Prayer for her was about Christ and nothing else. „She was quite clear that the one praying is

⁹ It is estimated that she wrote at least fifteen thousand letters, some even think that she wrote up to twenty-five thousand. Only 450 of these letters have survived. Teresa of Avila, edited by Kieran Kavanaugh. *The way of prayer*. New York: New City Press. 2003, 14.

always with Jesus Christ' (:58). If Christ is not in your prayer it is not a prayer at all. She contended that the soul is always in Christ's company.

Teresa considered Christ as a personal friend and mental prayer as an intimate sharing between friends. We receive graces and blessings through Christ and by contemplation we become nearer and present to Christ who is near and present to us (Healey 1990:265). For her prayer was paramount. She argued that prayer is the channel of union with God which the devil cannot break. She noted: „And I would dare say that if the prayer is truly union with God the devil cannot even enter or do any damage'.¹⁰

She argued that the way of prayer is the safest and the surest road to union with God. Both mental and vocal prayers are vital. She emphasized that, although the devil might try to frighten us, we should not fear because there is no danger in the way of prayer. She further argued that the virtue of humility is important and necessary in helping us to stay in this path. „It will be dangerous for you if you do not possess humility and the other virtues, but God forbid that the way of prayer should be a way of danger' (Teresa of Avila 1964:153). There should not be any fear in prayer because it is safe but always requires humility.

2.3.1.2 Images of mystical union with God

Teresa used helpful images to illustrate the experience of mystical union with God such as the Garden and the Castle. In the image of a garden she compares the four stages of mystical prayer to four ways in which a garden may be watered, in which God takes greater part while the human part decreases. In the first stage the water is drawn from a well by hand; this costs greater labour. This process describes beginners in prayer. In the second stage the water is drawn by a waterwheel and windlass and the work becomes less as the water becomes more: here the soul is conceived as advancing in mystical experiences. The third stage is by a river or stream where the watering is much easier and at this stage the soul does not only enjoy contemplation but also the active life of charitable works. The fourth is by heavy rain and it is the best of all; there is no human effort involved at this stage the soul enjoys divine union (Harpur 2005:156-157).¹¹

¹⁰ The Interior Castle, Translation by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, New York, Paulist Press, 1979. *Interior Castle*, V. 1.4,87.

¹¹ The collected works of St. Teresa of Avila, vol.1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Washington, DC, ICS Publications, 1987. *The Book of Her Life*, 11.7,113.

The *Interior Castle* illustrates the journey in prayer based on Teresa's inner experience which unfolds as an inward movement through rooms, leading to the centre – the abode of the Holy Trinity. Akin to the process of watering where the garden became more and more passive as the process progresses so it is in the spiritual growth of prayer life. When the person progresses in receiving God's gift and getting closer to union of love becomes more and more passive (Teresa of Avila 2003:20 -21).

Down the ages, many men and women have been inspired by Teresa's ardent mysticism. One of them was her younger contemporary, St. John of the Cross, whose works were highly characterized by a perfect fusion of intellectual, poetic and mystical insights to the extent that he was called „the mystic's mystic' (King 2001:153). A brief account of St. John of the Cross is given below.

2.3.2 St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)

John of the Cross (Juan de Yepes) was born in 1542 from a poor family near Avila in Spain. From his youth it was noticed that he was exceptionally gifted both intellectually and spiritually. He studied at a Jesuit school through the help of a devoted patron. He entered the Carmelite order where he became known as John of the Cross. He was ordained a priest when he was twenty-five years old, in 1567. That same year he met with the fifty-two year old Teresa of Avila and they became friends and co-workers. Through Teresa's influence he joined the Carmelite reform. Because of the conflict which existed between the unreformed and reformed parts of his order, John was imprisoned, interrogated and flogged by the unreformed party which was opposed to stricter and more ascetic observances of the rule. His incarceration lasted for eight months in Toledo. But his imprisonment served as the beginning of his mystical life: though he was deprived of everything he could think of, he had only God with him which was enough for him, for all he wanted was God. „He began to write poems on scraps of paper, which are now considered some of the greatest lyrical poetry in the Spanish language' (King 2001:154).

He eventually managed to escape from the prison after which he worked as a spiritual director in Andalusia most of the time and he continued to write. His writings include commentaries on his mystical poems explaining the way to union with God. „His three most famous poems are *The Spiritual Canticle*, *En una noche oscura* (The *Dark Night* poem) and *The living Flame of Love*. His books *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the*

Soul are commentaries on the poem *The Dark Night*; the other commentaries have the same titles as the poems' (:154).

2.3.2.1 The journey of a soul to union with God

John argued that the journey of a soul to divine union is made in the darkness. He described the whole process as the dark night and gave three reasons for calling it a night. The first reason is that the soul has to detach itself from the worldly possession, „this denial and privation is like a night for all their senses'.¹² The second reason is about the means the soul uses in order to reach union with God. He argued that the soul takes the road of faith to union with God which the intellect considers as a dark night. The third reason uses God as a frame of reference. God is dark night to the soul in the sense that the soul does not know God. However this is the way of the soul in order to reach union with God. „Night' for John means the darkness and emptiness of the senses.¹³

John emphasized that God cannot be apprehended only by intellect or memory: The soul must empty itself of all that is not God in order to go to God'.¹⁴ This means our intellect and memory should completely empty themselves of any ideas or any supernatural forms of God: they have to be in „darkness' in order to attain union with God.

John of the Cross' mystical approach and understanding is that, although God transcends the human soul God can still be known and loved in a most intimate union by the human soul. In fact, for John, this is the purpose of the Christian life, to seek mystical union with God. King notes that according to him „all Christians are called to ascend the mount where God lives' (King 2001:156).

Therefore, we can conclude that John's mysticism follows greatly the apophatic tradition (*via negativa*) where the soul detaches itself from the things it knows, until it knows only that which is dark, which is God. King notes that John uses the image of the „dark night' to illustrate the journey of detachment and purgation of the senses and the spirit until the soul is transformed into complete union with God (King 2001:155).

¹² John of the Cross: Selected writings, edited with an introduction by Kieran Kavanaugh, New York, Paulist Press. 1987. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I.2.1,63.

¹³ *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I.3.1, 64.

¹⁴ The collected works of St. John of the Cross, Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Washington, DC, 1991. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, III. 7. 2, 279.

2.3.3 Summary

For the above mystics the love of God and union with God is central. Teresa and John use the images in describing union with God. Teresa uses the images of garden and castle, while John uses the images of the dark night and also the ascent of the mountain. However, they show us the stages of the soul's movement towards God. Teresa and John both speak of the stages of the mystical life: purgative which is the initial state, illuminative which is the stage of receiving light from God and finally the unitive stage, in which the soul is in complete union with God. For both, when the person is in the initial stages of his/her journey toward union he/she is active but in the later stages one becomes less active and God becomes more active.

Both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross have been a source of inspiration to many through their writings on mental prayer and mystical life. Moreover their great influence has produced what is now called “mystical theology” in Spain, Portugal and France. It would be correct, therefore, to conclude that these Spanish mystics exercised a deep influence on the spiritual life of Western Christianity and also in the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the modern period (King 2001:156-157).

2.4 The Twentieth Century

This section discusses the life experiences and works of Evelyn Underhill and Thomas Merton with a view to defining the meaning of Christian mysticism in the contemporary era.

2.4.1 Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)

2.4.1.1 Background

Evelyn Underhill was born in Wolverhampton, England in 1875. She was the only child of Arthur Underhill, a barrister and Alice Lucy Ironmonger. She was baptised an Anglican but her family had no interest in religion. She went to a private school and later spent one year in the Ladies Department of King's College, London where she studied history, languages, botany and art. In 1907, she married Hubert Stuart Moore (Rakoczy 2006: 99).

She is described as a mystical poet, author and scholar. Her deep involvement with mystical experience led her to write the magisterial *Mysticism* in 1911 that had a major impact and influence on contemporary discussions on mysticism. Some of her major works include *The*

Mystic Way (1913) and *Worship* (1936) (King 2001: 225). She is further described as a unique, significant mystic, a married woman, writer and spiritual director committed to pacifism, with her mystical approaches reflected both in theological and psychological aspects (Rakoczy 2006:99). In addition, she demonstrated a comprehensible relationship between mysticism and social commitment.

Although she was Anglican, she had very strong attraction to Roman Catholic piety. (King 2001:225). She became a powerful religious counsellor, retreat leader involved in giving lectures at conferences and seminars and even doing journalistic works (:226). „Of a deeply mystical temperament herself, she is above all remembered for her pioneering work in the scholarship of mysticism, and for her classification of mystical experience, based on mystics drawn from the Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Indian traditions’ (:226).

2.4.1.2 Underhill’s interpretation of mysticism

Underhill notes that: „the mystic is “in love with the absolute” not in any idle or sentimental manner but in that vital sense which presses at all costs and through all dangers towards union with the object beloved’ (Underhill 1955:72). For her mysticism is an expression of a loving heart, a heart which has experienced the love of God and a heart that wants to love God for who God is and remain united with God. For her, mysticism is about all the unconditional love of God, the love that puts God first above everything else, that surpasses all and which is given to God without any reservations or fears. Love is the basis of all aspects of life; all actions, all relations as well as an attitude towards nature, love leads people to the communion with God (Underhill 2003:124).

Underhill emphasized that mystics have a personal encounter with God and are constantly aware of the presence of God in their lives. Therefore what is of the utmost importance is to be in union with God other than just to talk about God (Underhill 1955:72). According to her many people pass through this experience without being aware of and realizing it, hence she noted: „Few people pass through life without knowing what it is to be at least touched by this mystical feeling’ (:73). But those who consciously engage in this experience are led to conversion. One can conclude that this experience is lived and understood by those who go through it and is a path known to those who walk it. It may sound appealing to those who have not experienced it, or may remain something to be studied by others. Nonetheless mysticism is a normal human experience. She further pointed out: „The attempt which has

sometimes been made to identify mysticism with such forms and figures- with visions, voices, “supernatural favours” and other abnormal phenomena- is clearly wrong’ (:79). She further stated: „All mystics, says Saint-Martin, speak the same language, for they come from the same country’ (:80). All mystics speak the language of being in union with God or the Absolute. Mystics express in their lives the power of God working in them; they may not understand what they experience because it is a gift of God which they enjoy and struggle with at the same time.

2.4.2 Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

2.4.2.1 Background

Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk, is arguably the best-known modern mystic. He studied at Columbia University, New York. Subsequent to reading Gilson’s *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, he converted to Catholicism. After failing to join the Franciscan order he entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, a monastery of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, which is also known as the Trappists. Some of his works include *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Seeds of Contemplation* which was about contemplative prayer, *Waters of Siloe*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Gandhi on Non-violence*, *No man is an Island*, *the Way of Chuang Tzu* and *Witness to freedom: Letters in times of crisis*. He is considered one of the most influential contemporary spiritual writers. Many were inspired by his deep and profound writings on contemplation. He espoused the tradition of Catholic mystical theology while at same time being influenced by Eastern mysticism, especially Zen Buddhism. He died in an accident in Bangkok, Thailand, while attending a monastic renewal conference (King 2001:229-230, Rakoczy 2006:118).

2.4.2.2 Contemplative prayer

Merton emphasized the importance of contemplation. He argued that in contemplation we empty ourselves in order to be filled with God’s love. He writes: „The real point of the contemplative life has always been a deepening of faith and of the personal dimensions of liberty and apprehension to the point where our direct union with God is realized and “experienced” (Merton 1967:160). For Merton, contemplation is the way of deepening the union between God and a person. This experience can be called faith, contemplative illumination or mystical union (:161).

Merton believed that contemplative prayer is transformative. It turns a person's perspective into the likeness of God's. God's presence is realised in oneself as well as in others (Rakoczy 2006:122).

Merton also believed that Christian contemplation is the greatest form of prayer. He argued that action and contemplation do not oppose each other; inversely they are aspects of the same love of God (King 2001:230). Contemplation and action are one because one acts from within and gives what one has. Our actions come from the richness of our hearts. A heart that does not know how to contemplate God is poor and so are its manifest actions. He argued that „He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others' (Merton 1967:164). The value of our good works comes from the richness of our spiritual life.

2.4.2.3 Social justice and other world religions

Merton has also written extensively on issue that fall within the purview of social justice. He strongly advocated peace rather than war. For him, standing for peace is standing for truth. Attaining and maintaining peace is the expression of the truth from within because peace is not something from outside. Merton believed in, and supported, non-violent approaches as the authentic expressions of peace from one's heart. He prayed for peace: „Help us to use our science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction...grant light, grant strength and patience to all who work for peace... and bless our earnest will to help all races and people to travel, in friendship with us, along the road to justice, liberty, and lasting peace found; in your will, O God, is our peace' (Merton 2000:138-139). He also echoed President Kennedy's words that: „If we do not end war, war is going to end us' (Merton 1967:104). Merton strongly believed that war could be circumvented by employing peaceful means, by the way of love and peace rather than by violence and God alone can grant us true peace. He argued that „there is no charity without justice' (Merton 1963:114), and further said: „Christian charity is no longer real unless it is accompanied by a concern with social justice (:117). For him true love is genuine concern for the well being of others.

In addition, Merton had a remarkable respect for other world religions such as Zen Buddhism. He referred to Zen's awareness about God's reality as „purely spiritual' (Merton 1997:3). He noted that: „Zen does not deny the existence of a Supreme Being either. It

neither affirms nor denies; it simply is. One might say that Zen is the ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its “suchness” and “thusness” (:2-3). Merton appreciated Zen’s spirituality because it does not emphasise withdrawal and denial of certain realities of life but the integration of the realities of life. Merton noted that: „Zen insight is not our awareness, but Being’s awareness of itself in us’ (:7). From the Christian perspective the challenge of true spirituality should be the awareness of God’s presence as God in our lives rather than our own presentation of God.

His contribution to the understanding of Christian mysticism is that Christian mysticism is not only about contemplative life which is a way of emptying oneself in order to be filled with God and be in union with God but also about the awareness of the presence of God in social issues (Egan 1991:574). Mysticism is about becoming one’s true self which is transcendental and rooted only in God’s love and freedom(:575). He teaches the mysticism of contemplation and action. He said: „Action is not looked at in opposition to contemplation, but as an expression of charity and as a necessary consequence of union with God by baptism’ (Merton 1963: viii). Action and contemplation are one and they signify the person’s unity with God. He also taught that mysticism and theology are inseparable. In his words:

By “mysticism” we can mean the personal experience of what is revealed to all and realized in all in the mystery of Christ. And by “theology” we mean the common revelation of the mystery which is to be lived by all. The two belong together. There is no theology without mysticism and there is on mysticism without theology.... Mysticism and theology have one and the same end – they culminate in *theosis* or the fullness of the divine life in the souls of the faithful (Merton 2008: xxvi).

We may conclude that for Merton, mysticism is an individual experience of Christ whose revelation is experienced by all, whereas theology is about the community experience of Christ who is for all. Therefore, mysticism helps theology to bring about the meaning and the awareness of God’s presence in our lives and theology helps us to understand mysticism as more than just individual experience and they both lead us to union with God.

2.4.3 Summary

In this era we learn that Christian mysticism is about the profound relationship of love between a person and God in the incarnated Christ. Underhill emphasised the love of God. For Merton, action and contemplation are important components of mystical prayer. Therefore, Christian mysticism is not about renouncing the world, but it is about living in Christ who embraces the world. It is about the deep relationship of the human being with the

incarnate Christ who is an expression of God's love which is realized in contemplation and expressed to the world and others in action. They both emphasised the contemplative and active prayer life which they both underscored in their lives as also imperative to trying to understand the meaning of Christian mysticism.

2.4.4 Conclusion

To conclude, therefore, we can say mysticism is more about the experience of God than what is being said or described about God. Authentic mysticism is about the communion of the person with the transcendent which is the source of all being, who is God in the Christian perspective and understanding. This unique experience takes the whole human person into union with God who transcends all being. It happens beyond any human efforts or attempts. It is beyond human senses and capacities, even though senses, emotions and intellect are involved but they do not have any control over such experiences (Maloney 1974:9).

Considering the experiences and writings of the male and female mystics we have discussed above, we can therefore conclude that there is no definitive definition of Christian mysticism, but rather there are many, probably as many as the mystics themselves. This does not mean that anything and everything can be called mystical experience, but rather that mysticism is a personal experience of union with God which leads to greater love of one's neighbour. We can also conclude that both men and women in the Christian spiritual tradition have been called to mystical union.

Chapter three

The teaching of the Catholic Church on the social issue of gender

3.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses and analyses the social teaching of the Catholic Church on the issue of gender. The contributions of both men and women in the church will be analysed and evaluated. This is achieved through the use of some of the statements of the Church, including papal encyclical letters and other Church documents such as those from the Second Vatican Council. The chapter is neither exhaustive nor a complete study of the Church's pronouncements on this issue. On the contrary, it is a selective study, which hopefully is indicative of the Church's basic teaching on gender. This chapter analyses some of the attitudes towards the issue of gender in the Catholic Church from pre-Vatican II times to the present.

3.1 Pre-Vatican II statements

The history of the disparagement of women in the Church is both of long duration and well documented. Many people who have made statements that have belittled women, ridiculed them, discriminated and marginalized them have at times been part of the hierarchy of the Church, speaking sometimes even as spokespersons of the institutional Church. Among these we can single out St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) whose perspectives on gender have been very influential in Church teaching up to the present day.

According to St Augustine, the dignity of women and their image can only be conceived in relation to their husbands or fathers. On her own a woman does not portray God's image! It is only when she is with her husband that the image of God is realized in her.¹⁵ In essence man alone is the image of God. For he wrote:

I believe, as what I said when I was dealing with the nature of the human mind, namely that the woman with her husband is the image of God in such a way that the

¹⁵ Benedict Groeschel does not believe that St Augustine was hostile towards and downgraded women. Instead he argues that St Augustine loved and respected women, for example St Augustine loved and praised his mother. He also refers us to other writers who have been affirmative of St. Augustine's point of view towards women as images of God, such as Kari Elisabeth Børresen who stated, that St Augustine was the first one to confront 1 Cor. 11:7 „by affirming that women are created in God's image' (Groeschel 1995:169). He also remarks that: „What is very important to keep in mind is that in St Augustine's time, as in many other times, women were often seen as the servants of men's sexual needs' (:8).

whole of that substance is one image, but when she is assigned her function of being an assistant, which is her concern alone, she is not the image of God; whereas in what concerns the man alone he is the image of God as fully and completely as when woman is joined to him in one whole.¹⁶

St Augustine unequivocally argued that only men are exclusively true images of God. Women are images of God only when they are joined to their husbands, while men remain images of God whether joined to their wives or not. One wonders how Augustine justified that assumption. It seems that Augustine was thinking only about married women, but what about unmarried women? Whose image are they made in, and what if they remained unmarried? It implies that they will never be fully in God's image. Furthermore, in this line of thought women are presented only as men's assistants. This also raises the question, is it really proper to consider women as nothing other than men's assistants? The Bible says; „God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27). So according to St Augustine, God created an incomplete human being, suggesting an unfair God perhaps? As has already mentioned, this assertion was not based on the Word of God but his (St Augustine) own interpretation of what it means to be a male vis a vis a woman.

In addition, St. Thomas Aquinas was convinced that women are inferior to men. Although he affirmed that they were both endowed with reason and are both created in God's likeness, still he did not consider men and women as equals and as true images of God because for him „it was absolutely necessary to make woman, for the reason Scripture mentions, as a help for man; not indeed to help him in any other work, as some have maintained, because where most work is concerned man can get help more conveniently from another man than from a woman; but to help him in the work of procreation'.¹⁷ In other words men are good for each other in everything; they need women only for procreation. This supposition is not supported by scripture as Genesis 2:18 states „The Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him”. No where does this scripture indicate that a man only needs a woman in as far as child bearing is concerned. Instead it demonstrates that although a man can achieve alone, because he is complete, however with a woman (who is also

¹⁶ Saint Augustine: The Trinity, introduction, translation, and notes by Edmund Hill, Editor John E. Rotelle, Brooklyn, New York. New City Press, 1991. *The Trinity*, XII.3.10, 328.

¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, vol 13 Man made to God's image (Ia. 90-102). Latin text. English translation, Introduction, Notes, Appendices & Glossary by Edmund Hill. New York, Blackfriars, 1964. Summa Theologiae, Ia. 92,1, 35&37.

complete) the conquest can be tremendous. This brings to the fore the need for complementarity between the two.

In addition, St Thomas considered women as deformed men: „woman is defective and misbegotten’. He further wrote: „But man is yet further ordered to a still nobler vital action, and that is intellectual operation’.¹⁸ He maintained that man is more important because he can think and give life while woman is passive and dependent on man. He wrote: „Among perfect animals the active power of generation belongs to the male sex and the passive power to the female’.¹⁹ This demonstrates the ideology of male superiority that was mentioned in Chapter One. This thinking presuppose that a man is superior (perfect) while a woman is inferior (passive) and depends on the man. „Man represents in himself perfection, while woman stands for the imperfect’ (Meyer 1946:207).

In view of the above, it should not appear strange that St. Thomas would consider men almost as gods while he could not envisage women as true images of God. The most important question then is, how much of this thinking still persist in the Catholic Church where gender is concerned? Taking a balcony look at leadership in the Catholic Church, which excludes women, could it be suggested that St Thomas views on women and those of St Augustine influenced and continue to influence the attitudes of men towards women?

Hans Meyer argues that these erroneous views of St. Thomas regarding women came about as the result of the absence of a woman figure in his early life, since he entered the monastery at age of five. Therefore, both his monastic life and the mentality of his times in which women were considered to have no rights and their position considered low compared to men’s had a marked influence on his thinking about women (Meyer 1946:209). The assertion that „truth lies in the eyes of the beholder’ suggests that sometimes human beings portray the „truth’ on the basis of their presuppositions which then become filters of reality. So one can surmise that by St Thomas lacking adequate female interaction, his views came from the place of lack of experience of the value of a woman as he had no other information to negate his views. In other words, his early formation and adulthood were characterised by males to the total exclusion of females in his life.

¹⁸ *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Part 1. QQ.LXXV.-CII (4) Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London, Burns Oates & Washbourne LTD, 1922. *Question XCII*. The production of the woman. Q.92.Art.1,275.

¹⁹ *Ibid*,275.

Jean Gerson (1429), who was theologian and canonist, stated that, „All women`s teaching... is to be held suspect unless it has been diligently examined, and much more fully than men`s. Women are more easily seduced and are determined seducers and it is not proved that they are witnesses of divine grace` (Bynum 1984:135-6). If women`s teaching had to undergo more assiduous examination than men`s this would imply that men`s teaching was accepted without such examination while women`s was doubted or completely discarded.

This brings us to the issue of discrimination which means denial of equitable treatment and/or opportunities to individuals or groups. The one form of discrimination is systemic in nature, where people perceive that the system treats them unfairly because of their difference. The other form is attitudinal in nature, where people feel that people in the system treat them unfairly because of their difference. When looking at Gerson`s views of women`s teaching being held with suspicion, this puts to the fore, attitudinal discrimination as well as systemic discrimination which means, women started from a point of inequality. Sheldrake asks, was it because women were already stereotyped and given inferior education compared to men? As a result of such views women were lacking in theological formation because the all-male clergy monopolised centres of theological training (Sheldrake 1991:129). So it goes without saying that by being denied educational opportunities, this placed women in a situation of complete disadvantage.

Regarding Gerson`s assertion that women are easily seduced and they are resolute seducers without offering evidence of this clearly indicates prejudice against women. This then lends itself to a parochial and questionable argument. The other dimension to be questioned is his unproven inference that men are immune to seduction, either as perpetrators or victims of it. The same questions can be asked as to how he reached the conclusion that men are more true witnesses of divine grace than women. As already mentioned, this demonstrates prejudice towards women, which is judgement or prejudgment. Further, prejudice is hostile, irrational beliefs, opinions and feelings towards groups on the basis of stereotypical generalizations about group characteristics. In many instances prejudice leads to unfair discrimination.

There a myriad of reasons why women are discriminated against. Lancaster provides a possible reason. He observes that for the past 2000 years women have been marginalised in the Christian Church. They have been absent in decision making bodies and have been without any real authority. They have been considered a threat and a bother. „Viewed as exercising profoundly threatening, transgressive or disturbing roles, such women were seen

as the dangerous “other”; they need to be contained, marginalised, or punished’ (Lancaster 2004:37). This view projects men as poor victims who are in the danger of being overthrown by women. Neither does this assertion favour men nor women as it does them both disservice, women bearing the bigger brunt of it as it translated into their exclusion from the decision-making bodies.

Elizabeth Johnson presents the following statistics of canonised saints in the Catholic Church. She states:

The saints honoured in the Church to date have been predominantly male; on the present Liturgicacalendar, 73 percent of the saints celebrated are man, 27 percent women, if one counts Mary once; of the saints canonized in this century to the end of Paul VI’s pontificate, 79 percent have been clergy, 21 percent lay, of whom an even smaller percentage are women (Johnson 1991:163).

Considering that the decision to canonise an individual is done by an all-male clergy, is it surprising then that the majority (79%) of those canonized are the clergy? Not only do the all-male clergy unilaterally make decisions about those to be canonized but they are also the ones involved in the process of canonization itself. As a result, these numbers become a cause of suspicion on the part of women because there is obvious gender discrimination.

Against the backdrop of the male mystics discussed above such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Gerson, Tauler and Rolle (see chapter one) concerning the issues of gender and the role of women in the Church in the pre-Vatican II era, we could conclude that decisions in the church were based on gender, which disadvantaged women, while men were afforded unearned privileges which were not even questioned. Therefore, this period of many centuries was characterised by appreciable evidence of sexism towards women in the life of the Catholic Church.

Pope Pius XII, addressing the Catholic women’s leagues in Rome in September 11, 1947 gives a somewhat promising view of women. He encouraged the education of women. He wrote:

Witnesses of such a grave crisis, we cannot be content with lamenting it or forming sterile wishes. What must be done is to unite and to direct the living zeal of all toward the saving of the education of women and of the Christian family. That is the object of your congress here in Rome, at the very center of Christendom.²⁰

²⁰ Allocation of Pope Pius XII to the congress of the International Catholic women’s leagues, Rome, Italy, September 11, 1947. www.papalencyclicals.net. Accessed 12 May 2011.

The Pope also seemed to realise that women too have a huge responsibility in socio-political life which they have full God-given rights to exercise, although he appeared to emphasise more their domestic responsibility as their major contribution. He further wrote:

Your own role is, in general, to work toward making woman always more conscious of her sacred rights, of her duties, and of her power to help mould public opinion, through her daily contacts, and to influence legislation and administration by the proper use of her prerogatives as Citizen. Such is your common role. It does not mean that you are all to have political careers as members of public assemblies. Most of you must continue to give the greater part of your time and of your loving attention to the care of your homes and families. We must not forget that the making of a home in which all feel at ease and happy, and the bringing up of children are very special contributions to the common welfare. So we rejoice in the fact, which you yourselves rightly recorded, that among rural families, which are still such a large part of society, woman's work in the home still goes hand in hand with her contribution to the social and national economy.²¹

The pope clearly saw the importance of education for women so they could contribute to the social and national economy. Interestingly, he did not indicate how women contribute to the life of the Church.

3.2. Vatican II

In his encyclical letter Peace on Earth (*Pacem in Terris*) of 1963 John XXIII wrote:

...the participation of women in public affairs is obvious to all. It is happening more quickly, perhaps, in countries with a Christian tradition, more slowly yet on a widespread scale elsewhere. Becoming ever more conscious of their dignity as human beings, women will not tolerate being treated as goods and chattels. Instead they demand to exercise the rights and duties belonging to a human being, both in the home and in civic life (*Pacem in Terris* # 41).

The Pope admits that women are taking part in public life and are becoming more aware of their human dignity. The challenge, however, is how much is their participation in the Church being recognised and enabled? Is it in a liberal manner or in a controlled sense? These are questions that come to mind when analysing women's experiences in the Church. Furthermore, Pope John XXIII wrote: „[Human beings] have a perfect right to choose the state of life which they prefer. They can therefore please themselves whether to found a family- in which case the man and the woman share equal rights and duties- or they can aspire to the priesthood or the religious life' (*Pacem in Terris* #15).

²¹ Allocution of Pope Pius XII to the congress of the International Catholic women's leagues, Rome, Italy, September 11, 1947. www.papalencyclicals.net. Accessed 12 May 2011.

The above statement suggests that men and women are equal therefore have the freedom to choose either founding a family or priesthood or religious life. This statement has serious problems as women are denied to choose priesthood. So we can surmise that this choice is only available to men. In the Catholic Church it is crystal clear that men have more rights and privileges than women as they can ascend into priesthood and therefore the leadership of the Church. Subsequently, the prevailing attitude in the Church permeates all aspects besides priesthood that men have more entitlement to these rights than women.

The Second Vatican Council's „Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' states: „Any type of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language, or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design' (*Gaudium et Spes* #29). This statement suggests that any type of discrimination should be curbed and eradicated. Does this mean prohibition of women to entering ministerial priesthood should also be reversed, or does this only limit eradication of discrimination in other spheres of life other than the church?

3.3 Church- Documents after Vatican II

„The declaration on the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood' (*Inter insigniores*) prohibits women from entering ministerial priesthood. It states „The Catholic Church has never felt that priestly or episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women' (*Inter insigniores*#1). Notwithstanding the above, this document talks about the role of women in modern society. The church affirms some of the contributions made by some religious women such as Saint Clare and Teresa of Avila in the founding of great religious families and Saint Catherine of Siena who contributed significantly by her gift of writing spiritual doctrine. The same affirmation may be extended to countless other women who have contributed to the mission of God and the Church in various ways such as those who have helped their families, particularly their children by „passing on of their faith' to them, to help them to know and grow as God's children.²²

Pope John Paul II writing to the laity states:

The contribution of woman is indispensable for the fullness and harmony of the church's life. It is understandable that many women suffer from certain forms of paternalism and discrimination. The Christian community must enhance the value of

²² The introduction to *Inter insigniores*:331-332

the contribution and the responsibility of women, and be grateful to them for it (John Paul II 1987:49).

The pope asserts that the contribution of women is indispensable for the fullness and harmony of the church's life. As already mentioned, the contribution of women is limited to non-leadership aspects of the church. This means their contribution does not have material influence to change the DNA of the Church. The Pope however is aware that women make a crucial contribution to the life of the Church and the Church cannot turn a blind eye to it. Their contribution is not optional but necessary for the life of the Church. Furthermore, this statement also acknowledges that there are still forms of paternalism and discrimination against women. The Christian community should not entertain these practices anymore; instead it must learn to appreciate the contributions of women to the life of the Church.

In his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II writes of Mary as a woman and mother of God (*Theotókos*). He speaks highly about the dignity of the woman who is considered to symbolise the ultimate union of the human person with God in eternity. The woman Mary should be understood as representing the whole human race. „She represents the humanity which belongs to all human beings, both men and women’ (*Mulieris Dignitatem* #4). The letter continues to elaborate on the union which only belongs to the “woman” Mary. Mary entered into union with her son when she became the mother of God.

According to what we have seen above, if women were that valueless, weak and insignificant, how could a woman be entrusted with such a huge task? How could God prefer to choose one of them for such an important duty, honour and dignified responsibility of being the mother of God's son? Would that not be too much to ask of such a „weak sex”? The responsibility given to Mary, who represents the dignity of all women, is helpful for us to realise the importance and greatness of women in God's view.

Mary became the mother of God not by her own merit but through the grace of God. It is a gift in which Mary participated by her „Yes’ to God's calling. The document continues to illustrate that the fullness of grace was given to Mary in view of the fact that she would be the mother of God. This signifies the fullness of the perfection which is termed a characteristic of woman's femininity (*Mulieris Dignitatem* #5). This means that to be a woman is intrinsically wonderful: it is not a disgrace as expressed in some of the views discussed above. God sees beauty and perfection in the feminine, not a seducer and the tempter of men. The Pope argues

further that women should mirror the mystery of Mary's mission as the mother of God as their way of reflecting on their own dignity and their vocation as women because their vocation should be modelled on Mary. The document further affirms both male and female as being created in the image and likeness of God. „The dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in *union with God*. Mary, the woman of the Bible, is the most complete expression of this dignity and vocation. For no human being, male or female, created in the image and likeness of God, can *in any* way attain fulfilment apart from this image and likeness' (*Mulieris Dignitatem* #5). The question to ask oneself though is, could it be that the Church found it easy to put in high esteem “Mother of God” when she was no longer alive? In this way, it was not challenging male supremacy as she is no there in person to assume a practical leadership role in the Church. Furthermore, the issue of human dignity is noble, however there seems to be a misalignment between these declarations and the Church's discipline or the way it operates. So one can surmise that these wonderful statements exist mainly on paper but have done nothing to change the status quo of the Church.

Pope John Paul II makes some insightful comments concerning specific scriptural passages that may seem as if they give a certain mandate to men over women such as: „For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor' (1Tim 2:13-14). His view, which this study fully agrees with, is that the first sin is the sin of the human person created by God as male and female. It is not the sin of a woman but is the sin of both of them as human beings. It is the sin of the first parents which every human person inherits. Further, it is imperative to point out that indeed Eve was deceived by the serpent, however Adam was the one given the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. “ And the Lord God commanded the man, „You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you shall surely die' ” (Gen 2: 16,17). So by eating of this forbidden tree Adam was in disobedience to God's command.

Commenting on the passage which says about women: „Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you' (Gen 3:16), the Pope argues that this may sound like a threat with regard to the unity of the two and even more serious for women, but he considers it as a gift too. „While the violation of this equality, which is both a gift and a right deriving from God

the Creator, involves an element to the disadvantage of the women, at same time it also diminishes the true dignity of the man' (*Mulieris Dignitatem* #10). Both men and women need to understand clearly what the text „he shall rule over you’ means. We should take special note that this was a curse to the woman after the fall. This is a pronouncement of the relationship between man and woman in their fallen state. However this relationship changes when Jesus Christ enters the pictures as He came to restore what Adam and Eve lost in the Garden of Eden. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10) and “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8: 36). So we can see that this situation of domination of a woman by a man has been reversed by the Messiah who came to restore all things.

Consequently, it should be clear for both men and women that by no means does the text quoted by the Pope give men permission to dominate their wives. Instead, they should help and complement each other to maintain the stability of their original equality and the undisturbed unity of the two. Men’s domination over women leads equally to the disadvantage of both men and women because every person’s dignity is supposed to be respected. Therefore, for a man to violate his wife’s dignity would be equal to humiliating his own, because it is against human dignity to treat another human being with disrespect. When this domination happens could it be that the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil has been eaten instead of the tree of life, which is the Word of God and Jesus Christ Himself?

We may, therefore, make the submission that both men and women in the Church are called on to appreciate the personal resources of femininity and masculinity which are different but equal and to understand that neither one is inferior or superior to the other. If men violate women’s personal dignity and their vocation, they in fact do injustice to their own personal dignity and vocation because both male and female are made in the image of God.

Pope John Paul II, writing to women in 1995, said: „Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented: they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude’ (Letter to women # 3). For me, this statement affirms that women are still being pushed to the periphery and servitude. The above statement, in my opinion, should be understood as the Pope’s concern and a challenge at the same time.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* spells out that people share the same and equal dignity and that is what the Incarnation of the Son of God means (*Compendium* 2004:144). The scriptures also confirm that in God's sight: „There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). The son of God came to take our humanness. Pope John Paul II further reminds us that after the creation of the human person as male and female God was happy. „God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good' (Gen 1:31). God created both man and woman in God's own likeness and image.

Rakoczy comments that Pope John Paul II often speaks about women, maybe more than his predecessors, especially emphasising the basic fact that women, like men, are created in the image of God (Rakoczy 2008:159). For example, we read: „Both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree both are created in God's image (*Mulieris Dignitatem* #6). Rakoczy notes some similarities between John Paul II and Von Balthasar's assessment of women, their relationship with men and their role in the Church and society. Von Balthasar holds that „man has a monadic character oriented to woman – while woman has a dyadic character of orientation to the man and to the child' (:163). Rakoczy concludes that papal writings on women contain mixed messages.

While Rakoczy affirms that John Paul II acknowledges women as equals with men she also notes that the Pope places more emphasis on the biological differences between men and women. So “biology is destiny”. She sees the Pope's language linking women's body with her destiny as mother (:165). On this point Rakoczy resonates with Christine Gudorf (Gudorf 1996:70). Gudorf argues that to emphasize women's motherhood in the family is to exclude men's fatherhood and love in the family; the man then remains with watching and protecting the family as his sole function (:71-72). For the Pope, the female body is meant for motherhood. The traditional role of women in society is primarily as mother. Other things are secondary as though all women are mothers (Rakoczy 2008:166). Rakoczy further argues that John Paul II idealized women. „Woman is idealized throughout the papal writings; she does not live and breathe as a real person, but rather the pope constructs an abstract anthropology of her special nature' (:168). Women are presented as if they have no life of their own but they only exist for others whereas the truth is that they have their own existence: they have also been created in the image of God just like men. According to Rakoczy, in John Paul II's anthropology women have no initiative and self-determination, their role is receptivity and

self-giving. Further, she does not see any reflection on the masculine nature in the papal writings on anthropology because man is considered as the norm while woman has been idealized, considered as passive both physically and psychologically and as receptive to men and the world (:168-169).

Rakoczy further observes that the pope does not address much about women's ministries and experience in the church. Although the pope approves some women's contributions and dedication in the life of the church, for example that of Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Mary Ward and Rose of Lima among others, surprisingly, however, „nowhere is there mention of women's leadership in the church' (:176). This leaves one with a disturbing question whether the Church really does not realise women's leadership in the Church or is the Church just deliberately ignoring it? If it is true the Church is ignoring women's leadership, then this begs a further question „why'? How does that benefit the Church?

3.4 Summary

The Church can realise its richness in terms of human resources by recognising and appreciating both men and women as equals, as they share the same dignity as the body of Christ, the Church. Disparity and inequality only make the Church poorer (*Compendium* 2004:145). The Church should learn to utilise fully its own riches.

Many of the statements discussed above emphasize the equality of both men and women in God's sight. However, the study attempted to show that these statements are positive but do not translate into gender equality in the Catholic Church, lending the Church to be perceived as lacking authenticity in its teaching of gender. This was arrived by scrutinising the documents of the Church which support gender equality, yet the official stance of the Church says the opposite. Consequently it is imperative that that women's contributions in the church need be revised and given appropriate consideration. In addition, the official teaching of the church on Gender points to the fact that the Church still needs to work hard to respect women's dignity and put mechanisms in place to eradicate all forms of discrimination and sexism in policy and attitudes. One way of doing this is by listening to women themselves. In many ways they have significant, but unheard, contributions to make.

What John Paul II wrote to the laity is very important: that the contribution of women in the Church is vital. Without this contribution the Church is incomplete, and is therefore not fully alive. In order to enjoy harmony and full life in the church the contribution of women is

necessary. It is not an option, but an obligation, a necessity. Pope John Paul II was aware that women have their responsibilities to fulfil in the Church and they need to be respected for that. Things should not only be done according to men's preferences, women have their own choices and tastes too and should be allowed to express these. Their role is not merely to follow, but also to take initiative and to lead actively. The Christian community should be encouraged to appreciate and value the contributions and responsibilities of women.

3.5 Conclusion

The teaching of the Church on the issue of gender through the Church's documents that have been discussed in this study, including the letters of Pope John Paul II, agree on the same point namely that both male and female are created in the image and the likeness of God and therefore, they are equal in the sight of God (*Gaudium et Spes* # 29, *Compendium* 2004:144). However, the critical analysis made in this study about the contributions of both men and women in the Church illustrates the fact that the Church practises the ideology of male superiority in the leadership as women are prohibited from entering some ministries including ministerial priesthood. This ideology of male superiority is manifested in systemic discrimination and attitudinal discrimination based on gender. The study has shown that some of the doctors of the Church like St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have influenced the DNA of the church hence, the present bias towards men. This is manifested practically where men are afforded unearned privileges translated into taking major leadership responsibilities and the administration of the Church. As a result, women become suspicious of the all-male hierarchical administration; hence there is still a need for reconstructing and recalibrating the way the Church operates.

Therefore, we conclude that the Church is still faced with the challenge of ensuring and promoting gender equality in its life because all are called into the mystical body of Christ (*Lumen Gentium* # 7). The Church will achieve this by equally appreciating the gifts of all its members both male and female and by allowing herself to be inspired by the lives of both men and women mystics in the Church.

On the basis of the arguments raised by the teaching of the Catholic Church on the issue of gender, through the documents of Vatican II and Pope John Paul II's writings, one may argue that in many ways the Church documents do present mixed messages about women.

However, since the Church now teaches that men and women are of equal human dignity we are led to conclude, that they are both called to mysticism.

Chapter four

The contributions made by modern women mystics

4.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the contribution of three modern women mystics, namely, Thérèse of Lisieux, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It gives a brief background to each of them in order to provide proper understanding of their lives. The focus is on some specific aspects of their mystical experiences which validate their contributions to the life of the Church. It also evaluates their contributions to the understanding of mysticism and identifies and analyses some challenges they pose for contemporary society of the 21st century.

4.1 Thérèse of Lisieux (1873—1897)

4.1.1 Background

Thérèse was born on the 2 January, 1873 in Alençon, France. She was the daughter of Louis and Zélie Martin, being their ninth and last child. Her mother died of breast cancer when Thérèse was only four years old (1877). The same year her family moved to Lisieux. She began school when she was eight years old at the Benedictine Abbey in Lisieux. The following year (1882) her older sister Pauline who had been acting as her second mother left her and joined the Carmelites. Thérèse experienced this as a second loss which affected her profoundly (O'Connor 1987:12-13; Thérèse of Lisieux 2003:15).

In 1887, when she was fourteen years old, she asked her father's permission to enter the Carmel in Lisieux, and in November she took a trip with her father to Rome to ask Pope Leo XIII's permission to enter the Carmel. Among many complications surrounding her request was her young age. Secondly, there were already two other Martins in the Carmel. She was going to be the third. It was against prescribed norms of the time to have more than two blood sisters in the same convent. Thérèse was so determined to become a nun to the extent that during her visit to Rome she personally asked for permission from the Pope himself despite the given instructions that no one was supposed to talk to the Pope during the reception of an individual blessings (Thérèse of Lisieux 2003:21-22).

In April 1888 she entered the Carmel of Lisieux at the age of fifteen. The next year, in January, she received the habit and in 1890 she professed her vows. In 1893 she was appointed assistant to the novice mistress. She died of tuberculosis on 30 September, 1897 (Thérèse of Lisieux 1958:228).

Barely two years after her death, her autobiography *Story of a Soul* was published and within a decade thirty-three editions in French and six other European languages were in circulation. The process for her canonization was markedly one of the fastest in modern times. In 1921 she was declared venerable, beatified in 1923 and was finally canonized in 1925, only twenty-eight years after her death (Thérèse of Lisieux 2003:28).

We shall discuss three aspects of her spirituality, namely, her spirituality of love, her theology of prayer and her doctrine of little things.

4.1.2 Her spirituality of love

On the day of her final profession as a Carmelite (8 September, 1900), Thérèse wrote in a note which she put over her heart, these words: „Jesus, I ask you for nothing but peace, and also love, infinite love without any limits other than Yourself; love which is no longer I but You, my Jesus’ (Thérèse of Lisieux 2003:108). According to Thérèse, love knows no boundary: real love is about first, loving Jesus and can be extended to self and others. She believed that Jesus desires nothing but to be loved. She demonstrated this in her life by the total gift of herself. „Oh how sweet is the way of love; how I want to apply myself to doing the will of God always with the greatest self-surrender’ (:110). This prayer aptly summarizes the whole of her life. She made an act of oblation to the merciful love of Jesus and expressed her desire to love God and to make God loved. Thérèse was challenged by God’s love, the God who loved her so much that he gave her his only son to be her Saviour and her spouse (:110).

She considered „love’ as her vocation. As St. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11, about the mystical body of the Church that some are called to be prophets, others to be evangelists and others teachers. Thérèse was convinced that she was called to love. She happily exclaimed: „O Jesus, my love... my vocation, at last I have found it...MY VOCATION IS LOVE!’ (Thérèse of Lisieux 1996:194). For her, love embraces all vocations because love is everything. Love is the motive for all services in the Church. Love itself transforms human beings to perfection. This is the depth of her spirituality of love. Her spirituality of love profoundly affirms what theology teaches, that God is love and we are all made in God’s image. Therefore, our call is to radiate and transmit God’s love to one another.

4.1.3 Her theology of prayer

The following words clearly express Thérèse`s attitude towards prayer.

For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven. It is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus (Thérèse of Lisieux 1996:242).

For Thérèse, prayer comes from the heart, is simple and directed to God. It is about life; therefore, it must cover all aspects of our lives including the joys and sorrows of the mundane world. In prayer, human beings express both gratitude to God and the need for God`s mercy. There is a transcendental power in prayer that surpasses and supplants our natural inclinations. God`s work of drawing a person to union with Jesus takes place in and through prayer. Prayer, for Thérèse, is a mystical experience. She asked, „What should I do without prayer and sacrifice?’ (Thérèse of Lisieux 1958:209). It is evident that Thérèse valued prayer, as her way of life and the source and summit of her strength, her guidance, her reverence and the answer to her innermost questions.

As stated earlier, for her, prayer must be simple. One can be as simple as a child in prayer and tell God what one needs, with the confidence that God will understand. She beautifully summed up what prayer was for her: „For me, prayer means launching out of the heart towards God; it means lifting up one`s eyes, quite simply, to heaven, a cry of grateful love, from the crest of joy or the trough of despair; it`s a vast, supernatural force which opens out my heart, and binds me close to Jesus’ (:210).

We can, therefore, stress that her spirituality of prayer is quintessentially about surrendering oneself to God, to God`s mercy and care. Prayer is about child-like sincerity and trust and total confidence in God. Prayer is about the profound relationship of the whole human person with God.

4.1.4 Her doctrine of little things

Essentially, Thérèse's doctrine of little things is about the spirituality of humility. For Thérèse, the appreciation of little things leads to greater things and even to holiness. Humility can elevate the soul to the heights of holiness (Thérèse of Lisieux 2003:143).

She was inspired by the words of the scriptures that: „Whoever is a little one let him come to me' (Proverbs 9:47). Little ways leads to heaven (Thérèse of Lisieux 2003:143). She argued that everyone should love their littleness and their nothingness in order to allow the transforming process of Jesus to take place in their lives (:148). Even human faults should be seen as occasions for growth more than the source of discouragement. She noted: „Finally, it is not to become discouraged over one's little faults, for children fall often, but they are too little to hurt themselves very much' (:149). What is most important is to realise God's mercy for us.

Thérèse wrote of the little flower, little sacrifice and little soul. O'Connor observes that this phrase was common in Thérèse's family, as can be seen in the way they related to each other in the family: „Not only little Thérèse, but little Céline and even little father' (O'Connor 1987:89). For Thérèse, „little' had the connotation of a child though she did not mean being childish. The child is open and trusting and is not threatening in relationships; a child is friendly and is not an enemy to anybody. „A child is free to misbehave a bit; a child looks upon the treasures of its father as its own' (:90). This implies that the child is innocent, free and has a sense of belonging and values the treasures of the family.

In her manuscript C she wrote:

My dear Mother, you can see that I am *a very little soul* and that I can offer God only *very little things*. It often happens that I allow these *little sacrifices* which give such peace to the soul to slip by; this does not discourage me, for I put up with having a *little less peace* and I try to be more vigilant on other occasion (Thérèse of Lisieux 1996:250). (Emphasis is mine).

It has been her strength and motivation to do little things for God and others because for her God could be discovered in little things. Therefore, we can conclude that, those simple, daily activities characterised by humility, openness and total trust in God, explain Thérèse's spirituality of little things. She considered doing little things as her way of serving God.

4.1.5 How is Thérèse of Lisieux a mystic?

Coyle notes that many authors including Von Balthasar, De Meester, Gavarres and Grialou have different ways of determining the mysticism of Thérèse. Some of them consider her tremendous influence in the church during the past century as the indication of her mysticism (Coyle 2004:169). Coyle further points out that in the „Human struggle to know and speak the revelation of God, the mystics serve as a beacon, shining not with their own light, but with the pure light of God as manifest in their lives and teachings. In the holiness and purity of their lives, the Spirit is seen in fresh radiance, speaking a new word to the world, echoing and resounding the Word Incarnate’ (:126). This study agrees with Coyle’s contention, that Thérèse has satisfied the above observation. Thérèse’s life and writings have been the revelation and manifestation of God’s light.

Further, Coyle opines that both McGinn and Von Balthasar agree upon three characteristics which should be realized in a mystic; first, there should be the primacy of divine initiative over human effort, secondly, there must be an aspect of obedience over union and finally, there must be the mediation of the Incarnate word involved (:127). Emphatically and appreciably these characteristics have been realized in Thérèse’s life. First, her entire life was the reflection of divine guidance; secondly, she led a godly life; she lived in obedience to God and, finally, she strongly believed in the incarnate Son of God.

Coyle notes that Thérèse’s „whole life was one of utter disposition to the reality of God’ (:173). In her entire life, in everything she did such as her prayers, asceticism, her reading and her every act of charity were done for God’s sake, because she sought union with God, which McGinn terms a mystical life (:173).

Coyle concludes that Thérèse might not have had specific mystical experiences, but nonetheless she lived in a mystical state (:175). We fully agree with Coyle that Thérèse lived in God as much as God lived in her. Therefore, we conclude that Thérèse is a mystic.

King also confirms that Thérèse of Lisieux is „one of the best-known and most loved modern mystics of Roman Catholicism’ (King 2001:223).

4.2 Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

This section discusses three aspects of Dorothy Day's life: her efforts as peacemaker, her commitment to issues of poverty and prayer and, thirdly, her love of God as love in action.

4.2.1 Her background

Dorothy Day was born in 1897, in Brooklyn, New York, in the United States of America. Her parents were John and Grace Satterlee Day. She was the third of five children and had three brothers and one sister. Her father was a sports writer. When she was six years old the family moved to Oakland, California, then later to Chicago after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

For some time, like many Americans, she was technically a Protestant, though she was not a regular church goer. In her family, education, reading and writing were highly valued, as a result of which she developed a love for literature and writing (Rakoczy 2006:136-137). Eventually she converted to Catholicism and „was baptized conditionally since she had already been baptized in the Episcopal Church' in 1928 and was confirmed. „She was now fully a Catholic' (Rakoczy 2006:149).

She started reading about the class struggle in the United States and England as a teenager and she was moved by the accounts of poverty and injustice, especially in the poorest areas of Chicago, the city where she lived. As a result, she decided to play her part in doing something about it (Egan 1999: 263; Rakoczy 2006: 137).

4.2.2 The peacemaker (The Catholic Worker).

Dorothy Day is considered the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement with a French teacher, Peter Maurin. The Catholic Worker movement is an independent Catholic lay organisation whose main purpose is to build and promote a better society. This was realized in writing and editing a paper to enlighten people concerning their daily life issues such as, government, war and peace (Day 1952:181). Also central to the movement was „founding Houses of hospitality, where the poor could be fed and housed' (Rakoczy 2006: 139). Prayer was Day's strength and motivation to realise the aim and vision of the movement (:153). Maurin had an ardent belief that the Church's social teachings could change and build a better society. Day quickly resonated with him. According to Rakoczy, „Maurin was the thinker while Day was the writer and practical organizer' (Rakoczy 2006:139).

Subsequently, this movement produced and published the newspaper *The Catholic Worker* which was launched on 1 May, 1933, with a first issue of 2,500 copies (Day 1952:182). Since its founding in 1933, *The Catholic Worker* has never supported war and the use of violence because it regarded them as immoral. It has thrown its weight behind pacifism, while completely and totally eschewing the use of violence (LeBrun 2001:445). Day condemned the Just War Theory and promulgated a theory of Catholic absolute pacifism by advocating counsels of perfection to all Catholics (:455), as it was noted in the *CW* in May, 1936:2. „*The Catholic Worker* is sincerely a pacifist paper (:455).

Day argued that the strength of her movement was based on the issues of *pacifism* and *distributism*. She wrote:

We feel that the two go together. We feel that the great causes of wars are maldistribution, not only of goods but of population. Peter used to talk about a *philosophy of work* and a *philosophy of poverty*. Both are needed in order to change things as they are, to do away with the causes of war. The bravery to face voluntary poverty is needed if we wish to marry, to live, to produce children, to work for life instead of for death, to reject war (Day 1948:79).

Day was convinced that the material goods of society were not being adequately and equitably shared. The same applied to population distribution: some places were overpopulated while others had very few people. She argued that it was necessary to understand the importance of both work and voluntary poverty in order to embrace life and to stop war.

Day was a staunch and courageous pacifist, a stance which was not well understood during her time and even caused some divisions within the Catholic Worker movement itself. It is noted that: „She dedicated *The Catholic Worker* to pacifism at the advent of World War II, writing, “Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount”” (Riegle 2003:43). Day and Maurin wanted to live the Gospel in a radical way.

To illustrate further her involvement in the peacemaking process she visited Rome at the closing of the Second Vatican Council to plead for peace. „She appealed to the bishops to support conscientious objection against nuclear war’ (Riegle 2003:35). This demonstrates her courage and commitment to the struggle for peace. She really wanted to see peace prevailing in the world.

4.2.3 Commitment to poverty and prayer

This study deliberately chooses to discuss these two aspects, of poverty and prayer, together in this section because Day demonstrated a profound commitment to social issues which flowed from her commitment to prayer.

She believed that one has to live in poverty and be ready to share with others. She argued that it is important to make the distinction between inflicted and voluntary poverty, of which the former makes people victims because it is imposed while the latter makes them champions of poverty because they choose it (Day 1963:78).

Poverty is about sharing and giving. Day believed that the more people give the freer they become in all aspects of their lives. Also, poverty is about having not more than what is needed. She echoed Peter Maurin's words when she avowed: „Voluntary poverty is the answer. We cannot see our brother [and sister] in need without stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love' (:82).

Day also valued prayer. Her constant prayer to God was that she would be able to use her gifts and talents for the good of others. While she was in the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC in 1933 and was so concerned that she did not know how to serve the poor as a Catholic she articulated: „There I offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor' (Day 1952:166). Her value of prayer demonstrated her utter trust in God and her connection with others particularly the poor. Prayer was important for her because through it she was able to realise her gifts and to share them with others.

She was convinced that prayer was instrumental in the Catholic Worker movement. „Prayer gave her strength and courage to live the vision of the Catholic Worker movement: voluntary poverty, community life, a nonviolent pacifist commitment' (Rakoczy 2006:153). Prayer was the source of strength for her. Without prayer it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to do anything good towards God and fellow human beings. For Day, it is through prayer that God's power is realized.

4.2.4 Love of God and love in action

Day said: „We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more’ (Day 1952:285). For her, therefore, love of God and love of the other are coterminous. The ability to love God is realized only through loving others. She emphasized the importance of knowledge of the other. She argued that love is not passive but dynamic. Love is active; it is manifested in the breaking of bread – love in action. In order to love and know each other we need to be close to each other and our closeness will bring us closer to God. For her, there is always a connection between the love of God and love of neighbour.

Day believed that it is only through love of neighbour that issues like poverty could be adequately addressed. The love of neighbour is demonstrated by sharing resources with the poor, by being hospitable to them, by being attentive to their needs, by being available and having time with them, by „living with people one would never choose to live with’ (Riegle 2003:145).

All the works of charity; caring for one another, attending to the needy, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, the prisoners and being there for others in their different needs, are what Day considered as „love in action’ because these are works of mercy and love; „a love that continues to give even when one’s heart feels empty and one’s hands are empty’ (Rakoczy 2006:145). This is the love of God and the love of neighbour.

We can therefore conclude that, according to Day, love does not only unite us to God but also to one another. Therefore, because of love for God we have an obligation to take care of others. This is love in action.

4.2.5 How is Dorothy Day a mystic?

Coyle notes that McGinn, in defining mysticism, speaks about three fundamental characteristics of mysticism: that, firstly, mysticism should be understood as an element of religion. „Mystics do not practice mysticism but religion, which could be Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Hinduism to mention but some’ (Coyle 2004:170). Secondly, mysticism is a process or a way of life. It is not an end in itself, but a journey towards union with God, and

thirdly, „mysticism is an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God’ (:171). The same was pointed out earlier in chapter one.

Informed by the above definition of mysticism, Dorothy Day satisfied all three characteristics. She practised faithfully her Catholic faith and religion:

When she became a Roman Catholic, Dorothy accepted the entire church – doctrine, devotional practices, and ecclesiastical structure, from the beginning; however, she went beyond the conventional passivity most clerics expected and received from the laity. Dorothy acted out of her own conscience, studying scripture, the papal encyclicals and the writings of the saints to discover how to live her new found faith (Riegle 2003:93).

Firstly, she gave herself fully to her religion and loved her Catholic faith wholeheartedly. Secondly, she manifested her deep relationship with God in her daily life activities such as, her commitment and involvement in addressing the issues of the workers, her love of God, and her total pacifism. Thirdly, her strong faith in God has been an expression of the presence of God in her life. She encouraged others to live in faith, saying, „In this dark night, or in this desert, I know as others have known that God sends intimations of immortality’ (Day 2001: 306). Faith brings us closer to God.

We may, therefore, conclude that although Day might not have had any mystical “experiences”, as people generally interpret them, she lived the mystical life of prayer, committed to others and to God in a very profound manner. She, therefore, may be considered a mystic.

4.3 Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997)

We shall discuss three aspects of Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s mystical experience. A discussion of her background will serve as an apt introduction to the discussion of the three aspects of her spiritual life. These are her mission to the poorest of the poor, her simple life and trust in God and finally her respect for human dignity.

4.3.1 Background

Mother Teresa (Agnes Bojaxhiu) was born in 1910 into a solid middle-class Albanian family, in the city of Skopje which was under Turkish rule and which later became part of Yugoslavia and which is now part of the Republic of Macedonia (Feldman 1998:13). She was the daughter of Nicholas and Drana Bojaxhiu. She had a brother, Lazar, and a sister, Aga.

Her father ran an architectural firm and had some shares in one of the booming construction companies. Her father died in 1917 when she was seven years old (Glavich 2003:13).

When she was eighteen years old, in 1928, she left home to join the Sisters of Loreto in India. First, she had to go to Ireland to learn English. In May 1929, Agnes started her novitiate in India. She took on the name of Teresa of the Child Jesus.²³ It is said that after she had told her mother about her vocation her mother said to her: „My daughter; if you begin something, begin it wholeheartedly. Otherwise, don't begin it at all. Go with my blessing. But strive to live only for God and for Jesus Christ' (Glavich 2003:24). When she left her mother said: „Gonxha, (her other name) put your hand in God's and walk all the way with him' (:25). Teresa lived according to her mother's counsel for the rest of her life. In 1934 she made her first vows and after six years, in May 1937, she took her final vows and „she was addressed by the title “Mother” instead of “sister” (:41). Before her final vows she was sent to the college in Calcutta where she received a teaching certificate. She founded the Congregation of the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta which was approved by Pope Pius XII in 1950 (:61). In 1979 she received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo (Feldman 1998:77). Mother Teresa died in September 1997 at age of eighty-seven and she was beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 19, 2003 (Glavich 2003:111).

4.3.2 Her mission to the poorest of the poor

One may ask “who are the poorest of the poor”? Mother Teresa had the answer. She said: „In 1946 I was going to Darjeeling to make my annual retreat, on the train I heard the call to give up everything and follow Him, to go into the slums and serve Him among the poorest of the poor' (Teresa of Calcutta: 1982: 62-63). She considered this call as her second one, a call within her vocation because she was already a nun. This call meant her leaving the Loreto convent, where she was happy, and going into the streets to serve the poor (:62). As a result, she founded the Congregation of the Missionaries of Charity whose chief aim was to serve Christ by caring for the poorest of the poor and the sick, specially the lepers, uneducated children, homeless and the abandoned babies for their salvation and their holiness (Glavich 2003:60).

²³ Loreto sisters were not allowed to have the same name. In order to avoid confusion since there already was a Therese in the community Agnes spelled her name “Teresa”. Kathleen Glavich, *Teresa of Calcutta: A biography*. Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2003, 34-35.

Her motivation was from the Lord's words in the scripture that: „In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me' (Mt 25: 40) and the opposite: „In truth I tell you, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me' (Mt 25:45). Mother Teresa took this challenge seriously in her life. For her, to ignore the poor or to turn a blind eye to them by failing to feed the starving, failing to assist the needy and the homeless was equal to failing to help Jesus himself (Feldman 1998:78).

For Mother Teresa, the love of God has to be shown in practice. Everything she did in her mission for the poor was for the love of God. It is noted that one day as she was washing a woman picked up from the streets, her body covered in sores, the woman asked her, „Why are you doing this?' Mother Teresa answered her: „For the love of God' (Teresa of Calcutta 1974:54). Every good action she did for the poor was for God's sake; it was her opportunity to express her love to God. Because of this she used to say to the sick: „O beloved sick people, you are doubly dear to me because you personify Christ, and it is indeed a privilege for me to be able to care for you' (:55). For her, touching the sick was the same as touching Christ himself.

Mother Teresa categorically argued that the poor do not need sympathy or pity, but love and compassion and acceptance, because they are lovable people (Teresa of Calcutta 1994:43, Feldman 1998:78). We can, therefore, conclude that Mother Teresa's mission to the poorest of the poor was for the glory of God. She frequently said: „What you do, I cannot do, what I do, you cannot do. But together, we can do something beautiful for God' (Teresa of Calcutta 1994:58). For her, doing something good for one another is to give glory to God and we can all do this in our different ways.

4.3.3 Her simple life and her trust in God

It is reported that one time she told a group of volunteers that although they were feeding about ten thousand people daily, she did not want to rely on any financial support either from the government or the Church. They had no salaries but „there never has been a day when we have to say to somebody, “sorry we don't have.”” She said, „We fully depend on divine providence...how he gives, how he brings things. That is how we are able to care for thousands upon thousands of lepers' (Teresa of Calcutta 1994:42). Mother Teresa did not want to rely on anything other than God's providence. She trusted God for everything: for

money, food and all necessities that were needed for the poor and the sick since she believed that the work she did was God's. She trusted that God would provide for the needs of the mission.

Mother Teresa categorically and unequivocally insisted to her sisters that they should lead a simple life style and rely on God's providence, which she herself lived. She emphasized the importance of identifying with the poor in everything (Glavich 2003:103). Therefore, we can conclude that Mother Teresa constantly identified with the poor and entirely relied on God her entire life.

4.3.4 Her respect for human dignity

Mother Teresa had a deep respect and concern for every human person's dignity. Even when they died she wanted to see people dying with dignity as human beings. She argued that:

Today our poor of the world are looking up at you. Do you look back at them with compassion? Do you have compassion for the people who are hungry? They are hungry not only for bread and for rice. They are hungry to be recognized as human beings. They are hungry for you to know that they have their dignity; that they want to be treated as you are treated. They are hungry for love (Teresa of Calcutta 1994:43).

For her, poverty transcended the lack of material things such as food, clothes and shelter: it meant something deeper and profound. Poverty is lack of human care, love and concern. People need to be treated like human beings and made to feel that they belong to the rest of society regardless of their state of life. She strongly advocated respect for each and every person.

She wrote to her sisters that: „In the slums we are the light of God's kindness to the poor. To the children, to all who suffer and are lonely, give always a happy smile. Give them not only your care but also your heart' (:7). Mother Teresa believed that by reaching out to each other with love and care we can communicate God's love and radiate God's light to one another. When we do this we heal each other and make others feel that they are important and dignified.

Remarking on their work as Missionaries of Charity she said: „Leprosy is, certainly a great evil, but not as great as being deprived of love or being unwanted or abandoned. Lepers may be disfigured but they, like the poor, are wonderful people, with a great capacity for love' (Teresa of Calcutta 1982:56). She was convinced that in the first place the poor are human

beings: they are worthwhile people and God loves them. Even when they are dying they should still be respected and be treated with love so that they may die in peace with God. For her, to treat the poor, the sick and the marginalised with disrespect was worse than their physical sufferings itself. It kills people and makes them feel rejected and uncared for. Instead people prefer love (Feldman 1998:78).

Mother Teresa argued that every person irrespective of his/her condition is important and worthwhile; every person deserves love and care. Archbishop Henry D'Souza of Calcutta, summing up Mother Teresa's life says: „Perhaps the greatest message she has given is the value and dignity of human life. All human life is precious' (Glavich 2003:77).

4.3.5 How is Mother Teresa a mystic?

Mother Teresa did tremendous and overwhelming works of charity among the poor and the sick of Calcutta and other places with much dedication, commitment and love. However, for many years she suffered and struggled with interior darkness, a strong feeling of emptiness and absence of God in her life. In April 1961, she shared, in writing, the trials of her inner life with Fr. Joseph Neuner, a Jesuit priest who has been in correspondence with her. This was her first time to share her inner experience with another person (Teresa of Calcutta 2007:209).

She wrote to Fr. Neuner:

Now father- since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss- this untold darkness- this loneliness- this continual longing for God – which gives me that pain deep down in my heart. Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. -The place of God in my soul is blank. – There is no God in me – when the pain of longing is so great – I just long and long for God – and then it is that I feel – He does not want me – He is not there (:210).

This shows that for a long time Mother Teresa went through a „dark night', to the point of doubting God's presence in her life. Her pain was so intense that she begun to question her relationship with God. She felt a sense of contradiction in her life because she was helping persons to God whose presence she herself not felt (:210).

Further she noted:

Before, I could spend hours before our Lord – loving Him- talking to Him – and now – not even meditations goes properly – nothing but “My God”- even that sometimes

does not come. – Yet deep down somewhere in my heart that longing for God keeps breaking through the darkness (:211).

Based on the explanation of Teresa of Avila discussed in chapter two, on the image of the garden, we are led to conclude that this experience of Mother Teresa is demonstrated more likely in the third stage moving into the fourth of watering the garden; where the watering is by river or stream and the work on the part of the soul has been reduced while the water drawn has increased because the soul has advanced in mystical experiences (see chapter two). This is so because Mother Teresa „before could spend hours...’ doing more, being busy; but at this stage she experiences “darkness” because she is almost in union with God and her efforts have been reduced to simply being in God’s presence.

St. John of the Cross writes about ten degrees of the mystical ladder of divine love.²⁴ Mother Teresa could also be considered to be on the fourth step of the ladder of divine love. On this step the soul is suffering, however, is not weary, it does not seek any consolation even from God but is aware that it has already received God’s gifts. At this stage the soul is only interested in pleasing God.²⁵ This stage seems to fit well Mother Teresa’s experience because although she felt dry and empty, seeking no consolation even from God, she was still strong and loving in her relationship with God. St. John of the Cross states that: „This degree of love is exceedingly high’ (John of the Cross 1974:111) and he argues that this degree is elevated because at this stage, through suffering, the soul genuinely loves God for God’s sake.

Examining closely Mother Teresa’s experience of dryness, we are led to conclude that it fits well into John of the Cross’ description of the purification of the soul by going through the dark night, which is an advanced stage of the union with God. John of the Cross argues that there are three signs of the passive night of the senses of which the first one is: „When we find no comfort in the things of God, and none also in created things’ (:80). He further points out that this dryness should be understood not as the result of sin or imperfections, but rather

²⁴ In step or degree (1) the soul loses interest in earthly things. (2) The soul seeks the Beloved in all things. (3) The soul is in pain because it thinks it is worthless and unproductive. (4) The soul suffers but is not worn out, seeks no consolation even from God but it wants to serve and please God. (5) The soul impatiently longs to embrace and be united to God. (6) The soul runs swiftly to God. (7) The soul becomes vigorously forthright; it does not compromise anything for God. (8) The soul embraces and holds fast the Beloved; it is satisfied although it can still fall back. (9) The soul is pleasantly on fire with love because of the union with God. (10) The soul goes out of the body and is entirely absorbed unto God in the beatific vision. The collected works of St. John of the Cross, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Washington, DC, ICS Publications, 1991. *The Dark Night*, II. 19.1-5; 20.1-5, 440-445.

²⁵ *The Dark Night*. II. 19. 4, 442-443.

it is important and necessary for the soul to go through this stage in order to learn to follow, not its own will but God's (:80).

Mother Teresa, in her dryness, experienced an inability to meditate and do reflections as she used to before which, according to John, means that she could have been in the third sign of the passive night of the sense, where the person is helped to be humble and avoid „spiritual gluttons' (:82-83). Considering the extraordinary works which Mother Teresa did together with this experience of darkness which is a mystical experience, we may, therefore, conclude that Mother Teresa is a mystic.

4.4 Conclusion

What do we learn from these three women mystics? What do they teach us today in the 21st century? Coyle notes about Thérèse that: „By implication, Thérèse is capable of loving sinners and identifying with them because of her union with God' (Coyle 2004:132). Although this statement was written about Thérèse of Lisieux, it sums up very well what could be said about the three women mystics discussed above.

Dorothy Day was able to identify with the workers who were being exploited and with the unemployed. Mother Teresa too was able to identify with the poor, the sick, the homeless, the neglected mothers and babies, the uneducated and the starving. These three women mystics were able to identify with those in need because of their union with God. The love they had for God compelled and challenged them to be charitable, concerned, considerate and compassionate towards others, to be mystics. They present a refreshing challenge and a call to men and women in contemporary times. They demonstrated through their lives how the love of God may be put into practice.

They also teach us, by their lives, the importance of the virtue of perseverance. For Thérèse, this was manifested in her persistence in asking for permission (from her father and from the pope) to join the Carmel, even before she had reached the canonical age (Frohlich 2003:22). Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa showed the same enthusiasm and determination throughout their lives in their dealings with the poor and marginalized and they never gave in to the obstacles and difficulties they encountered. They persevered until they were able to get what they desired. This teaches us that with determination and trust in God even difficult situations of life can be turned into life-giving realities.

Since our focus is to discuss Christian mysticism in relation to the issue of gender we may now explore deeper this relation.

Chapter five

Christian mysticism and gender

5.0 Introduction

This chapter briefly examines the official Roman Catholic teaching on Christian mysticism and underscores the issue of gender and the role played by women mystics in the Christian tradition. It also explores the attitude of the Church towards the contributions made by women mystics.

5.1 Roman Catholic teaching on mysticism

Historically, the Catholic Church has not made many official statements and pronouncements concerning the subject of mysticism. As Egan has noted,

The Catholic Church's attitude toward mysticism has also been somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the Church fosters the contemplative life, which often leads to mystical consciousness. Many of the saints formally recognized as such by the Church were mystics. On the other hand, Church officials have tended to stress the mystical path as suitable only for elite and counseled the path of approved devotions and Liturgical life for the general faithful (Egan 2010: xvi).

The Catholic Church seems to appreciate and acknowledge the fact that Christian mysticism is a reality. This is through the formal canonization of persons such as Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux, who have been recognized as mystics and saints and whose contributions are cherished by the Christian community. But it remains difficult to point out clearly the official stand of the church with regard to this subject.

John McKenzie confirms the above and notes: „In spite of the frequency of mystical experiences, the official Roman Catholic Church is not sympathetic to mysticism and never has been. Its first response to mystical claims is to doubt them and to submit them to rigorous examination' (McKenzie 1971:236).

Therefore, we can conclude that the Catholic Church does not emphasize Christian mysticism as the highest form of the encounter with God. It would seem that it considers mysticism

simply as another charism among others which moulds and shapes the Disciples of Christ to the love and union with Christ (Küng 2001:52).

5.2 Gender

As already mentioned, by gender, we mean the process of socialization between men and women. Society generally attributes specific roles and functions to men and women and expects them to conduct themselves accordingly, based on these expectations. For example, traditionally in most cultures men are expected to do physically demanding work such as construction and outdoor activities while women are expected to do domestic work and less physically demanding duties. Society labels this social distinction of roles and functions for men and women as masculine and feminine (Cosgrave 2010:41). As such, gender is „a social construct of men and women’ (Dube 2003:86).

Official Catholic Church doctrine generally affirms the equality of all people. For example, in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, of the Second Vatican Council we read:

All men (sic) are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God’s image; they have the same nature and origin...there is here a basic equality between all men and it must be given ever greater recognition’, and it continues to say „But forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design (*Gaudium et Spes* # 29).

According to this document, the Church holds men and women in its teaching as equals because they both share the same nature and origin given by God. The Church condemns any sort of discrimination between the two as something opposed to the will and plan of God. But as already alluded to in the previous arguments, the discipline of the Church still leans towards sexism. Even the use of language in the above document is “manly”, as “All men” mean human beings.

Further Pope John Paul II writes:

In the Church’s outlook, women and men have been called by the Creator to live in profound communion with one another, with reciprocal knowledge and giving of self, acting together for the common good with the complementary characteristics of that which is feminine and masculine.²⁶

²⁶The pope speaks to women: letters and address of Pope John Paul II. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996. (John Paul II 1996: #3)6.; The Genius of women, Pope John II, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic conference, Inc, 1997. (John Paul II 1997: #3)39.

The Pope argues that gender should be understood as a gift from God. As a result both women and men have a duty to fully respect and complement each other with their femininity and masculinity for the common good.

This study affirms that the teaching of the Church on the equality of men and women is a commendable development because historically women have been considered inferior and subservient to men (Cosgrave 2010: 40).

5.3 Women mystics in the Christian tradition

Grace Jantzen (1995) is used as the main reference in the analysis which follows. This section attempts to address some of the questions Jantzen raises concerning mysticism such as: „Is mysticism related to gender, perhaps especially available to women? Is mysticism essentially patriarchal?’(Jantzen1995:1). It also discusses the importance of women mystics in the Christian tradition. This section seeks to underscore the importance and continued relevance of the contributions of these women in the Christian tradition.

The women mystics discussed in this work (in chapters two and four) share in common a number of aspects such as their humble education, their love of God and the Church, the spirit of service to both God and others (neighbour), their concern for the poor and the sick (Catherine of Siena, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa), and their determination when they were convinced of something (Catherine of Siena with the popes, Thérèse of Lisieux wanting to join Carmel and Mother Teresa wanting to start her congregation).

5.3.1 Their education

The women mystics discussed above did not have any formal theological training, but their written works are both numerous and theologically profound. Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, Evelyn Underhill, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa each left works that are considered spiritually and theologically significant. They demonstrated through their lives that although formal education is crucial it is not a qualification for union with God. Indeed, what counts most is the personal disposition to union with God.

Although none of them studied theology or the scriptures in a formal way their written works and the virtues of their lives have had a great impact on the lives of many people in the 21st century. It could be true that some of them such as Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and

Underhill have had more influence than some male theologians in the development of theological insights.

These women mystics bring a difference to the Christian tradition because unlike male mystics, they (women mystics) did not have any influence on the theology of the time and they were not part of the hierarchy of the Church. Their only influence seems to have been their profound encounter with God, which sometimes included visions and ecstasies. For example, Catherine of Siena had a vision of Christ offering her his wounded side from which she drank his blood (Jantzen 1995:219); Thérèse of Lisieux experienced healing through Mary (Thérèse of Lisieux 1958:67); Mother Teresa experienced the voice of God on a train saying to her that she should go into the slums to serve among the poorest of the poor (Teresa of Calcutta 1982:62-63).

Elizabeth Petroff writes: „If one is not already a mystic, one can best understand mysticism by reading mystical texts, for mysticism is an experience, not an idea. This is especially true for medieval women mystics, whose works explore the manifold dimensions of this experience, as far as is possible in words’ (Petroff 1994:3). This is true of all the women mystics discussed in this work. She further notes: „Mysticism is the direct experience of the real, and unmediated experience of God’, and the „authority to write came directly from God’ (:4). Unlike their male counterparts whose authority was derived from their formal education or belonging to the hierarchy, the women’s authority came directly from God.

Jantzen also argues that since women did not have the background of formal education in the scriptures on which to ascertain the mystical meaning of scripture because that opportunity was the exclusive preserve of men, they (women) did not rely on the intellect or rationality for their spirituality. Rather, the „source of their spirituality was experience more than intellect’ (Jantzen 1995:159). Their experiences and visions served both as the source and basis of their message. She asks: „What better basis for authority could possibly be claimed than a direct vision from God? (:169). Further, she notes: „It was this rootedness in experience which made women mystics different from many theological writers and even many of the male mystics of their time (:159). Although this was said in reference to medieval women mystics, her observation is applicable to and valid for women in other historical periods too, including those studied in this thesis. These women mystics received their authority directly from God.

5.3.2 Their love of God, the Church and neighbour

From the foregoing, we realize that the importance of these women in the Christian mystical tradition is based on their lives and experiences. They each led a simple life but with profound dedication to the service of God and neighbour. Everything that they did was for the glory of God, their sanctification and for the salvation of others. Their way of life was (at once) a challenge and a model both to the Church and society, especially considering the position assigned to women in society and Church. By their simple lifestyle, their sacrifices, their poverty, commitment to service of the poor, the sick, children (Catherine of Siena, Mother Teresa) and the unemployed (Dorothy Day), they challenged the injustices of the inequitable or asymmetrical distribution of resources in society. It may be argued that there is nothing extraordinary in what they did. True, but it is the extraordinary way in which they did ordinary things that makes them great and that turns ordinary experiences into extraordinary ones.

They also showed great courage by strongly challenging Church authorities and excesses. For example, Catherine of Siena, because of her tremendous love and concern for the Church which she understood as the kingdom of God on earth, was bold enough to involve herself in the Church's affairs.

She first worked for peace when Florence was placed under an interdict because it was in arms against the pope, Gregory XI. This made her travel to Avignon to plead with the pope on behalf of the city, but also to persuade him to return to Rome. Later when the Great schism of the papacy broke out, she became an active supporter of Pope Urban VI, urging bishops and monarchs in many letters to return to his obedience (King 2001:84).

She wrote letters to the pope reminding him of his primary work of taking care of the Church and giving preference to spiritual things rather than to temporal things for the well being of the Church (:84). At the time, it would have been normal for a man to do what she did because politics was the field reserved to men and men were considered more important and ostensibly more intelligent than women. The other woman mystic who demonstrated courage and perseverance is Thérèse of Lisieux when she pursued to obtain permission to join the Carmelites before she had reached the required age.

Women mystics seem to embody better the teaching that mysticism is a gift granted by God rather than an entitlement reserved for certain special categories of people. Through their lives they demonstrated that it is not a question of one sex being better suited for mystical

union with God. It is God who inspires, calls, and gives different people, male and female, different gifts and graces to follow a particular way of life accordingly, irrespective of their sex.

Some of the women mystics studied were very young (for example, Thérèse of Lisieux) and others had very poor health (Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux). Moreover, many of them lived a simple life of voluntary poverty. Some of them were married (for example, Evelyn Underhill). Some were single mothers (Dorothy Day). There were some who also embraced the religious life (for example, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Mother Teresa). This diversity is interesting because it shows that to be a mystic is basically something between God and the person concerned irrespective of one's status, gender, education, religion, and age. Mystical experience is not conditioned by social or biological factors.

By their contributions, these women mystics confirm what was suggested by Jantzen that: „It is time to look and see whether some other interpretation of Christian mysticism is required, which arises out of a perspective other than theological patriarchy, with all the sexism, racism and homophobia with which that patriarchal interpretation is implicated’ (Jantzen 1995:11-12). This is so because their contributions and their mystical experiences arose out of a perspective which was their personal encounter with God.

These women succeed in invalidating „the [popular] assumption that mystical experience is an essentially private, subjective matter which, as such, does not connect with issues of social justice...’ (:17): this is proved wrong by the experience of women mystics. This is demonstrated by their involvement with the poor, the sick, starving and homeless children, the marginalized and the unemployed. Through the example of their lives they have eloquently argued against the „assumption that spirituality and social justice are separate’ (:17). These two aspects were inseparable in their lives: the love of God and love of neighbour.

This study concludes that these women mystics stand as a challenge to the Church and the world by their prophetic witness of their lives and calls the Church to change its status quo. For example, their commitment and dedication in serving the poor (for example, Catherine of Siena, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa) should not just be seen as “what women do” but as a call for all, both men and women alike. Also in their simple but profound way these women

mystics, by their involvement in the Church's affairs and social issues of justice such as Catherine of Siena's involvement with Holy See, Therese of Lisieux confronting the pope, Dorothy Day speaking for the voiceless in *The Catholic Worker*, challenge the church to realize that it cannot be men alone who make all decisions in the Church. We could say that these women, by their mystical life which was always connected to the social issues of justice and God's interventions, had begun to weaken and question the pervasive patriarchy of the church.

We may therefore submit that women mystics have demonstrated by the example of their lives, through their writings, as well as their contributions in the Church, that mystical life is for all, both male and female alike. As St. Paul says: „You are, all of you, children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourself with Christ. There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3: 26-27).

We are therefore led to conclude that Jantzen's questions on mysticism have been answered. Mysticism is related to gender, but it should not be seen as the exclusive preserve of one gender. It would be wrong to think that men alone determine who is a mystic because mysticism is about the experience between a person (man/ woman) and God. Therefore, Christian mysticism is possible for both women and men.

5.4 Critical analysis: Based on the Experience of Mystics

My hypothesis is that: *Though both men and women mystics have tremendously contributed to the life of the Catholic Church, Christian mysticism has been focused more on male models than women. If the contributions of women mystics are taken seriously gender equality can receive a welcomed incentive in the Catholic Church.*

The central plank of my argument is that although the Catholic Church appreciates Christian mysticism reflected in the lives of both men and women mystics, it seems that women are still less recognized in the life of the Church vis-à-vis men and they are still being pushed to the periphery. This creates a situation of confusion because, on the one hand, the Church emphasizes respect for human dignity and gender equality, while on the other hand it practises gender-based discrimination and even sexism. This appreciable ambivalence weakens her teaching regarding gender equality.

The contention of this chapter is that the Church still needs to make quantum leaps in order to strike a healthy balance as far as the role of women in the Christian tradition is concerned. It is clear that in the present structures, men are still accorded more access and advantages juxtaposed with women. Women's access, contribution and participation in decision-making is at best miniscule and still largely controlled by an all-male hegemonic clergy. For example, in parish life, women's numbers are huge; they may make up at least 65 -70% of those who attend Sunday liturgy but in the decision-making bodies, the councils and ministries of the church, women's representation is still dismally low compared to men's.

The recent Synod of Bishops on Africa II (The Second African Synod) which was held in Rome from 04th - 25th October 2009 also confirms the salient point about the paucity of adequate appreciation of the invaluable role and the contribution made by women in the Christian tradition, specifically in the Catholic Church. Out of the 250 delegates who participated in the synod only about 25 were women. That demonstrates that women constituted only 10% of the total number of participants. In addition to that small number of women only a few women were allowed a voice and none of them could vote. To my mind, this unequivocally and objectionably confirms the assumption that their contribution to and their recognition in the Church is low and undermined. One religious sister even challenged the bishops gathered there; she asked them to imagine for a while how the Church in Africa would be without women members (quoted in Henriot 2010:45).

Building on this question, one may further ask: what would the universal Church be like without women? Many questions flood the gateway of our minds, such as: could it not be time for the Church to realize that women's role in the Christian life cannot be ignored any longer in the 21st century? Is it not time to clarify clearly the status of the women in the Church of today? Is it not time to eradicate gender-based discrimination and sexism in a substantive manner in the Church thus echoing the winds of change in bigger society where systems and attitudes against women are challenged and changed?

In the same Synod on Africa Archbishop Telesphore Mpundu of Lusaka (Zambia) has been quoted saying: „...the dignity of women, their giftedness to humanity, their potential massive huge contribution to the Church but their charisma is not being adequately recognised, sufficiently utilised and celebrated. So we as society and especially as Church are much less of what we might or ought to be' (quoted in Henriot 2010:45).

The final message of the Synod states: „The specific contribution of woman, not only in the home as wife and mother but also in the social sphere should be more generally acknowledged and promoted. The Synod recommends to our local Churches to... put in place concrete structures to ensure real participation of women “at appropriate level” (quoted in Henriot 2010:46). This recommendation is welcome, although the last part raises some pertinent questions such as „what does the synod mean by “at appropriate level”? Also, absence of women voices in the Synod ensured that the discrimination continues uncontested.

To my mind, the above statement implies that the Church is well aware of the contribution made by women in the Christian tradition. However, the Church is still faced with the challenge of sufficiently recognizing, promoting, and appreciating the role of women in the Church. Women are the majority in the Christian tradition and their full participation can benefit and enrich the Church enormously. I imagine that Bishop Mpundu is aware of the ever-widening chasm between men and women apropos of their contribution and role in the Church. There is a need for the emplacement of structures that will enable and promote equal opportunities for both men and women to take responsibilities in the Christian tradition for the greater good of the Church and society at large. If this reformation happens in Christian tradition, perhaps society would echo this move and the winds of transformation would permeate social structures in a substantive way.

5.4.1 Challenges and suggestions

During the patristic era women were generally looked down upon and ridiculed by the all-male leadership of the Church. They were associated with the flesh (carnality), the mundane or the worldly which in a dualistic framework is the weaker component compared to men who were associated with spirit and considered intellectuals, stronger and more spiritual. (See chapter three in this work).

The challenges that confront us are these: How much has changed in our present situation? How much is gender equality being ensured in the various Church's activities today? How much are women involved in the Church decision-making bodies? These are pertinent questions which cannot simply be brushed away by a simple wave of the hand. Yet the answers to these questions do not seem to be clear. Although the present situation shows some small improvement, there are still no major significant differences from the ancient era. The challenges and questions are still many.

5.4.2 What can be done to improve this situation?

Practical steps must be taken to make concrete and meaningful women's contributions in the Church. For example, if women are invited to participate in Church councils as they were invited at the African Synod, they must go as full voting members and not just as observers.

It is encouraging to learn that there are some positive aspects discussed in the recent Second African Synod concerning women's involvement in the Church. One of the propositions made in the assembly is to integrate women on a larger scale in the Church's structures and decision-making processes (Henriot 2010:46).

It is further noted:

If the Catholic Church, whose power structures and offices are entirely dominated by males, is to become a church for all people, women must be represented in all decision-making bodies: at parish, diocesan, national and global level. A blatant example of the non-representation of women is the Roman congregation for religious orders, which does not have a single women member; according to present legislation even an ecumenical council can consist only of males and the pope can only be elected by males. None of this is a matter of divine law; it is purely human law (Küng 2001:99).

The results of this study agree with some of Küng's comments above. If God intends equality between men and women, the Church must be organized to correspond to the will of God. As already mentioned, to be true to the will of God, the Church must therefore reform.

Women who comprise the majority of the Church need to be part of decision-making structures of the Church. Incorporating women's participation in such structures will make these structures more sensitive to gender issues and promote gender equality in the Church.

The use of inclusive language in liturgy and other Church documents is another practical step that could facilitate the process of gender awareness and the redress of imbalances. Hans Küng has challenged the use of non-inclusive sexist language in the liturgy. He argues that the liturgy lexicon should express and accommodate both men and women because they both share equal rights in the sight of God. They are both made in God's image and likeness and so the language of worship should express this (Küng 2001:99-100). Liturgical language must be inclusive and expressive of the reality of the worshipping community. Furthermore, the Church's documents like *Gaudium et Spes* should too refrain from using non-inclusive language.

5.5 Conclusion

To conclude we may recall Jantzen's argument. Her contention is that mysticism is a social construction, and is related both to authority and gender. She argues:

Knowledge is not raw or prime but reflects the interest of the knower. Since those who have had the power to define who counts as a mystic have usually been privileged males, often with high standing within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, it is inevitable that the ideas of mysticism reflect that perspective (Jantzen 1995:12).

Considering the social context of the people who determine who should count as mystics, in our case are the privileged males of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, it is inevitable that they will follow their inclination and focus on male mystics.

To say mysticism is socially constructed implies that society has formulated the idea and decided to term it mysticism. The social constructed issues are not innate; they are not immutable and can be changed, and therefore mysticism can be socially deconstructed. Hence, Jantzen argues that, since males in the church were privileged to define mysticism, their definition was bound to reflect their own interest and inclination. The result therefore is a situation of bias. She argues that: „It is time to recognise that the idea of an essence of

mysticism is a patriarchal construct, and one of which women have every reason to be suspicious' (:347). In as far as there is no change of approach in this regard, Jantzen's point is valid.

This chapter has shown that the Catholic Church, in its official teaching and practice has a long way to go before gender justice is achieved in the Church. The women mystics discussed have been present in the Church as a prophetic witness. They call the Church to repentance. The 2009 Synod of Bishops on Africa has, in recent times, taken up the call for a more inclusive ministry in the Church. Several practical steps need to be taken to make this transformation real.

In the next chapter we shall summarise our discussion and raise some challenges that still need further investigation.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

6.0 Summary

The core of the research problem of this thesis is how Christian mysticism relates to the issue of gender equality and justice in the Catholic Church. The hypothesis has been that although both men and women mystics have contributed to the development of Christian teaching and practice, Catholic tradition and teaching on mysticism has generally focused more on male models than women thus impoverishing what should be a very rich source of Christian spirituality. If taken seriously the contributions of women mystics bring to light the link between mysticism, social justice and also God's intervention in history.

According to this perspective the meaning of Christian mysticism has been established by referring to the historical development of the term from the patristic era through the medieval and early modern eras to the contemporary era. This study has confirmed that it is difficult to arrive at one clear understanding of the meaning of Christian mysticism. The reality is too rich to admit to one definition. Although various meanings are possible they all point to the understanding that mysticism is about personal union with God. It is a unique experience of God's divine love in the human heart. It is about the profound encounter between God and the particular individual concerned. Such an experience is not only difficult to adequately describe, but defies easy classification.

In dealing with the social teaching of the Catholic Church on the issue of gender we saw that the Catholic Church teaches respect for women and promotes gender equality, even though the systems and attitudes of the Church still point to gender-based discrimination and sexism. The Church's teaching is based on scripture and tradition: Gen 1:27 [that male and female were created in the image of God] and Gal 3:28 which teaches that all are one in Christ Jesus. It also bases its teaching on the documents of Vatican II such as *Gaudium et Spes* which prohibits every form of discrimination among people. However, the teaching of the Church and its practice are also contradictory. For example, women who were invited to the Second African Synod were not allowed to vote. The situation has not changed much since the patristic era.

In an attempt to establish the contributions made by women mystics three modern mystics were discussed: Thérèse of Lisieux, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Thérèse of Lisieux by her total obedience to God and the Incarnate Son of God reflected God's presence and guidance in her entire life; Dorothy Day by her fervent practice of faith, her profound relationship with God and commitment to the well being of others, and Mother Teresa by her total dedication to serve the marginalized as well as her profound experience of the dark night in her life, have proved themselves mystics of our times.

What has emerged is that a careful study and appreciation of the contribution of women mystics in the Church can facilitate gender equality and promote a culture in which both men and women are encouraged to seek deep union with God and with each other. Therefore, we can conclude that mystical life is about the human person irrespective of sex. This is supported by scripture that God is equally interested in both men and women. Consequently God relates equally to both, works with, and uses both men and women in building His Church. For this to be a reality, the study argues that there is an imperative to eradicate all forms of discrimination and sexism in the Catholic Church.

6.1 Areas for further research

There are still some challenges and questions that require further investigation and research. It would be interesting to research further on gender equity in order to answer questions such as: When will men and women ever share equally in the decision-making bodies in the Catholic Church? What is the actual position of the Catholic Church concerning women's leadership in the life of the Church? This study envisages that the area of women's leadership in the church still needs further research. How is gender equality being ensured in the various Church's activities today? Why is the Church not so vocal regarding Christian mysticism? There remain many questions that need to be further addressed so that gender equity may become a reality in the Church in the future.

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