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I first became aware of the need for something like the Classics of Western Spirituality (CWS) in the late 1960's and early 1970's when I was working on my licentiate thesis in Paris. My subject was the understanding of consecrated virginity in the first four centuries of Christianity. I was motivated to study this subject by two hunches, both confirmed by my subsequent research: first, that the spirituality of Catholic Religious Life, both monastic and ministerial, as it developed in the Christian tradition, was actually rooted historically and mystically in the commitment of the consecrated virgins in the first three centuries rather than in the later ascetical tradition of the eremitical movement of the third and fourth centuries; second, that our only access to that early spirituality of consecrated virginity was the texts of the Fathers of the Church, a surprising number of whom had written whole treatises *de virginibus* (on virgins) and *de virginitatis* (on virginity). It was one thing to know that such lesser known figures as Basil of Ancyra, as well as the better known fathers like Ambrose and Augustine, had written treatises, sermons, or rules on the subject of consecrated virginity and quite another to find accessible and reliable, to say nothing of critical, editions of these texts or helpful introductions or commentaries on them in any modern western language. I remember well my academic ecstasy when, after months of my fruitless searching, the ancient librarian at the Jesuit scholasticate library in Chantilly outside of Paris found, somewhere in the recesses of that private library's stacks to which only he had access, an uncatalogued and tattered, unannotated 1943 French translation of an Old Slavic version of Basil's work. No doubt the secret of the text's existence and location went to the grave with him a few years later.[1]

But my travails were minuscule in comparison with those of one of my fellow students whose doctoral dissertation on a 17th century French Carmelite, Maur de l'Enfant Jésus, was nearly fatally undermined by the fact that, despite his trips through most of western Europe in search of the third of three extant manuscripts of this worthy's writings, he appeared at his defense one-third short of a fully critical basis for his dissertation—a point that did not go unnoticed by the jury.

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The sheer amount of time, energy, and money spent by students in the fledgling field of spirituality trying to round up the textual resources for serious work in the field appears now, some thirty-five years later, like a colossal misallocation of resources—except for the evident fact that there was no alternative. The texts were simply not readily accessible, often not available in modern western language translations, and when they were available were not furnished with introductions, notes, or critical apparatus.

A few years after finishing my own doctoral work in Rome (where the frustrations of library research in spirituality easily matched those of Paris) I was on the faculty of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, involved with colleagues in the founding of the first research doctoral program in Christian Spirituality in the United States. It was in that context that I participated in a conversation about the feasibility of launching a publication project that would make available in critical English translation, with scholarly introductions and carefully selected bibliographies of both primary and secondary materials, texts of the great writers in the tradition of western spirituality, especially Christian, Jewish, and Muslim as well as those of some native peoples insofar as that could be done. I recall one of the Paulist Press editors expressing the very understandable concern about the financial riskiness of the project. What assurance might we have that there would be a wide enough market for works which, in the 1970's, seemed relatively arcane—works such as the inaugural volume, Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, or Origen's *De Principiis*, Emmanuel Swedenborg's esoteric writings on science and mysticism, or Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*—to make the series financially viable? The contemporary field of spirituality as a research discipline distinct from systematic theology, Church history, and moral theology was in its infancy and the infant mortality rate of new disciplines in the theological/religious studies academy was, at that point in time, distressingly high. Furthermore, there was little precedent among non-academic Catholics of post-Tridentine formation, who, at that point, were just rediscovering the Bible, or for Protestants, who were just rediscovering Catholics (and only beginning to look very suspiciously at spirituality in general and mysticism in particular, which they associated with pre-Reformation Catholicism) for reading and study of classical texts of the Christian spiritual tradition. And the young seekers of the Vatican II era were still looking east. I do remember, however, voicing, with ardent hope, the academic equivalent of a certain famous film line, "If you publish it they will come." Fortunately, my youthful hope was reflected in the more cogent arguments of the mature scholars participating in the conversation and Paulist Press, fortified with its own extensive feasibility studies, took a deep breath and jumped in.

My excited anticipation that the CWS would become a reality approached the eschatological. And it increased as the volumes began to roll off the press. The fact that the first volume to appear, in 1978, was the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich, a medieval woman mystic and theologian *extraordinaire* whose work had been largely buried in patriarchal oblivion for centuries, was symbolic of a new era in spirituality research. As texts of figures like Julian became readily available to younger scholars in the field, questions about mysticism as a vital and mainstream element in Christian spirituality, the experience and role of women in the tradition, the mutual rather than subordinate relationship of spirituality to theology, the nature and significance of paranormal experiences in Christian spirituality and their relation, on the one hand, to the less exceptional path of prayer and virtue and, on the other hand, to analogous phenomena in non-Christian spiritualities, the personal and textual relationships among the great figures in the tradition, became much easier to raise as research topics because the possibility of making some progress toward understanding them was greatly increased by the availability of the relevant texts.

I would highlight five notable effects on the teaching and study of spirituality, especially Christian spirituality, that readily available critical texts with notes and introductions that, in some cases, approximated commentaries, have caused or nurtured.

First, in seminars and classes it is much more feasible today than it was twenty-five years ago to expose students to a variety of texts pertinent to a particular topic or period. For example, one can use selections from Ignatius of Loyola and Martin Luther to ground a discussion of similarities and differences in spiritualities which are historically contemporaneous but emanate from Spanish and German cultural contexts respectively and express Catholic and Reformation sensibilities, both influenced by the polemical context of the sixteenth century. Or one can compare two women doctors of the Church, Catherine of Siena from 14th century Italy with Teresa of Avila from 16th century Spain. The former was a dynamo of apostolic involvement in the political and ecclesiastical events of the tumultuous era of the Black Death and the Avignon papacy. The latter was a reforming foundress of enclosed Carmelite life in the golden age of Spanish literature and spirituality and the repressive context of the Inquisition. Both were practitioners and theologians of the spiritual life who excelled in the direction of others in holiness and, in 1970, became the first two women to be named Doctors of the Church. Volumes of CWS like *Celtic Spirituality*, *The Shakers*, and *Angelic Spirituality* make possible the study of traditions, movements, and motifs which would have been virtually impossible, from a practical point of view, to study in a classroom context when the materials relevant to those phenomena were

dispersed in texts which were out of print, not comparable from the critical standpoint, and often not complete.

Second, the Classics series has helped considerably with the seemingly intractable problem American students have with foreign languages which has led some, if not many, doctoral students to tailor their research projects to their linguistic capabilities rather than to their real interests in the field. They have often selected projects which could be pursued largely through modern English-language primary texts such as those of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, or Martin Luther King, Jr. rather than embark on the lengthy linguistic preparation necessary for dealing with figures and movements textually available only in French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin or Greek. Pursuing, at the doctoral level, a topic for which the primary texts are in a foreign language of course eventually requires learning that language. One can no more do doctoral level work on Catherine of Siena without Italian or Teresa of Avila without Spanish than one could do doctoral research on Thomas Merton without knowing English. But students are much more likely to undertake the task of language preparation if they have been able to establish, by wide acquaintance with the texts in good English translation, that the project is really one for which they have a passion and if they can access collateral and secondary materials in English. I have seen some encouraging evidence of linguistic broadening of research interests which has been, at least in part, encouraged by the CWS. And, of course, English translations offer undergraduate and masters level students access to primary texts of the tradition which they will never study in the original languages.

Third, and closely related to the preceding, the availability of English translations of texts from the same period, or on the same topic, or as part of the background or context of the student's primary topic allows the student to range more broadly in her or his research which deepens the context for more constructive work.

Fourth, the accessible format of the volumes in the Classics series and their moderate price, especially in the paperback edition, makes work on the texts so much less tedious and stressful. Just being able to mark up a copy without fear of incurring the medieval penalty of excommunication for such a "crime against a book" that is posted in stone in the library of the University of Salamanca[2] facilitates in-depth personal engagement with the text. And, as we all know, the romantic charm of teasing out meaning from barely legible ancient copies of texts whose page numbers or paragraphing or apparatus (if such exist) are not standardized or comparable from copy to copy, is something that definitely increases in proportion to the project's recession into one's past. Research energy is much better spent on interpretation of texts and engagement with their subject matter, and the energy conserved by dealing

with well-published materials is much better directed to creative, constructive production in the field of spirituality.

Finally, the availability of the texts of the tradition of spirituality and mysticism encourages their study in the secular academy by scholars of history, literature, psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, and gender studies which has facilitated the dialogue between scholars in the theological and religious studies academy and scholars in the secular academy to the enrichment of all concerned.

Of course, I would not be an academically credible commentator on the series if my enthusiasm for the CWS were not qualified by some quibbles. I prefer to present them as desiderata or suggestions for editorial reflection rather than as criticisms. From my perspective, one weakness of some of the volumes is actually the flip-side of the strength I just mentioned, namely, the manageable presentation of the volumes. In some cases, especially of more prolific authors or richer and more ancient traditions, selectivity is required. And selectivity is also necessary in regard to which authors and works are published. The choices of what authors to include in the series and what parts of various author's works to include in the volumes devoted to them have been eminently judicious as well as being remarkably broad and inclusive. But we still lack Basil of Ancyra's text on virginity and, as far as I know, a critical English language text of Maur de l'Enfant Jésus,[3] and I have had more than one occasion in my teaching to regret the incompleteness of the version of Origen's *DePrincipiis* in the volume of his writing in the Classics series. Perhaps, in some cases, for example, the writings of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila (which are readily available in their integrity in the critical English translations with excellent introductions in the volumes edited by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, and published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies), some better known figures in the tradition could cede place to unavailable texts from lesser known figures. The series is, of course, devoted to the "classics" but what qualifies *as* a classic is determined to some extent by its availability to researchers. Marguerite Porete is not exactly a household name even now, but she is much more recognizable today than she was twenty years ago, partly because, I would submit, of her place in the CWS series. The more texts regarded in the past as marginal or even suspect become available for research (Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen are striking examples in the Christian tradition) the more flexible become our criteria of orthodoxy in the arena of spirituality and the richer our understanding of the complexity and variety of religious experience down through the ages. The CWS series is participating not only in making the acknowledged classics of the tradition more available, accessible, and better known but also in the process of expanding and deepening the canon of classics and thereby both broadening and refining the definition of "classics" and of "spirituality" itself.

NOTES

1. A newer French translation appeared in 1981. Basil, Bishop of Ankara, *De la véritable intégrité dans la virginité,* Translated by C. Coudreau, Introduction and Notes by Pierre Miquel (Saint-Benoit [France]: Abbaye Sainte-Croix, 1981). As far as I have been able to ascertain, there is still no English translation.
2. This stern decree of excommunication reads as follows: "*Hai excomunion reservada a su santidad contra qualesquiera personas, que quitaren, distraxeren, o de otro qualquier modo enagenaren algun libro, pergamino, o papel de esta bibliotheca, sin que puedan ser absueltas hasta que esta esté perfectamente reintegrada*."
3. Interestingly, the only English language reference in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique* (vol. 10, 1980, pp. 826–832) entry by Hein Blommestijn on "Maur de l'Enfant-Jésus," is the unpublished 1969 dissertation of my fellow student in Paris, Daniel DiDomizio.