

Mary of Agreda and the Origins of the Society of Mary

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Mary of Agreda (1602 - 1665) was a Spanish mystic, a great celebrity in her time.¹ She has passed into posterity as the author of *The Mystical City of God*, a life of the Blessed Virgin with a very particular, and therefore highly controversial, slant, begun in 1650 and published in Madrid in 1670, five years after her death. From a family imbued with the Franciscan spirit, in 1620 she entered the convent of the Franciscan Conceptionists² in Agreda and became Abbess in 1627. Her *The Mystical City* would be translated into numerous languages, but with a more or less poisonous reputation.

The work is in three unequal parts: Part 1: in 25 chapters and 411 paragraphs talks of the conception and childhood of Mary. Part 2 (Paras 412 - 1529) develops the life of Jesus up to the Ascension. Part 3 goes from the Ascension to the Assumption. Taking up much from the first two parts, it is quite different from what precedes it. Ever since its appearance the book has provoked arguments among theologians. However, the decisions of ecclesiastical authorities have turned out to be contradictory and the book remains suspect, without actually being banned³. Mary of Agreda's cause of canonisation, initiated by the Ordinary in 1666, just after her death was paralysed by the controversies and a Decree of Pope Clement XIV in 1778 imposed a definitive silence on the matter.

Despite many passages revealing a real experience, and even a theory, of the mystical life, theologians have not lacked reasons for being suspicious of *The Mystical City*, particularly in its Part 3 which presents Mary ascending to heaven at the Ascension with her Son while remaining in the Upper Room with the Apostles then returning among them to found the Church and ceaselessly inspire apostolic action. Immaculate in her conception, Mother of the Church and Queen of Apostles, Mary is the celestial Jerusalem described by John in Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelations because he alone saw the return of Mary to earth.

For an unprepared reader, it is a very dense story, confused and full of repetition. However, it is just a book of popular piety, even if the mysticism is buried under a sort of cosmic saga with a fairly vague but imperious God, (the Most High, the Divine Goodness) on one side with Mary, omnipresent and quasi-divine, and the Angels sent from the court of heaven. On the other side, the devil and his henchmen. Between them, Mary of Agreda, very much troubled and wavering between the divine exhortations to write in order to reveal Mary as Queen of heaven and earth, and the suggestions of the devil, dissuading her from doing so. Fundamentally, it is a novel

¹ King Philip IV of Spain visited her and corresponded with her afterwards.

² Franciscan contemplative nuns particularly devoted to the Immaculate Conception.

³ The Roman Inquisition banned it in 1681 and the Sorbonne University condemned it in 1696. However the Holy Office had approved it in 1686. In 1713 the work was placed on the Roman Index. One hundred and sixty-eight editions have appeared in Spanish (the last in 1970) and there have been numerous translations, not counting numerous short-versions.

setting out a powerful Christian imagination along with a theological and exegetical discourse, a spiritual autobiography, and a treatise on the mystical life.

It is understandable that theologians have been more than hesitant over a fundamentally questionable work in a form and appearance so ill-mastered. However, more recently, historians of spirituality have delivered more nuanced judgements⁴. Moreover, the remarkable spread of the work showed fairly well that numerous people, often of the upper-classes, appreciated it despite, or because of, its dense and wordy character since each person could find in its all-encompassing tale points which touched on their own spiritual needs. Literature of Mary of Agreda's time acknowledged what we might call "sagas", much like today's television series offering hundreds of episodes. Some people went on to interpret this work as a late manifestation of the mediaeval tradition which continued to reject the separation of mysticism from theology and the wisdom of popular culture. We will return to this interpretation later.

Father Colin and Marcellin: readers of *The Mystical City of God*

Jean-Claude Colin was one of the fervent readers of *The Mystical City*. Marcellin probably was too since he had the complete work in his library, described thus in the inventory of 1840: "*Mystical City*. Holy Life of the Bl. Virgin by Sr. Mary of Agreda; three large volumes in quarto". This was the French translation of the first edition published in Brussels in 1715⁵. In various written and verbal statements, I have alluded to Marcellin's being influenced by *The Mystical City* and latterly Brother Jesus Domingo of Chile has produced a new article on the subject. Since the question of the influence of *The Mystical City* on Marcellin has been clarified, I think it good to attempt to advance the issue around Father Colin and even the 1816 formula.

What Father Colin thought of *The Mystical City*

I will content myself with recalling what Father Mayet wrote in his memoirs on the subject⁶.

"He loved this book with a rare predilection; he brought out delicacies from it. In 1843 he went to spend a few weeks in Belley; [...] he took this *Mystical City* which belonged to him and which he had put into his library. At Lyon⁷ he had a search carried out for another copy; he was not able to find one and did not want to take the copy from the library in la Favorite (the Marist boarding school in Lyon) to the Mother-House. He did not tire of nourishing his soul from it; he told us that he made his meditation from it,

⁴ Father Pourrat in *La spiritualité chrétienne* points out that she created a new genre of mystical writing inspired by apocrypha, later taken up by Catherine Emmerich in the 19th century. In the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (1980) Julio Campos considers that "her work has not yet been studied in a satisfying manner" and "Account very much needs to be taken of the work's singular object." Isabelle Poutrin, in *La voile et la plume. Autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans l'Espagne moderne*, situates Mary of Agreda in the network of Franciscan literature, based on the following elements: the help of an angel (St Michael and Mary of Agreda), dictated by Our Lady or God, and the distribution of blessed objects (rosary beads, crosses, medals) with miraculous powers.

⁵ Mary of Agreda had been known and read in France principally through shortened versions of the work, first published in 1727 and republished many times. [Original note edited and adapted by translator.]

⁶ *Origines Maristes* Vol 2 Doc 554. Pages 347 - 348.

⁷ When the Mother-House of the Marist Fathers had been transferred there in 1839.

and his spiritual reading. This reading gave him the greatest, the sweetest ideas of Mary; he sometimes repeated what he had read for us; on certain pages, he wept as he went through them. He could not stop speaking on the topic. He was enthusiastic.

In Italy, he told us, there were prelates who constantly made their meditations from it; it was a treasure for these last times. This book had been judged and approved by many learned men. It was felt that the human spirit could not reach as far as that. [...] Yet we other French people do not have the faith. In France, he told us, our faith is a philosophical faith which kills the true faith⁸.”

However, Father Mayet states in a note: “during the time he exercised his sacred ministry he did not want to carry on reading this work for fear of confusing in the pulpit what he had read with what the Gospel and Tradition teaches us. For this same reason he forbade the reading of this work to several Marist Fathers who were still young.”

In fact, having become Superior, Colin reserved the reading of this work for solid spirits and for spiritually experienced souls. However, Father Jean Coste SM, author of the booklet *A Marian Vision of the Church: Jean-Claude Colin*⁹ which details the influence of *The Mystical City* on Colin’s thinking, writes that “the years in the major seminary are the most probable period for its discovery. [...] He could easily have found it in St Irenaeus’s well-stocked library and we cannot exclude the fact that Colin could have acquired a personal copy during these years, which he later deposited in the library of La Capucinière¹⁰ (at Belley)”.

From Jean-Claude Colin to the joint project of the Society of Mary

If *The Mystical City* had played such a role for Jean-Claude Colin, it would be quite astonishing, given the strength of unity among the first Marists, if it had not also affected the group, especially since Marcellin was probably also reading it at the same time. However, since Marist research remained fixed on the Founders for such a long time, Father Coste did not ask himself whether Jean-Claude Colin had shared with the other Marist aspirants his enthusiasm for the work so close to their project, which was more or less artificially unified around Courveille¹¹. It really appears highly improbable that, in their small, secret and fraternal meetings, Colin and Marcellin did not share with the others elements of their own spirituality and especially what they had discovered in Mary of Agreda. Should we not, therefore, enlarge on Father Coste’s hypothesis, by assuming that the Marist group of 1816 was influenced, one might say, inspired, by such a work?

⁸ A significant and typically ultramontane saying; the Revolution had corrupted the faith in France and it was in Rome that the true Catholic tradition could be found, one which was still capable of understanding Mary of Agreda and particularly of bringing France back to life.

⁹ Written in 1986, it remains incomplete.

¹⁰ After the Revolution the booksellers’ market had a very large number of books of piety or theology which had come principally from the destruction of ecclesiastical libraries and religious communities.

¹¹ Colin always emphasised that Courveille was not the Founder, but the promoter of a project which had started before him. Also, Marcellin was planning to found Brothers as part of the Society of Mary.

The consecration to Mary of the monastery at Agreda

Apart from the case of Colin, there are many indications of the proximity of the spirit of *The Mystical City* to that of all the first Marists. I will content myself with calling attention to a perturbing document: the consecration to Mary of the monastery at Agreda at the end of the work. Opening, as in the Marist phrase, “under the title of the mystery of her Immaculate Conception”, it displays quite a sober eschatological spirit¹², but completely in the spirit of the book, which is the revelation of the reign of Mary at the end of time. In deciding that from henceforward all nuns would carry the name of Mary, the monastery of Agreda seems to have created, in its own fashion, a “Society of Mary” insofar as she was declared “our only Superior”.

“As we wish all creatures to know us as your servants and inferiors, and that your most holy and sweet name is immortalised in us and may be the sign of our being and our labours, we make the decision that all nuns of this monastery, present and to come, will be called MARY, keeping this great name if they have it and taking it if they do not, before or after their baptismal name.”

However, I will hold off on this topic, which merits examination at greater depth. I would like to explore the influence of Mary of Agreda on Marcellin since it is not enough to possess a book to be inspired by it.

The drafts of letters of 1827

It was in the month of May in 1827, at least a year after the departure of Father Courveille, of Father Terrailon, and of several of the principal Brothers, that Marcellin wrote to his ecclesiastical Superiors, and we have the drafts of these letters. He sets out his difficulties while soberly expressing intimate aspects of his spirituality. To Father Gardette he states, “I see more clearly than ever the truth of what the royal prophet said: If the Lord does not build the house, they labour in vain etc...”¹³, a saying that he often recalled. To one of the Vicars General (Cattet or Cholleton) he sets out the need for his educational project “in this age where unbelief is making such frightful progress”¹⁴ Above all, he confides in Bishop de Pins:

“God wants this undertaking in these perverse times. [...] The unfortunate incident which took place, involving the one who appeared to be its leader¹⁵, is clear proof of the most terrible efforts which hell has ever conceived to overthrow an undertaking which it saw would do it much harm...”¹⁶

In the “If the Lord does not build...” he recognised that “the Hermitage of Our Lady”, the Lyon Society of Mary, formed in 1824 - 1826¹⁷, was not in line with the views of God. However, he

¹² Notably in the sentence, “We burn with desire to immortalise your memory in the centuries to come, and to appear without confusion at the end of time to have acted in you through imitating you.” [Translator’s Note: All quotations from *The Mystical City* have been translated from the French of Brother André’s Paper.]

¹³ [Translator’s Note] Extracts from Marcellin’s letters are taken from the 1991 standard English translation. This quotation is to be found on Page 31.

¹⁴ [Translator’s Note] Page 32 of the standard English translation of Letters]

¹⁵ Courveille

¹⁶ [Translator’s Note] Page 34 of Letters.

¹⁷ See Marist Notebooks No 34, May 2016.

was not concerned with seeing something new appear, undertaken by someone other than him. His proposals for the Society of Mary, which had to combat hell, expressed the conviction that it had to play a major role in the great eschatological battle against Satan. While Father Colin often expressed these sentiments, this is one of the few times Marcellin talks of his eschatological convictions. As for the departure of Father Courveille, interpreted as “efforts [of] hell”, he takes up a theme present in Mary of Agreda since *The Mystical City* is, among other things, the tale of the struggle between Mary and Satan.

Chapter 4 of Book 8 which describes the destruction by Mary of the Temple of Diana in Ephesus makes us think of the events in L’Hermitage during 1826 - 1827. Also, “several centuries before the Incarnation of the Word” Lucifer foresaw men and women Religious following Christ and Mary and who would threaten his empire. Mary of Agreda commented, “We see in that how old is the hatred of hell for Religious Orders.” Lucifer and his henchmen then decided to create “an Order of apparent virgins or hypocrites” which would bring dishonour to religious life. Installed in the Temple of Diana¹⁸, these “virgins who were beyond foolish [...] formed a Congregation in the town of Ephesus” but would be dispersed and their temple destroyed by an angel sent by God at the request of Mary, who then took up the post of “Commander” of the heavenly armies against those of Lucifer “so that, through your victories, you would protect my Church and acquire new favours for your faithful children and brothers.”

In her instructions to Mary of Agreda at the end of the chapter, Mary repeats that the demon would like to beat down the just “in his rage, when he is not able to make use of them.” “It is also for that reason that he takes so much trouble to overturn a few cedars of Lebanon, people renowned for holiness, and swallow up into the ranks of his slaves those who had been servants of the Most-High.”

Was Marcellin thinking of this chapter when he spoke of the efforts of hell against the Society of Mary? Probably not. On the other hand, he used an expression which we find quite frequently in *The Mystical City*. Above all, he displays a vision of religious life of which we find a superabundance in this work, which exalts its high spiritual value and denounces the hellish efforts to bring about its decay. Mary of Agreda was certainly not the only person to say that, but she gave it an inimitable form of words.

Influence of Mary of Agreda in the early conferences

Brother François left us three collections of conferences (nos 307 - 309), of which many are transcriptions of the teaching of the Founder. Several show indications of the influence of *The Mystical City*, in particular “Mary, Model of Humility” in manuscript 308. It is in these lines that we find the very clear expression of the idea, beloved of the French School of Spirituality, among others, that, if Mary is the most superior of creatures by reason of the privileges bestowed by God, she is, at the same time, as nothing before Him.

“As Mary had been the most perfect imitator of Jesus Christ in all her virtues, it was especially in that of humility that she merited being elevated above all creatures. Mary had such a low opinion of herself that, although she was full of grace (Luke Ch.1), adorned with all the virtues and enriched with the most beautiful and most excellent

¹⁸ In Greek mythology, Diana was the goddess of hunting.

privileges, she never preferred herself to any person; on the contrary, the more she saw that she was full of God's gifts, the more she abased herself before God, from whom she had received everything."

The instruction then expands on the life of the Blessed Virgin in the Temple¹⁹, as the wife of St Joseph, at the Annunciation, the Visitation... and we can discern here the connection between the talk and the book. From time to time, *The Mystical City* uses the very abstract term "nothing", but most often Mary is designated as the servant, sometimes slave (in the allegorical sense), or the mother "unknown and hidden". However, the conclusion is astonishing:

"Nevertheless, it must be noted that, with all of that, it cannot be said that Mary humiliated herself, despised herself, as many of the great Saints had it, seeing themselves as the greatest sinner; she knew that, alone privileged among all the children of Adam, she had not received the brand of their origin²⁰, nor know the consequences of that. She therefore counted herself as nothing before God, reflecting on the following elements with which she herself was deeply penetrated.

She thought that 1. From all eternity, she was nothing; that the Almighty had taken her from her nothingness in preference to so many others who forever remained there. 2. That He had gifted her with the most singular blessings, without her meriting them. 3. Fundamentally, she was not only a puny creature descended from a father guilty of betraying God, but that everything came to her from the goodness of the Most High, that she would be capable of every evil, had she not been preserved from it.

Thus, purer than the Daystar, adorned with every virtue, Mary, the Mother of God, elevated above the angels, thought only of her great dignity in order to abase and lower herself further. What boundless humility!"²¹

We find similar passages in *The Mystical City*, in particular this one from Book 4 no 578:

"Among the most excellent privileges and rarest benefits received by the august Mary, the first and foundation of all the others was that of being the Mother of God. The second was having been conceived without sin. The third, was to enjoy, on many occasions over the course of her life, the beatific vision. [...] She saw her soul united to the Divine Word, and recognised with profound humility her human inferiority. She saw very clearly the thanksgiving and praises that this soul rendered to God for having created her and drawn her out of nothing, as with every other soul, for having given her gifts above all others as a creature, and especially for having elevated her human nature to inseparable union with Divinity."

The talk, "Humility must be the virtue held dear and special by the Little Brothers of Mary" concludes:

"Mary's humility, according to *The Mystical City* and according to Champagnat, is not founded on the condition of a sinner or even on holiness, but on profound consciousness

¹⁹ [Translator's Note] There is an ancient Catholic tradition that Mary spent her childhood as an attendant in the Temple in Jerusalem, after having been presented to God by her parents.

²⁰ [Translator's Note] ie the stain of Original Sin.

²¹ [Translator's Note] Quotations from FMS documents are translated from the French of Brother André's Paper unless a published translation is specifically cited.

of her own nothingness before the Godhead, and it arises from justice and truth. It is the purest virtue of religion. Also, the humility of Brothers will not be of a devotional or ascetical order, to imitate the humility of Mary and take on her spirit, but will be to become adorers in spirit and in truth following the perfect adorer.”²²

Confirmation of L’Hermitage as Mary’s mystical city

The Society of Mary was canonically erected in 1836: for the priests at Belley in September, for the Brothers in L’Hermitage, in October.²³ On this occasion, the new chapel was brought into service and Brother François describes the decor for us in the Annals of L’Hermitage:

“M. Ravery, a painter from St Chamond and friend of the house, painted some pictures with which it is decorated. Twelve Corinthian columns in fresco with a cornice which protrudes above embellish the sanctuary. Between each column lie fresco medallions with invocations from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin represented in symbolic form.”

Above the altar, the Holy Spirit is painted in fresco on a blue background, surrounded by a great coronet. In the middle of the sanctuary (of the choir), behind the altar, a large painting representing the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, painted on canvas by M. Ravery. Above the painting is a fresco crucifix with two adoring angels. On the same level, on the epistle-side²⁴, there was a statue of the Blessed Virgin, the same as was in the former chapel, and, on the gospel-side, one of St Joseph in gilded wood, also bought by Father Champagnat. Lower down, on either side of the altar were also, on the epistle-side, the statue of St Aloysius Gonzaga, and, on the gospel-side, that of St Francis Xavier. A garland of roses ran along the walls of the nave.

The theological and spiritual message is therefore transparent

The painting of Mary’s Assumption, placed between the crucifix and the altar, by evoking Mary’s ascent into heaven recalls her eminent place in the mysteries as Mother of the Incarnate Word, immaculate and prototype of a humanity called, through the Incarnation and Redemption to life in heaven. As for the medallions, Marcellin did not randomly select the ten invocations out of the 45 that make up the litany. It is easy to see that they correspond two by two and constitute a sort of mystical scale culminating in the Assumption. One has the impression that Marcellin left aside the titles of Mother and Virgin in order to select those that were fundamentally biblical and evoked an ecclesiastical function. It is Mary as a participant in the work of salvation yesterday and today. It is Mary in majesty and as Resource.

Thus, this decor, which made the Assumption the crossing-point of the vertical and horizontal axes symbolically uniting earth and heaven, would present the Society of Mary, but more especially L’Hermitage, as the mystical city. However, no-one seems to have attached any

²² The talk, “Character and spirit of the Society of the Little Brothers of Mary”, (Book 307) has numerous elements in common with “Mary, model of humility”. For example, “she saw only her own nothingness and stood before God in humility and profound emptiness.”

²³ This was the start of public vows. The Brothers made up an annex of the Society of Mary. However, there was some ambiguity about the identity of their Superior: Colin or Marcellin?

²⁴ [Translator’s Note] ie the right-hand side of the altar from the point of view of the congregation. The left-hand side was referred to as the gospel-side.

importance to this spiritual manifesto, at first sight a classic one, but in fact expressing a true spiritual synthesis approaching that of Mary of Agreda and undoubtedly inspired by her. The chapel had been badly constructed and would be demolished in 1875 without anyone having thought of preserving, by photograph or drawing, the memory of its decor.²⁵

Almost certain influence, but with contours needing details

Although this study may be too incomplete, I believe it to be sufficient for the consideration of the influence of *The Mystical City* on Marcellin as almost certain. I willingly take up for this Father Coste's analysis of the case of Jean-Claude Colin: Mary of Agreda gave a structure to his thinking by offering him an eschatology (the final battle at the end of time), a utopia, (a Marian Church in line with the model of the primitive Church governed by Mary), and even a foundation-myth (Mary as a response to the anxieties of the times). Of course the two Founders experienced this thinking in different ways.

Indeed, in contrast with the Marist Fathers, the Brothers did not seem to have suspected the importance of *The Mystical City* in the spiritual career of their Founder. Brother François does not cite it. Brother Jean-Baptiste, who reproduced one of Marcellin talks on devotion to Mary²⁶ partially inspired by *The Mystical City*, recognised neither the title nor its author. For him the reference was to "*The Life of the Blessed Virgin* by Crozet" as he had retained only the subtitle of *The Mystical City* and had confused the translator with the author.

Clearly, and contrary to Father Colin, Marcellin did not pass on his knowledge of Mary of Agreda to the Brothers. Was he afraid, as Father Colin was for the young priests, that the Brothers did not have sufficient spiritual maturity? Undoubtedly. Yet at the same time, he was introducing them to a mystical concept of humility undoubtedly influenced by this nun, without necessarily believing that he had to name her.

Religion of the heart in a secular cosmos

At the time of Fathers Colin and Champagnat, *The Mystical City* was always seen as a bizarre, if fascinating, book and it is still the same today. I think this saying of Father Colin's "We other French people do not have the faith. Our faith in France [...] is a philosophical faith that kills the true faith" enables us to understand why many souls have appreciated Mary of Agreda. This saying takes us back to the opposition, according to Pascal, the 17th C. thinker contemporary with the mysticism, between the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and that of the philosophers and scholars. Historians of religion have themselves shown a recent understanding of Mary of Agreda, considering her as a typical case of the mystical visionary devalued by the break

²⁵ I note, however, in Brother François' Notebook 306 "345. 11th Sunday after Pentecost, 9th August. In a few days time we will have our great Patronal Feast and we will remember the great painting at the altar painted by Mr Raveyri of St Chamond by order of Father Champagnat. May our bodies be clean, our souls holy, our hearts ornamented, and our spirits clear."

²⁶ In the adaptation of a talk of Marcellin's on devotion to Mary cited in the *Life of Father Champagnat* (Second Part, Chapter 7 English Bicentenary edition)

between the old, mediaeval culture, under the blows of the Reformers²⁷, and the new concept of knowledge. In its time the Church itself was in need of discipline and not prophets and the arch-opponent of Mary of Agreda was the Jesuit Rodriguez (1538 - 1616) with his *Practice of Christian Perfection*, the formation-manual of the majority of Religious Orders and Congregations up to the 20th Century which detailed the “solid virtues” and put people on guard against mystical imaginings.

However, two factors saved this literature from oblivion. Firstly, in the face of theology and science which made rational discourse the only access-point to the truth, the development of a theology of the heart for which the “science of the saints” outstripped the faculties for getting to a person’s depths. Notably, these were the popular devotions to Mary and the Sacred Heart.

So, if the God of the Bible no longer coincided with a Galilean cosmos become rational or even rationalist, at least He remained what the mystics called the foundation of being, “the core of the soul”, Who could speak to whom He wished, wise or unlearned, in whatever way He wished. In this agreeable perspective, Mary of Agreda remained someone to be read, but privately, as a support for spiritual reading or meditation.

There would, moreover, be a great deal to say about edifying literature where the apparent banality is probably due less to a declining of mysticism than to a consciousness of the vanity of mystical language. In some way, the extreme difficulty of writing about Mary of Agreda is an indication of this period of impossible and even useless discourse: God speaks in secret and in the most unexpected, not to say, most basic ways.

In the second place, the French Revolution brought visionary literature of an eschatological type to life again, even of its most clear-sighted readers, ecclesiastics in the main, considered that it was profitable only for souls enjoying a sufficient amount of spiritual maturity which would allow them to access what was beyond words. Also, however much they esteemed mystical or visionary literature, there was a concern for sound doctrine and they contented themselves with a public discourse based on theology and Scripture, leaving to God the business of touching hearts.

Also, in the same way that Christian scholars had nevertheless to live in accordance with two distinct discourses, the one of science and the other of the Bible, the readers of mystical authors and devotional works would have to live on the two levels of theology and religion of the heart: the first accessible, the second arcane. This is perhaps why the first half of the 19th Century, extraordinarily prolific in works of all types - signs of a profound spiritual life - scarcely produced any truly mystical literature: nevertheless it is apostolic action and not writing which is the seal of divine inspiration.

The remarkable longevity of Mary of Agreda’s work is understandable since this literature, having become impossible to imitate, retained the trace of a world where heart and reason were brought together in the same environment. Reading her can be done in a nostalgic mood, rejecting reality, but it can also be a way into utopia, aspiring to the reunification of a world unduly divided, where mystical discourse will once again become possible because the distance between word and heart would be abolished, or at least reduced.

²⁷ [Translator’s Note] During the 16th and 17th centuries European countries and cultures were devastated by the effects of the Reformation, when many countries and individuals broke away from the Roman Catholic Church.

Using a different vocabulary, Michel de Certeau²⁸ gives us quite a similar key to understanding. In the Introduction to *The Mystic Fable*²⁹ he reminds us that, with the Enlightenment³⁰ “word”, especially the mystical word, was rejected along with “fable”: the imaginary story. In a parallel way, he states that there was a movement from “heresy” to “refuge”. Each Church showed only part of its nature, even if its ambitions did remain global, but ultimately, it was political power which became the arbiter of truth.

From that, “a prophetic fidelity organised itself as a minority in the secularised State”. It made up a “refuge”. Henceforth, spiritual history would function only in refuges such as the “secret” societies in seminaries, Religious Orders... The mystic lived in a type of exile, conscious of an end and of faith in an afterlife. Conscious of a world in ruins, mystics agreed to live there as practitioners of a humiliated Christian tradition. Conscious of the disarray of knowledge, they make simple, uncouth folk their teachers, like living bibles, disseminated throughout the countryside, the cowsheds, the convents...and distant countries.

Initially understood by a great number of people, *The Mystical City* would have been honoured with a large number of editions and a widespread distribution before being reduced to the ranks of “fable” for a small number of people by a secularised, politicised, rational elite. Those who have chosen to live their religion by way of the heart, of the clandestine refuge will remain aware of this “fable”. They do not see in *The Mystical City* rational discourse, but an apocalypse, a utopia capable of declaring in symbolic language and by analogy that they themselves are alive: a nostalgia for unity and a project for personal and communitarian unification in the faith and in a God underlying and beyond the visible cosmos.

In my opinion, it is through such men that the Society of Mary appeared, in a world where revolution left hardly any illusions about the standardisation of a world away from God and where it was necessary to dream of re-christianising the entire world, beginning with the near or far margins since they were more permeable to the true faith than the elites. This is why Marcellin went to the children in the villages and Colin to the abandoned parishes of Bugey, before the Society of Mary embarked for Oceania.

²⁸ [Translator’s Note] French Jesuit priest and philosopher, b. 1925 - d. 1986.

²⁹ [Translator’s Note] University of Chicago Press, 1995 and 2015.

³⁰ [Translator’s Note] The Enlightenment was a period in European history during the 17th and 18th Centuries in which great emphasis was placed on the search for human happiness and on the pursuit of knowledge. There was much rejection of religion, which was seen as holding up human development.