Marjorie J. Thompson

SOUL FEAST

Newly Revised Edition

An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life

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Contents

New Foreword

While Marjorie Thompson and I have met just once—for as long as it took us to exchange names and shake hands—the first edition of *Soul Feast* has been on my shelf since its publication in 1995. During the years I taught at Columbia Theological Seminary, it was on the required reading list for more courses than I can count. Students who read it invoked her name with the same reverence that she and I once invoked the name of Henri Nouwen, our teacher (at different ends of the same decade) at Yale Divinity School. Now it is my privilege to introduce you to the third edition of *Soul Feast,* a book that belongs not only on your shelf but in your life, at least if you are hungry for the more abundant kind.

By way of full disclosure, I should tell you that I am slow to trust most spiritual guides. Earlier in my life I spent so many years searching for a church home, listening to so many people tell me so many contradictory truths about God that I acquired a kind of seeker's squint—a narrowing of both eye and heart designed to protect me from the next evangelist who came at me with the next plan for my salvation. As far as I can remember, not a single one of them ever asked me an open-ended question. They were in the answer business, and all they needed me to do was swallow.

Marjorie Thompson is not that kind of guide. She has so much trust in her readers that she invites us to amend her teaching based on what we already know about ourselves. To extend the metaphor of the title, she does not fill the table with a bunch of dishes and then tell you how many servings of each you must eat to have a balanced diet. Instead, she asks you to taste them, taking your time as you pay close attention to how each one affects you. If you hate beets, can you put your finger on what it is about them that you cannot stand? If you love nothing more than a plate full of mashed

potatoes, can you figure out what makes them so satisfying? All that Marjorie asks of you is to come to the table with your appetite intact, ready to discover more about what nourishes you and why. She even leaves plenty of room in the margins of this book for you to adapt the recipes to your own kitchen.

At the same time, she is very clear about the spiritual practices that have nourished many kinds of Christians for more than two millennia. Skip one of these dishes altogether and you will be missing essential vitamins, so don't blame Marjorie when your soul starts feeling puny. Fortunately, she has a gift for presenting each practice with such clear appeal that there is little danger of skipping a course. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once told his preaching students, a truly effective sermon must be like offering a child a crisp red apple or holding out a cup of water to a thirsty person and asking, "Wouldn't you like it?" By that measure, every chapter of this book is an effective sermon, for when Marjorie holds out one of the central practices of Christian faith to her readers, the answer is, "Yes, please. I would like it very much."

Marjorie also trusts the body—both the individual and the corporate one—as the concrete locus of divine transformation. Whether she is inviting her readers to experiment with different prayer postures at home or to embody hospitality at work and school, she keeps body and soul together. She never opposes the two or makes one sound holier than the other. In this way and many others, she shows us what it means to live by faith in the incarnation. Whether you believe that the incarnation happened only once, in the body of Jesus Christ, or whether you believe that it happens every day in the body of the church, the truth is the same: God enters the world through human flesh.

From the very first page, Marjorie lets you know that she is less interested in giving you information *about* the spiritual life than she is in giving you the tools to *engage* the spiritual life—both for your health and the health of the world. While her book stimulates quite a lot of thought, making you a better thinker is not the point. The point is to offer you a map to living water, along with a packing list of what you might need and who you might invite to come along as you set off to make the journey for yourself.

At the same time, Marjorie has logged so many hours on that road with so many different kinds of people that she can almost read your mind as you think of a thousand reasons to turn back.

"But I get dizzy when I don't eat," you say to her in the chapter on fasting.

"Fine," she says. "Why don't you try fasting from social media instead?"

"But I'm too shy to talk to a spiritual director," you say to her in the chapter on spiritual guidance.

"Fine," she says. "Why don't you try a small group instead?"

Whatever excuse you come up with, Marjorie has already heard it. Whatever door you think is closed to you, she finds another one for you to try. In this way among many others, she embodies what she teaches: spiritual disciplines must be freely chosen. We choose them only if we have a strong desire to grow, and even then we cannot force them to produce fruit. In the words of Richard Foster, spiritual disciplines are "the means by which we place ourselves where [God] can bless us."[1]

So there you have it. Marjorie not only trusts us to adapt what she has offered in this book and further trusts our bodily experience to teach us what we need to know; she also trusts the Spirit of God to meet each of us where we are, both individually and in community. This makes her one of the most trustworthy guides I know, whose third *Soul Feast* promises to nourish another generation of seekers in the church and far beyond.

Barbara Brown Taylor

Notes

1. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 7.

Introduction

When I agreed to write a book on Christian spiritual practices more than twenty years ago, the concept of spirituality was still relatively new in most Protestant branches of the church. People were largely unaware that Christians had their own history of meditative practice, and had very little knowledge of contemplative prayer. Seminaries and divinity schools did not typically regard even the history of Christian spirituality as appropriate to a curriculum in ministry training, believing that "prayer and devotion" should be taught at home and in church. Consequently congregational leaders, themselves uninformed and unformed, rarely instructed church members in historic spiritual practices such as fasting, self-examination, or even prayer. Until the late twentieth century, Protestant churches chiefly gave their energies to the practices of worship, Bible study, and service.

Christians worldwide had lost touch with the riches of historic spiritual practices, particularly those of a contemplative nature. This loss eventually triggered a hunger to recover them. Mid-century, Thomas Merton played a significant role in reclaiming contemplation for monks and nuns within the very monastic communities that once were guardians of the contemplative life. His prolific writings brought to light the integral connections between contemplation and action. Merton influenced a new crop of church leaders and writers from a broad spectrum of Christian traditions, including fellow Roman Catholic Henri Nouwen and the Quakers Richard Foster and Parker Palmer (representing two distinct strands of the Society of Friends). In one of the gentler ironies of history, Catholics from the ritual-rich, sacramental side of Roman Christianity and Quakers from the low-ritual, "non-sacramental" wing of the Reformation both helped to carry forward a renewed

appreciation of contemplative Christianity. The reason, I believe, is fairly straightforward: Despite their many differences, each has historically valued and nurtured the central role of silence in the spiritual life. Silence, poetically described as "God's first language," is an indispensable condition for genuine spiritual transformation.

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a groundswell of interest in the spiritual life, spurred by the writings of figures like Morton Kelsey, Henri Nouwen, Eugene Peterson, Kathleen Norris, Richard Foster, and Frederick Buechner. This same period saw the development of major formational programs such as the Shalem Institute, Spiritual Directors International, the Academy for Spiritual Formation, and Renovare, alongside new journals like *Weavings* and *Presence*.

The pace of interest in things spiritual accelerated in the 1990s. Training programs in spiritual guidance gained a stronger appeal among Protestants, drawing many to locally available Roman Catholic centers. Several Protestant seminaries began initiatives in spiritual formation and guidance distinct from academic degree programs, offered to clergy and laity alike for ministry enrichment. Many pastors enrolling in Doctor of Ministry programs made spiritual formation a specialized focus of study and practice. The final decade of the twentieth century also spawned a great proliferation of books on the spiritual life, a trend that has continued unabated so far in the twenty-first century.

Soul Feast first appeared in the middle of this yeasty decade of spiritual fermentation. In the intervening years, the book has been deeply valued by individuals, small groups, church leaders, students, and professors. Its enthusiastic embrace has been genuinely humbling and gratifying to me. I receive it as answer to the prayer governing my writing over the two years in which the book took shape: that it might be of genuine help to both laity and leaders of diverse denominations. Some readers have told me it was "the right book at the right time," for them personally but also for the larger church. An author could scarcely hope for more.

Noteworthy Developments in Our Cultural Context

In the years since this book was first published, important shifts have occurred in our culture. One frequently noted with consternation is the growth of the religiously unaffiliated in the United

States. A Pew Research Center survey of the period between 2007–2012 shows an increasing movement away from traditional religious institutions. Twenty percent of American adults no longer identify with a particular tradition, and fully one third of those under the age of thirty are unaffiliated. Collectively, they have been given the moniker "Nones," so called for checking the box labeled None under the question about religious affiliation. This trend is in line with the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon that began as early as the foundation of Alcoholics Anonymous and that has grown more visible since the 1960s.[1]

While the rise in disaffiliation is widely lamented among church leaders, it need not be seen in a wholly negative light. Phyllis Tickle, in her book *The Great Emergence*,[2] argues that we are undergoing the most recent of our every-500-year "rummage sales"—an upheaval in culture and worldview that will inevitably reshape our faith interpretations and institutions as surely as the Great Schism of the eleventh century and the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century. This tsunami of change is well under way, marked by the postmodern and post-Christian sensibilities of the millennial generation. We can perceive certain characteristics of this emerging Christianity: it is profoundly Spirit-centered, seeking discernment through deep listening; it is more concerned with right practice than right belief; it is comfortable with questions and leery of answers; it embraces the truth of paradox over the dualistic absolutes of right and wrong; it rejects hierarchical structure, welcoming shared leadership and democratic decision making; it reflects the egalitarianism of the worldwide web, the new paradigms of quantum physics, and the recasting of traditional sources of authority.

Since these changes are still in a fluid phase, their creative energies are not yet coalesced into highly recognizable structures. We cannot see clearly the shape of what will emerge into a new and stable cohesion over the course of the twenty-first century. However, Tickle assures us that, as with every previous upheaval, this one will result in both greater vitality and a wider spread of the faith than before. It will meet our growing need for a more mature and authentic expression of Christian life. Therefore we need not fear the crumbling of traditional institutional structures or the reshaping of conventional religious ideas. Old forms are dying to make room for the new, sheltered in the mind of God. Since birth pangs are already upon us, those of us embedded in more traditional structures are naturally in distress. Yet if we dwell in trust, we may be confident

that the One who creates, renews, and fulfills all things will carry us through.

Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
Isaiah 43:19 (RSV)

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, an unorthodox teacher and writer, suggests that the rapid rise of the religiously unaffiliated offers humanity a splendid opportunity. Assessing the same Pew Research Center survey noted above he observes, "Most of these so-called Nones are not dismissive of God or spirituality but simply find religious labels and affiliation too narrow and constraining."[3] Shapiro calls them the "spiritually independent," a less prejudicial name than the Nones. He is convinced that they hold the same existential questions most of us do but are unwilling to confine their search for satisfying answers to any one religion or philosophy. They gravitate toward universal themes that resonate with their internal sense of truth, which attracts them to the writings of the mystics and great teachers of every age and culture. Shapiro joins Richard Rohr and others who term such writings the "perennial wisdom."

As I noted in my prologue to the second edition of this book ten years ago, beyond the walls of the church, multitudes of people with searching hearts look for truth wherever they think they can find it. Indeed, many within the church do so as well, a pattern by no means confined to the younger postmodern generation. There has been a notable increase in the number of educated, curious church folk who read broadly in other faith traditions and find it important to grapple with where and how we find common ground among the great spiritual teachings. Given the alarming increase of violence perpetrated worldwide in the name of religion, this is surely a healthy impulse. Yet there is more to the impulse than anxiety over destructive expressions of religious fanaticism. Many are genuinely interested in understanding other faith claims and are often willing to test spiritual practices from other traditions. Yoga is widely embraced in the West for physical and mental well-being, leading some to explore the spiritual underpinnings of Hinduism as well. Mindfulness is now a familiar category in mainstream American life, adapted for use in many settings devoid of its spiritual origins. Yet Buddhist teachings about impermanence, non-attachment, and living mindfully in the present moment carry the appeal of realistic perspective for many in a world changing as rapidly as ours.

On the other side of such explorations, those outside the Christian fold often find Jesus' life and teachings deeply attractive but are not drawn to the doctrines, sacraments, or communities of the church. In the globalized world of Internet communication, with

easy access to multiple cultural and religious perspectives, it is not surprising that more people are pondering and choosing their own synthesis of various spiritual traditions.

Another galloping cultural shift is the extent to which technology has reshaped almost every dimension of our lives. When *Soul Feast* was first published email did not exist! Now, as it is quicker than phone calls and can speed documents or photos halfway across the world in seconds, it has naturally become our preferred method of business correspondence. Means of personal communication are now splintered among a burgeoning buffet of social media platforms and messaging on mobile devices. Bills, banking, shopping, research, books, news, music, classes—all can now be done online. This constitutes an extraordinary shift in how we live day-to-day and foreshadows the path of our future. We have launched into a brave new world where technology impacts everything from industry, business, government, education, and medicine to the environment, the arts, civic engagement, community formation, and of course, religion.

The proliferation of communication modes alone is enough to saddle us daily with distraction. My editor recently acknowledged that he feels obliged to check six locations for messages, depending on who might be contacting him. When Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, and WhatsApp are vying for our loyalty along with phone messages and multiple email accounts, time for focused attention suffers. As the chatter of social media adds to that of TV, radio, and cell phone, reflective spiritual practice becomes more challenging to say the least. We have become masters in the art of distracting ourselves from life's depth. If we hope to penetrate the riches of our own interiority, we will need a strong intention to resist the clamoring demands of instant communication.

The Deeper Challenge

Despite our impressive technological advances, we have yet to learn how to live responsibly on this earth with the great multitude of God's creatures. We have been unwilling to face the full consequences of our increased affluence and unable to deal adequately with the toxic by-products of our way of life. The more technology is used to expand our appetite for consuming the world's shrinking resources, the less capable we will be of embracing with love and respect this astonishingly unique creation.

Nor have we learned, collectively speaking, to live responsibly and respectfully with one another. We are far from loving our neighbors as ourselves, much less loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:43–44). This is true not only for enemies abroad but also those we view as political, economic, or religious enemies on home turf. Two thousand years after Christ's ministry on earth, we are still largely in moral, emotional, and spiritual adolescence. It therefore remains a frighteningly realistic possibility that we will, in some measure, end up destroying both human community and the planet that sustains us.

What I have observed over the past twenty years has increased my sense of urgency about the need for spiritual practice among us. If we do not learn to honor and strengthen the inner life of spirit, all the external changes in the world cannot save us. New laws, regulations, and technological fixes are all susceptible to human corruption and self-interest. If we do not know ourselves as beings created to reflect the divine image, we will lose the immense opportunity for transformation God has offered us in the gift of life itself. And if the love of God embodied in Christ cannot turn us, how shall we be turned?

I remain convinced that the way forward lies in practicing the truths we know. If the importance of spiritual practice has become more widely accepted in recent decades, their appeal lies partly in sheer practicality. Here are forms of prayer, methods of reflection, and patterns of commitment that tangibly impact our spiritual and emotional maturity. Moreover, these practices can transcend the boundaries of theologies that divide us. A common experience of fasting could serve to build bridges between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Contemplative practices have given Christians and Buddhists ground for constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. Spiritual practices have the potential to heal wounds not only within but among us.

The term *practice* has more than one sense. It can mean preparation, as in practicing for a game. It can also mean the ongoing exercise of a profession, as in practicing medicine or law. Spiritual practices can embody both meanings but, in my view, carry more of the second sense. They are not just practice for the real game of discipleship but ways of expressing discipleship.

Spiritual practice is the heart of this book. The most basic practices of faith are relevant in every era. Prayer, meditation on sacred texts, self-examination, and hospitality never go out of style,

although they go out of corporate memory at times. Even today, many Christians remain unfamiliar with the deeper patterns of spiritual discipline that root us in God's transforming love. Given what is at stake in the world, the need is greater than ever for people of faith and good will to understand, experience, and embody the great practices that bring us to mature humanity.

Most of the practices described in this book originate in the ancient Jewish faith from which Jesus' life and teachings come to us. Yet they hold broad application for people of diverse faith backgrounds. Any sincere seeker after God may find practical guidance here in ways to deepen the human spirit and strengthen a sound heart. The essence of it all is learning greater intimacy and freedom in our relationship with God. And the key is giving the Spirit time and space to rearrange our interior furniture—setting our disordered priorities and putting love of God and neighbor center stage.

Approaching This Book

In the pages that follow, I offer my own understanding of what Christian spirituality is and how it may be nurtured among active people in contemporary life. Theological assumptions and definitions are laid out in the first chapter. These are based on my reading of scripture, which remains our most fundamental and precious wellspring of guidance concerning authentic spirituality. My knowledge of scripture is informed by biblical scholarship but rooted in personal prayer, corporate worship, and those theological interpretations held in common among the great streams of historical Christianity.[4]

I was raised and educated in the Reformed theological tradition, which has taught me, among other things, the value of being ecumenical. Within the broader streams of Christian tradition I have found much that is illuminating and lifegiving. Part of the work of the Spirit among us is reclaiming timeless truths from the rich heritage of our historic tradition, just as part of that work is leading us into new understandings of truth: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12–13a).

I trust that this book will speak to the yearnings and convictions of others within the Reformed tradition, but my primary intent is to make a contribution to the wider conversation of the church on the

topic of Christian spirituality. I aim to speak to the spiritual needs and concerns of the ordinary person in the pew as well as those who might never occupy a pew. Yet I know from experience that many pastors, church educators, and seminarians remain hungry as well for guidance in the spiritual life. Only over the past generation has leadership training in most Protestant institutions begun to include a full range of practices for nurturing inward faith alongside its outward expressions.

This is a book for beginners, yet the term *beginner* is deceptive and paradoxical. The more we comprehend of the spiritual life and the longer we try faithfully to live it out, the more we grasp how simple and primary its essential patterns are. There is a childlike simplicity to Christian spirituality. In a certain sense we never get past practicing the basics. This makes beginners of us all, a truth that is both humbling and freeing. The great sixteenth-century Carmelite nun Teresa of Avila captured the reality well when she wrote, "No soul on this road is such a giant that it does not often need to become a child at the breast again. . . . For there is no state of prayer, however sublime, in which it is not necessary often to go back to the beginning."[5]

Purpose and Scope

My purpose is to help people of faith understand and begin to practice some of the basic disciplines of the Christian spiritual life. Disciplines are simply practices that train us in faithfulness. I have chosen disciplines from the ecumenical tradition that have weathered the test of time, proving to be means of grace to Christians of different histories and cultures. Such practices have consistently been experienced as vehicles of God's presence, guidance, and call in the lives of faithful seekers.

In each chapter I treat one practice, offering (1) sufficient information to understand its nature, including historical, theological, and biblical references, and (2) questions and exercises of a practical nature to lead into an experiential encounter with the discipline. Because my intent is practical and experiential, the *information* in this book is offered in the service of faith *formation*. My aim is to engage mind and heart together in seeking nourishment for our spiritual hunger. The exercises suggested within each chapter are oriented to the individual reader but can be adapted for group use. (See Group Study Guide at the back of the book.)

No introductory book on the spiritual life can be comprehensive. I am keenly aware of the compromises made in treating certain topics and omitting others. For example, instead of a chapter on journal keeping, I chose to weave journaling suggestions into each chapter as it seemed appropriate. Within the limited scope of this book, the selection of topics inevitably represents my own sense of the weight of these practices relative to other possibilities.

I have tried to arrange the chapters with a meaningful flow between topics. In chapter 1, I discuss the widespread spiritual hunger of our time, suggesting where we might look for satisfaction. I introduce basic terms and perspectives concerning the Christian spiritual life. In chapter 2, I consider the practice of spiritual reading, understood primarily as meditative reading of scripture. For Protestants generally (but not exclusively), hearing and responding to God's Word alone or in a small group is a priority in the spiritual life.

The nature and practice of prayer is treated in chapter 3. The spiritual life receives its very heart and soul in prayer, a practice that for Christians is embedded in meditation on scripture. In chapter 4, I take up the role of public worship in our spiritual formation. This discussion is placed after that of spiritual reading and prayer only because personal reading and prayer immeasurably enrich our experience of corporate worship. Worship remains the foundation and context for every spiritual practice, especially those of a personal or "private" nature.

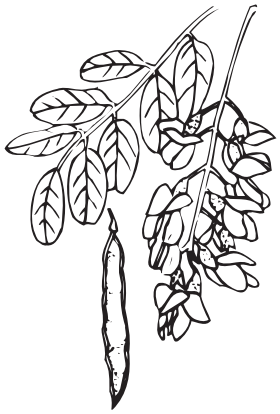
Chapter 5, new for this edition, addresses the theme of sabbath, a most critical practice to recover in our time. It follows the chapter on worship since reframing the concept of sabbath expands on an earlier understanding limited to the day for Christian worship. Fasting is closely associated with both public worship and private prayer in Christian tradition. In chapter 6, I look at fasting in the larger context of abstaining from excessive attachments and nurturing simplicity of life. Fasting and penitence are closely associated in most religious traditions, including Jewish and Christian tradition. Chapter 7 encourages us to reconsider the ancient art of self-examination and confession.

Christians historically have not understood confession to be solely a private matter between God and the individual. To examine one's heart alone can lead to despair, self-deception, or unhealthy scrupulosity. Chapter 8 is an introduction to the importance of consulting with another Christian who can act as a guide or mentor in spiritual growth.

In chapter 9, I consider the central Christian practice of hospitality. Here I move beyond disciplines that focus primarily on our relationship with God, even when they involve us with and affect others. Hospitality directly and visibly expresses our spiritual kinship with every human being and with the whole creation. It is both a *means* of God's transforming grace for us and a fruitful *expression* of the Spirit working in us for the sake of others.

In chapter 10, substantially expanded for this new edition, I consider what it might mean to devise a "rule of life" for ourselves from what we have learned by working through the preceding chapters. The connection between personal and corporate disciplines should be very clear at this point, not as a logical argument but as an experienced reality.

On Reading This Book



This book is intended to be a catalyst for your own thought, imagination, feeling, intuition, and will. The margin quotations and exercises throughout serve several purposes. They feature ancient and modern writers representing a spectrum of Christian traditions to help illuminate the basic text. (Source information for these quotes and for chapter epigraphs is included in the Notes.) They also contain questions and suggestions for reflection to help you assimilate chapter content in relation to your personal experience. I encourage you to treat the book as "spiritual reading." Take it in at a leisurely pace, pausing frequently to think and absorb as you read. Margin materials give both permission and structure to your reflective interaction with the text.

This book covers considerable ground on the subject of spiritual practices. You should not expect to launch into everything at once, even if you feel inspired to do so. Similarly, there is no need to be discouraged at the thought of all the things you *don't* do. My purpose is to introduce you to a variety of possibilities for enriching your spiritual life. Pay attention to what you feel especially drawn to and why. God would rather that we learn to be faithful in a few humble commitments than that we continually despair over our failures because we take on too much.

A good way to read this book is with a small community of other seekers. If you study, pray, and practice with just one chapter between gatherings, you will not run the risk of getting spiritual indigestion by trying to take it all in at once. The suggestions in

the Group Study Guide will help guide your class or group through each chapter.

I trust this book will continue to add a clear voice to the ongoing conversation in our church and culture concerning how we nurture and sustain spiritual vitality in contemporary life. I hope that reading and reflecting on what follows will do more than edify—that it will draw you into a courageous and joyful exercise of those practices that may yield an experiential knowledge of God. God's own challenging guidance and providential grace are more than sufficient to satisfy the hunger in each of our lives and communities of faith. When we begin to take spiritual practices seriously, the possibilities for personal and corporate transformation are truly beyond our imagining! May grace attend your reading and reflection.

Notes

1. The growth of the religiously unaffiliated reflects more than the individualism so rampant in American society. Studies suggest that contributing factors include a strong reaction against the melding of conservative religious teachings and aggressive politics that has shaped the American landscape since the 1980s and the general secularization that marks nations with more affluent economies. See the Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, " 'Nones' on the Rise" (Oct. 9, 2012) at pewforum.org.

2. See Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008, 2012). A gifted writer with immense historical breadth, Tickle offers a condensed yet comprehensive overview of the past two millennia, drawing out the confluence of social, economic, political, religious, scientific, and technological changes shaping each era. She helpfully puts current trends into a much larger perspective than most contemporary analysts of culture.

3. *Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent*, annotation by Rami Shapiro (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013), xiii.

4. The three main streams are Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. The theology they hold in common is expressed most concisely in the ecumenical creeds, particularly the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, which were adopted by the church before any major schism occurred.

5. *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), 145.