

Voice coach

Sor María of Ágreda learned to embrace her voice despite censure. Her story encourages us to seek silence to find and fulfill our own callings.



Photo by Marilyn H. Fedewa. 17th-century painting on display in the convent museum, Ágreda, Spain; artist unknown.

“Every soul, without exception, is capable of embracing its inner light. Yet in order to receive so delicate an influence, quiet is essential.”

—Sor María of Ágreda

MY MENTOR IS A 17TH-CENTURY mystic, a cloistered abbess in an old-world convent tucked into the mountains of north-eastern Spain.

I discovered Sor María of Ágreda (1602-1665) after battling severe burnout from 15 years as a fundraiser for higher education, while at the same time frequenting emergency rooms and nursing homes in the care of my aging family. One day, while sorting through my recently deceased mother-in-law’s books, I discovered four dusty green leather volumes by Sor María, each with faded gold lettering that read *Mystical City of God*.

The 2,700-page set, still considered a Baroque masterpiece by contemporary scholars of Spanish language and literature, chronicled the life of Jesus’ mother, Mary. In it, the author also shared some of her own story—that of a beleaguered holy woman trapped in a male-dominated hierarchy. Although revered by her community, privately Sor María suffered from self-doubt, fear, and conflicting aspirations.

“It is the duty of women to be silent in the holy church,” she was told by an old confessor in an attempt to discourage her writing. This struck a chord with me. So many women—even today—feel silenced in the church or in their professions. For those of us who struggle on that front, Sor María blazed a seemingly paradoxical yet striking path, because she utilized silence itself to gain her voice. Through the frequent practice of meditative prayer, Sor María experienced a deep peace and spiritual light. As she opened herself in prayer—“dilating the heart,” she termed it—her confidence grew, and she yearned to speak her own voice.

By MARILYN H. FEDEWA, a communications consultant and author. News on her recently completed biography of Sor María of Ágreda is available at cambridgeconnections.net.

WHILE COMMUNICATION HAS long been my strength, I most often used it to express someone else's voice, as many women do in service professions. At work I had ghost-written articles and speeches for university presidents, placing myself in their psyches, expressing their institutional hopes and concerns, and rallying forth their constituencies. It became second nature for me, and generally I considered it a welcome talent that I willingly contributed, as long as I also had time to pursue my own creative writing and spiritual development.

Constant medical emergencies, however, eroded that restorative cushion, and I buckled in the aftermath. Exhausted, I relinquished my dreams as my inner light dimmed.

From that dark place, as I tiptoed into *Mystical City of God*, I empathized with Sor María's misgivings about her calling, and the depth of her sadness as

she doubted her ability to fulfill it. As she shared the "story within the story," her own voice gaining in strength, she explained the nature of her mystical visions of Mary while in quiet prayer, and she railed against corrupt Christian governments that failed to follow Mary's "guiding star." Amazed scribes read the sheets that they copied and spread the news of their content. King Felipe IV of Spain could not fail to notice. Rather than take offense, he sought Sor María's spiritual and political advice for 22 years, documented in more than 600 letters between them.

Despite her friendship with the king, the Inquisition scrutinized Sor María's activities for decades, especially the reports of her extraordinary mystical experiences. Most notably, she was said to have levitated during ecstatic prayer and "bilocated," appearing in what is now the Southwestern United States, where she is known yet today as

the "Lady in Blue," while still living in Spain. After her death Sor María was fully exonerated and honored as venerable, the first step toward sainthood. Yet during those difficult years, she often pushed away her feather quill pen out of self-doubt and fear of censure. Twice she even burned her writing at the order of priest superiors. Yet the calling persisted.

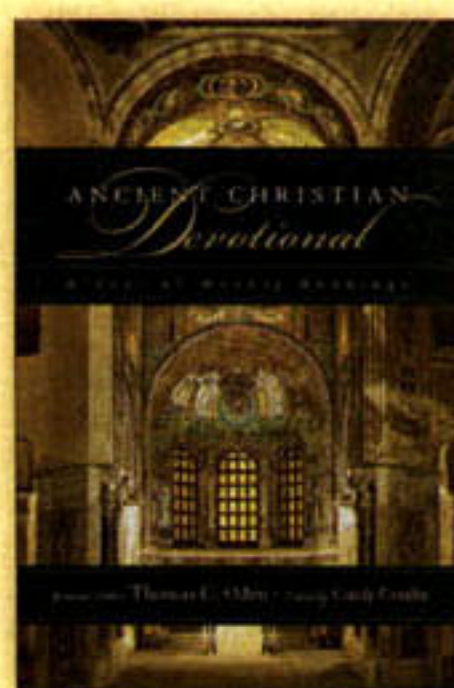
THE MORE I READ OF SOR MARÍA'S passion to follow her inner voice and complete the volumes, the more I wanted to absorb her meditative treatment of Mary's life, to immerse myself in the radiant feminine strength of the Mother of the Christ.

Before long I quit my job to go solo as an author and communications consultant. Days were spent generating business—including publishing articles on my new 17th-century "life coach" and writing her biography—while evenings were spent quietly absorbing *Mystical City of God*.

In this tranquil receptivity I, too, had my heart "dilated" and seemed to hear Sor María—and Mary through her. "It was as though our very souls were speaking to each other," she wrote about her mystical intuitions of Mary and others, in words describing what I now experienced in the silence.

There, Sor María reminds us, the powerful call to action will reverberate and compel us to our calling. **USC**

Ancient Prayer for the Liturgical Year



ANCIENT CHRISTIAN DEVOTIONAL
Cindy Crosby and Thomas C. Oden, editors

This unique devotional presents 52 weekly readings from the ancient church fathers. Beginning with Advent, it provides a simple format for following the liturgical year in prayer.

formatio from InterVarsity Press

formatio.ivpress.com 630.734.4000

SELECTED RESOURCES:

The Visions of Sor María de Ágreda: Writing, Knowledge, and Power by Clark A. Colahan (University of Arizona Press, 1994)

Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936, Vol. I by Carlos E. Castañeda (Von Boeckmann-Jones Company, 1938)

Marilyn H. Fedewa's website on Sor María: cambridgeconnections.net/Maria.html

Site celebrating the 400-year anniversary of her birth: MariaDeAgreda.org