

**Contemplation, Christian Spirituality, and Pauli Murray:
A Response to Donyelle McCray's "Contemplative Agitator: Tracing the Contours of Pauli
Murray's Black Contemplative Homiletic."**

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In "Contemplative Agitator: Tracing the Contours of Pauli Murray's Black Contemplative Homiletic," Donyelle McCray has developed a wonderfully rich view of Pauli Murray's contemplative, poetic, and "bridge-building" preaching vocation. Through her close analysis of Murray, the first African American woman ordained in the Episcopal church, McCray expands our view of what a contemplative homiletic might look like in practice. At the same time, this study of Murray contributes to the study of Christian spirituality by broadening understandings of contemplation to incorporate more diverse cultural particularities, providing a lived example of the "contemplative agitator," and highlighting the power of life writing (autobiography and biography) as homiletical text.¹ In this response I will comment briefly on each of these three areas and raise some questions to deepen the conversation.

First, Pauli Murray's life and writing expand our view of contemplation. Looking at the history of Christian spirituality from an African American perspective, Barbara Holmes argues that Christian understandings of contemplation have overemphasized individual, solitary experience due to insufficient attention to diverse cultural and religious traditions of contemplation. Holmes notes that while African and African American spirituality includes deeply personal religious experience: "The key to contemplation in the black church," Holmes writes, "seems to be its emergence as a communal practice."² Pauli Murray's life and preaching provide an example of a communally oriented contemplative-public spirituality. Murray's contemplative homiletic seeks a *shared* practice of awe, self-examination, and identity exploration that builds bridges while honoring the particularities of communities.

McCray describes Murray's contemplative homiletic as the facilitation of a different way of seeing on the part of the hearers, an ability to perceive the deep reality at the heart of the world all around us: "Preaching reframed the tensions and exigencies of the empirical world, allowing them to be examined through a numinous lens." Influenced by Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and Evelyn Underhill, Murray understands contemplation not as a withdrawal into interiority but as a more attentive practice of seeing all of life, the visible and invisible, what Nouwen understands to be "a practice of looking closely at life's nerve center." Walter Burghardt's definition of contemplation as a "a long loving look at the Real" comes close here too.³ In this approach to contemplation, there is not a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular but rather attention to the "overlays of seen and unseen worlds," as McCray writes.

¹ For an introduction to spirituality studies as an academic discipline, see Elizabeth Dreyer and Douglas Burton Christie, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). For further reading on life writing, see, for example, James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes, eds., *Teaching Life Writing Texts* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2008).

² Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 17.

³ Walter Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real" in George W. Traub, *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), pp. 89-98. Originally published in *Church*, 1989.

Contemplation entails the practice of finding small, seemingly insignificant material things as “portals to the divine.” Doors are everywhere. The contemplative preacher helps us to see them.

For Murray, preaching is a proclamation of wonder. This explains a shift in homiletic tone from argument to awe. For Murray, the preacher is not an expert, but rather, alongside the congregation, is “unraveled by the experience of God’s love,” writes McCray. Contemplation here is a communal experience, accessible to all, in ordinary spaces, not restricted by place or ecclesial position. It is experience of connection to God, to creation, to ancestors. To further explore this communal-contemplative preaching, it would be interesting to think more about the congregation’s experience of a contemplative homiletic. How does the community receive this invitation to wonder? What kind of formation does a congregation need to participate fully in a contemplative homiletic? How does the rest of the worship service—and the congregation’s life during the week—support (or impede) a contemplative way of being?

Murray’s life and preaching also show the interrelationships between a contemplative way of being and public witness. Contemplation and public action can seem worlds apart—one ensconced in quiet perception, the other in the loud public arena. Yet, while contemplation and public agitation may seem like very different callings to some, Murray embodies their integration. Murray thus offers a kind of nuanced case study for Christian spirituality and a living example that is inspiring and instructive. McCray carefully notes that the faith lives of African Americans should not be reduced only to public action—and, more specifically, to “outward” resistance to whiteness. She points to the need for more attention to the inner lives of African Americans and notes how important “inner life” is for Murray’s contemplative homiletic: “Murray’s sermons nurtured the inner lives of fellow contemplative agitators who were convinced of God’s abiding presence.”⁴ Such attention to interiority and homiletics is intriguing and merits further study. Also to be noted here is that interiority and community go together; inner life can be cultivated in the communal context of worship.

I would draw particular attention to McCray’s brief note about the “wearying” tensions in Murray’s life. The poet and warrior battle in her mind; the contemplative and the reformer pull in different directions. So often, the burden of sustaining that challenging, tensive relationship between contemplation and public action goes unnamed or unnoticed, quietly written into a diary or a personal note. For example, I have noted similar tensions cracking open in the letters of Dorothy Day, where Day describes her exhaustion as she struggles to build the Catholic Worker movement, live in community, and raise her daughter as a single parent.⁵ I would encourage more study of “weariness” in the lives of contemplative public leaders, including preachers. In Murray’s life, as for Day, surely gender complicates and intensifies the struggle to integrate public and contemplative leadership. How does the intersection of gender and race contribute to Murray’s fatigue? How nurture a contemplative way of being in the very public persona and role of the preacher? How might we teach or form students in a contemplative homiletic—and what sustains this homiletic?

⁴ On African American women and interiority, see also Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Tilling Sacred Grounds: Interiority, Black Women, and Religious Experience* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022).

⁵ See Robert Ellsberg, ed., *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day* (New York: Image Books, 2010) and Robert Ellsberg, ed., *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day* (New York: Image Books, 2011), as well as Day’s autobiography *The Long Loneliness* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). For more on the challenges of integrating spirituality and public leadership in Day and other women, see Claire E. Wolfteich, *Mothering, Public Leadership, and Women’s Life Writing: Explorations in Spirituality Studies and Practical Theology* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2017).

Third, McCray notes Murray's use of autobiography, biography, and memoir as texts of contemplative preaching. Murray expands beyond Scripture and the stories of well-known saints to include narratives of ordinary people who have shaped her faith, including the ancestors. McCray notes that the dominance of Eurocentric saints understood as exemplars in Christian contemplative tradition has resulted in certain spiritual itineraries, pathways, and progressions being understood as normative for Christian spirituality. For example, historical traditions of Christian spirituality include many examples of the familiar trajectory—purgation, illumination, and union—and the elevation of certain virtues (for example, humility).⁶ I share Murray's appreciation of life writing as an important entry into lived theology and spirituality. Lives can be read and preached as significant spiritual texts—embodied witnesses that can illuminate and energize the lived faith of the readers/hearers.

At the same time, I would be interested to hear more about Murray's (and McCray's) hermeneutical approach to life writing as a preacher and as an Episcopal priest. What authority does biography hold, and how did Murray bring life writing into dialogue with Scripture, tradition, and reason? As the lives that we regard as central texts expand beyond recognized saints of the church, we gain such rich and relatable companions. Yet, so too the theological questions get more complicated. How do we identify what is faithful in these lives? What happens in the encounter between preached life writing texts and the reader or hearer? Do these lives/texts function as mirrors, exemplars, and/or spiritual companions? Practical theological study of Murray's homiletic leads us into such questions.

In my own research on spirituality and women's life writing, I have grappled with such issues. One important Roman Catholic theological resource here is the idea of the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful): "Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the members of the Church possess the *'sense of the faith'* ... a kind of *'spiritual instinct.'*"⁷ This sense of the faithful is a capacity for discernment that operates within the communion of the Church. In my view, life writing can be a window into the *sensus fidelium*, revealing the daily texture of faith in actual lives of the people of God. Still, there is debate about how to identify authentic expressions of faith, as Pope Francis noted: "Of course, it is clear that the *sensus fidelium* must not be confused with the sociological reality of majority opinion. It is something else. It is therefore important...to develop criteria for discerning authentic expressions of the *sensus fidelium*. For its part, the Magisterium has the duty to be attentive to what the Spirit says to the Churches through the authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidelium*."⁸

This discussion of the sense of the faithful may be useful as we consider life writing as homiletical text, though clearly homiletical theologians from different traditions will need to reflect from within their own frameworks. McCray's study of Murray provides food for thought.

⁶ For further reading, see, for example, Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest 16 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986). See also Arthur Holder, "The Problem with 'Spiritual Classics,'" *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 10, no. 1 (2010): 22-37.

⁷ Pope Francis, Address to the International Theological Commission, December 2013: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_commissione-teologica.html, accessed May 24, 2024. See too International Theological Commission, "Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church" (2014), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html, accessed May 24, 2024.

⁸ Ibid.

How might we understand, specifically, the narratives of black women as ancestral wisdom?⁹ And, how might a contemplative homiletic cultivate the spiritual instinct of the faithful?

In sum, McCray's exploration of Pauli Murray makes a welcome contribution to homiletical theology and to spirituality studies. In Murray, we find a lived example of the contemplative preacher, agitator, reformer, and "poet-warrior." Her life and writing poignantly illustrate a distinctive contemplative homiletic while also raising generative questions for our further reflection.

⁹ On black women's autobiography, see, for example, Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).