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ANNOTATION

Evans, RSM, Jean Neva. “The Mystical Writings of Madeleine de Saint Joseph du Bois de Fontaines (1578-1637).” DTh dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa, 2002. 237pp.

Jean Neva Evans’ thesis, “The Mystical Writings of Madeleine de Saint Joseph du Bois de Fontaines (1578-1637),” is an excellent addition to the canon on French Spirituality. The subject of the thesis was the first prioress of the Teresian Carmelite order in France. Known for her spiritual direction, leadership, and writing, she is widely regarded as one of the more influential contributors to French spirituality.

Chapter One (1-18) provides an overview of the purpose of the thesis, the methods used, and a cursory overview of literature written by or about Madeleine de Saint Joseph (Mère Madeleine).

Chapter Two (19-56) presents an in-depth exploration of mysticism. Discussed is the relationship of mysticism to the body, consciousness, and knowledge. The author further explores the idea of mediation and provides a perspective on the feminist critique of mysticism.

In Chapter Three (57-103), an exploration of the political, social, and cultural context in which Mère Madeleine lived and worked is provided. This chapter includes discussion of the contributions of women in the church in France. Specifically, the contributions of Jane Frances de Chantal, Louise de Marillac, and Madame Barb Acarie. In addition, this chapter examines the mutual influence of Pierre de Bérulle and Mère Madeleine.

Through phenomenological analysis, Chapter Four (104-168) presents the context and content of selected writings of Madeleine in order to determine if they meet the criteria for authentic mystic experience. In addition, presented is an analysis of the theological content of the tests.

The spiritual teachings of Mère Madeleine are analyzed in Chapter Five (169-204). Themes that emerge include prayer, humility, petition, trouble in prayer, adoration and love, and detachment/adherence. Additional analysis of Mère Madeleine’s writings reveal the guidelines of spiritual direction that she shared with correspondents.

Chapter Six (205-211) provides a summary conclusion to the work. Presented is a summary discussion of feminist critique and the incarnate meaning of Madeleine de Saint Joseph’s existence. The feminist critique is summarized by the author as follows, “While the beginnings of Carmelite life in France may have been dominated by the inspiration of women, the rest of the story was affected by patriarchal structures and religious territorialism” (208). Evidence provided includes the requirement of Carmelite congregations to have a male superior, the refusal of the Father General in Spain to allow the Spanish Carmelite nuns to travel to France (so they did so in

secret), and the appointment by the Holy See of three French priests, who were not Carmelites, to be the ecclesiastic superiors for the women religious.

The author summarizes the incarnate meaning of Madeleine de Saint Joseph's existence as "worshipping the living God in spirit and in truth" (210). She saw the value in all created things and sensed the presence of Jesus Christ. She perceived herself as an imperfect sinner who needed to turn to God's love and in doing so "her life was lived in authenticity" (211).