

ELISABETH CATEZ (1880-1906): A MYSTIC FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Elisabeth Catez (1880-1906), a relatively unknown French mystical writer, lived an obscure life as a Carmelite in Dijon, France, dying at the young age of 26 yrs. Whilst not reporting extraordinary mystical experiences, nevertheless, Elisabeth articulates a profound mystical understanding of the Trinity, with particular reference to the indwelling Triune God. Born in an era marked by keen interest in the spiritual and aesthetic, Elisabeth was also clearly influenced by the prevailing historical, sociological and theological currents of her day. Although Elisabeth is more of an artist than a theologian, her writings portray a spiritual depth uncommon for a relatively uneducated young French woman in the early twentieth century. As a member of the Carmelite family worldwide, Elisabeth's thought reverberates throughout the continent of Africa, in the many Carmels founded over more than one hundred years ago, and witnesses to the on-going influence of the spirit of Carmel for the 21st century.

1 INTRODUCTION

Elisabeth Catez (1880-1906) known in religious life as Elisabeth of the Trinity, died at the young age of twenty-six at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her life was ordinary and obscure, the final five years being spent in an enclosed monastery in Dijon, France. Nevertheless, she has been acclaimed as one of the major mystical authors of the 20th century (Decourtray 1979:7) and her influence has spread world-wide, reaching countless women and men from all walks of life.¹ How can this be accounted for? What is so special about this young French girl that John Paul II could cite her as one of the greatest influences in his life (Decourtray 1980:8).

How relevant is Elisabeth today, particularly for women in Africa, in a setting so vastly different from France in the early twentieth century? The aim of this article is to provide a short introduction to Elisabeth and her Trinitarian mysticism, so as to elucidate the significance of her writings for the twenty-first century, with particular mention of the continent of Africa. In order to locate Elisabeth within the prevailing *Weltanschauung* of her time, a brief analysis of nineteenth and early twentieth century religious thought will be of value.

2 NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

The importance of the formative milieu is a *sine qua non* in order to understand the particular thought of a given mystic. Mysticism must be situated within its own particular history, and can only be understood in the light of its contextual and cultural configurations and its relationship to prevailing language systems and doctrinal beliefs. As a result of this, there can be a variety of perceptions with respect to an apprehension of the divine, due to the heterogeneity of social mentalities and cultural forms (Hick 1986:100). An understanding not only of the immediate context, but also of the wider historical and theological milieu of a given mystic, contributes to this hermeneutical enterprise. Therefore, it is important to see Elisabeth against the background of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Elisabeth was born at a time when the inner life was considered to be of unique value. The nineteenth century has been classified as the century of *religious experience* and although Elisabeth would have been largely unaware of the major philosophical and theological currents of thought outside her native France, nevertheless she lived in an era where new ideas and rich intuitions flourished. Richmond (1966:53) sharpens this point incisively in his description of the nineteenth century as one of the great determinative eras in the history of the church: "It was a convulsive and highly complex century which saw the emergence, sometimes only germinally, of most of the significant movements, tendencies and theories which formed the background and starting-points for much of our twentieth century living and thinking." The nineteenth century was the age of the Romantics, in which personal experience and a growing interest in the rich diversity of human life was brought to the fore by poets, artists and musicians and theologians (Livingston 1971:81). Whilst the Romantics did not wish to repudiate entirely the fruits of the Aufklärung, nevertheless they wished to enlarge the vision of the eighteenth century and give due credit to both reason and experience. Kant (1724-1804) had rejected the notion that the existence of God could be demonstrated by theoretical argumentation; however, his rejection of a predominantly metaphysical understanding of God was countered by his own rehabilitation of God in the sphere of practical reason, in which religion was overshadowed by morality (Nicholls 1971:63). Such a narrow, austere view of religion, reflecting a way of life which concentrates on stern, unflinching devotion to duty, and in which the overriding criteria is morality, gives no place to the mystical element in religion. The joy, ecstasy, gratitude, self-giving and self-forgetfulness that is found in the New Testament and in the lives of the mystics is completely absent in Kant's lack-lustre religion (Richmond 1966:52). The Romantics of the nineteenth century therefore rejected both the "... deist watchmaker God, dispassionately transcendent over his creation ..." (Livingston 1971:83) and the narrow moral creed propounded by Kant. They were unwilling to reduce experience "... either to rationalism or a narrow scientific empiricism" (Livingston 1971:81). The Romantics saw God as the vital Spirit immanent in all things, with whom communion was a possibility.

Certain *pro-mystical* trends can be detected, inter alia, in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher, (1768-1834) whose theology has been acknowledged as "... the most forceful and systematic statement of the Romantic and liberal understanding of the Christian religion" (Livingston

1971:96). Influenced by the Romantic school and the Moravians, a pietist group, Schleiermacher did not wish to divorce religion from either reason or morality. Yet, the core or irreducible element in religion was to be found in *das Gefühl*, or more precisely, *das Gefühl schlechthinniger Abhängigkeit* (McGrath 1986:20). This “feeling of absolute dependence” is not purely a psychological emotion; rather it is an “... immediate self-consciousness ... immediate intuition” (Livingston 1971:100). Not all feeling is religious. The latter is characterised by the “... immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the eternal ... It is to have life and know life in immediate feeling ... [as] an existence in the infinite and eternal” (Schleiermacher 1958:36). The use of the word “immediate” is an indication that Schleiermacher does not see the experience as that of a subject apprehending an object; rather it is an intrinsic encounter with the Divine, a contemplative reality, which entinctures the totality of life. This mystic tendency is the most fundamental principle in Schleiermacher’s thought:

The sum total of religion, then, is to feel all that moves us in our feeling in the supreme unity of it all, as one and the same, and to feel all that is individual and particular as mediated only through that unity - that is to feel our being and life as a being and life through God (Schleiermacher 1958:94).

Schleiermacher’s seminal expression of what he considers to be true religion, corresponds in large measure to current theories of mysticism, in which the essential core is *consciousness of union with the divine*. His description of a pure experience, not involving conceptualisation, and as an immediate experience, not involving any mind-dependent inferences ranks Schleiermacher among those who argue for a state of pure consciousness in contrast to the constructivist school of thought.ⁱⁱ Of course, the mystical interpretation of religion as exemplified by Schleiermacher was not unequivocally accepted by his contemporaries. Hegel (1770-1831) who taught with Schleiermacher at the University of Berlin, contemptuously called the latter “... a virtuoso of edification and enthusiasm” (Livingston 1971:144). Ritschl (1822-1899) felt that Schleiermacher’s view of religious experience was dangerously close to subjectivism. As a historian, the proper object of theology for Ritschl was not human consciousness, but the historical reality of the gospel as given in the New Testament, namely the historical Christ (Livingston 1971:248). Distaste for speculative and metaphysical attempts to establish a religious framework was also seen in another Ritschlian theologian, Von Harnack (1851-1930) who stressed the historical interpretation of Christianity and the inner drive toward moral values (Richmond 1966:95).

Mysticism in France at this time is exemplified, inter alia, by Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) and Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) as well as Elisabeth Catez. Thérèse offered a unique brand of Catholic spirituality, which represented a sharp break with the devotional tradition of the Catholic Church in the Latin countries, in which Marian devotion and the post-Tridentine emphasis on devotion to the saints held sway. Thérèse, however, turned directly to God the Father and the person of Jesus. Furthermore, in an age in which Catholic piety was inclined to try and find salvation in external religious

practices, Thérèse emphasised the absolute impossibility of saving oneself, and therefore the necessity of relying on grace alone – a very protestant position (Dwyer 1985:362). Likewise, Elisabeth Catez, although also a cloistered Carmelite, nevertheless offered a mysticism of the indwelling Trinity, which could be accessed by all, regardless of status. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

It is relevant at this juncture to comment briefly on the relationship of the church and state in France during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. The Bourbon monarchy of the Restoration (1815-1830) and the monarchy of the *July Revolution* (1830-1848) had restored the French church to a position of privilege, if not of power (Dwyer 1985:360). This situation continued with the establishment of the Second Empire (1851). However, with the demise of the Second Empire as a result of the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War, the Third Republic came into being. Characteristic of the latter was a “... wave of revulsion against the shallowness, the injustice and the clericalism of a social order with which the church seemed to be inextricably involved” (Dwyer 1985:361). Hostility towards the church was evident from 1876 onwards. In 1886 the teaching of religion in schools was prohibited, resulting in increasing anti-Republic feeling from Catholics. In 1905 and 1906, legislation was passed separating church and state, as a result of the antagonistic approach of the then President, Emile Combes, bringing to an end the public celebration of church holidays, and suspension of all government support of the church. During her time in the Dijon Carmel, Elisabeth refers to the prevailing political situation in certain of her letters. Elisabeth mentions, inter alia, the exile of the Capuchin fathers and the possibility of the Dijon Carmelites’ expulsion from the city (De Meester 1980:165,128,156). The strong anti-religious line taken by the civic authorities of the time served to entrench Elisabeth more deeply in her faith (Moorcroft 2001:98-99).

This brief excursus into the prevailing religious climate of the nineteenth and early twentieth century has demonstrated the importance of the various cultural and philosophical configurations of a particular era upon any given spirituality. Likewise, Elisabeth was a child of her time, although, as discussed later in this article, her message transcends particularities of time and place. Against this historical background, a short biographical sketch of Elisabeth is now offered.

3 ELISABETH CATEZ: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elisabeth Catez was born July 18 1880 at the military Camp d’Avor, near Bourges, France. Both her parents, Francis Joseph and Marie Rolland Catez, came from military backgrounds. In November 1882, the family moved to Dijon. In 1887 Elisabeth faced two severe trials, firstly, the death of her grandfather and then in October of the same year, the death of her father. De Meester (1980:11) remarks that this sudden disappearance of two of her loved ones must have had a profound impact on Elisabeth, only seven years old at the time, and could have given her a sense of the fragility of life. After her father’s death, the small family took up residence close to the monastery of the Discalced Carmelites in Dijon. Exteriorly, Elisabeth’s life resembled any

other child of her age. A talented pianistⁱⁱⁱ she spent much time studying the piano and her free time was taken up with the social activities of the age. Elisabeth enjoyed fashion and to all extents and purposes lived as any other young woman of her age (Moorcroft 2001:33). Interiorly, however, Elisabeth lived at a deep mystical level and in 1897 she made known her desire to enter Carmel but her mother refused permission until she was twenty-one years old. Consequently, it was only in August 1901 that Elisabeth entered the Carmel at Dijon,^{iv} fitting into the daily routine of the simple, austere and well-regulated life of a Carmelite, leading to her profession, January 11 1903. This is not to say that Elisabeth found her new life easy. On the contrary, a profound reversal of values and a systematic recasting of experience was necessary to effect a transformation of life-style from someone who loved to follow the latest Parisian fashions to someone who would be content with the patched habit of Carmel; from the promising classical pianist whose rendition of Mendelssohn's *Capriccio brilliant* won her top honours to someone who would use her musical and artistic talents in the humble, ordinary life of a Carmelite (Valabek 1985:40). From a comfortable bourgeois life-style to one in which there was no electricity, running water or heating in her cell necessitated "divine refinement" (Valabek 1985:41). Elisabeth lived life intensely, in accordance with her artistic, exuberant and emotional nature and channeled her previously headstrong and sometimes irascible personality traits into a deep and heartfelt passion for life; this found expression even in the silence of Carmel (Larkin 1984:8; Decourtray 1980:27).

Early in 1905, certain symptoms of the illness^v that was to overtake Elisabeth occurred. Certain rigid observances of the rule were relaxed for Elisabeth. However, the illness worsened, and in the spring of 1906, Elisabeth was permanently installed in the infirmary. After one or two relapses, after which her condition improved slightly, the final crisis came and Elisabeth died on November 9 1906. Her last words were, "Je vais à la Lumière, à l'Amour, à la Vie!"

4 ELISABETH CATEZ: AUTOGRAPHS

It is particularly noteworthy that Elisabeth's deep mystical insight has been gleaned from what can be considered a few occasional writings and one or two treatises and retreats.^{vi} Of particular interest is the fact that of the three hundred and forty-six letters of Elisabeth that have been preserved, eighty-four were written in her youth, and two hundred and sixty-two were written from Carmel. Given the fact that letter writing from Carmel was disciplined and restricted, in accordance with the aim of severance from the world and from unnecessary distractions, nevertheless Elisabeth's correspondence witnesses to her strong ties of friendship and her fervent apostolic spirit. It is also noteworthy that of Elisabeth's fifty-seven correspondents, forty were lay persons, an indication that she maintained close links with previous family members and friends, and in addition considered letter-writing as part of her apostolic vocation.

Elisabeth's mystical teaching found expression, not only in her treatises, but also in some of these letters, even short letters of thanks (Valabek 1985:32). With respect to the nature of the autographs the question can be posed as to

whether these writings can be classified as “mystical”? Keller (1978:77) defines mystical texts as those “... which deal with ultimate knowledge; with its nature, its modalities, its conditions, its methods, and also with secondary insights which might be granted to a seeker in the course of the pursuit of his (sic) task”. Bearing in mind the occasional nature of her writings, it cannot be claimed that Elisabeth sets out a systematic description and evaluation of the mystical path, as is the case, for example in the highly structured works of John of the Cross (1542-1591). Nevertheless, it is certainly true that her writings discuss the means to realisation of God’s presence, and she certainly offers many statements concerning this knowledge. Furthermore, bearing in mind the important relationship between mystical writings and the underlying mystical experience, Elisabeth’s works offer reflections on her own experience and faith. The manner in which this is done calls for some clarification: Elisabeth does not record her religious experience in precise detail; it is rather a question of communicating the deep level of the interior and spiritual dimension, in itself a major characteristic of mysticism, in a manner suited to her readers. In other words, Elisabeth does not propound abstract, philosophical theology, but concretises the mystical dimension, making it relevant for daily existence. Whilst emotionally vibrant, Elisabeth’s writings also give witness to a strong intellect, enlightened by meditation and contemplation and a deep desire to share the fruits of her mystical insights with her readers.

It is apposite at this juncture to point out certain limitations in the writings of Elisabeth Catez. Her earlier writings portray a sentimental style (Van Balthasar 1956:19). A certain artificiality and stiltedness is evident, in which a kind of “rhetoric of the sublime” is used, in line with a particular type of piety of the age (Decourtray 1980:27). Nevertheless, Elisabeth’s later writings, more and more coloured by biblical thought, portray little if any of this superficiality of style. Decourtray (1980:24) commenting on the scriptural nature of Elisabeth’s writings, incisively points out that at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, such biblical language would have appeared quite new and almost revolutionary. Bearing in mind the limited knowledge of the Bible among ordinary Catholics of this era, it is true to say that Elizabeth prefigures much of the scriptural renewal prevalent since 1943. Although enculturated within a particular epoch, Elisabeth’s writings are such that their value transcends the parameters of culture and time, and thus they can be of vital significance for the twentieth century.

5 TRINITARIAN MYSTICISM

Although the variegated aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity have been the subject of scholarly discussion and debate throughout the history of the Christian church, nevertheless it is an unfortunate fact that this doctrine, which is in essence the nucleus of Christian theology, is largely considered mysterious and unattainable. Consequently, it has been left mainly to the intellectual speculations of theologians to plumb the depths of this mystery. This has resulted in a dichotomisation between mysticism and the doctrine of the Trinity, since the intellectual endeavours of theologians are usually far removed from the average Christian. Many contemporary theologians manifest a certain “anti-trinitarian timidity” which serves to isolate even further

this central tenet of the Christian faith. This results in a profound lacuna and although statements regarding the Trinity are issued, "... the reality itself has ... almost nothing to do with ourselves" (Rahner 1966:81-82). However intellectually stimulating, scholastic argumentation and theological speculation is of limited scope when trying to describe the trinitarian concept of the divine. Rational discourse and conceptualisation is but an attempt to articulate a vision of the truth, which when apprehended, needs no other justification than itself. True knowledge of the Trinity, therefore, comes by way of *experience* (Arborelius 1985:3).

It is clear from even a cursory reading of Elisabeth's works, that the criterion and interpretive key to her mysticism is her trinitarian hermeneutic. The mystery of the Trinity entinctures every aspect of her life and thought, and the entire edifice of her mysticism is built on the "creative and redemptive presence of God triune" (Arborelius 1980:74). Although Elisabeth is a trinitarian mystic par excellence, she cannot be classified as a theologian, concerned with classifying the various tenets of revelation. Elisabeth does not systematise her thought into neat, logical categories. Her interest is not in the speculative and systematic, but in the spiritual and experiential dimensions of theology. Elisabeth's writings are mystical and at the same time eminently practical, dealing mainly with particular persons and circumstances, and as such, they can be classified as occasional. It cannot be claimed that Elisabeth has the philosophical depth and the gift for abstract thought that characterises many speculative theologians. Therefore, the danger of presenting Elisabeth as an intellectual must be avoided, particularly as she had no formal theological training. Her writings have been described as more artistic than academic (Valabek 1985:30). Consequently, the mysticism of Elisabeth is seen to be the "... spontaneous outpouring of a contemplative soul" (Philipon 1947:xxi). However, the foregoing does not preclude the epistolary, didactic and paraenetic function of Elisabeth's writings. While she does not offer a ready-made doctrine, nevertheless an underlying doctrinal foundation can be detected (De Meester 1985a:80). This is quite remarkable, given the paucity of her philosophical and theological background, as well as her lack of education in general.

5.1 Indwelling Trinity

The Trinity *within* - "au-dedans" - is the pivotal point of Elisabeth's mysticism. The indwelling Trinity figures strongly in the life of Elisabeth even before her entrance into Carmel, forming the metaphysical and theological basis to her entire mystical teaching. The intrinsic dialectic of the inhabitation of the Trinity experienced by Elisabeth leads to the conclusion that she was indeed a mystic from her adolescence (Camelot 1985:259). Elisabeth was particularly captivated by the teaching of the Flemish mystic, Jan van Ruusbroec (1294-1381) especially in the last few months of her life. Ruusbroec imparted a depth and vigour to Elisabeth's mysticism which is quite remarkable for such a young contemplative. As Elisabeth exclaims: "Dieu en moi, moi en Lui ... pardons-nous en cette Trinité Sainte, en ce Dieu tout Amour ..." (De Meester 1985:221). God is not a monad, a self-enclosed unity, but rather a community of persons, offering a release from ego-centricity and entrance into the heart of the trinitarian love which is constantly ebbing and flowing in the divinity

itself. For Ruusbroec, the final end, the *telos*, of humanity is to return to the Triune God, the Source of all being. This takes place in the Spirit, who as Love is the very energy of God's being, and according to Ruusbroec, is like a great "flood" or "storm" drawing the adherent to return to the Source in an eternal *now* (Mommaers & Van Bragt 1995:134-135). Elisabeth sees this powerful Love as the *cynosure* which draws, captivates and encloses within it all of creation. Love is the immeasurable truth of God, far transcending any attempt at description. Love is gift and exchange, and therefore needs to be mutual. It can only exist in its fullness when there is a plurality of persons. The Trinity, for Elisabeth, is the ultimate paradigm of human relationships, given the relational nature of the person, in that the Trinity is exocentric, not egocentric.

Elisabeth, in a simple yet profound manner, brings into clearer focus the pristine message of Christianity, and due to the testimonial character of her writings, removes much of the obscurity which has surrounded the mystery of the divine indwelling (Arborelius 1985:3). True to her particular charism, Elisabeth leads her readers to what is *essential*; she does not devote her time to peripheral doctrines and fringe devotions, but penetrates to the core of reality. Furthermore, hers is not a mysticism which emphasises the meretricious; on the contrary, self-centred practices are notably lacking in her exposition. As seen earlier, this is not propositional knowledge about the Trinity, but *experiential* knowledge which affects the totality of life. The spirituality of Dom Marmion (1858-1923), the well-known Benedictine monk, influenced by Elisabeth's teaching on the Trinity describes God as "the plenitude of being, the shoreless ocean of perfection and all life" and he urges his readers, "Come! Let us adore this marvellous fellowship in the Unity, this wonderful equality of perfection in the distinction of Persons" (1925:37, 39). Marmion's life was more active than Elisabeth's; however both shared the apostolic mission to promote the richness of this central doctrine of the Christian faith (Kourie 2004:45).

This doctrine of the divine indwelling is succinctly expressed by Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion, *Whether God is present everywhere by essence, presence and power*.

God is said to be in things in two ways: in one way, after the manner of an efficient cause, and thus He is in all things created by Him; in another way, He is in things as the object of operation is in the operator; and this is proper to the operations of the soul, according as the thing known is in the one who knows; and the thing desired in the one desiring. In this second way God is especially in the rational creature, which knows and loves Him actually or habitually. And because the rational creature possesses this prerogative by grace ... He is said to be thus in the saints by grace; ... through sanctifying grace, the whole Trinity dwells in the mind, according to Jo xiv, 23: "We will come to him and make Our abode with him" (*Summa Theologiae*, pt1, q8. Art 3; pt1, q43, Art 5; in O'Brien 1976:222).

For Elisabeth, the abode of the Divine is found in an *abyss* in which she loses herself; following the teaching of Ruusbroec, who speaks of sinking into the depth, she describes this as a “declivity of love”. This descent is a process of interiorisation, and involves a denuding of the mind and an abolition of selfhood. Within this deep core, or essence of the soul, there is no discursive thought, no thinking or acting. Here the formless awareness of and absorption in God takes place without intermediary, without reflection or imagery. Interestingly, Elisabeth speaks of a “double abyss” following the thought of Angela of Foligno. Angela had spoken of the abyss of the infinity of God which confronts and embraces the abyss of the nothingness of the creature (Von Balthasar 1956:56). The two abysses become one when the abyss of the soul’s capacity and need is progressively filled by the abyss of God’s infinity. The divine spark, the *synteresis*, the *Seelenfünklein*, is the meeting point between God and the adherent. Scholastic theology speaks in terms of the *potentia obedientialis*, namely the capacity of the human person to receive the divinity. The synergy of love is actualised in the depths of the human being.

Elisabeth’s cathexis with respect to the inner life of the Trinity effected a *reality transfer*, namely the stimuli of her inner world became invested with the feelings ordinarily given to external objects by the average person, and hence the inner workings of the Trinity became more real to her than external actuality. Although the mystery of the indwelling Trinity remains beyond comprehension, Elisabeth’s *realisation* of the mystery in her own life points to the reality of the “extra-mental” world and “reifies” for her readers that which transcends description.

The *social* model of the Trinity is the most biblically faithful and theologically relevant theory to describe this mystery and one which appealed to Elisabeth’s own personality. To be human is to be dialogic, and since mutuality is constitutive for authenticity, this necessitates self-giving. In such wise, the Trinity is the ultimate paradigm for human relationships. The social model of the Trinity lends impetus to the growth of community. This motif figures strongly in the work of Moltmann who cogently states: “The Holy Trinity is our social programme” (1983:104). The eschatological nature of this mystery is pre-eminent for Moltmann. As O’Donnell (1988:109) states, “The completion of the *imago trinitatis* will take place only in the eschaton when the Son will hand over the Kingdom to the Father. Then God will be all in all, and there will be one *koinonia*, all men and women united in the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Isaac the Syrian speaks of the mutual love of the three persons of the Trinity as being the “place” of fulfillment, “... when we have reached love, we have reached God and our journey is complete. We have crossed over to the island that lies beyond the world, where are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (quoted in Ware 1986:21). Such a relationality is “... the ‘truthing’ that is Truth itself, the eternal and infinite correspondence in joy of the divine Persons one to another” (McIntosh 2005:185). This interpersonal trinitarian communion is a paradigm and model for humanity, calling all to reflect this reality in daily life and interaction with others (Downey 2005:625). Contemporary spirituality moves beyond the classical nomenclature of Father, Son and Spirit in order to promote a greater understanding of the Divine, for example, “Source”, “Mother”, “Ground”, “Light”, “Healer”, “Power”, “Energy”, etc. (Perrin 2007:98). While Elisabeth

does not describe her own experiences in detail, she does, however, expound on the mystical meaning of the Trinity in order to lead others to a personal realisation of this mystery in everyday life. The richness of Elisabeth's thought, the depths of her intuitions and the freshness of her exposition have helped bring greater clarity to this often neglected, yet foundational teaching of the Christian faith.

6 RELEVANCE OF ELISABETH CATEZ FOR AFRICA

What is the relevance of Elisabeth for Africa? How can Elisabeth's writings impact upon a continent far removed from the France of her day and age? Is there a perennial message that transcends time and culture? While it is true to say that Elisabeth was largely unaware of the social and political situation outside of her native France, nevertheless, the Carmelite spirituality which she expressed in her life and writings is not limited to any one country, or even continent. As early as the sixteenth century, only two years after the death of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) efforts were made to establish a Carmelite community in Africa for enclosed sisters. The Carmelite Friars arrived in the then Congo in 1584. A daughter of the King expressed a desire to become a Carmelite nun, resulting in missionary efforts from the Carmelites in Portugal and Spain to realise an African Carmelite presence. Jean de Bretigny (1556-1634) was greatly enamoured of this vision for Africa, and gave generously of his time and money (Carmels of Africa 1999:8). However, the time was not yet ripe for such an endeavour, and it was only in 1885 that the first Carmel was established in Tunisia; this itself was a reflection of the great missionary thrust of nineteenth century Christianity (Carmels of Africa 1999:11). Other foundations followed resulting in Carmelite foundations in 35 African countries between 1885 and 1998^{vii}. As such, Carmelite spirituality spread throughout the continent of Africa: sisters in African countries live according to the simple, austere yet joyful rule of life that Elisabeth Catez followed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Of course, whilst the Carmelite rule applies equally to each monastery across the world, each country adapts and enculturates Carmelite spirituality accordingly. In Africa, particularly in the liturgy, which is at the centre of Carmelite life, African customs and music are employed, and the spirit of Carmel finds expression in many diverse ways. Given the breadth and depth of Carmelite spirituality, the writings of the great Carmelites, including Elisabeth of the Trinity, contribute to the growth of spirituality and mysticism in Africa and other continents. Celebrations of the centenary of Elisabeth's death (1906-2006) were held world-wide, including the Carmels in South Africa, in the Cape and in Benoni, in Gauteng. A Carmelite sister from Rwanda, now living in South Africa, witnessed to the influence that Elisabeth has had on her religious life.^{viii} The events in Rwanda have been noted in a recent history of the Carmelites in Africa (Carmels in Africa 1999:108). The Carmel at Cyangugu, Rwanda, was instituted in 1991, before the tragedy of 1994. The Carmelites in Kigali, Rwanda had been approached by Mgr Thaddée Ntihinyurwa, bishop of Cyangugu, to make a foundation in his parish. After careful reflection and prayer over a period of five years, a Carmelite monastery was eventually established, 21 November 1991. With the genocide in Rwanda, in 1994, the sisters were forced to flee to the Carmel of St Brieuc, France. The civil war which tore Rwanda apart resulted in the new Carmelite monastery at Cyangugu being completely ransacked, with only the walls

remaining. However, in 1998, despite the fragility of the situation, and the continued threat of danger, the Carmelite sisters returned to Cyangugu to rebuild their monastery, continue the tradition of contemplative prayer and thus bring hope to a people ravaged by war (Carmels in Africa 1999:108). The same Carmelite spirit that inspired Elisabeth and her sisters under threat of expulsion in France, in the early twentieth century, although, of course, not of the same magnitude as the tragedy of Rwanda in 1994, nevertheless inspired the sisters of Rwanda to pursue their charism of prayer and presence in Africa.

7 CONCLUSION

Articulation of the great mysteries of faith, in particular, the mystery of the Trinity, finds resonance in many diverse parts of the world, despite differences of culture and social environment. Elisabeth Catez witnesses to this fact; although she belonged to a specific era, as evidenced in her style of writing and expression, nevertheless her mystical insights extend beyond the particular parameters of her time, relating as they do to the perennial concerns of humanity. Elisabeth teaches the unification and simplification of daily existence which counteracts a purely external and frenetic life-style. In a direct and simple manner, Elisabeth enables her readers to free themselves from the quagmire of the psyche and embark on the inward journey to the centre. The Trinity is the criterion and interpretive key to all of Elisabeth's teaching, and in a clear and luminous manner, she revitalises this mystery, which for many has remained largely marginal. Furthermore, Elisabeth's thought has spread further than she would ever have imagined, influencing not only other Carmelites world-wide, but ordinary women and men who have found a richness, and depth of meaning in her mystical articulation. The continent of Africa is no exception: the Carmelite life-style and teaching has spread, in spite of many vicissitudes, and the message of Elisabeth has found a place in the hearts of many African women and men. Elisabeth is seen to be both a mystic and a mystagogue who leads others to experience something of the intoxicating beauty and boundless love of God, so much needed in the 21st century.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 The publication of the critical edition of the *Complete Works* by De Meester (1980; 1985a; 1985b) – the first volume to celebrate the centenary of Elisabeth's birth – was a landmark in studies on Elisabeth. These volumes provide a scholarly and scientific analysis of Elisabeth's writings which is in stark analysis to certain previous hagiographical works.
 - 2 See Kourie 1992 for a critique of the constructivist position of Katz 1978.
 - 3 A career as a piano teacher would have been quite a good position. However, although Elisabeth received excellent piano tuition, her general education suffered as a result.

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- 4 The Carmelite foundation at Dijon dates back to 1605. It was the third Carmelite monastery to be founded in France, after Paris, and Pontoise. The first prioress was Mother Anne of Jesus, a companion of Teresa of Avila. In 1790 the community was expelled from their house by virtue of the revolutionary laws suppressing monastic vows. The Carmel of Dijon was restored in 1866, housed in a very old building in the poorest quarter of the city. It was on this site that the monastery was built into which Elisabeth entered in 1901. In 1979 the community transferred to Flavignerot, just 13 kilometres southeast of Dijon. Elisabeth's cell has been transferred to this new site, as well as a small museum where many souvenirs have been preserved.
- 5 Addison's disease, which had only been identified in 1849. Elisabeth suffered from anemia, nausea, and increasing gastric problems which made it almost impossible for her to eat or drink. Further complications included internal ulcerations, fierce headaches and insomnia which became progressively worse. In the midst of such atrocious sufferings Elisabeth received no analgesics, no morphine. Although three doctors were consulted, an operation was considered to be of no value. Georges Chevignard, Elisabeth's brother-in-law, who was also a doctor, was not convinced that Elisabeth was receiving sufficient medical care, a view that Elisabeth ardently refuted (De Meester 1980: 348-9; 351; 430). Today, Addison's disease can be kept under control with hydrocortisone tablets. Although not widely known during his lifetime, President Kennedy suffered from Addison's disease, and Jane Austen died from it (Moorcroft 2001:110-111).
- 6 The various writings of Elisabeth, from which her mystical thought has been gleaned are: a *diary*; seventeen *personal notes*; list of *references* from the Bible or other authors; one hundred and twenty-four *poems*; four *spiritual treatises*: (i) *Heaven in faith (Le Ciel dans la foi)*, written in a notebook; (ii) *The greatness of our vocation (La grandeur de notre vocation)*, in the form of a letter; (iii) *Last retreat (Dernière Retraite)*, written in a notebook; and (iv) *Let yourself be loved (Lasse-toi aimer)*, in the form of a letter; and three hundred and forty-six *letters*.
- 7 In addition to Tunisa (1885-1964) the following foundations were made: 1921: Antananarivo, Madagascar; 1927: Fayoum, Egypt; 1931: Benoni, South Africa; 1934: Kananga, DR Congo; 1934-1936: Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia; 1934: Tangier, Morocco; 1938: Nairobi, Kenya; 1946-1975: Fataki, Belgian Congo; 1950: Sébikotane, Sénégal; 1952: Wynberg, South Africa; 1952-1974: Zaza, Rwanda; 1956: Tindinyo, Kenya; 1958: Fianarantsoa, Madagascar; 1962: Kinshasa, DR Congo; 1964-1977: Trigo de Morais, Mozambique; 1965: Lumbumbashi, DR Congo; 1967: Mityana, Uganda; 1969: Kigali, Rwanda; 1969: Yaoundé, Cameroon; 1974: Brazzaville, Congo; 1974: Owerri, Nigeria; 1974: Vacoas, Mauritius; 1975: Toliary, Madagascar; 1978: Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast; 1980: Moundasso, Dédougou, Burkina Faso; 1983: Les Avirons, Reunion Island; 1990: Grand-Bassam, Ivory Coast; 1991: Figuil, Cameroon; 1991: Cyangugu, Rwanda; 1991: Mahajanga, Madagascar; 1992: Mafikeng, South Africa; 1994: Kisii, Kenya; 1994: Buea, Cameroon; 1995: Zing, Nigeria; 1998: Tamale, Ghana (Carmels in Africa 1999:2-3).
- 8 Discussion at a Conference celebrating the centenary of the death of Elisabeth (1906-2006) held at Benoni Carmel, South Africa, Nov 9 2006.