In the first chapter we discussed the groundbreaking role that the Samaritan woman played in the ministry of Jesus; immediately after comprehending the meaning of Jesus’ message, she departed to direct others to their salvation. As a result, “many Samaritans from the town believed in him of the strength of the woman’s testimony” (Jn 4:39). Lest the skeptic think that such exegesis is the product of overzealous projections into Scripture on my part, we should listen attentively to Teresa of Avila’s ruminations on the Samaritan woman’s spiritual direction.

I have just remembered some thoughts which I have often had about that holy woman of Samaria, who must have been affected in this way. So well had she understood the words of the Lord in her heart that she left the Lord Himself so that she might profit and benefit the people of her village. This is an excellent example of what I am saying. As a reward for this great charity of hers she earned the credence of her neighbors and was able to witness the great good which Our Lord did in that village. This, I think, must be one of the greatest comforts on earth—I mean, to see good coming to souls through one’s own agency. . . . To me the astonishing thing is that they should have believed a woman—and she cannot have been a woman of much consequence, as she was going to fetch water. . . . In the end, her word was believed; and merely on account of what she had said, great crowds flocked from the city to the Lord.1

Teresa quite clearly was aware of the scriptural foundation for women spiritual directors. She emphatically argued that the Samaritan woman’s ability to guide people was due not to social or financial status but purely because
of the truth of her message. The significance of the message in fact made all aspects of the messenger insignificant, including her sex. It is also clear that Teresa appreciated how rewarding it is to contribute to another’s spiritual advancement. “What a great thing it is to understand a soul!” Teresa admitted humbly.\(^2\) Such skill was a gift, and if one possessed the necessary qualities spiritual directing was both obligatory and self-satisfying. When the nuns at St. Joseph’s Monastery learned that Teresa had leave to write about prayer, their desire to obtain her guidance was so great that they “so earnestly begged me to say something to them about this that I resolved to obey them,” Teresa records. Because they freely desired her spiritual advice, Teresa believed that “what I shall say to them” would be “more acceptable than other books which are very ably written.”\(^3\)

Teresa apparently thought her being a woman was more, not less, of a reason of offer direction to nuns. In a comment typical of what Alison Weber has called her “rhetoric of femininity,”\(^4\) Teresa wrote in her preface to Way of Perfection about her suitability to direct nuns: “I know that I am lacking neither in love nor in desire to do all I can to help the souls of my sisters to make great progress in the service of the Lord. It may be that this love, together with my years and the experience which I have of a number of convents, will make me more successful in writing about small matters than learned men can be. For these, being themselves strong and having other and more important occupations, do not always pay such heed to things which in themselves seem of no importance but which may do great harm to persons as weak as we women are.”\(^5\)

It was the realization that she had such insight into life’s mysteries that made Teresa convinced she must share it with others. For example, when she found the key to understanding the profundities of the Song of Solomon, she felt obligated to write it down for the benefit of others. “For about two years past, it seemed to me that for a purpose of my own the Lord has been enabling me to understand something of the meaning of a few of these texts, which I think will bring comfort to those sisters whom the Lord is leading along this road, as well as to myself.”\(^6\) Thus Teresa directed, regardless of the potential risks involved in glossing the difficult Song of Solomon (Luis de Léon was arrested in 1572 in part because of his translation of the book into the vernacular). The commentary, known of Conceptions of the Love of God, was the only one of Teresa’s writings known to have been burned by one of her confessors because of the risk involved,\(^7\) specifically, because he thought “it a new and dangerous thing that a woman should write on the Songs,” according to Gracian in his preface to the first published edition of Conceptions.\(^8\) Anticipating such reaction, Teresa argued in the first chapter of Conceptions that gender was not sufficient enough reason to outlaw her from writing a scriptural commentary. “Just so, we women need not entirely re-