

The Way of Perfection



The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila
Volume 2

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The Way of Perfection

may be divided as follows:



-Introduction (Overview)

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Introduction

Origins



- ❧ *The Way of Perfection* was written at the request of Teresa's nuns when they learned that Teresa's confessor at the time, Domingo Banez, refused to allow her book, *La Vida*, (*Life*) to be circulated among nuns and interested others. He did however give permission for her to 'write some things on prayer' and so she wrote *The Way of Perfection* as an act of obedience to her nuns. (1566)
- ❧ Teresa summarizes the subject matter as 'how one reaches the fount of living water, what the soul feels there, how God satisfies it.' She implied that *The Way of Perfection* was an introduction to her *Life*. She felt that those who had reached the fount of living water would find her *Life* very beneficial and receive much light from it.

Introduction

Historical Context



- ❧ In sixteenth-century Spain, political events were closely tied to religious ideas. What was happening in the world at large, particularly in Spain, left its traces on Teresa's works.
- ❧ The final experiences relayed in her *Life*, suggests that Teresa was living more among the Church triumphant of heaven, but the first chapters of *The Way of Perfection* describe her as very much back on earth, keenly distraught over the afflicted Church. For Teresa, the Church and Christianity were identical. The attack of 'those Lutherans' was an attack against Christianity.
- ❧ In her mind, the faith was what the Church holds, the truths of Sacred Scripture...in consulting learned men and in giving them an account of her spiritual life, Teresa was concerned with whether or not her life and experiences were in agreement with these truths. Teresa felt that what was done against the Church was done against Christ.

Introduction

Historical Context



- ❧ What might Teresa do to prevent this harm (Lutherans), these 'great evils'? She resolved 'to do the *little* that was in my power.' This *little* developed into the Teresian ideal: a small group of Christians who would be good friends of the Lord by striving to follow the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, obedience) as closely as possible and living a life of unceasing prayer; a life in service to Christ and to the Church.
- ❧ A group of women dedicating themselves to a life of prayer and contemplation in that age and in those circumstances was destined to be looked upon with suspicion. The Spanish people at the time were taught to follow the ascetical life, practice vocal prayer and shun mysticism.
- ❧ There was a fear of false women mystics. It was said that women were a mistake of nature, unfinished men. A saying of the time suggested a woman should only leave her house on 3 occasions: at the time of her baptism; to go to her spouse's home; for her burial.

Introduction

Historical Context



- ❧ Teresa founded a monastery of women dedicated to a life of prayer, of intimate friendship with God and of living faith and love.
- ❧ Conservative theologians at the time feared that the seeds of Protestantism lay in the practice of mental prayer...for ordinary people Mass and vocal prayer were sufficient. In this environment where it was thought that women should...*stick to their sewing...*and that the *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* were sufficient.
- ❧ Teresa agreed that if the *Our Father* were to be authentically prayed it must be joined to mental prayer...vocal prayer joined to mental prayer can lead to perfect contemplation.

Introduction

Historical Context



- ❧ Teresa emphasized the practice of solitude and withdrawal from the world greater than was practiced at the Incarnation, a poor community where large numbers lived and easily obtained permission to leave the enclosure.
- ❧ Some nuns at the Incarnation desired a stricter observance of enclosure but Teresa's appeal was to the *eremitical spirit* of living in accordance with the Carmel rule (1247, Honorius III): *'For the style of life we aim to follow is not just that of nuns but of hermits.'*
- ❧ Silence and solitude were both important for Teresa's small communities dedicated to prayer.

Introduction

Historical Context



- ❧ Much evidence suggests that the Incarnation monastery was devout and fervent . However, there existed among the nuns a class structure based on one's material (wealthy or impoverished) background.
- ❧ Teresa sought the poverty of spirit of the Gospels; equality amongst her sisters; poverty-in clothing, in words, in thought- was the insignia of her nuns along with detachment from both honor and money as they always go together.
- ❧ This life of equality and humility was meant, as Teresa envisioned it, to blossom into a life of authentic sisterly love, the love Christ insisted upon for His followers. As she put it, *"in this house all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped."*

Introduction

Central Theme



The Way of Perfection is
a practical book of advice and counsel
destined to
initiate the Carmelite nun into a life of prayer.

Thus, Teresa is a teacher throughout the work,
demonstrating how to lead a life of prayer,
pointing to the pitfalls, and explaining
the right from the wrong way.

Introduction

Foundations of Prayer



Love of Neighbor

Detachment

Humility

Introduction

Foundations of Prayer



- ❧ Teresa wanted the Lord's friends to be good ones, so she wanted her nuns to follow Christ's counsels as perfectly as possible; this implied careful observance of the Rule of Albert, the essential element being *prayer without ceasing*.
- ❧ Peace was necessary for a life of prayer so Teresa avoided placing burdens on her nuns.
- ❧ She focused on the three practices necessary to possess inward and outward peace thus disposing them to a life of prayer: Love of Neighbor, Detachment and Humility. These three virtues form a *foundation for prayer* and *free the spirit* but are also *the effects of prayer*.

Introduction

Foundations of Prayer



❧ 1/ Love of Neighbor:

- Two types of love: spiritual love and love mixed with sensuality,
- term 'love' is applied to too much having little to do with true and perfect love,
- **importance** of friendship and its growth into perfect love, compassion is essential,
- avoid too much restraint to not frighten people away from the service of God,
- never lose compassion that goes with charity.

Introduction

Foundations of Prayer



2/ Detachment:

- in observing the human condition Teresa was struck at how quickly things come to an end;
- the result of detachment is inner freedom from worry about bodily comfort, honor and wealth.

Introduction

Foundations of Prayer



3/ Humility:

Humility and detachment are so closely joined that Teresa couldn't speak of one without the other; humility implies detachment from oneself-- from worry about esteem and honor;

By humility the soul draws love to itself; in humility one realizes that every good thing comes from God and could be taken away;

Humility does not disturb or disquiet, it comes with peace, delight, and calm; the pain of genuine humility expands the soul enabling it to serve God more.

Introduction

Foundations of Prayer



“I cannot understand how there could be
humility without love or
love without humility;
nor are the two virtues possible
without detachment from all creatures.” (W 16 2)

Introduction

A Method of Prayer



Teresa's method of prayer is for those minds, like hers, that are like *'wild horses'* vs. methodical minds who practice discursive meditation.

Teresa turns to the *Our Father* as vocal prayer does not prevent contemplation. Its recitation must be prayed using the prayer of recollection or Teresa's way... *'the soul collects its faculties together and enters within itself to be alone with its God.'* (W 28 4)

It is also important to realize the nearness of God... *'all the harm comes from not truly understanding that He is near. Not only is He near, but 'He never takes His eyes off of you.'*

Introduction

A Method of Prayer



- ☞ Teresa's method is one of being fully present to God in our prayer...*'I am not asking you now that you think about Him...I am not asking you to do anything more than look at Him.'* (W 26 3)
- ☞ The Prayer of Recollection, accompanied by vocal prayer, proved to be an *excellent method* of disposing one for contemplative prayer...the divine Master comes more quickly to teach it and give it the prayer of quiet...(W 29 7)

Introduction

A Method of Prayer



Teresa claims that she never knew what it was to pray with satisfaction until the Lord taught her this method. (W29 7) ...

'out of love for the Lord get used to praying the Our Father with this recollection, and you will see the benefit before long. This is a manner of praying that the soul gets so quickly used to that it doesn't go astray, nor do the faculties become restless ... (W 29 6)

Introduction

A Method of Prayer



- ❧ Teresa never limited herself to one formula and utilized all forms of prayer: adoration, petition, praise, offering and thanksgiving.
- ❧ Free from any restriction, Teresa valued being present in a variety of ways to the Lord. Joyful, she sought the Risen Christ; in trial and sadness, she sought the Christ in His Passion.
- ❧ Prayer of Quiet, the initial stage of contemplation, can occur while praying vocally. This passive prayer is unattainable through any human efforts. There is not yet a complete silencing of the faculties (only the *will*, not the *intellect* or *imagination*, is taken over by God).

Introduction

A Method of Prayer



- ❧ Prayer of union, recollection takes a deeper hold, all the faculties (*intellect, imagination, will*) are silenced or under God's control.
- ❧ This favor cannot be brought about (active prayer) nor removed but only received in gratitude (*passive prayer or contemplation*).
- ❧ Contemplation is like living water drunk from the fount, but unlike earthly water, while satisfying the soul's thirst, it, at the same time, increases its thirst.

Introduction

A Method of Prayer



‘Certainly it never entered my mind that this prayer (Our Father) contained so many deep secrets; for now you have the entire spiritual way contained in it, from the beginning stages until God engulfs the soul and gives it to drink abundantly from the fount of living water, which He said was to be found at the end of the way.’ (W 42 5)

Introduction

A Method of Prayer



...Muy determinada determinación...

'They must have a great and very resolute determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses.'

(W 31 6)

...the end of the way cannot be reached without Teresa's 'determined determination'...