

## Introduction

Teresa of Avila developed a way (kind) of prayer (V Prologue; F 2 3) that she will offer in her writings as a fundamental type of prayer usable by either beginners or those more advanced in the way of perfection.

We know that interior prayer held the secret to the Holy Mother's success, even to her whole life. It is thanks to it that she met the Living God, thanks to her practice that she achieved perfect union with God, and drew the strength to successfully carry out her work as the Carmel reformer. It is not surprising that she wanted to make herself an apostle and all her books speak of this, even The Foundations which, in principle, should only relate the events of her trips throughout Spain.<sup>1</sup>

If interior prayer took up such an important place in the Saint's life and doctrines, one could assume that broaching this subject would touch upon all the aspects of her thought and work. To limit ourselves, we propose only to retrace the origin and the content of her teachings on her *mode of praying* or recollected prayer.

It is hard to formulate a complete or precise idea of recollected prayer based on Teresa's descriptions alone. The difficulty, admittedly, is in part due to the subject itself; it is about a complex, spiritual reality on par with faith and experience, differing according to the individual, situated at the limit between the natural and the supernatural, and in between ordinary meditation and infused contemplation.

Teresa realized this difficulty. *May what has been said be well understood; even though it seems obscure, it will be understood by anyone who desires to practice it* (W 28, 8). It took Teresa herself time to identify the original characteristics of her *manner of prayer* compared to discursive prayer of which she will most often speak in a negative aspect, dismissing it: *I am not asking you to reason, deliberate* etc., she often repeated.

Moreover, for quite some time, she, herself, wouldn't be able to explain to others what she was living. She had to refer to pages in Bernardino de Laredo's book, The Ascent of Mont Sion, in order to explain to Francisco de Salcedo and to Gaspar Daza the different states of her soul. Later on, she will consider it a special grace received from the Lord to have the capacity to describe her own interior movements. *In an instant, God gave me in a moment a completely clear understanding so that I knew how to explain His favor* (V 12, 6). *For it is one grace to receive the Lord's favor; another, to understand which favor and grace it is ; and a third, to know how*

---

<sup>1</sup> The Citations are based on the translation by Kieran Kavanaugh, Complete Works and Letters, Washington D.C.. Abbreviations used: V Autobiography, W Way of Perfection, IC Interior Castle, F Foundations, L Letters, S Spiritual Testimonies, M Meditations on the Song of Songs

*to describe and explain it* (V 17, 5). When Teresa wrote her *Autobiography* and her other books, a long time had passed since she had advanced beyond this first form of prayer, the prayer of recollection. She still however found it difficult to explain it clearly and concisely. She would correct herself on several occasions in the *Autobiography*, the *Way of Perfection* and then the *Interior Castle*. We also know that her difficulty came from the extreme variability of her spirit. She hardly began to talk about one subject before she digressed to another. She wasn't able to discipline herself to logically develop an idea. But, she did have the remarkable talent of being able to return to her original idea. She knew her shortcoming and asked to be forgiven for it admitting that she didn't know how to explain herself without using a lot of words. With her usual grace, she would acknowledge that she had perhaps said *a lot of superfluous and even foolish things in order to say something that is right* (IC 1 2, 7). She had the feeling of not having said all that she wanted to say or that she had said it incorrectly. So out of desperation, she would refer her readers to their own future experience of it: *what I want to explain to you is very difficult to understand without experience* (IC 1 1, 9). From time to time, while repeating herself for whatever it was worth, she would include a detail that would clarify the entire question. That is why it is up to the reader to assemble the pieces of the puzzle in an attempt to reconstruct the entire picture.

To all this, a final difficulty must be added, the imprecise vocabulary employed by Teresa. She never received philosophical or theological training and she would often complain about it (IC 4, 1, 9). So, on the one hand, she would criticize meditation---implying a methodical approach---and on the other, however, would recommend it, but another form of it, as we shall see. She used the term *entendimiento* or intelligence with four different meanings without making the reader aware.<sup>2</sup>

For a longtime, she confused intelligence with imagination (see IC 4 1, 8). She will talk about recollection sometimes in an ordinary sense and sometimes in an infused sense. She was aware of this confusion for her reader, though it didn't exist in her mind. *It's possible that in dealing with these interior matters I might contradict something of what I said elsewhere* (IC 4 2, 7).

Rather than conclude contradiction, perhaps trying to point out ambiguities in an attempt to discover, in spite of imperfect or defective expressions, the truth that she was striving to communicate because there was surely coherence in her thought and experience.

To fully develop her method, she needed a lot time. We will follow the steps of her journey. She will begin by trying her hand at discursive prayer, then she will follow Osuna's method, until finally, she will find her own path after many mistakes and uncertainties.

---

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Lepee, *Sainte Therese d'Avila, le realism chretien*, Desclee De Brouwer, Paris, 1947, p. 348-350.

## Discursive Prayer

It could be assumed that Teresa had discovered the value of interior prayer within the Tradition of the Order. Indeed, the Carmel is contemplative in its essence, and interior prayer is its soul. *So I say now that all of us who wear this holy habit of Carmel are called to prayer and contemplation* (IC 5 1, 2).

In reality, it would seem that during her novitiate at the Incarnation Convent she didn't receive any special training in this area. Moreover, there wasn't any obligation to have a personal prayer time. She had to figure it out all alone. Let's remember that before entering a religious order, she *practiced prayer without knowing what it was* (V 9 4) when each night before going to sleep she would think about Christ's Passion. She went about it empirically with the goal of gaining indulgences. As a novice, using a few books, she would practice traditional meditation. At that time, there wasn't a shortage of works on the subject coming from the influence of the *Devotio Moderna* and Erasmus.<sup>3</sup> We know that religious fervor would degenerate in certain spiritual groups of the *Alumbrados*, but throughout the century they would produce several valuable works such as those of Louis Vives, Louis de Grenada, Pierre d'Alcantara, Francois de Borgia, Garcia Jimenez de Cisneros, Alfonso de Orozco, etc.<sup>4</sup>

It was the discursive prayer or meditation that Teresa made herself practice beginning in the first year of her religious life. She would meditate on the mysteries of the Passion of Our Lord and on her sins, without ever thinking of anything supernatural: she only considered creatures and things which gave her insight into the briefness of everything in this world (S).

She did not get much benefit from this method, even after having read many books on the subject and having put forth a lot of effort practicing it, she found she was hardly further along at the time of her final vows than when she entered the convent. *And although during this first year I read good books (for I no longer desired to make use of the others, because I understood the harm they did me), I did not know how to proceed in prayer or how to be recollected* (V 4, 7).

Through the descriptions she has given us of methodical meditation, it is apparent that she only had a vague idea of what it was all about, but not a completely accurate one. She mentioned herself that she had *read a lot of things and didn't understand anything of what I read* (V 12 6; see V 22 3).

---

<sup>3</sup> Erasmus supported an interior Christianity, a Christian liberty free of chanel law from the Old Testament, from casuist moral legalism, from scholastic theological formulations, of rituals and ceremonies and lastly from religious authority.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Pablo de Maroto, *Dinamica de la Oracion*, Editorial de Espirtualidad, Madrid 1973, p. 91-92.

On the subject of meditation, she left us fragments throughout her writings of what she retained from it. Most of the time to indicate what, in this form of prayer, didn't suit her. Here is the most complete explanation of it that she wrote towards the end of her life:

*By meditation I mean much discursive reflection with the intellect in the following manner: we begin to think about the favor God granted us in giving us His only Son, and we do not stop there, but go on to the mysteries of His whole glorious life; or we begin to think about the prayer in the garden, but the intellect doesn't stop until He is on the cross; or we take a phase of the Passion like, let us say, the arrest, and we proceed with this mystery considering in detail the things there are to think of and feel about the betrayal of Judas, the flight of the apostles, and all the rest (IC 6 7 10).*

Taking into account the other passages where she talks about it, we can sum up her thought by the following lines:

It is clear that for her, meditation is essentially an exercise of the intelligence. It is about *thoughts to help the intellect*. She believes that the *whole business lies in thinking* (F 5 2). What's mainly important is *reflecting* (V 9 4); in other words, *reasoning a great deal with the intellect, deducing many ideas from one idea and working with concepts* (V 13 11) without the option of *stopping yourself and staying there*, in other words to give into an attraction for a particular aspect of the mystery being considered. In addition, it was necessary to respect the topic or subject of the chosen meditation. Anyway, it had to be, preferably, according to Teresa, a general subject, so as to allow vast developments such as *reflecting discursively on what the world is, and what one owes God, and how much God suffered, and on how little one serves Him, and what God gives to anyone who loves Him* (V 4 8). She notes that for this, there are *books in which the mysteries of the Lord's life and Passion are divided according to the days of the week, and there are meditations about judgment, hell, our nothingness, and the many things we owe God* (W19 1). Unfortunately, this type of exercise presupposes a *good intelligence* (V 13 12), an ordered intelligence, in other words a form of logical thinking, along with a visual form of imagination capable of supplying dialogue to the intellect of constantly-renewed suggestive images successfully carry out this meditation.<sup>5</sup>

Teresa felt that this type of mental gymnastic required a lot of *work* (V 11 10) and *the intellect grows weary*(V 11 9) especially when one has a practical intelligence, focused on reality and a poor imagination, which was her case. In addition, we noticed that this conception of meditation that Teresa had, wrong or right, it doesn't matter, cannot be influenced by emotions.

Under these conditions, it is understandable that the discursive method of meditation wouldn't suit her. She speaks of those who *cannot work with the intellect* (V 13 11). Teresa could never get accustomed to this method. She admits it, again in a categorical manner: *ascending by means of reflection to the high things of heaven or of God and of the grandeurs that are there and of*

---

<sup>5</sup> A modern author concluded on this Ignatian method of meditation: 'Product of a directed imagination, the image is the constant matter of the Exercises: the visions, the representations, the allegories, the mysteries (or evangelical anecdotes) continuously raised by the imaginary senses, are the basic elements of meditation' (Roland Barthes, Sade, Fournier, Loyola, Seuil, Paris, 1971, p, 71).

*His great wisdom. I have never reflected in this way, because I did not have the ability (V12 4). She gives the reason for it: For God didn't give me talent for discursive thought or for a profitable use of the imagination (V 4 7). The intellectual subtleties disconcerted her, as when she read Saint Augustine. She had an intuitive and practical form of intelligence that allowed her to rapidly grasp a truth without thinking about it, keeping her thoughts focused on it (see F 5 2). There are some souls and minds so scattered that they are like wild horses no one can stop. Now they are running here, now there, always restless (W 19 2). She speaks of the wandering minds (W 28 1), of the millclapper (IC 4 1, 13). It is important to separate here what she attributed to intelligence, and what came from her imagination, and vice versa, since she confused the two for a longtime (see IC 4 1,8), and on top of it, was unaware of the existence of the two forms or functions of intelligence: intuitive and reasoning.*

So it isn't surprising that from then on her attempts at meditation put her through torture. However, she doesn't deny the value of this method since she mentions it in passing for those able to benefit from it. *There is nothing for me to say to anyone who can form the habit of following this method of prayer, or who has already formed it, for by means of so good a path the Lord will draw him to the haven of light. And through such a good beginning the end will be reached. All who are able to walk along this path will have rest and security for when the intellect is bound one proceeds peacefully (W 19, 1).*

For those who know the enthusiastic character of Teresa, such a measured praise signifies that she wasn't that enthralled by it. *...The souls in the previous dwelling places... do well because nothing further has been given them (IC 4 1, 6).*

As for her, she recommended strongly a *short cut* (V 13 5; see IC 5 3, 4) for those who, like her can't meditate according to the methods taught by the authors of the time.

By this path *one reaches contemplation more quickly (V4 7). In its progress it advances a great deal because it advances in love (V 9 5); And its divine Master comes more quickly to teach it and give it the prayer of quiet than He would through any other method it might use (W 28 4).* She adds that with *this method in which you proceed without discursive reflection on the part of the intellect, the soul be very advanced, or lost (V 9 5) so a greater danger (V 4 8).* But it's worth it. Moreover, by hypothesis, you can't take another path.

## The Osuna Method

After having read many works on prayer, Teresa finally found an author who suited her, Francisco de Osuna, with his book *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, named as such because the subject was divided according to the letters of the alphabet of which each one constituting the initial of a sentence for comment.<sup>6</sup>

This Franciscan suggested finding union with God in prayer through the path of interior recollection, he suggested simply becoming silent within, to make oneself 'deaf, blind and dumb' (o.c. tr. 3 ch.3), to 'empty the intellect of all human thought of the created' (ibid. tr.4 ch. 5) by applying *no pensar nada*: 'to think of nothing' (ibid. tr. 4. Ch.1, ch.5) in order to be attentive to God (ibid, tr. 21 ch. 5).

He suggested fixing your attention on God alone and on His Divinity (ibid. tr. 4 ch. 5). In addition, one needed to make a big place in the 'heart', in other words, for love, in keeping with Franciscan thought.

This method completely agreed with Teresa's temperament, leaning towards kindness and emotional activity and very little towards reasoning. Enthusiastic, she completely gave herself to it with fervor. She was so successful, that in six months she experienced the prayer of union (see V 4 7). This first experience of God will be conclusive and constitute the foundation or the basis of all that she will look for from then on.

Osuna's book, which reacted against the rationalism of Erasmus, the overly intellectual sermons and the scholastic approach venerated in schools, was full of richness that would make Teresa very happy. Several examples: appetite for truth and simplicity, abundant utilization of Scripture, love of nature, reference to experience and actions rather than theory. On the other hand, Osuna's style was one of a preacher and his writing confusing: prolixity, verbal amplifications, overuse of allegory (particularly for the letters D and R) and especially his imprecise vocabulary. In a few words, his doctrine was not reliable. Teresa, who was self-taught, would find herself frustrated before her teacher. However, she will not lose her esteem for him, especially for the

---

<sup>6</sup> Complete Title: *Tercera parte de libro llamado Abecedario Espiritual*, Toledo. 1527. We are using the edition of Miguel Mir in *Escritores misticos Espanoles*, t.I.Madrid, 1911. A recent edition done by Melchades Andres based on the first edition of Toledo, 1527, gives an interesting introduction: Francisco de Osuna, *Tercer Abecedario Espiritual*, Estudio historico y edicion critica, Madrid, BAC num. 33, 1972, 644 p. We find in the Carmels the French translation by a Dominican from the Notre Dame Convent of Quercia (near Viterbe), which appeared under the title: *L'Abecedaire spiritual* used by Saint Teresa of Jesus by le R.P. Fr. D'Osuna of the Order of Saint Francis, Lerins Abbay, 1899 to 1908. 9 papers 14 x 9.5. Unfortunately this translation misrepresented the original text which was reworked: Chapters redone with corrections of the imperfections of Osuna, introduction of the spiritual elements of the French School, teresian thought, and even references to the events of Paray-le-Monial and Pontmain. To this day, there is only one acceptable French translation, but incomplete, because it stops at the letter M, that of R.P. Michel-Ange: Nouvelle traduction of the *Troisime Abecedaire spiritual* based on the first edition of Toledo, 1527, in the review *Orient*, 1923-1932.

extraordinary spiritual manifestations (consolations, visions, ecstasies). But she will react to two points in particular.<sup>7</sup>

The first possible wrong interpretation of Osuna came from the fact that it was tempting to create 'absolute silence' within, in such a way that was both premature and too radical, suppressing all activity of the mind before God could invite the person to do so. Thus, Osuna wrote: "You can compare someone who recollects himself to a hedgehog who reduces himself and closes up on himself, without worrying about what is happening on the exterior" (ibid, tr. 6 ch.4). It is this text that the Saint remembered as she wrote: *It seems to me I have read where it was compared to a hedgehog curling up or a turtle drawing into its shell. (The one who wrote this example must have understood the experience well.) But these creatures draw inward whenever they want. In the case of this recollection it doesn't come when we want it but when God wants to grant us the favor* (IC 4 3, 3).

Osuna wasn't sufficiently clear. In his idea, recollection included a part for thinking without discussion and for an action of the will. In any case, Teresa understood the suggestion *no pensar nada* as a void of thought and image to bring about without delay. She realized that to claim to automatically find God by emptying the senses and the intellect could only cause the soul to be idle, to immerse it in the uncertain, in the desert and dryness. *The intellect ceases to work because God suspends it [...] trying to keep the soul's faculties busy and thinking you can make them be quiet is foolish* (V 12 5).

It was, she said again, like *expecting the toad to fly of itself* (V 22 13). The hand of God should not be forced. Be attentive to God alone, yes, this is what we should look to do in interior prayer, but if God doesn't recollect the soul in a supernatural way by attracting it to Himself, it is then that the spiritual faculties are put to work.

*Since God gave us our faculties that we might work with them and in this work they find their reward, there is no reason to charm them; we should let them perform their task until God appoints them to another greater one* (IC 4 3 6).

*But if we don't know if this King has heard or seen us, we mustn't become fools* (IC 4 3, 5) *cold simpletons*(V 12 5).

Another error of Osuna's that Teresa reacted strongly towards, was that the Franciscan suggested eliminating from one's thought the consideration of the human nature of Christ, in order to concentrate solely on His divinity. "It would be appropriate for those who wish to attain high and pure contemplation, to leave aside creatures and the holy humanity of Christ to go

---

<sup>7</sup> The *Treces Abecedario* tended towards erroneous interpretations. Melchiades Andres noted that it was also the case of certain *Alumbrados* (o.c. p.43) Nothing suprising that the Inquisition examined Osuna's works which however will only have one of his books, the *Gracioso Convite*, recorded in the index of Valdes in 1559, surely because of the insistence of the author to recommend frequent communion or to have treated the nature and effects of the Eucharistic Sacrement.

higher” (o.c. Prologue).<sup>8</sup> This advice was followed by references from Saint Cyprian, Saint Bernard, Saint Gregory, Saint Augustine and Gerson, calling on the example of the Apostles for whom the attachment to the sacred humanity made His departure necessary with the Ascension. That which was accepted by the Apostles, because of their weakness, should be accepted logically by those who ‘*desire to be raised to a superior state*’ (ibid.).

Even if Osuna was more subtle on this point than his colleague Bernardino de Laredo<sup>9</sup> by specifying that this only would be ‘*for a time*’, this advice that Teresa would try to follow for a while would cost her dearly. This is why she went out of her way to refute at length this erroneous doctrine (V 22 and IC 6 7, 5).<sup>10</sup>

She, on the other hand, asked that one attach oneself passionately to the humanity of Christ, not only because this attachment provides man *friendship* (W 26 2), a focal point for *faculties* (V 22 9) but mainly because *if we are going to please Him and receive His great favors, we must do so through the most sacred humanity of Christ, in whom He takes His delight* (V22 6).<sup>11</sup>

At that point, it was clear that Osuna’s method didn’t allow her to blossom. Although the Franciscan’s method opened the path for her by teaching her that the essential was not reflection but love, and in giving her a taste for the Living God, her other readings and her confessors didn’t warn her about the errors that we have mentioned or against her own weaknesses. So for *almost twenty years* (V 8 2) she persisted in wanting to taste the recollection of infused contemplation that she had known in the beginning and also, for a while, claimed to do without the Humanity of Christ (see V 22 3; IC 67 14). She will also know interior dryness which would make it necessary for her to summon all her strength to remain faithful to interior prayer. It is also important to add that she hadn’t understood the demands of a *good conscience* required by Osuna which asked one to ‘run from venial sins, to practice virtues, to detach oneself from created objects, to stimulate one’s heart by means of ejaculatory prayer’ (see *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, tr. 16 ch.10). She deliberately allowed herself venial sins that the half-clergy told her was without importance.

*For during the twenty years after this period of which I am speaking, I did not find a master, I mean a confessor, who understood me, even though I looked for one. This hurt me so much that I often turned back and was even completely lost* (V 4 7).

---

<sup>8</sup> Among other texts: “Those who have a very high love of God only seek after His Deity” (ibid. tr. 16, ch.9)

<sup>9</sup> See *Subida des Monte Sion*, Sevilla, 1535.

<sup>10</sup> She targeted both Osuna and Laredo, but the latter had less of an impact on her than Osuna who she continued to read all her life, according to the testimony of one of her companions. Her copy in her possession, maintained at St. Joseph of Avila convent, is well-worn from having thumbed through it. As for Laredo, she met him in 1558, or twenty years after Osuna (V 23 12). We cannot therefore support the thesis of Fidele de Ros who felt Laredo’s influence on Teresa was significant (see Fidele de Ros, *Un Maitre de Sainte Teresa, le Pere d Osuna, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa doctrine spirituelle*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1936).

<sup>11</sup> And, although Saint Teresa was very indebted to Osuna, it is, supposedly, for this precise reason that she refused to recommend him to her girls in the Constitutions, while she proposed Louis De Grenade towards whom she was much less indebted (see Constitutions).



She even gave up interior prayer for a year and a half which she considered *the greatest temptation* (V 7 11, see V 19 4). When she began again following the advice of a Dominican, her father's confessor, Father Vicente Barron, she would be inspired by Osuna but with more liberty.

It would take a Jesuit, Diego de Cetina, to whom she went after her conversion, to teach her how to practice the virtues, to attach herself to the Humanity of Christ, to meditate according the Company's method (V 23 17). Father Balthasar would forbid her to allow herself to experience infused recollection even when it came about. She would not be freed from this obstacle until Saint Peter Alcantara and Saint Francis of Borgia intervened.

So it would take her a long time to discover what best suited her. It was only after much trial and error and a lot of suffering that she would finally perfect her *way of interior prayer*.

*I believe that the Lord didn't want me to find someone to guide me* (V 49). She would even affirm that it was the Lord Himself who taught her this *habit of recollection* within herself (W29 7; see V 13 5).