

# Teresa of Avila: Sin & Salvation

Fr. Luc-Marie, ocd Lourdes 2015

St. Teresa of Avila's life is a prototype of Christian life for **two reasons**. The **first** is that her life contained a real and significant experience with **sin** up until the time of her conversion at the age of 40. **Secondly**, Teresa lived a real experience of **salvation**.

We are going to look at Teresa from these **two angles**: Teresa's experience with **sin**; Teresa's experience with **salvation**.

**A/ Experience with Sin:** It is this aspect of her life that draws her near to us and makes her a **true sister**. We will look at **three main areas** under this heading:

- 1 Teresa didn't **take advantage** of the good family environment that God gave her;
2. She was **trying to find herself**, not without God, in a lot of different areas;
3. She was very drawn to **distractions**.

1. Teresa doesn't **take advantage** of her good family situation:

- She didn't benefit from the virtuous example of her parents (1<sup>st</sup> Ch. VIDA). She said that she didn't know how to benefit from her parent's positive influence and example.
- This is the opposite of Therese, the Little Flower, who as student of Louis and Zele chose sainthood.
- In Teresa's case, one could only think that she deliberately chose **bad relationships** and not the example of her parents. A Religious in the convent where she was a student suggested she needed to become more virtuous. Teresa became angry with her and didn't take this good advice.
- Teresa was influenced by **her cousins**. They dragged her into superficiality, frivolity and carefree worldliness.
- It would seem she did all she could to move towards **evil**, to slide towards vice and what would cause her to be lost.
- This is apparent from the resistance she showed towards God's calling on her life and towards his presence in her life.
- The **religious life** filled her with aversion and disgust. Becoming a religious meant leaving the world along with a lot of other things. She couldn't imagine herself enclosed in a narrow religious life or even worse in the narrowness of a cloister.
- We may know young people who have felt a call to religious life but who ran away when they realized what it meant. It takes **courage** to enter religious life. Teresa lacked courage and so turned away from it.
- She was torn between the world and God's call on her life. The Lord had to take a **forceful approach** with her and become present to her.
- In the end it was out of the **fear of hell** and her concern for her **salvation** that she decided to enter religious life.

-In **sum** then, Teresa didn't take advantage of the good influence around her but gravitated towards bad company.

2. Teresa was trying to **find herself** in a lot of areas.

**Essential points:**

- She liked to **please**, seduce and be admired by others and was very successful at it. She had a lot of qualities and was very feminine. People admired her because of it.
  - Teresa was trying to find herself in her **relationships** not only to be admired but also to be loved, like we all do. She liked to be **loved more than she liked to love**
  - There was a lot of **self-satisfaction** at being able to attract attention. This put her in danger, it caused her to get caught up in all sorts of pride, vanity and physical and spiritual primping.
  - At one point Teresa was caught up in an exclusive and dependent friendship with a **priest**. She realized that this situation could have taken a bad turn as she was sensitive and could have easily been trapped in it.
  - At her uncle's home, where she went when she was sick, she spent time reading him spiritual books. She said she did it to please and be loved by him.
  - She had an **obsessive need** to be appreciated, to draw love to herself and to be admired.
  - She always acted out of **pride and honor** that she defended. What was important for her was the **image** she projected to others. Protecting her **reputation** was paramount for her. She would stop a sin if she felt it could become a **scandal** or if she thought that she would be pointed out for it or both.
  - But it's not what others think that should deter us from sin but that we love God and want to glorify him and live according to his will. St. Teresa wasn't there yet.
  - She did end up cutting off the relationship with her cousin when she felt her cousin it had gone too far. She then went into the **convent** to protect her reputation and avoid hell. She was the daughter of Spanish nobility. It wasn't acceptable to behave like a street walker.
  - It was important for St. Teresa that things remain **hidden**. As long as she could safely get away with something in secret, she continued to do it.
  - It is hard to choose God; it is hard to act simply for the satisfaction of doing his will, for his glory, day or night in what is seen and in what is unseen.
  - Another area where Teresa was seeking to find her way was in her apostolic life. She evangelized in the parlor. She taught the taste of God and how to practice silent prayer. She did it very well. She used the ministry and our Lord to create a personality **'for all to see.'**
  - Are we singing God for himself or for our own glory?
- 3/ Teresa is drawn to **distractions** and to **entertainment**:  
She spent a lot of time in worthless, **worldly pursuits** for her own **selfish satisfaction**. She devoured chivalry books. If she were alive today she would surely spend a

lot of time on the internet. Her father had forbidden her to read these books, but she continued to read them for her own **enjoyment** and **pleasure**. She preferred **personal satisfaction** to the glory of God. She wasn't willing to cut off **venial sins**.

How often do we **tell ourselves** that that isn't so bad? We need to live in this world after all? We need to try and make this life as pleasurable as possible! We **suffer enough** as it is!

When the Lord isn't the center of our lives we waste time not **purifying our desire for God** because the created takes up too much room in our lives. The created of course has a place! We do need to eat, drink and sleep! But the created has to have its rightful place!

In our **overindulgence** of seeking pleasure, distractions and satisfaction we wind up in **sin** if we aren't determined to cut it off! We don't really choose God but rather money & God; pleasure & God; cigarettes & God; alcohol & God.

There is never an effort, an **ascetic effort**, a **deprivation**. A **Christian life** without deprivation, or an **effort** to take control of our **addictions** and **dependencies**, is a life that **lacks God** or that **delays seeking him**. This was exactly the **obstacle** that St. Teresa faced. This was how she lived until her **conversion** at the age of 40 years old.

### **B/ Experience with Salvation:**

Despite her sins, St. Teresa had **assets** that allowed her to keep her hand in the Lord's and to move step by step towards him. He held a **place of importance** in her life though her **attachment to him** would be the source and the cause of a **true combat** within her.

Though a **prisoner** of the **flesh** and the **world**, she wanted to belong to God. She was **divided between the world, the flesh** and the attraction to **divine life**. For almost **20 years** she wore herself out in this combat because she was unable to make a choice. The **ambivalence** exhausted her soul.

When in the world and the flesh, she felt she had abandoned God. When she would choose God, she missed the world. When in the world she didn't really benefit from it because she regretted having lost God; when with God she didn't really benefit either because she missed the 'onions from Egypt' so-to-speak, and the world she had left behind.

Teresa was permanently **suspended** between **Heaven** and **Earth** since she wasn't completely in the things of the world nor in the things of Heaven. Nothing is more exhausting than the **inability** to make a **final choice either for God or the world**.

In Teresa's experience of **salvation** and in her **struggle** to reach a decision, there are **two fundamental issues**:

**A/ general intervention of God's Grace at work in her life;**

**B/ specific intervention of God's grace at work in her life.**

**A. General intervention of God's Grace in her life:**

**-Introduction:**

God secretly gives all of us a **human capital** of qualities, gifts and moral virtues that constitute our **character**. We might be attracted to evil but thanks to our God-given nature we are also attracted to good. It is up to us to determine our gifts by seeking deep within our nature. It is these gifts that cultivate the good seed and choke out the bad. The more we make room for good, the less there is room for evil in our lives, until good finally takes over our being.

Good is a **dynamic**. The more I practice good, the more I am capable of good things. I become the enemy of evil and come to hate sin. The opposite is also true. The more I allow hateful thoughts to arise within me, the more I give in to hateful urges, the more these hateful urges take over my being. There is a **logical dynamic** in evil too. The more I do bad things, the worse I become. The more I look for the good within myself the greater my chance of being saved. The more I let evil dominate my life, the greater my chance of being damned.

It is important to know that heaven and hell exist!

**-Teresa's natural gifts or human qualities from the Lord:**

Despite her experience with sin, Teresa had a good heart and good intentions. An example of Teresa's goodness, strongly influenced by all the chivalry books she had read, was the project she came up with as a child to go to Moor country as a witness for Christ and to **die a martyr** there. This project of course failed as her family intercepted her leaving town with her brother Rodrigo. As soon as she returned home though, disappointed that she couldn't give her life as a martyr, she decided she would give her life to God as a solitary, living the life of a hermit. She and her brother began to build her first **hermitage** at 10 years old. Together they meditated on the always, always, always of **eternal life**.

Early on Teresa realized the **vanity** of the things of this world. One day she saw a very sick nun dealing with her difficult situation with the utmost patience, totally submitted to and accepting of the will of God and the path to sainthood he had chosen for her. Teresa was deeply moved and desired that same **grace**.

All around us there are brothers and sisters in Christ who serve as models of sanctity for us. Instead of being jealous or minimizing them for it, we can lean on them. We can look at their merit and ask God for the grace to be brought up to their same degree of sainthood.

Another example of her goodness was that she never said anything bad about anyone. She didn't **gossip**. She was very attached to wanting to preserve the honor of those absent.

This behavior had to be **purified** in her though as it was an area where she was trying to find herself. She didn't want to talk about others behind their back because she didn't want them talking about her. She told herself that if she didn't say anything bad about others they would be more inclined not to say anything bad about her. But what's important is to not gossip because we respect someone and see the good in them.

**-Teresa was courageous and determined:**

Teresa had both appeal and character. She knew how to rein herself in to answer the **call** God had placed on her life. Though she had resisted God's will for a long time, she ended up giving up the struggle because she loved and wanted God. She even decided to enter the Incarnation Monastery, the '**casket**' that God had prepared for her, this '**first-class burial**' of religious life that God offered her. He was more important than her and she preferred him to herself even though she remained ambivalent.

There was the best and the worst in Teresa. It was the best however that allowed her to get a hold of herself and follow God's call into religious life.

Teresa was also sick with a **mysterious illness** that kept her bedridden for three years. She was finally given last rites, taken for deceased and wax was used to seal her eyelids shut.

Yet, despite three years of illness, Teresa **persevered** as best she could in religious life, in what she had to live and in what Christ asked her to live. This is very important. She didn't give up even when she had to crawl.

We all have **crosses** that we want our Lord to take from us but it isn't necessarily a good thing that he take them. We just might need to keep these crosses to forge a loyalty and purity in love. It is these crosses that we continually live with that develop and reinforce our **choice for God**.

On this earth, our life only makes sense in the choice for God. The only thing that will remain from our life here below when we finally appear before God's throne is **what we chose from him when facing our sins and our internal and external temptations**. What is important in life is to choose God. God alone suffices. Little by little Teresa brings us to a choice for God within the reality of our own personal lives- determination, courage, strength of character, behavior in our lives of prayer, the **place of sanctification**. It wasn't always easy for St. Teresa to practice prayer nor is it easy for members of the Carmelite family today. We don't always feel like praying; it could even be said...that we rarely do!

A young person who heard a friar say this told him that he was an **imposter!** Yes, in fact he would be IF he didn't go and pray when he didn't feel like it. Or he would be if he wanted to and benefited from the

pleasures it brings him, in other words he was only loyal to prayer because he finds it pleasurable.

It is important to differentiate our internal **zones**:

**-Sensory:** in this zone we develop appetites, tastes, preferences, **desires**;

**-Spiritual life:** rational attractions through which we **make choices**. The choice to love God with determination and courage; pray for his glory; we offer ourselves to his presence when we don't want to pray or even feel disgust for the things of God.

St. Teresa takes us by the hand and leads us along the path of determination and of the courageous choice for God. This choice for God forges a loyalty for him that allows us to go through the desert, the promise land, without water or food or anything except a feeling that we are **going to make it**.

Women are courageous, that is why there are more women contemplatives and more women in the secular Carmelites!

**-St. Teresa's humility is perhaps the most important general help that God gave her:**

**Humility** was in fact the secret of her sainthood. Teresa felt it was the '**mother**' of all virtues. She had a real grasp of her '**miserableness**' - her **state of sinfulness**. She was very clear about herself and wasn't afraid to **confess** her unworthiness. The only reason she didn't lay out her sins for us in a public confession was because she was told not to. But she would have gladly done so if she could have.

Teresa wanted others to see that she was a poor sinner. She wasn't a 'Mary' like the Little Flower, the oldest daughter of the Gospel of her Father. She was rather a Prodigal Son, a Mary Magdalene or the Samaritan woman who had had 5 husbands. Teresa didn't hesitate to identify with both women. She understood her miserableness. She saw things as they were and confessed herself to her sisters as much as she was permitted to.

We understand from the generic imperfections that she spoke of that **concrete sinful events** had occurred in her life. This sense of her poverty and miserableness is well-summarized when she told us that God had to put up with her presence in prayer.

A king who accepts the visit of his subject who betrayed him. A subject who knows that the king knows he betrayed him and yet the subject dares to come before the king.

How do you **enter a chapel or a church?** Do you enter as a prideful person who feels your worthy because you have accumulated a **collection of good actions?** If we put all these good actions on a scale, the grade might be 60/100; yet we hold our heads up as if worthy of a **rite of passage**; the right to appear before God's throne.

What a **spiritual illusion!**

If we could really see the **state of our souls**, how we are riddled with sin, would we even have trust in God's

mercy to dare to enter a chapel? This is how St. Teresa lived silent prayer; she lived it like a poor sinner who the Good God full of infinite patience and mercy accepted into his presence.

**Teresa didn't make demands** on God for a special form of supernatural prayer. She presented herself before him as someone **very small**. She felt that she had been largely rewarded and was grateful that God would even accept that she come before him in this life of prayer. This was St. Teresa of Avila! She never sought consolations from God and she invites us to do the same. She wants us to remember how blessed we are and all that God has done for us even if we are going through spiritual dryness.

We can often feel like we are paying attention to God, but that he doesn't pay attention to us; that we have been forgotten. We complain! Who do we think we are?

**-Teresa lacked trust in God; that was the temptation:**

Teresa often cried and her heart broke thinking of her resolutions with no tomorrow. She even went so far as to not dare to return to our Lord and stopped praying for over a year. She felt it was her **greatest temptation**. It wasn't about humility though. She **lacked trust in God**; that was the temptation. It was once again with the help of **general grace** in her life, that she came to **trust in God's mercy**. Humility goes hand in hand with trust in God's mercy.

In spite of her sin, Teresa always experienced God's **loyalty** towards her. He always tenderly sought her out overlooking her faults with an infinite patience. She compared herself to St. Augustine. He was sought by God and then turned and sought God. She told us that she was called by God not once but a thousand times and she didn't respond to the call. The Lord continued however to tirelessly call her.

We need to discover the face of God who loves us so much and never gets tired of us. Yet, we crucify him on a cross and we pierce his heart with the spear of sin. In spite of this, he continues to cry out that he is thirsty. The door is always open. His hands are always open and spread out ready to embrace us even in the last hour. There is no problem. We are able to return to God anytime and throw ourselves into his arms. Our Lord's **mercy** for us is **infinite**. He easily forgives us because he is viscerally attached to us. We are his little darling sons and daughters of the Father!

St. Teresa came to have a very strong **trust** in our Lord. She would tell her sisters that it was as if **he hid her faults**. He accepted that she was concerned with her honor and hated being discovered in the act of sin. Our Lord's mercy went so far as to preserve her from what she dreaded.

She said he **punished** her by his **favors**. He **pursued** her with **special graces** which allowed her to feel and understand the **free gift of God's love**. She was also able to see that **God is everything** and she was nothing.

She understood that she had to be **tamed** and **grow to love him**.

To be nothing next to God who is everything, this deployment of goodness for us sinners is called **mercy**; **love that leans towards the miserable sinner**.

One day St. Teresa was in the choir where she discovered the little Christ attached at the pillar. It is a well-known statue and can still be seen at the Incarnation monastery in Avila. This little Christ symbolized her sins; the heartbroken looked at her with love and tenderness.

Susan Stanford went through an abortion and then wanted to commit suicide. She had a vision in image of Jesus in the OR with her at the time of her abortion. His loving look freed her from the trauma. She was then able to resume her therapy practice and help others.

Mary Magdalene had a similar experience, as did Zacchaeus. It is the story of each one of us. **It is St. Teresa's Story**.

**Please Note:** the **specific** intervention of God's grace at work in her life will be addressed in next video on Teresian prayer by Fr. Marie-Laurent ocd.