

## Teresa and Prayer

### St. Teresa's Concept of Prayer

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#### Introduction

Prayer is the central theme to Teresa's message. It became for her an adventure in prayer. Through her understanding of prayer, she came to understand the mystery of the Christian life.

Today we are living a crisis in prayer and her writings speak to our situation. But we are not going to look to her to address today's issues.

We shall go to her teachings and find out **what prayer is** and **how we ought to go about it**. We will **leave aside** the historical background to her thinking, the degrees of prayer, and mystical prayer. We will **seek out** what are the most **basic and universally applicable expressions of her thinking on prayer comprised of three superimposed layers**: experience, reflection and teaching. Teresa doesn't really theorize about prayer; she **communicates her experience** and invites and guides the reader into it.

#### 1/ Experience of Prayer:

We will stick with **Teresa's testimony**. Her **testimony** is spread throughout her writings from the **first** one in 1560 to the **sixth** one in 1581 which was a formal account a year before her death. The book of her **Life** is the **most fruitful source**.

There are **three situations** that Teresa went through that are **typical of a Christian before God**: spontaneous prayer without problems; critical stage of difficult prayer; and, the flow of infused prayer. We will **focus** mainly on the **second- the struggle to pray**, which is the most interesting. Through it, Teresa's doctrine on prayer takes shape. It is framed between the other two situations giving us the opportunity to speak of them but only in passing.

#### The First Experience

"I had one brother about my own age. We used to get together to read the lives of the saints... When I considered the **martyrdoms** the saints suffered for God, it seemed to me that the price they paid for going to enjoy God was very cheap, and I greatly desired to die in the same way. I did not want this on account of the love I felt for God but to get to enjoy very quickly the wonderful things I read there were in Heaven. A brother and I discussed together the means we should take to achieve this. We agreed to go off to the land of the Moors and beg them, out of love of God, to **cut off our heads** there. It seemed to me the Lord had given us courage at so tender an age, but we couldn't discover any means. Having parents seemed to us to be the

greatest obstacle. What we read about pain and glory lasting forever made a deep impression upon us. We spent a lot of time talking about this and took delight in often repeating: forever and ever and ever. Through the frequent repetition of these words, the Lord was pleased to impress upon me in childhood the way of truth" (L, 1, 4)

It is important to note that God impressed on Teresa the **way of truth** (L1,4); her account had a contemplative feel at a very young age; Teresa grasped the transitory nature of things here below; in opposition in her life was the vanity of the perishable and the truth of the eternal. However, the first breath of adolescence blew away all the above musings.

#### Second Experience

Teresa went through 18-20 years of **great aridity**. It was not continuous but interspersed with mystical prayer. She struggled to recover the **sense of prayer and the ability to pray**; she sought to speak to God.

The focus of her struggle was to pray. She decided to train herself to pray the **prayer of recollection** described by the Franciscan, Osuna, in the Third Spiritual Alphabet. Until she came upon Osuna, she really didn't know how to pray.

She easily grasped the idea of **Christ in his humanity** from a childhood practice of **meeting him nightly** in the **garden of Gethsemane**, her earliest recollection of personal prayer (L, 4, 7). She was determined to follow this path and experienced marvelous results that were followed by 18 years of aridity.

There were no rules for personal prayer in her community. Teresa herself determined to make time for daily prayer. She set aside time and she easily made contact with Christ.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Crisis

In her **practice of prayer**, she encountered **two difficulties**. The **first** was her inability to reason; she couldn't picture things to herself or think or meditate in God's presence. The **second** she could not control her thoughts. She struggled with her imagination, the **madman in the house**.

These **two hurdles initially smothered her first attempts at prayer**. "I now think it was the Lord's provision... it would have been **impossible to persevere for eighteen years in this trial and great aridity**. I suffered being unable to reflect discursively. In all those years, except for the time after Communion I never dared to begin prayer without a **book**. For my soul was as fearful of being without it during prayer as it would have been should it have had to **battle with a lot of people**..... it was like a partner or a **shield** by which to **sustain the blows of my many thoughts**, I went about consoled. For the dryness was not usually felt, but it was always felt when I was without a book. Then my soul was thrown into confusion and my thoughts ran wild.

With a book I began to collect them, and my soul was “**drawn to recollection**” (L, 4, 9).

She used the book as a **shield** against her active mind. She even anticipated the **bell** for the first few years announcing the end of the prayer time.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Crisis

Teresa’s life was not in line with her prayer. She ‘**wasted**’ time and was impoverishing her spirit with affections and friendships that had too strong a hold on her. The **dilemma** was anxious and painful for her. It took twenty years for her to cross this stormy sea. **She was living far from perfection and neither enjoyed God nor the world.** God continued to come to her anyway, but she was ashamed to meet him in **intimate friendship** which is what **prayer** is. She gave up prayer for a year and a half due to her shame and feelings of unworthiness to continue her dialogue with God. She was thirty years old (1543-44), ten years into the twenty-year trial. It is however important to note that in both crises, Christ was always within her reach.

The **whole problem** lay within Teresa. The **first crisis** was psychological. The inner mechanism for thinking, reasoning and imagining was not in tune with her will, soul and person thus frustrating and breaking down the continuity of her contact with God. The **second crisis** was about **false humility** or a lack of authenticity in her prayer. To Teresa, humility meant walking in truth, and truth is the essence of things, that phrase sums up what was the **root of the problem**: she feared God she had to meet in prayer and she was ashamed of herself.

## The Long Struggle

Teresa’s way of prayer was **simple**. She advised ‘**representing Christ to herself**’, as being near or within her soul, and speaking to him. Here is her description of how she first proceeded: ‘I used to try as hard as I could to keep Jesus Christ, our God and our Lord, present within me, and that was my way of prayer... (L,5,7)

Teresa would **enter into prayer by ‘thinking of Jesus as present within me.** This was a simple, effective but fragile way that she protected with all sorts of supports. **Reading** was the support she used the most. Sometimes it was enough to have a book beside her like a weapon: ‘Often it was enough just to open the book. Sometimes I read a little, sometimes a great deal, depending on the Lord’s favor” (L,4,9). She had her own ruses all geared to achieve the **aim of the initial effort: to make Christ present and to meet him.**

Her preference was for Gospel characters and scenes that would bring her nearer to the historical Christ and, transfer him from a biblical framework to her own inner life. Some of Teresa’s **favorite ruses**:

1/ She relived the scenes which portrayed the **Master’s dealings with the Samaritan woman and with Mary Magdalen.**

-“How often I recall the living water which the Lord spoke to the **Samaritan** woman about! I am so fond of that passage. Indeed. I always have been, ever since I was a child, though without understanding this good then as I do now. I often begged the Lord to give me that water, and I used to carry a little picture of the episode of the Lord at the well, with the inscription: Domine, da mihi aquam” (L30, 19)

-“I had a great devotion to the glorious **Magdalene**, and often thought about her conversion especially when I received Communion...I, thinking that he would not despise my tears, placed myself at his feet... I commended myself to this glorious saint that she might obtain pardon for me’ (L, 9, 2)

2/ The **moments after communion** (Way, 34, 6-7) were favorable for Teresa’s method of praying and her ruses. “...The Lord had given her such a faith that when she heard someone say they would have liked to have lived when Christ walked the earth, she used to laugh to herself. She wondered what more they wanted since in the most Blessed Sacrament they had him just as truly present as he was then...for many years when she received Communion...**she saw him enter her house**...she freed herself from all external things when possible and **she entered to be with him.** She strove to recollect the senses so that...they would not impede the soul from recognizing it. She considered that she was at his feet and wept with the Magdalene...though she didn’t feel devotion, faith told her he was there” (W, 34, 6-7).

3/ **Christ’s prayer in the garden of Gethsemane**, one she cultivated and liked the best as it had evolved from childhood. ‘This is the way I used to pray... I would try to picture Christ within me, and it did me greater good to picture him in those scenes where I saw him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as a person in need, he had to accept me. I had many simple thoughts of this kind. I found the scene of his prayer in the garden especially comforting; I strove to be his companion there. (L, 9, 4). This scene recurs throughout her life. She cultivated it with the faithfulness of a lover.

4/**Christ’s Triumphant entry into Jerusalem.** “On Palm Sunday (probably 1572) after Communion, my faculties remained in such deep suspension that I couldn’t even swallow the host; and holding it in my mouth...it seemed to me that my **entire mouth was filled with blood. I felt my face and all the rest of me covered with this blood...** (ST No.22).

These ‘simple thoughts’ and ‘foolish reflections’ were Teresa’s usual aids to prayer.

5/ **Other Biblical characters.** Teresa did call on other Biblical characters such as St. Paul at his conversion (W,

4, 1-3), St. Peter in tears (IC, VII, 4, 5), St. Joseph in silent contemplation (L, 6, 6-8).

6/ She repeatedly returned to the **Biblical theme with Christ in his humanity central to all**. 'All my life I had been so devoted to Christ...I returned to my custom of rejoicing in him especially when I received Communion. I wanted to keep ever before my eyes a painting or image of him since I was unable to keep him as engraved on my soul as I would have like... (L, 22,4)

7/ **Her sin and reflection on her life** arose when coming into the presence of the suffering Christ or when she was forced to engage in serious dialogue with him. She was compelled to overcome the barrier of her own wretchedness to rise toward his mercy or his person.

8/ Teresa used **nature to draw near to God as an aid to recollection**. 'It helped me also to look at fields, or water, or flowers. In these things I found a remembrance of the Creator...they awakened and recollected me and served as a book and reminded me of my ingratitude and sins. (L, 9,5).

9/ **Her daily mental journey to the Garden of Olives**, was to picture her own soul as a garden: ... it was a great delight to me to think of my soul as a garden where the Lord was walking. I begged him to increase the fragrance of the little flowers of virtue which appeared to be about to bloom, ...' (L,14, 9).

The use of such helps to recollection never lessened Teresa's concentration on the **principal target** of her attention: **Christ**. Gospel scenes, characters, and the inner garden were only a way of inviting him inside (her soul). She used Gospel scenes to transpose the central figure, **Christ** into her own life. She sought a real relationship with him. So, her constant effort to '**represent the Christ**', **make him present near or within her**, is absolutely **Central to Teresa's prayer**.

### To Represent the Christ

The exact meaning is **not easy to grasp** and would seem like an apparent contradiction. First, she says to 'try and represent Christ' within her. Then she said: 'I had so little ability to represent things with my intellect that unless I had seen the things my imagination was no use to me. I could only think of Christ as he was as man, but never in such a way that I could picture him within myself...I was like one who is **blind or in darkness**; he speaks with a person and sees that the person is with him because he knows with certainty that he is there ( I mean he understands and believes that he is there, but he does not see him). That is how it was with me whenever I thought about our Lord' (L, 9, 6).

This second passage allows us to **clearly understand the double meaning** which the word '**to represent**' or to '**picture**' had for Teresa. **When praying, she neither imagines Christ nor is she even trying to**. Her whole effort is to **re-present him to herself**, enter the fact of

his presence, make it felt within her, objectify what she believed. As she expressed it elsewhere: "I try to think of Jesus...as present within me' (L,4, 7), so there is no setting the scene, imagining what he looked like, etc. She just goes directly to him and invites him into the space of her own spirit where he can be 'in her' or with her' so that she only has to talk to him.

### Conversion

Teresa's conversion took place prepared for by long practice. Here is her account: 'On entering the oratory one day, I happened to see a statue which had been brought there in preparation for a certain feast we observed in the house. It represented the much-wounded Christ and was very devotional, so that beholding it I was utterly distressed at seeing him that way, for it well represented what he suffered for us. I felt so keenly aware of how poorly I thanked him for those wounds that, it seems to me, my heart broke. Beseeching him to strengthen me once and for all that I might not offend him, I threw myself down before him with the greatest outpouring of tears (L, 9, 1).

She had made similar gestures many times before, especially when she re-lived scenes about Mary Magdalene. 'But on this occasion ... I think I profited more...I think I told him that I would not rise from there until he granted what I was begging him for' (L, 9, 3) Accustomed to getting inside Gospel characters, she now came across St. Augustine's account of his own conversion, in the Confessions 'I seemed to see myself in them... When I came to his conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, I couldn't help feeling in my heart that the Lord was speaking to me' (L, 9, 8).

### II. Mystical Prayer

It was on the foundation of that humble tactic of hers that Teresa's third form of prayer, **mystical prayer**, originated and developed. Going from the '**re-presentation**' of the **person** she was speaking with to his '**Presence**' was a short step. Mystical prayer always remained something of a **novelty** for Teresa though for the last 28 years of her life she constantly experienced his presence. She continued the prayer she had developed over the **last 20 years** too which co-existed with mystical prayer.

'I sometimes experienced... though very briefly...the feeling of his presence, or even while reading, it sometimes happened that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt he was within me or I totally immersed in him' (L, I). In other words, one's entry into this **new form of prayer** is '**a presence of God**... such that anyone who commends himself to his Majesty will find him.'

The remaining history of Teresa's prayer, the **degrees and variations of her mystical contemplation**,

correspond quite simply to an **intensification of this presence**. Teresa continued to use her skills but no longer needed them to bring Christ near, in fact, he was almost forcing his presence on her.

As time went on, Teresa discovered this presence more and more. It is possible to **define that process** in its **three peak moments** by pointing out the **three key discoveries**:

- 1/ becoming aware of the **presence of God everywhere** within and without;
- 2/ discovery of the **presence of Christ beside or within her**;
- 3/ experiencing the **presence of the Trinity within the soul**.

Let's look at her **testimony** of each of the **three discoveries**.

**Testimony #1:** In the Life and in the Interior Castle, Teresa tells the reader how one day... she came to discover that God himself was everywhere: "There was one thing I was ignorant about at first: I didn't know that God was in all things. So, even though he seemed to me to be very much present, I thought it was impossible. I couldn't stop believing he was there because it seemed almost obvious to me that I had perceived his very presence. Those who had no learning told me that he was **present only by grace**... A very learned man of the Order of St. Dominic **freed me from this doubt**, for he told me that God was present and how God communicated himself to us...' (L, 18, 15).

**Testimony #2:** Another day ... a further presence was revealed to her: that of Christ "God and man." Again, she mentions how unprepared she was and how totally ignorant that anything of the kind could happen between her and him: 'At the end of two years... I had the following experience. When I was praying on the feast of the glorious St. Peter, I saw or, to put it better, felt **Christ beside me**. I saw nothing with my bodily eyes or with my soul, but it seemed to me that Christ was at my side, and I know it was he who was speaking to me. Since I was completely unaware that there could be such a vision as this, it greatly frightened me in the beginning... It seemed to me that Jesus Christ was **always present at my side**; but since it was not an imaginative vision I did not know what he looked like. Yet I felt very clearly that he was always at my right side and that he witnessed everything I did. Whenever I was a little recollected, or not very distracted, I was **unable to ignore his presence at my side**' (L, 27, 2).  
Being interested in only having **direct personal contact with him**, she had pictured him **beside her**, or **within herself**, or else found in the **Sacrament of the Eucharist**. But now, all of a sudden, she **discovered the**

**reality: Christ present in her very spirit, not as a picture but as the 'Living Christ.'**"

**Testimony #3:** 'God decided to remove the scales from my eyes' and showed her 'the **Most Holy Trinity** in all three Persons' in the central dwelling place of her soul. 'Here all three Persons communicate themselves to the soul, speak to it' (IC, VII, I,6). Her initial reaction was one of surprise ... but surprise gave way to growing admiration: 'Each day this soul becomes more amazed, for these Persons never seem to leave it anymore; it clearly beholds ... that they are within it. Deep inside, in a part so deep that it (soul) can't explain it, the soul experiences this divine company' (IC, VII, I,7)

**Mystical prayer** not only enriches and deepens prayer; it **simplifies** it. It achieves all at once what has been the object of a **long and arduous search**, finally reaching the Person and entering into communication with him. The whole of her prayer was essentially a **seeking effort**, a pursuit of the Person, a matter of reaching God. Teresa paid much less attention to the **subject matter of her prayer**; such things she regarded as **determined by the life style** of the person praying. In her own case, the **way she lived had a decisive influence on the way she prayed**.

**Christ appeared to be the solution to all her problems**. The Gospel provided opportunities to find and reach him. But the **historical Christ** was of interest only to bring the **living Christ** as deeply as possible into her own life '**within**' her and **not just 'with' her**. This is part of the **mystery of Christian life**. Living at the level of mystical experience one enters into real possession of the Christian life and through the higher stages of prayer, makes full use of it.