

## Learning to Pray

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Clarion Jul-Aug 2006  
Vol. XXII No. 4

Teresa did not have a method of prayer, but she did have a **method of teaching** it; a very personal and effective method uniformly consistent throughout her works. As long as it was her using it, it was documented to be **quite effective**.

Initially her success at teaching her method of prayer was limited (L, 7, 13), but as she progressed, her success rate improved (L, 13, 9).

The book of her *Life* was the **result of an increase in virtue and mastery of her way of prayer**, and was **written for her first school of prayer**, a small group of friends. At the **second writing** of her *Life*, the members of this group had made considerable progress. Of one she says: ‘One of the people who commanded me to write this book, whom the Lord has brought in four months to a point far beyond that which I have reached in seventeen years. ...’ (L, II.8).

Her testimony concerning the **most famous** of this group the **theologian Ibanez**, a man who had given up his chair of theology for a life of prayer and died transformed by it, is quite moving: “His prayer had reached such a degree that at the time of his death when he wanted to avoid mental prayer because of his great weakness, he couldn’t on account of his many raptures. He wrote me asking what he should do” (L, 38, 13). Before she founded her first monastery, she was successful with an even **larger number of disciples** in the monastery of the **Incarnation**. To quote a contemporary witness: “More than forty nuns are practicing great recollection in her house.” But her **greatest success** came when she was at last able to have **her own group of novices** in the convent of **St. Joseph in Avila**, and subsequently in the **other convents** she founded. Her own estimate of these was very favorable... She wrote: “So many are the favors which the Lord does in the houses that though there are one or two (nuns) in each whom God leads by way of meditation, **all the rest attain perfect contemplation**” (F. 4,5).

**Her father** was an early and successful disciple of Teresa’s in prayer (IC 7, 10); and later, **her brother Lorenzo**, who had returned from America, made great progress in a very short time. Other letters show a teaching mission to a variety of people. On those

journeys through Castile and Andalusia who knows what other friends she may have attracted to prayer. The **covered wagons** in which she and her nuns travelled were to some extent a **traveling school of prayer**. Ribera, an early biographer, wrote: “They traveled in covered carts, and organized themselves as if they were in their **monastery**... They always brought a little **bell**, which they rang for the regular times of prayer and **silence**, and a sand-glass to measure the time. At such times all had to be silent. Afterward she **rewarded their silence** by giving them **something to eat**.”

**To grasp Teresa’s method of teaching prayer** we must **examine her experience**. She was convinced that her life only really began when she made it a **life of prayer**. From then on she lived a friendship with the Lord. Prayer activated the friendship and kept Teresa in contact with him. In spite of the hustle and bustle of her life, she was always the nun who talked to God. This **inner attitude** allowed her to easily rise above life’s circumstances. In Teresa’s writings, prayer is the determining factor that introduces the reader into the atmosphere of her dialogue with God.

She introduces God in her writing as a party to her conversation rather than as a subject. She writes as if **talking to the reader** but **alternates her conversation between the reader and God**. Her dialogue with the reader is so simple and sincere that when she turns to talk to God the reader feels included in the conversation. When a reader really enters into her writings he cannot avoid the **principal personage, God**. Teresa’s writings reveal those parts of her life that serve to tell the reader what vocal and mental prayer, or meditation and contemplation, are and that provide an opportunity for her to try and pray with him.

A **typical example** of the pedagogical approach in the *Way of Perfection*, a book in which she sets out to teach her own nuns how to pray. The very first chapter is a **model of her technique of alternating dialogue**; she is writing for nuns, but talks to them and to God alternately. Her aim was to tell them the reason for the life they were leading.

In another chapter, the reader sees the author become moved talking to the Other. He gets caught up in that conversation. From the very beginning of the book **God is present as one of the group**. Nothing is discussed without him, and if you try to ignore his presence, you cannot understand the book.

In the rest of the *Way of Perfection* the procedure is the same, especially concerning its **central lesson**: what prayer is, how to pray, how to grow in prayer etc. Teresa simply brings in the third party by introducing his word and declaring him the Master.

This way of **combining communication of ideas with practice simplifies the learning process**. The reader doesn't have to know the various degrees of prayer or wait to understand their mechanics before making direct contact with them and using them. Saying prayers and thinking: thinking and loving; meditating and contemplating; recollecting oneself and listening...these are things which the book simply does as it goes on, and whoever reads it does them with it. The way these succeed one another and combine in various ways is a practical demonstration that **nothing is impossible or automatically out of anybody's reach**, that if some things are not within one's grasp now it is only because they have not yet become part of one's life. Because **one's life determines** these things; it is by relating to God that one's capacity for relationship grows. "The Lord invites everybody" He offers 'living water' to everybody. He excludes nobody from the Way (W 19; 20, 1).

Teresa knows from experience that **'this way' is difficult**, almost impossible without **solid support**. She is convinced of the necessity for practical guidance and the efficacy of communicated experience.

In the *Way of Perfection*, her **'manual of prayer', two levels of initiation and training** are distinguishable: one is **personal and individual**; the other is at **group or community** level. Here is the basic outline of each.

### **Individual Training**

St. Teresa requires certain **predispositions** in anyone setting out on **"this road of prayer"**. They must meet certain **requirements** before she will give them directions for the road ahead.

The requirements concern **one's life** which must be **converted into prayer**. The garden's soil must be prepared so that when watered it **brings forth flowers** (virtues) not weeds.

In the *Way of Perfection*, these requirements are expressed as follows: "The **first** is a **general one**: to aim at having the **Church as an ideal** to serve and as a reason for living. This is to avoid the trap of living as if only 'God and oneself' existed...For such people

spiritual narcissism and false eschatology are real dangers."

The **second** concerns **sustenance for the journey**: **practical virtues** that keep one's feet on the ground, such as **brotherly love, detachment** from material things, and **humility** to walk in truth.

Her **final** and most insistent requirement is a **'resolute determination'**. Teresa sees it as the **key component** of the whole operation.

You could think that **'resolute determination** is just another virtue to be added to the three just mentioned. But she is really talking about a **fundamental firmness of purpose in life** which **typifies a conversion experience** like the one she had. Teresa knew that a **life of prayer** pursued to perfection requires **"more courage** than the suffering of a quick martyrdom" (L 31, 17). She knew too that one can even encounter attacks from those in the Church who reject a Christian life expressed in terms of prayer.

Teresa gives her **basic requirement** a military tone. From the outset, she prefers military images. The 'bravery of a warrior' is required. Her readers were women but she wanted them to be courageous: "I would not want you, my daughters, to be womanish in anything...but like **strong men**..." (W 7, 8). The sisters were to fight vigorously to the death.

Teresa devotes two chapters (21&23) to spell out the kind of determination she has in mind and its importance for the road ahead. Speaking to those who set out **in search of the water of life** she said: "I say that it is very important-all-important indeed that they have a **great and very resolute determination** to persevere until they come to it...whether they arrive or die on the road...even if the world collapses" (21, 2). In the second chapter she is still insisting on the same thing: "But this little bit of time we resolve to give him... let us be wholly determined never to take it back from him...I should consider the time of prayer as not belonging to me ..." (23, 2).

These two texts, which have parallels in her *Life*, 9 & 11, are enough to show what Teresa thought; **determination is not a conversion to practice a few virtues; it is conversion to the Person of Christ, a definitive binding**.

When it comes to **introducing us to personal prayer**, Teresa feels she has a **simple and effective way, guaranteed by her experience**. She says she had never known "what it was to **pray with satisfaction** until the **Lord showed her this way**". She is convinced that

anyone who tries it will **succeed**, though not without some trouble and care. In fact, **she gives us her word**: “I know that if you try you will acquire it in a year, or maybe six months” (29, 8). She is convinced too of the **effectiveness** of her **teaching method**. Her emphasis is on **avoiding stagnation** and **stimulating development toward more intense, contemplative and mystical, forms of prayer**. She doesn’t believe in teaching beginners about such distinctions as active and contemplative prayer. She introduces a **kind of rhythm in praying, alternating between vocal and mental prayer, between meditation and recollection, recollection and contemplation**.

Her **aim** is a **practical** one. She sets out to make use of her own **experience** and her personalized approach to prayer that is basically a matter of relating to God. It is more a conversation between two people than a conversation about something.

The emphasis of Teresa’s way is on the two people involved. The person praying becomes **aware** that he is entering God’s realm and engaging Him in conversation. The attitude of the person is ‘different’; he is in a **posture** which creates the space to pray and makes it possible to speak to God. Teresa called the **combination of awareness and spiritual posture ‘recollection’**. The word has **lost the meaning** it had for her because it doesn’t really convey that **inner attitude**, that **spiritual posture**, which Teresa sought to convey. This is because **inwardness** is not favored in contemporary spiritual writing. Hence the need to accept it as a Teresian term with the meaning she gave it. A **brief analysis** of the central chapters in the *Way of Perfection* (26-29) will accomplish this.

The first two chapters deal with the **most important aspect: introducing Christ into our prayer**. The second two cover the **other aspect: entering within ourselves to pray**. These **two elements make up Teresa’s concept of ‘recollection’**. Each concentrates on one of the two people ‘**sharing the friendship**’ and each has its specific function. The **first simplifies** things as much as possible. The **second serves to interiorize and spiritualize the act of prayer**. “Since you are alone (in prayer) daughters, strive to **find a companion**. Well what better companion than the Master who taught you this prayer? **Represent the Lord himself as close to you and behold how lovingly and humbly he is teaching you. Believe me, you should remain with so good a friend as long as you can**” (26, 1).

The encounter with the Person is paramount, thus, the **effort to simplify the act of faith by which the presence of Christ is made real**. All her guidance is to **avoid** the tangle of meditation, the distraction of too much thinking. The **vocabulary** she chooses is very **effective**: Christ is really present; one has only to ‘look’ or ‘see him looking at us’, and to accept that he speaks as a teacher. The advice ‘**to look at him**’ is the **center** of her whole exposition. Her intention being to grasp his entire presence in this intuitive act: “Turn your eyes and look at him”, ‘look at him on his way to Gethsemane ...look at him bound...or look at him burdened; and he must look at you ...’ (W26, 4-5).

In her *Life* she **impressed on beginners**: “...it is good to reflect awhile and think about the pains Christ suffered...but one should not always weary oneself ... **just remain in his presence with the intellect quiet...occupy himself in looking at Christ looking at him**; he should speak to him, ask him for things, humble himself, and delight in the Lord’s presence, remembering he is unworthy to be there. Whenever he can do this...he will derive **great benefit...**” (L 13, 22). Her concluding remarks in the *Way of Perfection* are the same: “Draw near to this good Master with strong determination to learn what he teaches you, and His Majesty will see to it that you turn out to be good disciples. He will not abandon you, if you do not abandon him...” (W 26, 10)

**‘Entering into oneself’** is the **second aspect of recollection**. ‘**Recollecting oneself**’ requires a **twofold effort: letting go** of the external, the **sensory world**; and **engaging in ‘interior acts’**. “It is called **recollection** because the soul collects its powers and retires within itself with God” (W 28, 4).

This is the starting point of the *Interior Castle*, the **door** of which is prayer. To **enter the castle** is to **pray**; to **continue into the castle** is to **progress** through the various **stages of prayer**, the degrees by which prayer is intensified and purified.

Teresa, a contemplative, was **determined to develop** in her **disciples** the **powers** most suited to **penetrate** into the sphere of the **divine**. She was deeply convinced of man’s inner riches. The **call to interior prayer** is based on the **conviction** that our **inner world** is more **spacious** than the whole world around us and that it is the person himself who matters the most when meeting and speaking with God. The **measure of any person** is the **depth of his inner life**.

## Group Training

The **formula of 'recollection'** has outlined the program of initiation of the individual into prayer. By **group training** is implying a **group of people called by God to live out the experience of prayer by walking the 'road of prayer' together in community.**

Teresa's early experience convinced her that on the **difficult road of prayer, the lone walker stood little chance of surmounting the difficulties.** It was a necessity she felt to find people whose solidarity will provide **mutual support.** "Of myself I can say that had the Lord not revealed this truth to me and given me the means by which I could frequently **talk with persons who practiced prayer,** I, would have ended by falling headlong into hell..." (L 7, 22).

The conclusion she drew from her own case led her to often repeat: 'It is a very **hard thing for a soul to be alone amid so many dangers...**I would advise those who practice prayer, especially in the beginning, to **seek the friendship and conversation of others** who are doing the same...even if all you do is **help one another** by your **prayers;** it is so important...Those who serve him must stand shoulder to shoulder if they are to advance. Until they are strong, they ought to **seek companionship as a defense...**Charity grows by being communicated ...sharing is very important" (L 7, 20-22).

**This vision of fellowship, at the service of prayer, cultivating human communication to further communication with God, is beautiful:** "Since friends are sought out for conversations and human attachments...I don't know why a person who is to truly love and serve God is not permitted to talk with others about his **joys and trials,** for those who practice prayer have **both**" (L 7, 20).

Teresa's first group experience dates from before her first foundation based on this conviction: "I should like the five of us who love each other in Christ to make a **pact of friendship...**" (L 16, 7). This group sought to demonstrate the importance of the group in advancing the ideal of prayer.

This **ideal was ultimately achieved** only when the little group was **bound** not by a pact but by their **relationship with God.** This little group that was to found St.

Joseph's of Avila responded to a **basic set of ideas:** prayer was the **basis** of their association; **Christ** was at the group's **center** to become the center of their collective lives as he already was in their individual prayer; their **lifestyle** was to become extremely **simple.**

**Teresa sums it up** after making the foundation: "It is the most wonderful consolation to be able to live with **souls so detached.** Their whole **object in life** is to learn how to **make progress in the service of God.** **Solitude** is their **comfort,** and the thought of seeing others...is a burden...no one comes to this house save those who **speak about this love,** ....The **only language** they know is speaking about God, so they understand and are understood only by those who speak the same language" (L 36, 26).

The group's **fellowship developed into a 'language'** they used to communicate with God and man; a language which was expressed in words, in their lives and all that influenced it: environment, means of livelihood, communal living (Teresa's greatest joy). The **ideal picture** is later given in doctrinal form in the *Way of Perfection* prompted by the theme of the apostolate of prayer: "For the love of God I beg you that **your conversation** always be directed towards bringing some **good** to the one with whom you are speaking, for your prayer must be for the **benefit of souls...**strive for this in every way...Let **truth** dwell in your hearts, as it should through meditation, and you will see clearly the kind of **love** we are obliged to have for our **neighbor**" (W 20, 3-4).

Teresa defined clearly the kind of lifestyle the group should have: "**Your business is prayer...**it is your business and your language. Whoever speaks to you must learn this language; if he doesn't be on guard that you don't learn his; it will be a hell. If they should think you unsophisticated, what does it matter? If they take you for hypocrites, it matters even less. You will gain in that no one will want to see you except those who understand this language... to begin to speak a new language would cause no small amount of harm...and you cannot know the great evil this new language is for the soul; in order to know the one, the other is forgotten. The new language involves a constant disturbance from which you ought to flee at all costs, for what is best suited to this **path** which we are beginning to discuss is **peace and tranquility** of soul. If those who wish to speak with you wish to learn your language...you can tell about the riches that are to be gained by learning it" (W 20, 4-6).

Dealings and language are seen as expressing a way of life, an indication of the spirit of the group, in a kind of citadel where **relationship with God has been made the center and justification of life.** Teresa was thinking of the mixture of language spoken in Castile in her day.



The whole thrust of a **community life oriented towards the 'road of prayer'** is to create within the group a spirit and channels of communication that would facilitate the vertical movement of fellowship with God in such a way as to be a normal extension of fellowship amongst themselves; hence **one language to speak to both God and man.**

The kind of life that Teresa planned for her monasteries makes sense only in this context. There were a few **indispensable elements**, such as **enclosure, separation, real poverty**; but even these had to have a **spiritual function**. They were preparatory: creating adequate space for prayer, a **space suitable for turning the group into a school of prayer and a community of praying people**. They had **solitude and privacy; enclosure and individual cells saw to that and the Rule imposed silence**. But these things were **relative**. The **solitude** was to **foster community** as well as meeting God on one's own. Silence intensified their language-the words they spoke to God, individually and together. So, in the group, **apprenticeship to a life of prayer did not begin with the reciting of prayer; it began with speaking and listening in a fraternal environment.**

A synthesis of St. Teresa's twofold pedagogy of **prayer-at individual and community level** might be sought from the symbol of the **castle**, which she used in both the *Interior Castle* and the *Way of Perfection*. The *Interior Castle* opens with an invitation to the reader to **enter the castle of his own soul- the synthesis of 'recollection'**. The *Way of Perfection* also opens with an invitation to a group of readers, Teresa's first praying community, to **enter the 'little castle' of their Carmelite monastery, a miniature of Christ's Kingdom, the Church, and there to live the Christian life** as intensely as possible, in the presence of God and of the Church.