

## A Guide to Reading the *LIFE*

### Introduction:

When beginning to read the *LIFE* of St. Teresa, our attitude is not simply one of pure curiosity or obligation. We realize we have before us a book that gives us facts and involves us. What is explained in the *LIFE* could be an account of what has already or will happen to us.

The book can be read in an ‘involved way’, because the *Madre* tells her own story as an experiential path for others. The way in which she led, or better yet allowed herself to be led, lays out a path adapted to our own interior adventure and leads us to a full encounter with God. She explicitly said it in affirming her intention to write in a way so as to ‘*seduce souls by the attractive traits of such a high good.*’ (V 18, 8)

This spontaneous Teresian confession gives us the *key* to guide our reading of the *LIFE* and that is noticeable in all of her works: St. Teresa is the mediator of an active Presence, the presence of God. She encourages the personal encounter, not only with her, but also with her divine counterpart. When Teresa speaks of God she always does so before Him, *Coram Deo*, so that He appears and makes Himself known on His own.

Here is how the text was received and experienced by her first editor, Friar Luis de Leon: ‘Each time I read her writings, I was once again in admiration, in several passages, where I didn’t hear the genius of man but couldn’t doubt that the Holy Spirit spoke through her in many ways. He guided her pen and her hand. Thus the light of obscure things was manifested and a fire ignited through her words in the heart of the reader.’

This feeling is repeated amongst her friars and nuns. As Carmelite Friars and nuns, we are called in a special way to find our truth, the Truth in the pages of this ‘living book.’

Many friars and nuns witness this experience explicitly when relaying their vocation or conversion, fruit of their meeting with Teresa or with Jesus, Way, Truth, Life. This was possible thanks to the reading of works especially the *Book of her Life* (Francis of St. Marie Pulgar, and Thomas of Jesus, in the 16 century; Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in the 20 Century).

The Discalced Carmelite Constitutions remind us that: ‘The beginning of our family in the midst of Carmel and the profound sense of our vocation are closely linked to spiritual life and to St. Teresa’s vocation, especially to mystical graces whose impact influenced Teresa to undertake the project of reforming the Carmel (Const. #4, #5)

If you really want to experience a fruitful reading of the *LIFE*, let’s not forget what Father General told us: ‘For you I was born’: ‘Barely opening the volume of the works of St. Teresa, we run into the extraordinary *Prologue* of the *Book of her Life*, in which she warns the reader not to

forget her dark side which she wasn't allowed to talk about. She was only permitted to write about her method of prayer and the graces she received. This is a declaration that puts us outside of the conventional hagiographic (biography of saints) style and brings us back to the authenticity of a Christian life in a state of conversion. If St. Teresa wrote this it was so that no one would feel excluded from the possibility of going down the same road she took and from receiving graces similar to hers. But if between us and St. Teresa of Jesus, between our truth and hers, there is a barrier of stereotypes, more in line with the canons of a certain hagiography or of a certain spiritual theology than to Teresa's real story, hearing her words will not become our source of salvation renewal, and risk being transformed into a pious exercise that we will be able, if nothing else, to draw conclusions relating to morality and spirituality.'

### **1/ *The Book of her Life:***

This '**living book**' is one of the first books of the Saint. It wasn't initially given this title; the librarians at Escorial gave it this name and it was transmitted to us today.

Of all of her works, the **LIFE**, is the longest and St. Teresa presents herself as an author. It is a profound work that captures the authentic revelation of her soul, so much so, that she herself called it: '**My Soul**' (Letter to Luisa de la Cerda, 6/23/68, 3; V16 6; V epilogue, 4).

Saint Teresa made a consistent effort in this book, the first in the history of thought and of literature, to pour her whole self into the pages of the book. In fact, literary critics consider it the most personal book in all of Spanish literature.

St. Teresa doesn't only write an autobiography, she also tells her story to the reader as a story of salvation, like a meeting with God. The Saint tells of how God took initiative in her life, waiting for her (V, prologue) and patiently transforming her. Therefore, the **Book of her Life**, describes God's intervention in the life of this woman, St. Teresa of Avila, and invites the reader to allow God to direct his own life.

Although written in different periods, (1562-1565), it remains a well thought out book, with a well-defined structure, alternating between the narration of biographical facts and an essay with a doctrinal character. This rhythm between the narrative and the didactic is a very particular characteristic of this author; it is in fact, a trait found throughout all her writings. An exceptional narrator, she doesn't confine herself to only relay a chronicle. Often carried away by an ardent communication, Teresa preferred to guide spiritually by making the biographical narrative a launching pad for doctrinal instruction. She wanted us to welcome what she was saying more than the conclusions resulting from it.

### **2/ *The Structure of the Book:***

The book is written in **40 chapters**, with **5 different thematic sections**:

**Section 1:** The first part of the book contains **chapters 1-9** where St. Teresa details an autobiographical portrait of her 40 years of existence. It covers the period from childhood through the foundational beginning of her mystical experience. Throughout these chapters Teresa seems to double as both the narrator and the character. The narrator becomes Teresa the writer, while the character is the actor of the

events that Teresa relates. This section allows the reader to enter into an ever-increasing drama which completely absorbs the reader up through the time of St. Teresa's conversion. Her conversion is the key event in her life which has a before and an after.

**Section 2:** After chapter 10, the transitional chapter, the writer lays out the four degrees of prayer with the help of an allegory (ch. 11-22): the **4 Ways to Water a Garden**: meditative prayer (ch. 11-13); the infused prayer of recollection; the prayer of quiet (ch. 14-15) and the prayer of the sleep of the powers (ch. 16-17); and finally, the prayer of union (ch. 18-21). Chapter 22 summarizes and crowns the whole spiritual itinerary with the irreplaceable mediation of Jesus Christ, 'from whom all good things come' (V 22,7). This section helps us better understand the new life that she experienced since she entered mystical life.

**Section 3:** In chapters 23-31, the author returns to her autobiographical account but now with a different approach as compared with the first section. The distance spoken of between the narrator and characters in the beginning has been reduced to a minimum. Assuming a new identity, Teresa from the start has used similar expressions and has had similar experiences to Saint Paul: A new book is beginning, no, I mean a new life. What I spoke of at first was my life; the one I described later which outlines the different states of prayer is, if I am not mistaken, the life of God within me (V 23,1).

**Section 4:** Chapters 32-36; The foundation of St. Joseph's of Avila. According to the author the event and its chronology are the fruit and the effect of her mystical experience which had become a source of life for others. Her own salvation story becomes a part of *The Story of Salvation*. With the first nuns who followed her, St. Teresa's goal is to serve both Christ and the Church within the convent of St. Joseph's of Avila. The graces and blessings she receives are revealed not only as a personal gift for her but for the entire Church who will benefit too.

**Section 5:** This section makes up the last chapters of the *LIFE*, ch. 37-40. Fr. Garcia de Toledo helped St. Teresa to return to the autobiographical account of her life in order to complete this third installment of the autobiography that she was then in the process of living. In contrast with the fears and perplexities that she had previously gone through, here we find a feeling of serenity and interior security which allow Teresa to relate her new experiences with absolute conviction.

### **3. Suggestions for a thoughtful reading of each section:**

**Section 1:** Teresa talks to us about herself honestly: her family, her childhood, her adolescence, her youth, her vocation, her encounter with Carmelite life, etc. But above all, St Teresa talks to us about God; about His action in her, of an active and dynamic God who does His utmost to get close to man, lowering Himself to share his life and to transform it. Based on her personal experiences, Teresa teaches us that God is a positive presence, who improves an individual, increases his good desires and pardons his faults.

To clearly demonstrate the greatness of God and His never-ending desire to transform a person, Teresa presents herself as someone who was ungrateful and who resisted God's divine action. It isn't however a pessimistic or negative vision of the human being; St. Teresa attempts to point out the incomparable initiative of God and to help us see that His action is independent of our worth, though He may appreciate our good intentions, and only and exclusively granted out of His mercy.

**Section 2:** Mental prayer is the privileged meeting place between God and the human being. It is here where the miracle of transformation takes place. God sits down at table with the man and the woman, likes taking walks with them in order to communicate His nature to them. There is the expectation that there be a detached and loving attitude within the climate of mental prayer. Mental prayer is not a practice where we try and find ourselves or spiritual consolations. It is rather the door where God's action happens in His timeframe which is different from ours. It is here that He shows us His friendship and love by taking the reins of our lives. Jesus Christ in His Holy humanity plays an irreplaceable role in this process. We are saved by Him and through Him God gives us the necessary graces to be transformed in His image. To abandon Him is to close the door on any sort of progress.

**Section 3:** In this section, God becomes Teresa's guide in the new life she is beginning. As this is happening to Teresa, we are surprised to discover that God is as close, as loving, and as giving of constant graces to the people He loves. When love totally imposes itself, doubts cease, and we can move in harmony with God who becomes the center, the root and the only object of man. The graces Teresa received (visions, locutions, etc.), as important as they are, aren't the essential element in mystical life. What's essential remains the teaching we receive and the deepening of communion with God who is both near and loving. We will constantly see in Teresa the fruits of mystical experience: personal richness, moral transformation, increase in the love of God and neighbor, humility, the rejection of evil, etc. In conjunction with this rich panorama of multiple graces, appear trials, temptations, rejection, misunderstandings and hardships. Perfection doesn't happen overnight. It isn't a path without both internal and external difficulties. Above all, the Saint asks that we watch out for discouragement caused by our own weakness. There is no way around it except to turn oneself over to Christ and to be patient with oneself. Don't get weary, hope in Christ, persevere in prayer and do what's necessary for each one to realize his desires.

**Section 4:** God doesn't give uniquely for one person's benefit. We are part of the human family and a part of the Church. We are in the middle of this community as a shining light, as a city on a hill, as yeast that ferments in a society that dares to turn from God. But He leaves the sign of His hand in our history like a sign of salvation. For example, He nudged Teresa to found St. Joseph of Avila convent. In the same way God puts His hand on us to invite us to put aside personal projects and to embrace in His name what could appear to us to be incomprehensible.

**Section 5:** As a community, we contemplate with Teresa God's marvels which continually allow for prayer, poverty and brotherhood. We look at our community, and we try to build it up according to Teresa's dream which became a reality with St. Joseph of Avila. The Madre invites us to hurry up and serve His Majesty and to let Him bring about in and by us the miracles that she related in the Book of her Life: *'This is the life that I live now, my lord and my father (Fr. Garcia de Toledo). Ask God yourself where He is calling you to Him and that He give you the grace to serve Him.'*(V 40, 23)