

A Guide to Reading the Life

by St. Teresa of Avila

Introduction

When Teresa speaks
of God,
she always does so
before Him, *Coram Deo*,
so that He appears
and makes Himself
known on His own.

- What is explained in the LIFE could be an account of what has already happened or will happen to us;
- Teresa tells her own story as an experiential path for others that leads to a full encounter with God;
- She sought to write in a way so as to 'seduce souls by the attractive traits of such a high good.'
(V 18, 8)
- Teresa's spontaneous confession gives us the **Key** to guide our reading of the Life; She is a mediator of God's Presence;
- Teresa encourages the personal encounter both with her and her Divine Counterpart.

Introduction

“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.”

Friar Luis de Leon,
1st Editor

- Teresa’s friars and nuns in relaying their vocation or conversion found their Truth in the pages of this ‘living book’;
- To really experience a fruitful reading of the Life, remember what Father General said in ‘For you I was born’;
- He points out that in the Prologue, Teresa was only allowed to write about her method of prayer and the graces received...;
- And that the Book of her Life was written to not exclude going down the same road as she and of receiving similar graces...

The Book of her Life

The Book of her Life,
describes God's
intervention in the life of
St. Teresa of Avila
and invites the reader
to allow God
to direct his own life.

- Librarians at Escorial gave this 'living book' the title the Book of her Life;
- The Life captures the authentic revelation of her soul; She called the book, 'My Soul';
- St. Teresa made a consistent effort to pour her whole self into the pages of the book;
- Literary critics consider the Life to be the most personal book in all of Spanish literature;

The Book of her Life

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.

- The Life was written in two different periods: 1562, 1565;
- It remains however a well-thought out book with a well-defined structure;
- The book alternates between the narration of biographical facts and an instructional essay;
- This rhythm between narration and teaching is typical of Teresa's writings;
- An exceptional narrator, she often gets carried away.

The Structure of the Book

Section I Chs.1-9

Portrait & Path of Conversion (Sins, Graces & Vocation)

Teresa gives us a portrait of the first 40 years of her life. She tells the story of the struggle and love between God and herself which ultimately results in her 'Conversion' before the Wounded Christ.
(1554, 5 D)

- Teresa details an autobiographical portrait of her 40 years of existence;
- It covers the period from childhood through the beginning of her mystical experience;
- Teresa doubles as both the narrator and the character;
- The narrator becomes Teresa the writer, while the character is the actor of the events;
- The reader is absorbed into a drama until her conversion, the **key event** in her life.

Suggestions

Section 1

Chs. 1-9

Suggestions for a More Thoughtful Reading

- 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**; lowering Himself to share his life and to transform hers;
- 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**;
- 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.

The Structure of the Book

Section II

Chs. 10-22

Treatise on the Degrees of Prayer

Following chapter 10, the transition chapter, Teresa outlines the **4 degrees of interior prayer** using the analogy of the **4 ways to water the garden**. She finishes her presentation by stressing the importance of the Humanity of Christ.

- Following chapter 10, the **transition** chapter, Teresa outlines the **4 degrees of interior prayer** using an **allegory** (11-22);
- The **4 ways to water the garden**: **Meditative** prayer (11-13); **infused** prayer of recollection; **prayer of quiet** (14-15) and **sleep of the powers** (16-17); and finally, the prayer of **union** (18-21);
- Chapter 22 summarizes the **spiritual itinerary**. We can better understand the **new life** she experienced since she entered mystical life.

Suggestions

Section II

Chs. 10-22

Suggestions for a More Thoughtful Reading

- **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 or takes 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.**

The Structure of the Book

Section III

Chs. 23-31

Mystical Life- Teresa's New Life

Teresa picks back up
telling the story of her life...
the story of God within her.
There is less distance now
Between the narrator and
the principle person
in the tale.

- In chapters 23-31, Teresa picks back up telling the story of her life;
- There is less distance now between the narrator and the characters than in the beginning;
- Teresa has used similar expressions and has had similar experiences to St. 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 (L, 23,1).

Suggestions

Section III Chs. 23-31

Suggestions for a More Thoughtful Reading

- God becomes Teresa's guide in the new life she is beginning. We are surprised to discover that God is as close, as loving, and as giving of constant graces to the people He loves;
- The graces Teresa received (visions, locutions, etc.) 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.

Suggestions

Section III Chs. 23-31

Suggestions for a More Thoughtful Reading

- 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**;
- Watch out for discouragement. Don't get weary, hope in Christ, persevere in prayer and do what's necessary for each one to realize His desires.

The Structure of the Book

Section IV

Chs. 32-36

The Foundation of St. Joseph's Convent

We go from the interior life
to an external event...
the Foundation of
St. Joseph's Convent.
A fruitful experience.
The Blessings received are
for the Church.
(1562, 6D)

- Chapters 32-36; The foundation of St. Joseph's of Avila; the event and its chronology are the fruit and the effect of her mystical experience which had become as 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 was 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.

Suggestions

Section 4

Chs.32-36

Suggestions for a More Thoughtful Reading

- 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.
- 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.

The Structure of the Book

Section V

Chs. 37-40

Effects of Prayer: Peace is Restored

Teresa once again takes up the telling of her interior experiences which brings her to discuss her present... rich in divine favors, lived out with an internal sense of security; a new serenity.

- Chapters 37-40. Fr. Garcia de Toledo helped St. Teresa to return to the autobiographical account of her life;
- She completed 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.

Suggestions

Section 5

Chs. 37-40

Suggestions for a More Thoughtful Reading

- 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)