

Life-Introduction

Translated by K.Kavanaugh, ocd, O. Rodriguez, ocd
Vol. 1 Collected Works

Early Years

Spain was the greatest power on earth in the 16th century, the equivalent of the USA today. During these years of outward glory for Spain, St. Teresa lived and witnessed a sacred truth, an inward glory, the rich possession of every mystic; a **person's greatest good is within** and **'won by giving up everything.'** (Ch. 20, 27)

Teresa's grandfather, a Toledan merchant, a Christianized Jew, had to accuse himself before the Inquisition for judaizing. He had to wear the humiliating *sanbenito* seven Fridays in procession. Out of necessity he moved his family to Avila where he continued his profession as a cloth merchant.

His son, Alonso married in 1505, but two years later his wife died leaving him with two children. He married again four years later, Dona Beatriz de Ahumada, who gave birth on March 28, 1515 to Teresa de Ahumada, born under the reign of the catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, died at the age of thirty-three, leaving behind from her marriage ten children.

Her undaunted spirit began to show signs when she was only seven and decided to set off with her brother Rodrigo for the land of the Moors to have her head cut off for Christ. But as she grew older the piety of the now adolescent Teresa began to grow cold. She became interested in reading romantic tales of chivalry and began to cultivate her feminine charms.

After her mother's death in November 1528, Teresa began to meet with opposition at home because of her affection for her cousins. So, at the age of 16, Teresa was given over to the care of the Augustinian nuns of Our Lady of Grace in Avila where the girls were prepared for marriage. It was the influence of Dona Maria Briceno, a gentle, friendly nun, a woman of deep prayer that caused Teresa to realize that this nun meant more to her than her former friends. It seems however, that the **inner struggle over the pros and cons of the life of a nun harmed Teresa's health** so that she had to leave the school.

When her health had improved she was brought to her sister's stopping at her Uncle Don Pedro de Cepeda, a hermit. He introduced her to spiritual books helping her in her struggle over her vocation. It was finally the Letters of St. Jerome that enabled her to decide. Her

father refused to give his consent so on November 2, 1535, at the age of 20, Teresa stole away to give her life to God as **a nun in the Carmelite monastery of the Incarnation**. Her father accepted it all, gave her a substantial dowry and acquired his daughter a private room.

Life at the Incarnation

Contrary to popular belief, life at the Incarnation was austere. Days of the week were set aside for fasting and abstinence; silence was carefully maintained to encourage continual prayer. **No time though was designated for mental prayer**. Novices received instruction about the Carmelite order, its eremitical origins, its devotion to the Blessed Mother and the prophets Elijah and Elisha. They were also trained in the chanting of the Divine Office.

Irrespective of the Carmelite rule of continual prayer, Teresa states that until reading Osuna's Third Spiritual Alphabet, given to her by her uncle, she had no idea how to go about praying or being recollected.

Shortly after her profession, **two years** after entering the monastery (1537), her **health gave way again**. Some say it was a nervous breakdown brought on by her desire to please God while at the same time seeing all her faults. Following a harsh treatment by a quack, she remained a paralytic for three years. It was through St. Joseph's intercession that she was able to walk again but suffered miserable health the rest of her life.

Once again able to get around again, Teresa then experienced a prolonged period of difficulty in prayer. She writes: "And very often, for some years, I was more anxious that the hour I had determined to spend in prayer be over ..." (8, 7). Her recent biographer states she lacked technique. **She didn't realize that the imagination (mind) and feelings can wander while, as St John of the Cross points out, the soul on a deep level can be in contemplation.**

These **difficulties with prayer went on for about 18 years** until she experienced **a conversion** before an Image of the Wounded Christ and again while reading from the Confessions of St. Augustine (1554). She learned from these two experiences to **lose all trust in herself and to place it in Christ-she couldn't save herself, she needed a Savior**. She experienced **compunction**, the gift of tears. This is a **theme** running through the Life. Compunction or true sorrow for sins consoled her. It could look like an exaggerated remorse to an inexperienced person. The

Desert Fathers felt that when the heart was softened by interior weeping and God would give the experience of His light; in the shadow of sorrow was to be found the spiritual joy of enlightenment. This compunction intensified with mystical experience, the shabbiness of sin beside his boundless outpouring of love. Spiritual humiliations preceded her spiritual exaltations. It was at the **time of her conversion** that Teresa began to **experience passively God** at the center of her soul. Not yet enlightened on the stages of prayer Teresa became fearful when she experienced the prayer of quiet and of union. She sought council thus the beginning of her struggle to explain her supernatural experiences and ultimately resulted in the writing of the Life.

In the Context of her Times

Spain at that time was effervescence not only politically but also spiritually. A longing for deep spirituality took hold among the people themselves and pervaded their lives, having at its **center three basic characteristics**: a call to the interior life; the practice of mental prayer; and strong leanings toward higher levels of the mystical life. The newly founded printing press offering the people a large supply of literature on prayer and the interior life: a cross-fertilization of ideas amongst the European Schools.

The Inquisition was established throughout Spain to further the cause of Spanish unity, a national unity. The Illuminist movement sprung up. Its members were known as *alumbrados* (affiliated with Erasmus). They later divided into different groups: **recogidos supporting recollection** and divine action; and, the *dejados* on self-abandonment. The partisans of recollection were mainly the **religious orders**, including the Franciscans (Osuna, The Third Spiritual Alphabet). Teresa herself could be considered a member of the *alumbrados*.

In addition, there existed an unrestrained infatuation with ecstasy and other extraordinary phenomena. Of the several deceptive visionaries of the time, Magdalena de la Cruz, a Poor Clare had a reputation for holiness, severe fasts and, also bearing the stigmata, confessed to being a secret devil worshiper. She had successfully fooled both bishops and kings. She brought the fear of being deceived to all of Spain. The Inquisition was not the sole source of constraint however. Suspicion of those who deviated from the common norm was deeply rooted in 16th century Spain. Another prevalent fear in Spain was of the devil. As a

result, it is not difficult to see why mental prayer was distrusted, especially practiced by women, along with books that fostered the practice and there was an open hostility toward mystical manifestations.

Teresa decided that the safest course was to hide nothing from her confessors. Through her experience she acquired the ability to discern when an experience was God's grace. **She felt that the favors that she received were from God** and were not to be disparaged as they brought her a source of fortitude and strengthened her faith. She felt it was important, however, for a person to have the assurance of God's love to pursue the virtues (humility) of the perfect as our nature, being so dead, tends to go after what we see in the present. (Ch. 10,6). Teresa feared that she might be deceived by her experiences. So, her thought was to 'seek out' the Inquisitors to submit her soul to the judgment of the Church. She saw it not as a cause for terror but as a chance to grow in love for her Lord. She was never found guilty. P-11

Devotion to Christ in His humanity was never for her an obstacle to perfect contemplation. The obstacle was the mistaken notion that all thought of Him in His humanity must be set aside, for in so doing these souls often didn't get beyond union. She recognized that when God decided to suspend the faculties in the higher degrees of prayer the presence of His humanity is taken away. 'Then let it be so-gladly; blessed be such a loss that enables us to enjoy more that which it seems is lost.' (ch.22,9) ...In the midst of business matters, and in times of persecution and trials...Christ is a very good friend because we behold Him as man and see Him with weaknesses and trials—and **He is company for us** (Ch. 22,10).

Her **spirited defense of friendship** with ...Him even in higher stages of mystical life did not spring ...from a special talent ...for picturing Him...'For God did not give me talent for discursive thought or for a profitable use of the imagination ... (Ch. 4,7). As a result, when speaking of meditation, she had in mind a simple quiet presence through one of His earthly mysteries. 'But one should not always weary oneself in seeking these reflections but just remain there in His presence with the intellect quiet. And if a person is able, he should **occupy himself in looking at Christ who is looking at him** (ch.13, 22).

The key element of her teaching about the devil is the utter uselessness of all fears concerning him. 'I don't

understand these fears...we can say 'God! God!', and make the devil tremble" (ch.25, 22).

A deep division slowly developed in Spain between the learned men (theologians) and spiritual men (those experienced in prayer). The intellectual tendency was the norm of the Inquisition. Therefore, Fernando Valdes, a Dominican theologian and Supreme Inquisitor, published an **Index** of forbidden books which included almost all books dealing with prayer.

Despite the Inquisition, Teresa had little doubt about the central place of prayer, she continued to view prayer as the source of the good things God had worked in her. Turning away from prayer would be the equivalent of shutting the door on God. Experience in prayer was essential for spiritual direction of beginners. Learned men were more suitable for the one who had begun to experience God's favors, as they could discern if one were walking in line with Scripture. But expertise in Scripture doesn't make up for experience and humility. With her ideal that learned men be also men of experience, she won the illustrious Dominican theologians Garcia de Toledo and Pedro Ibanez to the path of prayer. They soon began to experience God's favors. Some teachers of the time felt that many years of effort were necessary before there could be any **passivity in prayer**. Teresa taught that the Lord follows no strict schedule. Often 'the contemplation the Lord doesn't give to one in twenty years He gives to another in one' (Ch. 39, 11).

At that time in Spain the faithful were unable to read Scripture in the vernacular (only in Latin). Teresa relied on spiritual books which usually abounded with quotations from Scripture. When these books were placed on the Valdes' Index she was in despair. The Lord told her in a locution not to be sad that He would be her living book. Subsequently she began to receive mystical understanding of many truths which left her with no need for books (Ch. 26, 5). She then later wrote her own books to explain and give instructions to her new followers about the **path to union with God**.

Her First Spiritual Directors

Teresa's first two directors (Salcedo, Daza) concluded her experiences were from the devil. A position they held for several years. She next approached the Jesuits (Cetina, Pradanos, B. Alvarez). Fr. Alvarez was faithful to her and when he became very drawn to mystical prayer himself ten years later, he at last felt peace about

her. Years later he confided to a colleague (Ribera) that he had to read many books to understand Teresa of Jesus.

In the group of Dominicans, 3 stand out, Garcia de Toledo, P Ibanez, D. Banez. The first two ended up giving themselves to prayer and the third (Banez) defended the Life favorably before the Inquisition. Two others who were a consolation and help to Teresa were later both canonized by the Church: Francis Borgia, Jesuit; Peter of Alcantara, Franciscan.

A Report in Writing

Teresa began writing her Life at the age of 50, she had been receiving mystical grace now for 10 years. She was finally obliged to report in writing her unusual experiences for them to be judged by the professionals. To help her do so, as she was having trouble putting her mystical experiences into words, she underlined passages describing her experiences from Laredo's Ascent of Mount Sion. She pointed out: "For it is one grace to receive the Lord's favor; another, to understand which favor and grace it is; a third to know how to describe it" (17, 5)

The first two **Spiritual Testimonies** were written before she wrote her Life. Garcia de Toledo (Dominican) was avid to know all he could about her and encouraged her to write more. So, she set about writing her Life and gave it to Fr. Garcia in June 1562. This first draft has been lost. In his eagerness to know more, he asked her at the end of 1563 or the beginning of 1564, when she had been given permission to live in her new monastery, to re-write it and to add a section on the founding of St. Joseph's (ch.32-36). Anxious to be clear then: she added 11 new chapters (11-22) on the 4 ways of watering the garden; a complete treatise on the degrees of prayer; then 4 additional chapters talking of other extraordinary favors she had received up until 1565 (6 DP).

The Nature of Her Book

Teresa's book is not an autobiography or a diary. It deals mainly with the supernatural realities of the interior life. Autobiographical material is used as a backdrop against which she treats the favors from God. The biographical data comprises **two levels**, one **exterior**, the other **interior**. The exterior level deals with the historical facts; the interior level deals almost exclusively with the mystical facts. It embraces higher states of consciousness, passive perception and love, relations

with the transcendent God, intensification of the life of the spirit (See **Graph** Interior-Exterior events of her life). The evident preponderance of interior facts does not, prevent an interweaving of both levels that results in the **ingenious plan of the book**.

When finishing her work, she was raised to an even higher form of mystical prayer beyond visions and revelations. The soul is lifted above itself into a vast solitude where it experiences **Spiritual Pain** which suspends the faculties much like spiritual joy does in union and rapture. Teresa says that the desert and solitude seem to the soul better than all the companionship of the world. If anything could console the soul, it would be to speak to someone who had suffered this torment. (ch.20, 12-13). This painful spiritual fire never produced the death and vision of God she longed for.

What is worth pointing out is that the definitive work on her Life poured from her pen while she was at this milestone of her spiritual journey. In later works she speaks of a further deepening of her union with God, of a more gentle, peaceful fire in which the soul feels that it already enjoys the possession of God...in which it goes about so forgetful of self that it thinks it has partly lost its being.

In giving personal testimony of her own experience, Teresa proceeds from her case to a teaching suitable for all. The real object of her testimony is the supernatural; she describes the existence and value of the realities of her inner life and affirms their importance universally. The intermingling of testimony and doctrine is a **characteristic of Teresa's method of teaching**. She says that through experience she knows that what she says is true. (ch.27,9). Not all possess the charism to speak of the unutterable mystical experience, the grace of speech as Thomas Aquinas calls it. The Lord gave her this gift only after she had experienced years of stammering and powerlessness. By God's gift not only were her spoken words imbued with unction but her written ones were as well. Those who knew her testified that reading her words were like hearing her talk; the effect was the same. She was aware of the divine source of some of the pages (ch.39,8). Though she cherished spiritual books, she said that she understood nothing until the Lord gave her understanding through experience (ch.22,3). She

longs to attract souls to the practice of prayer and encourages them to persevere. (ch.19,4; 16,6).

Where did Teresa find her message? It was in the story of her own life that Teresa found the lessons she must write about. Teresa simply tells her story and teaches her doctrine without any literary artifices or aids.

The Plan of her Book

The Structural plan of the book results in a remarkable unity, developed with logic, and articulated into four sections almost equal in length. By combining the basic outline with a **summary of the contents** the following guide can be constructed (See **Graph** of Plan):

Part 1. She starts off telling how at a very early age she began to receive God's abundant grace. She was introduced into the path of prayer in her early twenties and even had some mystical experiences. She repeatedly frustrated God's work and even abandoned prayer and the interior life. God's mercy was finally victorious. When she finally surrendered to his grace, God began his work in her soul (ch1-10).

Part 2. 4 Ways of Watering the Garden (see table): Teresa presents a detailed exposition of prayer, its nature, degrees, and effects. She uses an allegory, the 4 ways to water the garden: using buckets of water drawn from a well, the equal of meditation; using a bucket-type water wheel that has to be turned by hand, the equivalent of the prayer of recollection and quiet; diverting a stream along irrigation ditches, equals to the prayer of the sleep of the faculties; and allowing the garden to be watered with rain from heaven, the equivalent of the prayer of union (ch.11-22).

Part 3. From the detailed exposition of these 4 forms of prayer the reader understands more easily how the ways of watering the garden were accomplished in the soul of Teresa; how the Lord purified her, flooded her with grace, allowed her to perceive His divine presence, hear His voice, penetrate the mysterious abyss of His Trinitarian life, and come into contact with the most varied realities of the supernatural work...Throughout the pages of her book a steady series of rare and wonderful things is set before our minds: ecstasies, visions, locutions from God, transverberation of the soul, infused love of the purest and strongest kind, new wisdom, the flowering of sturdy virtues, premonitions of a probable death of love...P-23 (ch.23-31).

Part 4. A practical result of this outpouring of divine grace is the fruitfulness of her life of service. She

observes that in the earlier period of her spiritual life only three persons, over many years, profited from what she said to them. Later when she had been strengthened through God's favors, many profited within two or three years (ch.13, 9). In Carmel itself, through the foundation of St. Joseph's she inaugurated a new, more contemplative lifestyle that stressed divine intimacy and was to spread throughout the entire world, serving as yeast, reminding all that if they seek resolutely through prayer, the things above, they will soon enjoy the possession of perfect love, a blessing more precious than any earthly thing. (Ch. 11,1-2) P-24

Teresa lives the mystery of the communion of saints; she deals on familiar terms with the saints in heaven. Her prayer is particularly efficacious for those in purgatory and on earth; it also gives her dominion over demons (Ch. 32-40)

Main Ideas

Her doctrinal thesis rises out of her personal story. She is certain that **everyone is called to the summit of the mountain where only the glory of God dwells**, that God is keeping watch, waiting for the hour to give. You can put off the hour; yet if and when it arrives, early or late, God will not fail to act with a generous mercy substantially identical with that referred to in the book. '...You wait for the other to adapt to Your nature, and in the meanwhile you put up with His!' (ch.8, 6). It is in this sense that Teresa's case is a typical one. P-24

For the hour to arrive, an unavoidable condition is required: total surrender to God...she insists again and again on determination...joined to surrender ... determined to follow Christ even if the dryness may last a lifetime (ch.11,10).

Every individual, then must undergo a change in the recesses of his being before he can perceive and follow the delicate urgings of the Spirit...this requires time and effort.

This brings us to the **central theme of her book: mental prayer...**'an intimate sharing between friends...taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.' (Ch. 8,5)...This concept of prayer as a relationship between friends who know they love each other and need to be alone in order to share intimately their deepest feelings and thoughts is the **simple and strikingly human Teresian characteristic of the path to perfection**...For more than eighteen of the twenty-eight years since I began prayer, I suffered this battle and

conflict between friendship with God and friendship with the world (Ch. 8,3)...she one day while praying in solitude to her God for light about some friendships to which she was attached, experienced her first rapture in which she heard the words: 'No longer do I want you to converse with men but with angels.' The words were efficacious. 'I have never again been able to tie myself to any friendship or to find consolation in or bear particular love for any other persons than those I understand love Him and strive to serve Him.' (Ch. 24, 5-6)

Prayer is an actuation of the theological virtues; charity is friendship of human beings with God. The **friendship** is intensified through the growth simultaneously of charity and prayer, a growth corresponding to the 4 ways of watering the garden, the 4 Degrees of Prayer or 4 Ways of receiving an inflow of Grace.

At the outset the prayer begins with an ascetical effort at personal communion with God, either by means of the tedious and often dry exercise of discursive meditation or by patient repetition of vocal prayer—in both cases always making the effort to keep Christ present. These initial efforts reach their culmination in the height mystical graces, with locutions, visions, and union, when (if) the divine Friend removes some of the veils and reveal His presence.

With the support of these graces, she is ready to discuss...the **sanctifying power** of the mystical favors. While writing her Life she is undergoing herself a transfiguration in the depths of her being...Long years of painful efforts and tenacious struggle do not reach into the deep caverns of energy and power as does a brief experience of these supernatural graces, '...one of these favors is enough to change a soul completely.' (Ch. 27,9) Her mission is the mystical life. She protests against those who ...think these graces can be evoked through subtle techniques, that the toad can fly of itself whenever it wants (Ch. 23,13). No. Regarding the mystical graces one's whole **task consists in accepting the cross** of dryness with courage and humility and the freedom of spirit that comes with **detachment from consolation**; it consists in preserving in prayer to be open to receive what God gives, first the little spark, which in turn will enkindle the large fire. 'I say only that prayer is the door to favors as great as those He granted me. If this door is closed, I don't know how He will grant them.' (ch.8, 9) ... **her basic message**, is that the favors of the mystical life have an incomparable value. 'Let us not cease to believe that even in this life God gives a hundred-fold.' (ch.22,15)

History of the Autograph

The **Life was written for her confessors**; Teresa wasn't completely satisfied with the approval they gave of her spirit. She sought the opinion of St. John of Avila considered at the time to be the most capable person in Spain to judge spiritual matters. In September 1568, he returned the manuscript to her with a letter of praise. In 1570, she showed her account to two of her confessors in Salamanca: two Jesuits, Martin Gutierrez and Jeronimo Ripalda; two Dominicans, Bartolome de Medina and Pedro de Herrero. Word of the secret manuscript spread. Teresa allowed some copies to be made.

When the capricious and wealthy Princess of Eboli, who had financed the founding of two Carmels at Pastrana, heard of the work she insisted on reading and Teresa had to concede. The princess allowed her servants to read the manuscript. This deeply spiritual account quickly became a subject of ridicule and gossip.

Upon the death of her husband, the princess expressed her grief by entering the Carmel of Pastrana to become a nun. She created such a disturbance that the nuns abandoned the monastery for Segovia. She settled the score by denouncing Teresa's Life to the **Inquisition** as the work of a heretical nun. Without delay the Inquisition took action. The Bishop of Avila received a letter in January 1575 ordering him to surrender the book he had by Teresa of Jesus. Fr Banez, one of Teresa's confessor was appointed censor. He approved the book.

The autograph was not returned but kept in secret archives until 1588 after Teresa's death. At this time Mother Ana of Jesus, prioress of Madrid, obtained the manuscript from the Inquisition for Friar Luis De Leon, who was preparing a work on Teresa's writings. King Philip later obtained the manuscript for his **library** of the **Escorial** where it is still preserved.

Teresa's works have been translated into twenty-one languages. The Life was the first work to attract translators. The first English translation was published in 161. The most widely circulated English translation in that century was by British scholar E. Allison Peers.