

St. Teresa & Prayer

What is Prayer?

Tomas Alvarez, O.C.D.

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Teresa's conception of prayer stems from her **experience**. So, it's hard to find a basic line of thought that will give meaning and value to her contributory thoughts, observations, words of advice and suggestions throughout her treatment of prayer.

Teresa's **definition** of prayer is an accurate expression of the nucleus of the Saint's teachings. "... the person who has begun to practice prayer must not abandon it, since it is the means by which he can remedy the situation; and to remedy it without prayer would be very difficult... Whoever has not begun to practice prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good... it's the road leading to Heaven... *For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing but an intimate conversation between friends; it means conversing frequently and alone with him who we know loves us...*

Oh, what a good friend you make, my Lord! **Prayer is a wonderful manifestation of friendship with him.**

We will focus on the italicized part of the passage above. The outstanding feature of her definition is its emphasis on the person praying. Prayer is reduced to an act where **man converses with God**. The **key to prayer** is to **make friends and to communicate at that level**.

It is love and friendship that bear the burden of the relationship in the act of prayer. It's about **being friends and being aware of the other's love**. There is no mistaking her meaning: the cornerstone is **charity**, including and giving priority to the other's love as he is the only one who cannot fail. A **determination** is also necessary.

The reference to 'an intimate conversation between friends' refers to **one's behavior in prayer**, not the content of it. The important thing was to activate this friendship conversing frequently and alone with one's friend. 'The important thing is not a lot of thinking but **a lot of loving so do what best stirs you to love**' (IC, 4, I, 7). It doesn't require much strength, just love and habit (L, 7, 12). Speak with him as with a father or a brother or a lord, or as with a spouse, sometimes one way sometimes another (W, 28, 3). Teresa tells us to put up with ourselves not being able to contribute more to the friendship and having to draw near to the Friend in that state ... (L, 8, 6)

Friendship requires one to be fully present, fully open to the other person complete with one's burdens. This is why she became embarrassed and ashamed in God's presence. The affective element is the driving force in "friendship." Truth is a pre-requisite for anyone beginning prayer an indispensable part of the content of any prayer. In talking to beginners about prayer she said: 'I would rather a spirit without prayer than one that has not begun to walk in the truth... When brought before the truths of Sacred Scripture, we do what we ought. May God deliver us from foolish devotions' (L, 13, 16).

This advice sums up her wealth of experience and her convictions. The 'truth' in question is the truth of one's life: 'to walk in truth before Truth itself' (L, 40, 3), not to pretend with God.

Whenever she spoke to her nuns at St. Joseph's in Avila about the **basic requirements of a life of prayer**, she always insisted on the need for the **support** of someone well-versed in the teachings of the Scriptures and of the Church.

Prayer for Teresa is open to **two fundamental truths**: the truth of each of the partners in the friendship. In the **human partner**, not just self-knowledge but all that affects his salvation; in **God**, not only himself in Christ, in the Church, in his word, in his presence, but everything to do with him.

As in friendship, so with prayer, as it develops the focus is more and more on the partner. Thus, **meditation**, a basic form of prayer, can involve a wide variety of topics. But, **contemplation**, a more mature prayer, progresses differently, God is the topic. Teresa basically says this in a piece of **advice for beginners**; 'One should ... 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' (L, 13, 22) ... 'consider whom you are speaking with as well as who you are' (W, 22, 1).

Teresa's Concept of God

Teresa believed she was what she was in God's eyes. That was her truth. She presents herself before God with a double burden: her person and her life. The person is her soul, the space of her inner world from where she speaks to God. She **preferred inwardness**, and this is where her contact with God developed. No understanding of the development of Teresa's prayer is possible without reference to this **basic fact**.

She believed that Christian and even human life was impossible unless one became aware of one's personal inner and spiritual dimension.

The dignity of the person is not the decisive element in prayer: the burden of one's own life has greater import. The key to the solution of her problems proved to be prayer... there is great value in giving some time to so great a good.' (L, 8)

Teresa was torn between two poles: God and the world. Teresa had chosen the latter. The whole drama can be reduced to one word: **Friendships**. Her **conversion** would be about overcoming this scattered life and bringing the focus on God. The **key** to her whole life was putting God in the number one slot. Prayer became a channeling of life towards God through friendship. Essentially, **Teresa took what came naturally to her in the human realm and transferred it to the divine and became God's friend.**

How did Teresa seem to reduce the **transcendence of God** to the **convenient and easy plane of friendship**? There are really **two problems** here: What was Teresa's God Like? What was her idea of him? How did she relate to him?

A. The God of Prayer

In order for **love to be true** and the **friendship enduring**, the **wills of the friends must be in accord**. There is an inequality between the persons, their natures, and their loves that affects both the friendship and the prayer. But the fact of God being so different does not put him **outside the bounds of friendship** with us. Teresa's sense of God's transcendence is keen. She reserved the word, **Majesty** for God. God is his Majesty. As for God's attributes she derived them mainly from experience: power, truth, light, just, faithful, eternal. She is very **reverent towards him** but there is an outpouring of intimacy and trust which expresses her friendship.

Almost any passage from the Life could illustrate this aspect of Teresa's attitude in God's presence: "...How is it, my God, that it's not enough that you keep me in this miserable life and that for love of you I undergo it and desire to live where everything hinders the enjoyment of you, in that I have to eat and sleep and carry on business and talk with everyone... how is it that when there is so little time left over to enjoy your presence you hide from me? How is this compatible with your mercy? How can the love you bear me allow this? I believe, Lord, that if it

were possible for **me to hide from you**, as it is for you to hide from me, that the love you have for me would not suffer it; but you are with me and see me always. Don't tolerate this, my Lord! I implore you to see that it is injurious to one who loves you so much? ... (L, 37, 8-9)

St. Teresa discovered the true face of God in the mystery of his **condescension**: God in Christ. In her Life she wrote: "Here there is no call for reasoning, but for frankly recognizing what we are and **for placing ourselves with simplicity in God's presence**, for he desires the soul to become ignorant in his presence, and indeed it is. **His Majesty humbles himself** so much that **he allows us to be near him** in spite of what we are.' The censor of the Way of Perfection crossed out the following passage: 'What a marvelous thing that he who could fill a thousand worlds with his grandeur would enclose himself in something so small (the human soul)! He did the same when he fitted into the womb of his most blessed Mother. In fact the Lord is free to do whatever he likes, and since he loves us he adapts himself to our size... (W, 28, 11-12).

Both passages reflect **the two aspects of the mystery of God emphasized by Teresa**: his self-abasement and disguise in Christ, and his person-to-person communication with us. She makes both observations... based on what she has learned by **experience**.

In Jesus, God acquiesces in our friendship: '**Christ is a very good friend** because we behold him as a man and see him with weakness and trials - and **he is company for us**. Once we have the **habit**, it is very easy to find him present at our side' (L, 22, 10). While nearer to the end of the book: 'A much greater love for and confidence in this Lord began to develop in me when I saw him as one with whom I could **converse so continually**. I saw that, even though he was God, he was a man who wasn't surprised by the weakness of men, that he understood our miserable make-up subject to so many falls... I can speak with him as with a friend, even though he is Lord. .. How true that **your kingdom is not armed with trifles, since it has not end!**' (L, 37, 5-6). Teresa's spiritual experience took her face to face with the **second aspect of the mystery of God**: God's **personal communication with man**. For her this is precisely what the **Christian life is all about; personal communication rather than endowment with graces**. In the Interior Castle... we are not to be surprised that God communicates with man... The more we are aware

that he communicates with creatures, the more we will praise his grandeur!

Union is the highest point of man's relationship with God, it leaves him overwhelmed and speechless..."that you bestow such sovereign favors on souls that have offended you so much certainly brings my intellect to a halt...(L, 18, 3).

B. How to Relate to God

In Teresa's opinion, we can relate to such a God: "My God is not at all touchy; he doesn't bother about trifling things. (W, 23, 3)

She turned to God **in any and in all situations in life**. For example: Teresa fell out of a cart and hurt her leg. She said: 'Lord, after all I have been through and now this?' He replied: 'This is how I treat my friends.' 'Yes, Lord, and **this is why you have so few of them.**'

Teresa had a **great sense of humor but a great respect at the same time**. 'If you can talk to other people, why should you be at a loss for words when speaking to God...failure to communicate with a person causes both estrangement and a failure to know how to speak with him...(W, 26, 9). He delights more in unpolished manners of a humble shepherd who he realizes would say more, than he does in the talk of wise and learned men...if they don't walk in humility. (W, 22, 4)

Our **lifestyle and actually speaking to God** will solve the problem of how to relate to him...they will **set our tongues free of inhibition**: "Fine humility indeed! I have the Emperor of heaven and earth in my house and out of humility I don't want to answer him or stay with him or take what he gives me, but I leave him alone. (W, 28, 3).

Do you think it important... to understand that there is no need to go to heaven in order to speak to one's Eternal Father? Nor is there a need to shout, however softly we speak, he is near enough to hear us...look at him within yourselves and do not turn away from so kind a guest...speak with him as with a father or a brother or a lord or a spouse...stop being foolish and ask his permission to speak (W, 28, 2-3).

Her daring is even more striking...her prayers are almost to the point of what she calls 'madness and

foolishness' yet intense and revealing examples of the power of Christian prayer. Here are **both prayers** in question:

A prayer to the Father for Christ profaned in the Eucharist:

'Well, Holy Father in heaven...here must be someone to speak for your Son, since he never looks out for himself. Let us be the ones, daughters, even though the thought is a bold one, we being who we are...Well, what is this, my Lord and my God! Either bring his world to an end or provide a remedy to these evils. There is no heart that can suffer them...Stop this fire, Lord...Behold your Son is still in the world. In his beauty and purity he doesn't deserve to be in a house where there are things of this sort. ...Do it for your Son's sake...Since some remedy must be had, my Lord, may Your Majesty provide it' (W, 35, 3-4).

Prayer to Christ in favor of his Father:

O, Son of God and my Lord! How is it that you give so much together in the first words of the Our Father...You oblige him to be true to your word which is no small burden since being in the Father he must bear with us no matter how serious the offenses. If we return to him he must forgive us, as he did the prodigal son....Behold, my Lord, your Father is in heaven...It is right that you look to his honor. Since you have vowed to undergo disgrace for us, leave your Father free. Don't oblige him to do so much for a people so wretched, like myself who will not thank you properly! (W, 27, 2-3)

An **analysis of her prayers**...shows that Teresa's **conversation between friends** develops **naturally** along the usual lines of Christian prayer: praise, adoration, thanksgiving, glorification, acts of faith, hope, desire and love; as well as prayer for sin, petition and self-oblation. All bear the stamp of **deeply felt dignity for God** 'is so great a friend to his friends and so great a Lord to his servants'. (W, 35, 2).