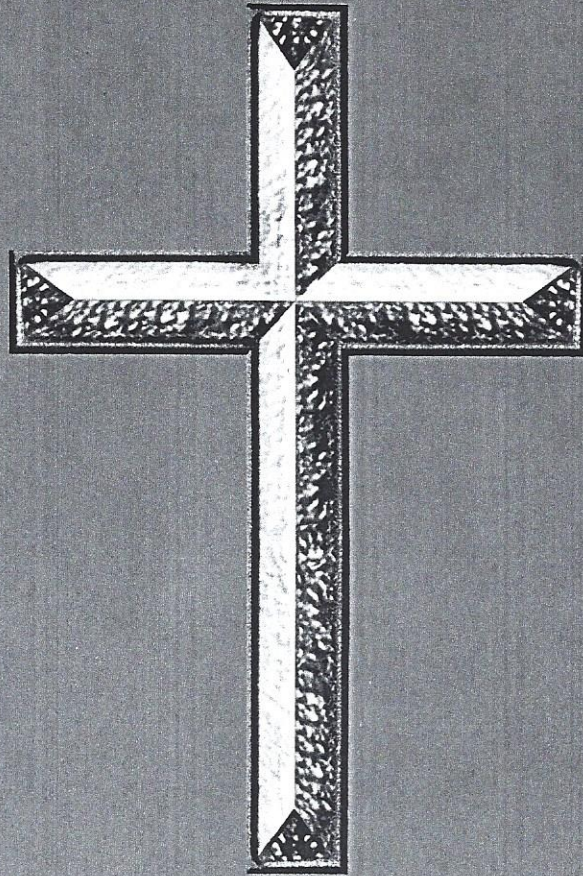


HONORING



*Fr. Kieran of the Cross, O.C.D.*

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## St. Teresa of Avila: A Joyful Saint

**W**e will speak of the human joy that Teresa experienced—The joy in her community life, and finally of the joy she had in her spiritual life. Joy is one of Teresa's outstanding psychological characteristics. Her joy was a capacity for enjoyment, and for spreading it in her surroundings. She recalls its presence in her childhood and adolescence. "The Lord gave me the grace to be pleasing wherever I went, and I was so much loved." In full youth, there came upon her a spontaneous, joyful style.

At the age of 23, she was struck down by an illness that lasted three years. She speaks in her *Life* in this way: "I (did not) find rest, either by day or by night." This was a depression that she suffered along with her illness, which the illness caused. But soon, she regained her habitual joy and regained her physical health. Regarding her physical paralysis she writes: "I suffered all those years in great gladness. I spoke of God in such a way that I was edifying to everyone." It seemed it would have been impossible to suffer so much with so great contentment.

### **Teresa's Joy in Her Religious Community Life**

"It sometimes happened to me, (and even now, but not so much) that I had very bitter trials of soul together with severe bodily torments and pains and sicknesses that I wasn't able to help myself. At other times, I had more serious bodily illnesses, yet, since I didn't have the sufferings of soul, I suffered there with great gladness." She lived her religious life with great joy. "He gave me

such great happiness at being in the religious state of life that it never left me up to this day—and God changed the dryness my soul experienced into the greatest tenderness." "All the things of religious life delighted me!"

When she was founding St. Joseph's, and they were talking about it and planning it, she thought, "How would I be able to endure so much penance, and leave a monastery that was large and pleasant, and where I had always been very happy. How could I leave so many friends?" So, she didn't leave the Incarnation because she was discontented there. She was always joyful.

In her new Carmels, she decided to introduce a new spirit into the Order. And so, she introduced recreation—one of the innovations she introduced—a style of community life she established. This is a proof that this human aspect formed an important part of her ideal for Carmel and is evident in her decision to inculcate in St. John of the Cross the idea of recreation that she established among the sisters—and taught him to inaugurate it among the friars. She codified it especially in her constitutions: "When they are through with the noon meal, the mother prioress may dispense from the silence and they may all converse together whatever topic pleases them most, as long as it is not one which is inappropriate for a religious. And, they shall all have their distaffs with them there. Games should in no way be permitted, for the Lord will give to one the grace to entertain the others."



(Fr. Kieran looked up, paused. Audience laughed, Fr. Kieran laughed). "In this way, the time will be well spent. They should strive not to be offensive, one to another, in that their words and jests must be discreet. When this hour of being together is over, they may, in summer, sleep for an hour. If some do not wish to sleep, they must observe silence." That's from her Constitutions.

Thus, the day of the Carmelite Community will be marked off by times of community joy and conversation and communication. One period at noon and then she introduced another one, after Compline! (in the evening, the same as times assigned for mental prayer). So, an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. So, she introduced (recreation) for an hour at noon and an hour in the evening. Recreation in the evening, following evening prayer was up until then a stricter silence. But, this shows she wasn't really reforming the Carmel or reforming the Rule, she was introducing her own style of living the Carmelite Way.

The newness and boldness of this initiative by Teresa is that to introduce it into Carmel, she had to go against a proscription of the Carmelite Rule that not only prescribed silence throughout the whole day, but a greater silence after Compline until Prime of the following day. For the community recreation, she and the nuns composed poems, carols, and songs. She enjoyed the Feasts and wrote poems to celebrate them.

Her manner of travel, as a founder, was typical. Despite the incredible troubles with the wagons on their travels, the cold, the heat, the snow (Once

it didn't stop snowing the whole day!), sometimes getting lost, other times getting sick and having a fever, "For Glory to God, I usually have poor health!" she says. Teresa has on her face and in her eyes, a contagious smile that she conserved fresh into her last years. Rivera, her Jesuit first biographer, says that, "Her eyes were smiling and ready to laugh, especially at herself and her miseries." "I'm really laughing at myself" she writes, "over these comparisons, for they do not satisfy me. But, I do not know any others. You may think what you want, I have said what is true." "I was laughing at myself and feeling pity at the sight of what poor people esteem."

In her letters she is constant in the numerous situations of social life which stir up joy in her and make her laugh. She writes to her brother, Lorenzo: "I am laughing to myself to think how you send sweet presents and money. And I send you hair shirts!" Or to Mother Maria de San Jose, she writes: "I'm laughing to myself how burdened I am with correspondence, yet spend time writing about trivia!"

Teresa's capable of laughing as well at the devil, when she lost her fear of him: "I was left truly exhausted from such a conflict and I laughed to myself at the devil for I saw clearly it was he! I saw beside me black, abominable little creature, snarling like one in despair that where he had tried to gain he had lost. When I saw him, I laughed to myself and was not afraid." In reading the little flowers of saints, about popular legends, she appears often to enjoy the laughing side of persons, reacting to them with a certain irony, not with sarcasm.

We are not dealing with an idyllic passage and in so much less than with a superficial facet of Teresa who in her youth suffered a physical blow of profound sadness in Becedas and at the infirmary

at the Incarnation. Later she experienced the same pain on a spiritual plain before her powerlessness in the apprenticeship of prayer which filled her with sadness in the deepest layers of her psyche: "And, so unbearable the sadness I felt on entering the Oratory that I had to muster up all my courage to go to pray."

One of the symptoms of change in the community life in the transition from the middle ages to the modern times is the ingredient of a healthy joy with which Teresa organized the religious life. "As the style of both our life together as sisters and the recreations we have together." And which she proposes directly to John of the Cross when he was on his way to Duruelo. The healthy joy that Teresa introduced into the structures of community, in the life-schedule.

And it was itself, in the daily community life, she infringes in a certain way on the prescriptions of the Rule. For, she breaks the Rule, in certain parts. She doesn't live according to the Rule. In a certain way, in a pedagogical tone, she inculcates in her readers of *The Way of Perfection*: "Strive to take time for recreation with the sisters, and, when there is need, and where there is time set aside by custom, even though this may not be to your pleasure, everything done with a pure intention is perfect love." So, even if you don't feel like going, go! That's what she says. Anyway "Sometimes it is a particular joy for me to see these sisters gather together and feeling such great joy at being in the monastery." At times, during recreation, she improvises in a festive manner the joy of the group, as when she received coconuts from America, the New World.

The fact itself of being a nun is a fount of joy (for Teresa). "As soon as I took the habit, within an hour, He gave me such great happiness at being

a religious, in the religious state, that it never left me up to this day!" And she writes, after she had been in religious life for thirty years: "Oh sisters, understand for the love of God, the great favor He has granted those He has brought here!"

She's convinced that religious life, without joy, is a contradiction. (Fr. pauses, looks up to audience and said with a smile on his face, "Remember that!" Pause. Laughter from the audience). He repeats: "Religious life, without joy, is a contradiction."

She expresses this graphically in a passage from the *The Way of Perfection*: "The discontented nun is like someone who feels great loathing for food however good the food may be. It nauseates her. And the food that healthy people find great pleasure in eating is repugnant to such persons." In the same passage, she diagnoses what the true joy of religious life consists in: "This house is a heaven if one can be had on this earth."

Here, in her first Carmel, "We have a happy life if one is pleased only with pleasing God and pays no attention to her own satisfaction. If a nun desires something in addition to pleasing God, all will be lost." She writes: "I fear an unhappy nun more than many devils!"

Among the sources of monastic joy, Teresa separates out, in a special way, Evangelical Poverty. In Chapter two of *The Way of Perfection* she treats how one should not worry about bodily needs, and the blessing there is in poverty. She underlines that in the experiences of extreme poverty, when making new foundation,

The experience was very good for us. The interior consolations and happiness we felt were so great that I often think about what the Lord had stored up, within the virtues. Truly I have seen that there

is more spirituality and even inner happiness when suitable accommodations for the body are seemingly lacking, than afterwards, when the house is large and the accommodations good.

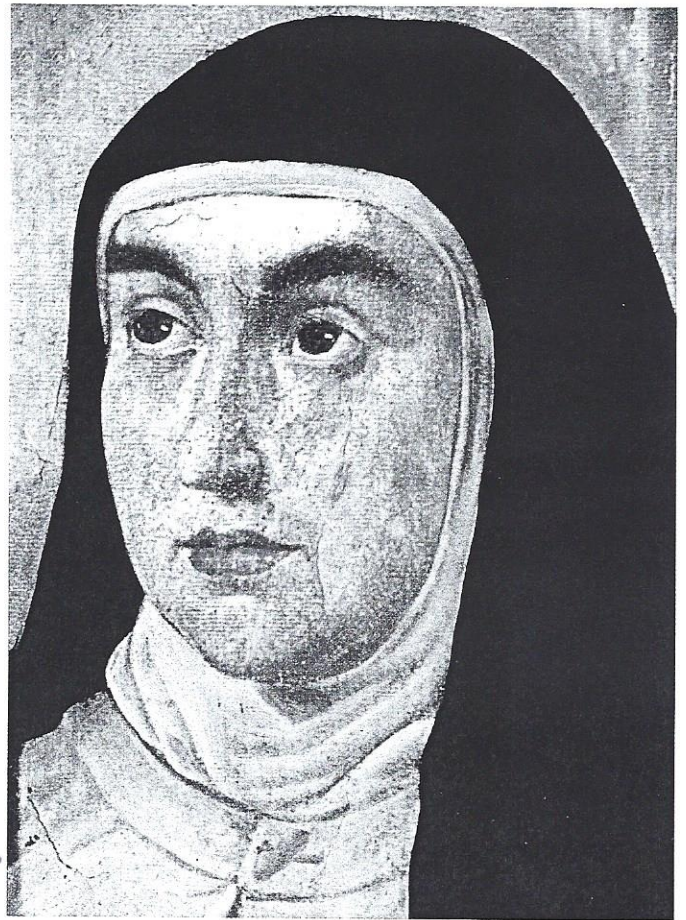
Another cause of Joy is that each time that she accepts in one of her houses a poor young woman, without a dowry:

Believe me, mi Padre, it is a pleasure whenever someone who brings in nothing and is received for love of God alone. And, I can certify that when I received those who brought much wealth, I did not feel as great a joy as I did when I accepted only the one nun, only for the love of God, who was poor. On the contrary, I have fear about those with wealth. But, the poor, filled and enlarged my spirit with a happiness so great I wept for joy when they entered. This is the truth.

A good exponent of the joy Teresa fostered in the Religious life are her own poems, with the exception of those which were motivated by her mystical graces, all the rest of the poems radiate a festive aspect of the religious life. Community Joy, the Day of a Sister's Profession, The Explosive Joy on the Feast of Christmas, A humorous procession before the danger of fleas! (...in her coarse, wool habits. She wrote a poem and the fleas never returned!). They are poems composed with rhymes and meter from profane songs known by everyone, so as to facilitate singing by a group. For Christmas, Teresa promoted an exchange of Carols among communities of Andalusia and Castille.

### **The Joy Teresa had in the Spiritual Life**

The First Counsel that Teresa writes down for the beginner is the two-fold slogan, Joy and Freedom. And, she concludes: "The formulation of this First Counsel, in this way, there are many reasons why it is permitted to take recreation, even so, as to be



able to return with greater strength to prayer." Joy is an indispensable ingredient of Teresian ecumenism. Not merely as a tonic for community life, but as a factor for spirituality. It was what Teresa calls, *Interior Joy* which has its roots beyond psychological talent of the individual and beyond the joyful living together of the brothers and sisters in community and recreation.

By means of the biblical word, Teresa returns to the primordial spring of every blessedness, that is, the Trinitarian mystery. Perhaps the most biblical word that most consistently motivated her is that which assures us that "God finds His delight with the Children of this earth." "For the Lord takes delight in His people. He crowns the poor with salvation." (Psalm 149) He finds His delight—with us, in other words—with us! He's delighted with us, and looks and finds His delight there.

And that among the children of the earth, He rejoices—especially in Jesus! Something that makes her cry out with an authentic shout of joy: “Be joyful, my soul, for there is Someone who loves your God, as He deserves! Be joyful!” So, if you are feeling sad, think of the Joy Jesus finds in the Father and the Father finds in Jesus. Give thanks to Him. Hear the Carols of our Joys overflows definitively. Then, my soul, you will enter into your rest, when you become intimate with this Supreme Good. Understand what He understands, Loves what He loves, and rejoices in what gives Him joy.” That’s where we must find our joy in what gives Jesus joy. That’s where we must find our joy, where Jesus finds His joy!

Prayer must concur with the development of this joyful background of the Christian Life. Without prayer, we cannot find it. Teresa inculcates it in the praying novice. In the first book of her *Life* she counsels: “The soul can place itself in the presence of Christ and grow accustomed being inflamed with love for one, for His Sacred Humanity. It can keep Him ever present, and speak with Him, asking Him for its needs, and complaining of its labors, being glad with Him, in its enjoyment, and not forgetting Him, because of these enjoyments.”

She inculcates it again with insistence in a passage in *The Way of Perfection*: “If you are joyful, look at Him, as Risen. Just imagine how He rose from the tomb will bring you joy. “Just imagine that will bring you joy.” According to Teresa, prayer as it develops, flowers into a state of joy, designated by the term ‘consolation.’ Consolations that normally flow into the profound joy of contemplation, which she designates by the term, “spiritual delight.” For prayer, she is a partisan of an environment of solitude, but not of isolation, not of a somber absorption.

Many think that to pray you have to be absorbed in a somber way so no one ever distracts you. “When I see souls very earnest in trying to understand the prayer they have, and very sullen when they are in it, for it seems they don’t let their minds move or stir lest a bit of their spiritual delight and devotion be lost. It makes me realize how little they understand of the way by which union is attained. I think the whole matter lies in these things: “No sister. Absolutely not. Works are what the Lord wants. He desires that if you see a sister who is sick, to whom you can bring some relief, you have compassion on her and not worry about losing this devotion.”

An equal facet of joy is present in the idea that she has of sanctity. She enjoys the humor of a popular Saint of Avila, María Díaz. “I remember a saint I knew in Avila, for certainly it was clear she lived the life of a saint: She had given everything she had to God, but kept a mantle to wear. And after she gave that away, God gave her a great interior trial and dryness. After she had given everything away, all her wealth, she complained very much to the Lord. She said, ‘Is this the way you are Lord? After leaving me with nothing, You Yourself leave me?’ “

In sketching a likeness of the penitent Fra Pedro de Alcantara, she writes, “It seems he was made of nothing but tree roots.” She then adds another trait: “Yet, with all this sanctity, he was very affable. Although his words were few, unless he was questioned, he was very pleasant in his speech, because he had a bright mind.”

Her nurse, Blessed Anne of St. Bartholomew, recalled that: “Mother Teresa was no friend of people who were sad. Nor was she (sad) herself. Nor did she want people who were with her to be so. She used to say, ‘God deliver me from sad-faced

saints.'" So, that's a quote from Teresa, but the source is from Anne of St. Bartholomew.

Now, joy is a beatitude. The evangelical blessing that accompanies all trials is the blessing of the persecuted. A joy that is chemically pure, that flowers in a special freshness among contemplatives or in the Christian who is tried and mature. Among the characteristic traits of the terminal state of prayer, or simply of the Christian, Teresa notes, is interior joy persecution. If you are persecuted, do you feel joy in that?

"These souls have interior joy, even if they are persecuted, with much more peace than that mentioned, and with any hostile feelings towards those who do or desire to do them evil." This capacity for profound interior joy in the social content of calumnies and persecutions she had all but formulated in *The Way of Perfection* as the indispensable condition of the true contemplative, that is to say, the adult christian, in Christ.

Of herself, in this situation, she assures us: "These calumnies not only fail to make me sad, but gave me so great and accidental joy that I could not restrain myself. As a result, I'm not surprised that what David did before the Ark of the Lord. For, because of my joy, which I didn't know how to conceal." The same joy she shares with Maria de San José, (her friend who was the prioress in Seville, since they were both 'calumniated' by a kind of crazy nun that was in there. So she writes: "The love I had for you has doubled to the extreme. Even though it was great, and for you especially, since you suffered the most! But, be assured, when I learned that they had deprived you of your office, voice (explains: 'Your say in the community'), and standing in the community (explains that Sr. Maria de San José was imprisoned), I felt a particular consolation. (aside to

audience: Has anyone written a letter to you like that? Followed with laughter).

Especially of the invulnerable Christian beatitude, "Blessed are you, when you are persecuted, and hated, and people say all kinds of terrible things about you—Rejoice and be glad! That's the joy that she experienced. Yet none for these persons there has poured forth an inexhaustible fount of joy. I tell you, sisters, that the cross is not wanting, but it does not disquiet or make them lose peace. For the storms, like a wave, pass quickly and the fair weather returns because of the Presence of the Lord. The experience makes them soon forget everything. May He be blest and praised by all His creatures. Amen."

Finally, we can say that Joy is a Fruit of the Holy Spirit, given to men and women as new creatures in Christ. As a counterpoint to the appetites of the flesh, the Teresian message is a patent reflection of the cry of St. Paul in Romans: "When we cry Abba, Father, it is the Spirit Himself, bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."



It is especially in her *Soliloquies* where St. Teresa reaches a tone most penetrating of her joyful delight in the Holy Spirit. We can call this joy "The Mystical Joy of Teresa." From her profoundest depths, onto

it's Christological-pneumatic manifestation, simple prophesy reserved to whomever is engulfed in these mysterious possessions, a foretaste already here below of the divine blessings and eternal life for which they hope.

By nature and destiny, through creation and divine adoption we are destined to be happy and enjoy the expansive fruition of the three divine persons, eternally happy! "Oh my soul! Consider the great delight and love the Father has in knowing His Son and in His Son, in knowing His Father. And, the enkindling love with which this Holy Spirit is joined with them. And, how not one of them is able to be separated from this Love and knowledge because they are One. These Sovereign Persons know each Other, Love each Other, and delight in Each Other. Oh My Hope, My Father, My Creator, My true Lord and Brother: I consider what you say, that your delights are with the children of the earth, my soul rejoices greatly!"

Now, Teresa had two daughters: They later entered into her Carmel. They were both canonized later in their life: One was St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the other was St. Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross). They are more recent Carmelite saints, whom you all know well.

Many of us perhaps think of St. Thérèse, or the Little Flower, as someone who was very pious and very perfect. Now, they had in the community a Mother Superior who was a difficult person, a character: Mother Marie Gonzague. She had great qualities, but she was jealous of them and she could cause trouble. But, she always esteemed Thérèse very highly, much more than the other Martin sisters.

And, this is what she writes of her (a very different picture than when we read about her): "Tall and strong, with the air of a child. (She had) a tone of voice with an expression that hides in her the Wisdom and Perspicacity of a fifty year old. A little, untouchable saint whose head is full of mischief—to play on whomever she wants. A Comedienne! She is everything! She can make you weep with

devotion and just as easily faint with laughing." So, she understood Thérèse very well!

And, St. Edith Stein—Edith Stein, the Philosopher, whose picture, as a nun, makes us feel so forbidding that we all run from her! (laughter) We wonder if she ever cracked a smile. (more laughter) And when we read her, too, we feel the same (laughter). Anyway, the truth of the matter is that she was a very happy nun, and was always smiling, ready to help the other sisters.

Essentially, what Edith Stein, Philosopher and Educational Specialist had to learn at Carmel was how to become a pupil again. She had been a teacher all her life. Now her life was different. She found herself in a situation where people, twenty years her junior, carried out their duties more effectively than she. They were better at it. To the rest of the community she appeared not as a renounced Philosopher, but as a rather clumsy postulant. (laughter).

Nevertheless, Edith blossomed in a happy novitiate atmosphere. Her face lost the traces of her suffering, and acquired a cheerful, new serenity. She succeeded in adapting herself to her younger companions and patiently accepting her limitations. A novice who was with her in the novitiate wrote:

Everyone knows that more laughing and joking goes on in the novitiate—about nothing at all. (laughter). Edith joined wholeheartedly in the fun! Sometimes she laughed so hard, especially when the joke was on her, that the tears rolled down her cheeks. Yet, at a certain point in the novitiate, when I was feeling depressed, it was Edith who, as inconspicuously as possible, did everything she could to cheer me up.



Edith continuously radiated joy. Edith would tell the Prioress that she had never laughed so much as she did in Carmel. Hers was a spiritual joy, rising out of her union with God. And also the childlike, carefree joy of a nature freed from the extra burdens of its own making.

So, that's the end of my talk on Joy.

Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D.†  
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2015 OCDS National Congress  
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Celebrating the Fifth Centenary  
of St. Teresa of Jesus

This is the transcript of Fr. Kieran's  
last formal presentation



Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh's lifetime achievement award.  
Icon by Sr. Mary Grace Melcher, O.C.D., from the Terre Haute, IN, Carmel.

