

# Presentation of the Book of Her Life

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We will begin with a few words on the historical origin of the **Book of her Life**, followed by the context in which it was written. In other words, we will seek to understand why she wrote her autobiography. By looking at the historical aspects of the book we will come to appreciate the spiritual life of Teresa of Avila.

## I. The Two Editions:

Historical research shows that there were two writings of the **Book of Her Life**. As a matter of fact, there is a letter that she sent with the book addressed to Fr. Garcia de Toledo: 'This book was completed in June 1562.' But if we compare it to the beginning of the passage in Chapter 39, 14: 'I received permission from Rome, authorizing this monastery to exist without any revenue...etc....'

The footnote explains that the letter from Rome was dated July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1565; in other words, two different dates which thus indicate an historical discrepancy. How could Teresa have stated that she had received permission from Rome in July, 1565 if she had communicated in a letter to Fr. Garcia De Toledo that the work had been completed in 1562?

### A/ First Edition:

It is almost certain that she wrote the first edition in Toledo at Dona Luisa de la Cerda's palace between January and June 1562, because in 1561, Teresa had received an order to go to the Dona's palace (she had been widowed –Don Arias Pardo de Travera). She would stay there until June 1562. (See Life 34, 2)

The first edition wasn't divided into chapters when it was first written but rather in one long manuscript. The recipients of this work were to be her Confessors- Jesuit, Dominican and priests from Avila. The chapters relating to the foundation of St. Joseph's Convent weren't included in this edition as they weren't written until August 1562 (Chapters 32-36); nor were the blessings of the last hours (Chapter 37-40), and, perhaps neither the expose on interior prayer (Chapters 11-21) as would indicate a study by Thomas Alvarez.

### B/ Second Edition:

This is the version we have today. In the Prologue of the Foundations, another major work of St. Teresa of Avila, we read: "I was at St. Joseph's (the Carmel) in 1562, the year this monastery was founded, when Father Francois Garcia de Toledo, a Dominican, my confessor at the time, ordered me to write an account of the foundation of this monastery, and other things that you will read throughout this manuscript if it comes to pass.'

She is talking about the Book of Her Life that she has to begin again and that she will finish in 1565 (see Life 39, 14, the brief from Rome).

For your information, Teresa met Father Francois Garcia de Toledo at Luisa de la Cerda's home.

In 1562-63, the Bishop from Salamanca (Francisco SOTO de Salazar) was in the area (in Avila). He was the Inquisitor from Toledo. Teresa met with him and told him everything. Seeing her quite troubled, he told her to write an extensive account of all that had happened to her, her whole life, omitting nothing, and turn it over to the Master of Avila (Saint John of Avila). The Bishop assured her that St. John's response would calm her concerns.

In other words, the Inquisitor from Toledo, Soto, suggested that Teresa follow the advice of her confessor about writing a book on her whole life and then turning it over to a competent authority—the future St. John of Avila.

### **The Different Recipients of the Book:**

Before allowing St. John of Avila, someone she didn't know, to review her work, Teresa turned her work over to her two Confessors and friends, Garcia de Toledo and Domingo Banez. The circle of recipients of the Book of her Life was widening: John of Avila, Garcia and Banez both Dominicans. The text also ended up in the hands of those who wished her well such as Dona Guiomar de Ulloa, who helped at the St. Joseph's foundation, Father Balthasar Alvarez (Jesuit), Francisco de Salcedo (the saintly gentleman) and Gaspar Daza (secular).

Teresa wrote in the prologue of the Life (2): 'I beg God with all whole heart to give me the grace to write this account with complete clarity and truth, this account that my confessors have been asking me for for such a longtime.. she adds...I know the Lord Himself has wanted it for a longtime too, but I didn't dare...' Teresa admits that she herself has felt driven to write this book.

It is worth noting that this book would be in the hands of the Inquisition until the death of the Saint. Ana of Jesus would get the book back and give it to Luis de Leon to be edited (Salamanca 1588). It was then given to Phillip II to be preserved at the new Escorial Library. It is still able to be viewed at the Royal Saint Laurence of Escorial Library, Window 26. (If you plan on making a pilgrimage to Spain)

### **C/ The Three Testimonies (Relations)**

From the writings of Teresa concerning the period between 1562 and 1565, the context of the Book of her Life, we have the Testimonies. Though there were many of them, we only have the first three available to us today. They are the first spiritual writings (1560-63).

These first three Testimonies are, chronologically, the first spiritual writings (1560-1563). They were meant for her Confessors to guide her in **discernment and spiritual direction**. They give us an insight into her spiritual life, her theological preoccupations and her manner of protecting or watching out for herself. Let's remember quite simply that the work of the Book of her Life is preceded and prepared by the Testimonies. Actually, there were certainly many of them but only three of them are available to us today.

## **2. The Climate in Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century**

We have seen that the Book of her Life covers the first 50 years of her life or up until 1565. She is being asked to write an account of both her life and her prayer experiences (1562-65). It was at this time that Teresa was undergoing the most challenging yet extraordinary point of her mystical life. She was starting to draw the attention of the people of Avila not only for her personal experiences, which translated into ecstasies and other extraordinary phenomenon but also on a social level. The Reform of the Carmelite order was seriously underway and was causing quite a lot of commotion.

But to really grasp the concerns of both religious and seculars, we have to put ourselves into the context of the times Teresa was living in.

### **A) A Turbulent Century:**

Teresa's experiences were taking place in an extremely rich social, religious, economic and scientific world. The Church at that time was undergoing many big changes that resulted in the implementation of Church reform.

During the middle Ages the common spiritual practices were based on external practices and vocal prayer. With the advent of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the spiritual norm went from being based on appearances (bringing about as a result superstitious thought) to an internal norm based on personal experience.

With the invention of the printing press, the internal norm came about as the result of a spiritual trend born in the Netherlands- Devotio Moderna. This method of mental prayer, introduced in Spain in 1490, was made available to all through the proliferation of publications. Starting in the XV century, the mystic of recollection, the Recogimento being the most well know movement, would emerge from the practice of mental prayer.

The Recogimento mystic points out three movements perfectly defined by Francisco de Osuna: **No Pensar Nada** (no thinking); **Attento a solo Dios y content** (pay attention to God alone); **solo amor** (love alone).

### **B) The Spanish Illuminist Movement**

This method of recollection, **pensar nada a solo amor** (no thinking only loving), will be successful and much appreciated amongst practitioners who at that time had a spiritual life based on interiorization. From this movement, illuminism came to be.

They were called the 'alumbrados.' In this movement, where union with God was sought through mental prayer, the alumbrados were passionate about supernatural phenomenon such as ecstasy, visions, raptures etc. As a matter of fact, as mental prayer was considered to be divine in nature, they put aside everything else. Neither penance nor the practice of virtues was considered to have any importance. In addition, to not negatively impact recollection or the prayer of quiet, it was

suggested that one abstain from any interior action or exterior works, and what's more, they were not even to think of the humanity of Christ.

All this drove them to imperfection. They sought union with God through passivity and abandonment which only undermined it. The apparent attraction for extraordinary mystical phenomenon was then turned to communion, frequently sought after. While exterior worship was deformed or done away with, union with Christ through communion was exalted and encouraged in an exaggerated and dangerous way. They were convinced that these experiences were something to obtain at all costs.

St. Teresa of Avila's life of prayer became the talk of the town because of the mystical phenomenon that she was experiencing in her spiritual life. Teresa was obliged to write down an account of her life of mental prayer so that theologians could determine the veracity of her mystical experiences.

For the Inquisition, this was no laughing matter. It did what was necessary to eradicate those belonging to this movement. So it is easy to understand then why the Inquisition cast a suspicious eye on all those who practiced mental prayer. Teresa of Avila was part of those defending this practice. On top of that, there was the Lutheran reform movement happening in Germany. So it is understandable that the Inquisition was on red alert when it came to these diverse heretical movements.

### **C/ A Woman in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century**

The condition of women in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain was vastly different from today. Women were distrusted, especially by those tasked by the Inquisition, 'letrados', of verifying the authenticity of one's Christianity.

They didn't appreciate at all that just anyone was practicing 'mental prayer' especially those who had never received a theological formation. Women at this time were generally not educated, and in the eyes of men, more apt to get off track spiritually. It is then easier to grasp the struggle Teresa had to go through to defend her practice of mental prayer. Her position was far from enviable.

We are now better able to answer the question initially asked in the introduction about why she had to write an account of her spiritual life (Life). This account was really a long examination of conscience requested of her by Confessors in order to allow them to authenticate her spiritual life.

In conclusion, Teresa had everything to attract the Inquisition's attention to her:

- 1/ she was a woman with no formal theological training
- 2/ Teresa advocated for the right to practice mental prayer
- 3/ she experienced mystical phenomenon.
- 4/ she undertook the reform of a male dominated religious order.

We will now look at the content and structure of the book...