

The Book of Her Life

Introduction

St. Teresa of Avila

Introduction

Early Years

Spain was the **greatest power**
on earth in the 16th century,

During these years of glory for

Spain, Teresa lived and
witnessed a sacred truth —

the **possession of every**

mystic; a person's greatest

good is within and

'won by giving up everything.'

(ch.20,27)

-Teresa's grandfather, a Christianized Jew, accused himself before the Inquisition for **judaizing**. He wore the humiliating **sanbenito** seven Fridays in procession. Out of necessity, he moved his family to Avila and continued his profession as a cloth merchant;

-His son, Alonso married in 1505, 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;

-Teresa's spirit showed signs at seven when she decided to set off with her brother Rodrigo for the Moors to have her head cut off for Christ. As as she grew older her piety Teresa grew cold. She read romantic tales of chivalry and began to cultivate her feminine charms.

Introduction

Early Years

Her father refused to give his consent so on November 2, 1535, at the age of 20, Teresa stole away and gave her life to God as a nun in the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation.

- After her mother's death in November 1528, at 33 years old, Teresa, at the age of 16, was given over to the care of the **Augustinian nuns of Our Lady of Grace** ;
- Teresa realized that a nun, **Dona Maria Briceno** meant more to her than her former friends; however, the **inner struggle over the pros and cons of the life of a nun harmed Teresa's health**; she had to leave school;
- Uncle Don Pedro de Cepeda, a hermit, introduced Teresa to spiritual books to help her in her **struggle over her vocation**; finally the **Letters of St. Jerome** enabled her to **make a decision**;

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.

-Irrespective of the Carmelite rule of continual prayer, Teresa states that until reading **Osuna's Third Spiritual Alphabet**, she had no idea how to go about praying or being recollected;

- 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, Teresa remained a **paralytic 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;

-Teresa then experienced a **prolonged period of difficulty in prayer**. She didn't realize the imagination (mind) can wander while the soul on a deep level can be in contemplation.

Life at the Incarnation

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 experienced **compunction**, the gift of tears. Compunction or true sorrow for sins consoled her; a theme running through the Life;

-The Desert Fathers felt that when the **heart was softened by interior weeping**, God would give the **experience of His light**; it intensified with mystical experience, the **shabbiness of sin beside God's boundless love**;

- At the time of her conversion Teresa began to **experience 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 the prayer of union**;

- She sought **council** thus beginning her **struggle to explain** her supernatural experiences which ultimately resulted in the **writing of the Life**.

In the Context of her Times

A longing for
Deep Spirituality
took hold in Spain having
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** offered literature and an exposure to other European Schools;
- The **Illuminist** movement emerged-- members known as alumbrados. They later divided into different groups: recogidos supporting recollection and divine action; and, dejados supporting self-abandonment;
- Recogidos were mainly the religious orders (Franciscans Osuna, **The Third Spiritual Alphabet**);
- Teresa herself could be considered a member of the alumbrados.

In the Context of her Times

The **Inquisition** was established throughout Spain to further the cause of **Spanish unity, a national unity.**

- One of several deceptive visionaries, Magdalena de la Cruz, a Poor Clare confessed to being a secret devil worshiper- a **prevalent fear** in Spain was of the devil;

- So **mental prayer was distrusted**, especially practiced by **women**, along with books that fostered the practice; there was **hostility toward mystical manifestations**;

- For Teresa, the **safest course was to hide nothing. She felt that the favors she received were from God**, but, she feared she might be deceived by her experiences, so she sought out 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.

In the Context of her Times

‘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);

- Devotion to Christ in His humanity was essential; Souls who don't focus on His humanity often don't get beyond union; 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).
- Unable to picture him, meditation for Teresa was a simple quiet presence through one of His earthly mysteries;
- An Index of **forbidden books** including almost all books dealing with prayer;
- Despite the Index, Teresa had little doubt about the **central place of prayer**. She was wondering what to do now that she didn't have access to spiritual books containing Scripture.

In the Context of her Times

Many felt that
many years
were necessary before
any passivity in prayer
could happen.

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).

-Scripture was only available in Latin so Teresa relied on spiritual books with quotations from Scripture;

-When these books were placed on the Valdes Index she was in despair;

-The Lord told her in a locution 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 about the path to union with God.

Her First Spiritual Directors

Baltasar Alvarez
confided to
a colleague, Ribera,
that he had to read
many books
to understand
Teresa of Jesus.

-Teresa's first two directors (Salcedo, Daza) concluded her mystical 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;

-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, a consolation and help to Teresa, were both canonized by the Church: Francis Borgia, Jesuit; Peter of Alcantara, Franciscan.

A Report in Writing

In his eagerness to know more,
Garcia de Toledo asked Teresa to re-write her book and to add a section on the founding of St. Joseph's; anxious to be clear she added 11 new chapters on the 4 ways of watering the garden; a complete treatise on the degrees of prayer; and 4 additional chapters talking of other extraordinary favors she had received up until 1565

-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 so she underlined passages describing her experiences from Laredo's Ascent of Mount Sion;

-The first two Spiritual Testimonies, accounts of her spiritual states, were written before she wrote her **Life**;

-Garcia de Toledo asked her to write her life; this first draft has been lost.

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; (See Graph Interior-Exterior events of her life);

-The evident preponderance of interior facts does not, prevent an interweaving of both levels-interior & exterior- 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 into a **vast solitude** where it experiences Spiritual Pain ; the desert and solitude seem to the soul better than all the companionship of the world.

The Nature of Her Book

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.

-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;

-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 Nature of Her Book

Not all possess
the charism to speak
of mystical experience;
the Lord gave her
this gift only after
she had experienced
years of stammering
and powerlessness

-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)

-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)

The Nature of Her Book

Where did
Teresa find
her message ?

-Though she cherished spiritual books, she said that she understood nothing until the Lord gave her understanding through experience; (ch.22,3)

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

-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).

The Plan of Her Book

Teresa presents
a detailed exposition
of prayer,
its nature,
degrees,
and effects

Part 2

4 Ways of Watering the Garden (see table):

Teresa 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).

The Plan of Her Book

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

Part 3

We understand 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...

(ch.23-31).

The Plan of Her Book

A practical result of this
outpouring of divine grace
is the fruitfulness of
her life of service

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)

Part 4

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)

Main Ideas of Her Book

Her doctrinal thesis rises out of her personal story

‘...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

-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;

-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, 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.

Main Ideas of Her Book

... one day while praying in solitude to her God for light about some friendships

to which she was attached, she 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)

-The central theme of her book is Mental Prayer or ‘...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 to share intimately their deepest feelings and thoughts is the **simple** and strikingly human **Teresian characteristic of the path to perfection...**;

- Teresa said that for more than eighteen of the twenty-eight years since she began prayer, she suffered this battle and conflict between friendship with God and friendship with the world (Ch. 8,3)

Main Ideas of Her Book

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;

-It happens 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.

Main Ideas of Her Book

With the support of
these graces,
she is ready to discuss...
the sanctifying power
of the mystical favors

-Her mission is the mystical life;

-She protests against those who ...think these graces can be evoked through subtle techniques; (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.

Main Ideas of Her Book

‘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)

-While writing her Life she is undergoing herself a transfiguration in the depths of her being;

-...Long years of painful efforts do not reach into the depths as does a brief experience of these supernatural graces, ‘...one of these favors is enough to change a soul completely.’ (Ch. 27,9)

-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 in 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.

History of the Autograph

She settled the score
by denouncing
Teresa's Life
to the Inquisition
as the work of
a heretical nun

-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;

-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 confessors, was appointed censor;

- He approved the book.

History of the Autograph

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 1611. The most widely circulated English translation in that century was by British scholar E. Allison Peers

-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;

-She gave it to 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 today.