

Teresian Prayer (Summary)

Carmelite Nuns

Carmel Clarion, Jan-Mar 2011

Introduction

We have only to look to Teresa to discover the **elements** that make a **Carmelite vocation** and **how to live it** in an adequate way. This applies too in the **area of prayer**, the **center** and **characteristic mark** of **Teresian life** and **charism** and, because of this, the **principle component** of **Carmel's place** in the **Church**.

St. Teresa's **person** and **message**, along with the Carmel itself, cannot be explained without speaking of **prayer**. The **study of Teresian prayer** gives us access to the whole of her **life** and **teaching** while allowing an **understanding** of the **Carmelite vocation**.

Today's person has the right to expect from us the **experience of prayer**. It is through Teresa that the **Carmel** has become known in the **Church** as a **praying community**.

All the **elements** that make a **qualified teacher of prayer** can be found in **Teresa**: vast **experience**; profound **understanding** of grace received from God; ability to **communicate** her experience. She writes:

“For it is one grace to receive the Lord's favor; another, to understand which favor and grace it is; and one more, to know how to describe and explain it” (L 17:5 ...)

These **three mystical graces** make Teresa a qualified **teacher of prayer**, while mapping out for us the subjects for studying Teresian prayer: **Experience, Doctrine and Pedagogy**.

Part 1. Teresa's Experience of Prayer

To **understand Teresa's message**, knowledge of her **experience** is necessary. It is from her experience, where she saw the **essential elements** of **Christian life**, that she drew her knowledge...

... A schematic helps us grasp her word and message. **Three periods** are apparent in the **development** of St Teresa's prayer.

1-First Period:

Easy and spontaneous prayer. Teresa took to prayer. (cf. LI)

2-Second Period:

Difficult and **testing prayer** from an **adolescence crisis** triggered by her mother's death up to her **definitive conversion** in 1554. (L9)

The **difficulty** had a **two-fold source**:

- Teresa's inability for **discursive (or methodical) reflection** and **thoughts** that ran wild (L4 ...);
- Teresa's **resistance** to embracing the way of love, and the **contradictions** in her lifestyle.

3-Third Period:

This period begins with Teresa's entry into **mystical life** in 1554, the year of her **definitive conversion**.

From now on, she will no longer fall back but only ascend. She avoids **occasions of sin** and spends more time in **prayer**. God lavishes His attention on her.

“Now, then, when I began to avoid occasions and devote myself to prayer, the Lord ... started to grant me favors” (L 23:2; ...)

A careful study of **mystical prayer** ... allows us to discover that ... it is a **communication of God**, a **personal communication** to the **human being**. The person “experiences” this communication each time to a **greater level inwardly**, until it becomes **personal communion**.

Mystical prayer for Teresa is about a **Person to person relationship**”, “**a friendly communication**”. God is more **active** in the prayer than the person. In friendship, friends take first place and all else becomes secondary.

Part 2. Teresa's Method of Prayer

Teresa's “**method**” or “**manner**” can be described as follows:

“I tried as hard as I could to keep Jesus Christ ..., present within me” (L 4:7).

“This is the method of prayer I used: ... I strove to represent Christ within me” (L 9:4).

At the moment of Communion ... **(I) “entered (my poor home) to be with Him”** (W 34:7).

Praying means: **Attention to the person , and this within, where the personal encounter takes place.**

To pray is: **to be with Him, “to draw Present” or “to represent”,** that is to revive His presence. **“I remained with him”** (L9:4). It means to **make contact** with the Person.

When Teresa converts her experience into teaching she only needs to change the subject of the sentence:

“One should just remain there in His presence” (L 13:22).

Teresa would later call this way of praying **“the prayer of recollection”**. She sets it out in chapters 26-29 of the *Way*.

“I never knew what it was to prayer with satisfaction until the Lord taught me this method” (W 29:7)

Her **experience** of prayer leads her to **equate prayer and perfection**. To be a **“friendly relationship”**, prayer is a **commitment** of one’s entire life...

-To pray is to **opt** for God as a **friend ...**

-To pray is **“to seek to be servants of love”** and **“to follow resolutely by means of this path of prayer Him who has loved us so much”** (L 11:1)

Living for another, the **Friend**:

“Once you are placed in so high a degree as to desire to commune in solitude with God and to abandon the pastimes of the world ... Let His Majesty lead the way along the path He desires. We belong no longer to ourselves but to Him” (L 11:12).

Prayer follows the **type of life** we lead. We are what our **prayer is or** what our **friendship with God** is. For this reason, prayer is a **‘relationship of friends’**. It brings about and deepens our friendship with God.

Part 3. Teresa’s Viewpoint on Prayer

From Teresa’s personal experience:

“Prayer is an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us” (L 8:5)

... The entire emphasis in the Teresian **concept of prayer** is on the **persons**, who now live engrossed in one another in a friendly way. The definition given of prayer given us by Teresa shows that to pray is to **reach out** to the Person with one’s **entire person**; ... listening and speaking; **“intimate sharing”**.

When answering the question **“what is mental prayer”** in the *Way* (cf. W 22...), Teresa does not use the definition of prayer she gave us in the *Life*, but says this:

“This is mental prayer ... to understand these truths.”

In other words, **“the truths”** are about **God** and the **human being ...**; about a **discovery** leading to an **encounter**; and, about **“conforming my way of life to His”** (W 22:7).

Teresa wants all the **attention** of the one praying to be focused on the **divine Person** or **“looking at”** the Person.

“I’m not asking you to do anything more than look at Him” (W 26:3)

“With the intellect quiet ... look at Christ who is looking at us” (L 13; 22).

What is said is not important. What matters is **“being with Him”**, the **act of being present**.

Paying attention to God’s love for us, forms part of Teresa’s definition of prayer: **“who we know loves us”**. Teresa notes that the **first lesson of Christ**, the Master of prayer, is the **love** He has for us:

“In the first word of the Our Father, you will immediately understand the love He has for you”. (W 26:10)

To know one is loved, generates a loving response: **“love begets love”**. (L 22:14) Therefore, it is always necessary to look at the love God has for us: **“do that which best stirs you to love”** (IC IV 1:7).

Prayer is a **loving encounter**, an encounter in **truth: God’s truth and our truth**. In prayer, God reveals Himself to us. He shows us **His truth**: that **He loves us and gives to us**. **“He never tires of giving”** and **“without measure”**. **“He looks for someone to give to.”** This is the God Teresa

discovered in prayer. We only **get to know** people—God included—when we share **intimate friendship** with them.

This is also true for **self-discovery**. To pray is “**to enter**” within ourselves, “**to get to know ourselves**”: our richness, misery and moral state. The first words Teresa entices us with in the *Interior Castle* are about “**our marvelous capacity**”, “**dignity**”, “**beauty**”, that we are a “**palace made entirely out of diamond or very clear crystal**”. “**We have the power to converse with none other than God**” (IC 1 1:6)

Prayer also reveals to us our moral state. Teresa tells us that “**through the practice of prayer... I knew... the bad road I was following**” (L 19:12)

...Prayer is also a transforming encounter... “**Intimate friendly sharing**” means the friendship grows stronger ... This **thesis** is defended by our Holy Mother in **all her Works**. The *Life* defends the **thesis** that **prayer is transforming**. As proof, she points to her own life, the **fruit of prayer**... The *Way* deals with the same thing: **prayer is the way of perfection**. The *Interior Castle* presents prayer as a **movement inward** towards the **center** of our being where God abides and towards **deepening** our relationship with Him.

The **best prayer** will always renew one’s life: “**I would not wish for any other prayer except that which makes me increase in virtue**”... to **discern** if prayer is real it is necessary to look at one’s own life. In dealing with **mystical prayer**: “**It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer; there is no better crucible for testing prayer**” (IC VI 8:10, etc.) ... “**What each of you will understand, daughters, if you are advanced, will be that you are the most wretched of all (...) and not in having more delights and raptures in prayer, or visions, or favors of this kind that the Lord grants; ...**” (W18:7)

Since it is a **friendly encounter**, prayer is open to **grow and develop**... It is a *living reality, dynamic, ongoing*.

It is important to underline the **dynamic nature** of prayer so as to **support** a person’s prayer positively in **all stages** of the process.

Teresa has spoken graphically of the **dynamism** of prayer using comparisons: various ways of **watering the garden** (of the soul) in her *Life*; various **levels of communication** ... between God and the soul in the *Interior Castle*. Both comparisons illustrate a **progression** ... in other words, God’s **activity** increases while the “**passivity**” of the soul increases. She points out in her *Life* that the “**work**” of the gardener (soul) is increasingly less, but the **harvest** is greater. God progressively **gains control** ... until He finally commands it. In the *Interior Castle*, Teresa speaks of prayer as an inward movement ... God and the soul “**share intimately**” at ever more profound levels. This is the meaning of different “**mansions**”.

Mystical prayer is the subject of Teresian teaching. She underlines that what is most important in this **friendly encounter**, but often overlooked, is **God’s part** in this prayer. He is the **principal agent**.

The soul is lead to an **attitude of passive-activity**; one of **receptive listening**. For Teresa, prayer is fundamentally a **time of listening**, a time of God’s manifestation... She points out the attitude with which one must approach the rendezvous of prayer when she writes: “**Draw near, then, to this good Master with strong determination to learn what He teaches you** (W 26:10). God-Christ “**teaches**” in prayer “**to anyone who wants to be taught by Him in prayer**” (W 6:3 etc.)

When prayer is seen as an **interpersonal encounter** of **mutual love**, we have a **radical solution** to a “**problem**” which has always vexed the practice of prayer: **distractions and aridity**. Teresa tirelessly repeats that they are **no bar** to prayer, but do make it more difficult... She goes on to say that one can “**be**” with God “**with a thousand disturbances from worldly cares and thoughts**” (L 8:6), as **He doesn’t pay any attention to bad thoughts** (L 11:10). She continues saying: “**that if they can’t even get a good thought, they shouldn’t kill themselves**” (L 22:11 etc.). “**And so it isn’t good for us to be disturbed by our thoughts, nor should we be concerned**” (IC 4 1:11) ... Amen

Part 4. Christ in Teresian Prayer

Teresian prayer is **Christ-centered**. He is **not** the **theme** but rather the **unavoidable presence** in the entire process. Teresa's prayer was **always** centered on **Christ, the Man**. (cf. L 4:7 etc.).

She rejoiced in this Lord (L 22:4) that she had devoted her life to (ib.). She tells beginners to simply “**place themselves in the presence of Christ and grow accustomed to being inflamed with love for His sacred humanity and to keep Him ever present** (L12:2).

She calls those souls “**advanced**” who “**strive to remain in this precious company**” (ib.), while at the same time telling them to **reflect “often on the Passion and life of Christ from which has come and continues to come every good”** (L 13:13).

... Teresa talks about the **presence of the sacred humanity of Christ** in the **entire spiritual process** based on her experience. She declares that it is the **path and gate to all good**, and that “**I wouldn't want any good save that acquired through Him from whom all blessings come to us**” (IC 6 7:15).

The Christ-centered orientation of Teresian prayer is affirmed by a **decisive event**: Christ presented Himself to her as the “**living book**” or “**true book**” in which she learns “**what must be read and done**” (L 26:5).

A series of **mystical graces** (visions, locutions, etc.) with Christ as the focus deepen this line of thought. Christ leads Teresa to **spiritual matrimony** and into the **mystery of the Trinity** (IC 7 1:7 etc.).

From “**set your eyes on Christ** (IC 1 2:11) to the “**appearance**” of “**the Lord in the center of the soul**” (IC 7 2:3), prayer progressively reveals God and the person in Christ ... : “**Let us walk together ...**” (W 26:6).