

The Way of Perfection

Introduction (summary)

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1/ Origins

The Way of Perfection was written at the request of **Teresa's nuns** when they learned that Teresa's confessor at the time, Domingo Banez, refused to allow her book, the **Life** to be circulated among nuns and interested others.

He did however give permission for her to '**write some things on prayer**' and so she wrote the **Way of Perfection** as an **act of obedience** to her **nuns**. It is thought that Teresa wrote the **first redaction** of the **Way of Perfection** in 1566 and the **second** in 1569.

Teresa summarizes the **subject matter** as '**how one reaches the fount of living water, what the soul feels there, how God satisfies it**'...

She implied that the **Way of Perfection** was an **introduction** to her **Life**. She felt that those who had reached the **fount of living water** would find the **Life** very **beneficial** and receive much **light** from it.

... In answer to the question whether God might give **mystical graces** to **imperfect souls**, Teresa thinks that He would, so as to **free** them from their **imperfections**. But she categorically denies that **contemplation** would ever be granted to someone in **mortal sin** ... In her view, she simply says:

"I want to say, then, that there are times when God will want to grant some great favor to persons who are in a bad state so as to draw them by this means out of the hands of the devil."

2/ Central Theme

When Teresa revised **The Way of Perfection** in 1569... she wrote ... on the opening page:

"This book deals with the advice and counsel Teresa of Jesus gives to her religious Sisters and daughters."

... It is a **practical book of advice and counsel** destined to **initiate the Carmelite nun into a life of prayer**. Thus, Teresa is a **teacher** throughout the work, demonstrating **how to lead a life of prayer**, pointing to the pitfalls, and explaining the right from the wrong way.

3/ Autograph (Copies)

Two copies of **The Way of Perfection**, censored by Garcia de Toledo, have been conserved. The **first** is on display at the royal library of the **Escorial**; and the **second** is in Teresa's foundation of Carmelite nuns in Valladolid ... **Two copies** were made of

Valladolid ... and were reviewed ... by Teresa herself. They are **conserved** today in the **monasteries** of Carmelite nuns in **Salamanca** and **Madrid**.

4/ Historical Context

In sixteenth-century Spain, political events were closely tied to religious ideas. What was happening in the **world** at large, particularly in Spain, as well as in the little world of the **monastery of the Incarnation** left its traces on **Teresa's works**.

The final experiences relayed in her **Life**, suggests that Teresa was living more among the **Church triumphant of heaven**, than the Church of this earth ... How much she was living in heaven is reflected in her following thoughts :

"These heavenly revelations helped me very much ... in coming to know our true country and realizing that we are but pilgrims here below ... those who I know live there are my companions in whom I find comfort; it seems to me that they are truly alive and that those who live here on earth are so dead that not even the whole world ... affords me company." ...

The first chapters of **The Way of Perfection**, however, describe Teresa as very much back on earth, keenly distraught over the **afflicted Church** ... **As though I could do something or were something, I cried to the Lord and begged Him to remedy so much evil** ...

For Teresa, the **Church** and **Christianity** were **identical**. The attack of 'those Lutherans' was an attack against Christianity... Moreover the **relationship** between her **mystical life** and the **Church**... was **inseparable**.

... Teresa's **mystical life** consisted of an **inner experience** ... and brought what was contained in the faith into sharper focus resulting in her powerful **awareness** of **faith's mysteries**. Her love of the faith ... moved her to look to the Church and Scripture for **guidance** ...; in her mind, the faith was what the Church holds, the **truths** of **Sacred Scripture**.

...In consulting learned men and in giving them an account of her **spiritual life**, Teresa was concerned with whether or not her life and experiences were **in agreement** with the **truths** of **Sacred Scriptures** ... They found that **none** of her experiences was **lacking** in **conformity** with Sacred Scripture which put her at peace ... She followed up by saying that: **"... as long as God leads me by this path I must not trust myself in anything. So I have always consulted others...**For Teresa the learned man is the spokesperson for **"what the Church holds,"** a master in **"the truths of Sacred Scripture."** ...

Teresa felt that what was done against the Church was done against Christ. What might she do to prevent this harm, these “great evils”? She has no use for any recourse to violence and says “... **it has seemed to me that what is necessary is a different approach ... as I have said, it is the ecclesiastical, not the secular arm that will save us.**” ... They who through their learning and words must defend the Church ... As a woman however, Teresa felt incapable of doing anything useful ... but she resolved “**to do the little that was in my power.**”

This “**little**” developed into the **Teresian ideal**: a small group of Christians who would be good friends of the Lord by striving to follow the **evangelical counsels** (poverty, chastity, obedience) **as closely as possible and living a life of unceasing prayer; a life in service to Christ and to the Church.**

A **group of women** dedicating themselves to a **life of prayer and contemplation** in that age and in those circumstances was destined to be looked upon with suspicion. The Spanish people at the time were taught to follow the **ascetical** (austere) life, to practice **vocal prayer** and to shun **mysticism** (out of the ordinary).

There was a fear of false women mystics. It was said that women were a **mistake of nature, unfinished men.** ... More than mere jest was involved in a saying of the time suggested a woman should only **leave her house on 3 occasions**: at the time of her **baptism**; to go to her **spouse's home**; and for her **burial** ...

... As a result of these attitudes, Teresa didn't feel capable of much. Nonetheless, her defense of women was clear and forceful in her first writing of **The Way of Perfection** that the censor had to intervene. Teresa felt obliged to omit a large portion of her revision ... She pointed out that the Lord found as much love in women as in men, and more faith ... and concludes sharply by saying: “**Since the world's judges are sons of Adam and all of them men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect.**” ...

Teresa's small group of women were to become **good friends of the Lord** ... through a life of **unceasing prayer** as the **Carmelite rule** prescribed ... but the notion that they were to practice **mental prayer** also **created problems** ...

Conservative theologians feared that in the **practice of mental prayer** lay the **seeds of Protestantism**, dreaded by both civil and ecclesiastical (religious) rulers of Spain in the golden age ... In 1559, Valdes, the Inquisitor General, published an **Index of forbidden books**, all of which mainly **dealt with prayer** ... For **ordinary people Mass and vocal prayer** were **sufficient**. Another theologian ... confessed that he did not understand how those on their knees before the tabernacle for two hours could be thinking of God since God is **invisible**. Yet

another theologian criticized the idea of **prayer as a sharing between friends**.

In this skeptical environment **Teresa founded a monastery of women dedicated to a life of prayer, of intimate friendship with God and of living faith and love**. The most perfect example of this life for Teresa was the Blessed Mother, a carpenter's wife.

This mistrust of women is implied in Teresa's own words: “**You will hear people making objections: ... it's harmful to virtue; it's not for women who are susceptible to illusion; it's better they stick to their sewing; ... the Our Father and Hail Mary are sufficient.**”

Teresa agreed that if the **Our Father** were to be authentically prayed it must be **joined to mental prayer** ... “... **You don't know what mental prayer is, or how vocal prayer should be recited, or what contemplation is** ...” Here Teresa offers a **strong defense** of mental prayer as it can lead to perfect contemplation.

This community of women that had come together to live a **life of prayer** could find **support** in the spirit of the **Carmelite rule**. The hermits of the past who lived in rugged solitude and contemplation on Mount Carmel were to be their inspiration ... The **rule of 1247**, approved by, Innocent IV led Teresa to emphasize the **practice of solitude and withdrawal from the world** greater than was practiced at the Incarnation.

Because of the large numbers living in the Incarnation monastery and the poverty of this community, the nuns could easily obtain permission to leave the monastery.

Some nuns at the Incarnation, however, desired a stricter observance of enclosure as outlined in the Council of Trent. But Teresa's appeal was to the **eremitical spirit of living** in accordance with the **Carmelite rule**: “**For the style of life we aim to follow is not just that of nuns but of hermits.**” Solitude was important for her small community dedicated to prayer. Thus work in a common room was to be avoided; “**silence is better observed when each nun is by herself; and to get used to solitude is a great help for prayer.**”

Much evidence suggests that the community at the Incarnation monastery was a **devout and fervent** one. However, there existed among the nuns a **class structure** based on one's material (wealthy or impoverished) background ... The better rooms went to the richer nuns while the poor nuns slept in dormitories ... Some nuns even had servants or slaves ... It might also be added that at that time it was not unusual for many to enter a monastery to solve social problems rather than in response to a vocation.

Teresa sought the **poverty of spirit of the Gospels**. “**But the one who is from noble lineage should be the**

one to speak least about her father. All the Sisters must be equal.” Poverty was to be the hallmark of Teresa’s nuns: **“in houses, clothing, words, and most of all in thought.”** And closely linked with **detachment from money is detachment from honor** because **“honor and money always go together; ...** This life of **equality and humility** was meant, as Teresa envisioned it, to blossom into a life of **authentic sisterly love**, the love Christ insisted upon for His followers. As she put it, **“in this house ... all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped.”**

AMEN

To be continued...