

The Book of her Foundations

by Teresa of Avila

Introduction by Kieran Kavanaugh, ocd

Opening Remarks

St. Teresa wrote her extraordinary story **The Book of Her Life** under obligation to her **confessors** and **spiritual directors** hopeful that they would come to **understand and enlighten** her about the path along which the Lord was leading her...

Her narration grew into something more than plain history and became **a witnessing to the realities of the interior life and their transforming power**. The story of Teresa's life **evolved into a story of God's mercy** ... and she became obsessed with a desire to **serve 'His Majesty'** ...

In her **Foundations** she tells that she was **tormented** when the Franciscan missionary Alonzo Maldonado came to St. Joseph's. Recently returned from Mexico, he brought to the monastery grille his tale of the **millions** who had **never heard of Jesus Christ**. In Teresa's mind there could be no fate worse ... She thought that the **greatest service** one could render the Lord was to **bring souls to Him** ...

In 1567, the prior general of the Carmelites, Giovanni Baptista Rossi ... made his visitation of the Carmelite houses in Spain ... Teresa arranged to meet with him ... to explain ... her compelling desire ... The meeting turned out to be a happy one for both ... He wanted Teresa to found other similar monasteries and provided her with the official letters she would need ... This much consoled Teresa but she felt helpless: "Here I was, a poor discalced nun, without help from anywhere—only from the Lord ...

At the time of her death seventeen of her little Carmels **for women** had been founded:

Medina del Campo (1567);

Malagon and Valladolid (1568);

Toledo and Pastrana (1569)

Salamanca (1570);

Alba De Tormes (1571);

Segovia (1574);

Beas and Seville (1575);

Caravaca (1576);

Villanueva de la Jara and Palencia (1580);

Soria (1581);

Granada and Burgos (1582).

For men:

Durelo (1568) and

Pastrana (1569)

Origin & Composition

On **August 25, 1573 in Salamanca** ...

Teresa **began** composing the **story of her foundations**. The idea for this new book seems to have derived from the Jesuit Jeronimo Ripalda, her friend and confessor ... who urged Teresa to **enlarge upon her story** and to write as well the history of **the seven monasteries** she had already founded...and about the **first monasteries of her friars**. He insisted that **'it would be of service to our Lord,'** an irresistible argument for Teresa ... In **February 1570**, the **Lord had appeared to her pressing her to make as many foundations as she could and also to write about them...**

Teresa was reluctant to follow the Lord's urgings that she write about her foundations... because of the lack of quiet time for writing. In addition, she had tangled business matters, endless correspondence, persistent bad health to deal with which also contributed to her lack of enthusiasm for the project. So in the end, **only the thought of obedience** to her confessor provided her with the strength needed to begin ...

Once Teresa had completed chapter 19, her responsibility of obedience to Father Ripalda was fulfilled ...

Father Gracian entered the scene next and firmly insisted that Madre Teresa finish her story. Her objections ... only met with further encouragement and the advice to

write in snatches and to do the best she could
....

In the **closing lengthy chapter**, which recounts the foundation of Burgos, with all of its troubles, **Teresa's handwriting clearly demonstrates her state of exhaustion.**

The Autograph (Original Work)

The original copy or autograph of **The Foundations**, once finished, was probably left at the monastery of Alba de Tormes. Later it was given to **Luis de Leon**, the noted Augustinian friar and scholar at Salamanca, who was assigned the task of **preparing the first edition of Teresa's writings; The Foundations was omitted.** The given excuse was lack of time. But few doubt that there were other reasons as well ... namely **Teresa had made references to people who were still alive...**

After the death of Luis de Leon, in an effort to **enrich his library, Philip II** called for **Teresa's autographs** - The Life, the Way of Perfection, On the Making the Visitation, The Foundations. They are now all in the library of King Philip II, the **Escorial**. In 1610, two of Teresa's close friends, **Padre Gracian** and **Madre Ana de Jesus, in exile** from Spain, took upon themselves the task of getting the book into **print in Brussels** ... Teresa hadn't given the book a name, so they called it **The Book of her Foundations...** Their publications had its **deficiencies** ...

An **account of the foundation in Granada**, written by Ana de Jesus, was included. This latter foundation was made by Madre Ana and Fray John of the Cross with **Teresa's authorization** at the time of the foundation in Burgos.

The publication was not well received in Spain. The book had been brought out **without gaining the required permission** from authorities within the order and because the editors depended on **defective copies rather than on the original.**

Even in the original work the industrious Gracian crossed out some words, but wisely in such a way that usually they can be easily read ... It was later that Fray Domingo Banez, Dominican, crossed out many of Gracian's comments and corrections and rewrote clearly Teresa's original words ... Not until 1880, when Don Vicente de la Fuente **published a photocopy of the original** did readers have a faithful copy. Padre Silverio in his critical edition of the works of St. Teresa was the first to offer the public a reliable text.

The General Content

The Jesuit Ripalda's desire was that Teresa record the many events surrounding her foundations ...

This work is a **narrative of the happenings involved in each of the foundations** ... But Teresa **expands** her account so as to turn again to **the theme of prayer...**

Chapters 4 through 8 constitute the longest interruption to the history of her foundations ... Teresa declares in a matter-of-fact way that most of the nuns in her foundations were experiencing perfect contemplation and several were familiar with raptures, visions, and revelations (4, 8). She also gives some **pertinent counsels to prioresses** flowing from her own observation of **what had been happening spiritually in her monasteries. These counsels deal with:**

- the need...at times...to set aside contemplation for ... active works of service (**ch. 5**);
- a delightful absorption ... that is deceptive and comes from bodily weakness caused by austerities (**ch.6**);
- melancholy or emotional or mental illness (**ch.7**);
- a safe method of procedure ... for visions and revelations (**ch.8**);
- ...the need for discretion in government and mortification (**18, 6-13**);

-And throughout...shorter instructions and motherly exhortations concerning the spiritual life...

There are important and insightful digressions from her story, but ... **two principle concerns** weigh on Teresa's mind: ... **first**, she must be completely truthful and, **secondly**, the glory and praise must go to God ... who she comes to learn is deeply involved ... even in the minutest details ... Teresa, herself, a lover of solitude, has now entered more visibly into this historical process ... For all who must live the active life please note that **'it is not the length of time spent in prayer that benefits one; when the time is spent as well in good works, it is a great help in preparing the soul for the enkindling of love. (5, 17)**

The Mother Foundress with her classic determination ... embraced the work God had given her. She quickly made friends wherever she thought she might find help for God's service....

She was forced to become both an expert in money management and an attentive organizer and planner ... In a word, Teresa was **thrown into the world of people, money, and property**, and all the unwelcome conflicts that these are liable to bring forth ... especially when collective egos are threatened ...

To **find God in all things** ... even *among the pots and pans* ... was the **art she was forced to master** ...

To **ward off the devil, relentlessly plotting** to spoil the Lord's work of establishing new communities ... Teresa's methods were simply **prayer** and the **practice of Christian virtues** like charity, humility and obedience. In addition, she made inquiries of ... others to discern what might be for **God's greater service** ... Once it was clear to her, ... she threw herself into the task with **determination** ... "God wants no more than our **determination** so that **He may then do everything Himself**" (28, 19) ...

The **essential point** is that through Jesus Christ Teresa feels liberated, free of worries about all interference coming from either

human or demonic powers ... and she discovers that **in the end Jesus is always victorious** and never fails those who seek to serve Him (18,1; 27,11, 20).

As for the style of this book, it is that of the Mother Foundress speaking to her daughters ... When we read this book, we are, as it were, invited to a community recreation period in which Teresa entertains. Ana de Jesus, one of Teresa's nuns, declared that in reading Teresa's works she felt she was listening to her speak.

Partly because of our distance from sixteenth-century Spain and partly because of Teresa's story, stranger than fiction, much of the **spirituality** beneath the surface could go unnoticed without some **historical** and **cultural** background ... To provide this background, it was necessary to expand this introduction...

The Order of Carmel

Carmelites, considered the oldest of all orders, are called a special and ancient order of our Lady ... Elijah and Elisha dwelt on **Mount Carmel** ... and saintly men continued to live there in solitude, until the time of our Savior when these hermits were **converted** by the preaching of the apostles. They built a Church in honor of the Holy Virgin ... For this reason they were the first of all orders to be called the **children of the Blessed Mary of Mount Carmel**.

Later, after Teresa's times, the order of Carmel, **without a critical sense of history or a definite founder**, got caught up in the challenge to prove its age-old traditions ... In 1725 the **Carmelite order triumphantly installed in St. Peter's in Rome its celebrated statue of Elijah as the order's founder** ... thus ending a thirty year literary battle with the Jesuits.

Carmelites from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century thought that **The Institution of the First Monks** was the rule given their forefathers by John, the 44th Patriarch (or Mayor) of Jerusalem. This rule was dutifully followed until the rule written by Albert of Jerusalem in the 13th century was received.

It is commonly recognized, however, that the **Institution of the First Monks** gave Carmelites their **manual of spirituality**. The unknown author describes the way toward “**prophetic perfection**” and the purpose of **the religious eremitical life**. In eight chapters, the **eremitical-contemplative ideal** is explained:

first, to offer God a heart holy and pure of all stain of actual sin (through one’s own efforts assisted by grace);

second, to taste at times, by divine gift, God’s sweetness in the depths of one’s heart and to experience in one’s soul the power of His divine presence.

The order’s devotion to our Lady grew stronger through another tradition that in 1251, a time of hardship for Carmelites, when Our Lady appeared to the prior general, **Simon Stock**, to encourage him and give him the scapular as a pledge of her protection ...

The oldest written account of this vision comes 150 years after the alleged event, too large a gap for certainty especially in light of medieval fondness for clothing a spiritual or theological belief in a story ... What is more, it now appears certain that the prior general from 1247-1256 was not Simon Stock) ...

Teresa found inspiration in all these cherished Carmelite traditions of her time and speaks about ... the order as being our Lady’s order and the habit as being our Lady’s habit ...

The actual date of the formal beginning of the Carmelite order ... that brought the **hermits** together near the **fountain of Elijah on Mount Carmel** may never be uncovered. It is assumed to be sometime around **1210** that a definite community had formed there and decided to petition **Albert, Patriarch (Mayor) of Jerusalem** to give them a formula of life, given limited approval by Pope Honorius III in 1226 ...

The hermits became known as the **hermit brothers of St. Mary of Mount Carmel** ...

Owing to the precarious position of Christians in the Holy Land from 1229

onward, the hermits decided to make foundations in the West.

On **September 4, 1247**, the **Rule of St. Albert** was **mitigated** (modified) and became canonically an **official rule**. ...

This was the **version of the rule that Teresa thought was the primitive** (original) **rule**. It allowed the Carmelites to live according to the new forms of Religious life in vogue with **mendicant** (begging) orders ...

Alterations made in the text of St. Albert’s rule were slight but the results were extensive: houses were now being **founded in cities and towns**; community life developed; and ,external ministries were gradually introduced.

In **1432**, Pope Eugene IV made **further changes** to the rule at the request of the Carmelites who felt their **rule too strict**. They were now able to eat meat three times a week and leave their cells. These changes made **the Carmelites mendicants (beggars)**. **It is this rule that Teresa thought of as the ‘mitigated rule.’**

These concessions were **not** written into the rule and were seen by some as a betrayal of the contemplative ideal.

In **1452 John Soreth, Prior General**, obtained a papal bull that authorized **women** entry into the Carmelite order as nuns. He never travelled to Spain so the nature of the life of a Carmelite nun varied from place to place.

The **Incarnation convent**, anything but luxurious, was founded in 1479 in Avila. Despite meager means, it became a **refuge for women of the nobility** ... With their special privileges, these Donas became a source of injustice, accentuated class distinction and caused jealousies.

It should be noted that Teresa herself at the Incarnation bore the title Dona, and lived in a suites of rooms, that at times she shared with her relatives.

From the prior general Rubeo’s visit to the Incarnation in 1567, we learn: that there were 144 nuns but only enough food to feed the community for a third of the year; that the monastery was in debt; that the

maximum number of nuns sustainable would be 60; that the unfinished church was ready to collapse; and that there were many human problems besetting the nuns.

Forced by hunger, the nuns had to go to friends and relatives for help and got permission to keep their own money. At one time between 1560 -1565 more than 50 nuns were living outside in the homes of relatives and benefactors. Parlor visits in the monastery were encouraged to help cultivate benefactors to receive alms (money) from them. ... However, the many obstacles to a life of recollection and prayer did not discourage a large group of devoted and excellent nuns within the community ...

Teresa often showed her esteem for the Incarnation, and left there with a certain reluctance to begin her new foundation. In fact, she later recruited as many as 34 nuns from the Incarnation for her new houses.

Teresa was made prioress of the convent of the Incarnation in 1571 ... in hopes she could bring about some reforms and find some remedy for the community's economic troubles. She called on St. John of the Cross to come as confessor and spiritual director to assist her.

The step taken proved to be a successful one. The community under the guidance of these two leaders experienced a complete spiritual renewal and resolved a number of the convent's problems.

