

Constitutions

by Teresa of Avila

Introduction

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The contribution of St. Teresa to spiritual literature has received universal recognition. As a Mother Foundress, Teresa also stands out for her practicality and talent in having maintained the highest spiritual life amid everyday conflicts that arose particularly from the material and personal needs of the nuns in her new communities. But, one of her accomplishments, revealing another facet of her talents, is her work as **legislator** for her new Carmels.

Petitioned Rome

When Teresa petitioned Rome for permission to found the monastery of St. Joseph, she only had a general plan in mind. In the reply from Rome, in February 7, 1562, the brief granted her the power to make **statutes and ordinances** in conformity with canon law along with the right to change these for the better or eliminate them entirely according to the condition of the times or to make new ones.

Teresa needed these powers because the constitutions in use at the Incarnation monastery where she had come from, would not have served for the kind of life she envisioned in which the primitive rule of Carmel was to be observed. Neither did there exist within the order any other constitutions for monasteries of nuns observing the primitive rule.

First Steps

It seems the **first steps** taken toward the drawing up of constitutions, are found in Teresa's account of her first foundation presented in her *Life*. She writes; "**Now although there is some austerity because meat is never eaten without necessity and there is an eight-month fast and other things, as are seen in the first rule, this is still in many respects considered small by the Sisters; and they have other observances which seemed to us necessary in order to observe the rule with greater perfection.**"

Teresa wrote these words after some three years experience with the new life at St. Joseph's. The other observances referred to, introduced to **keep the rule** with greater **perfection**, formed, no doubt, the nucleus of the constitutions.

The **first years**, must have served as **experimental ones**. Maria de San Jose supports this when she says that Teresa preferred first to experiment before presenting anything for approval as law. Another of the early nuns, Maria de San Jeronimo, testified that if a religious introduced a practice of penance or mortification, Teresa wanted to be the first one to try it out.

First Draft & Approval

By the time, Teresa wrote her first draft of the *Way of Perfection*, in 1566, a year after she had completed her *Life*, she was able to refer explicitly to the constitutions, so some existed in written form.

When, in 1567, the prior general Rubeo visited Avila, Teresa was able to show him the text of her constitutions and seek his approval of them. The provincial of the Carmelites in Castile, Angel de Salazar, has left us a testimony that Rubeo saw and approved Teresa's constitutions. This approval came as the culmination of the quiet and restful years of Teresa's life, the first five years at St. Joseph's.

Original Text & Friars

The text shown Rubeo has not been preserved but the Teresian constitutions that have been preserved, legislate not only for a single monastery in Avila, but for a number of Carmels. We, however, have some idea of the first text when looking at the text for the Friars followed in Durelo. These constitutions were obviously copied, with certain adaptations, from Teresa's first constitutions, deduced from the brevity of the text and the occasional lapses where the author neglected to change the gender from feminine to masculine.

These constitutions for the friars were sent to the prior general for his approval and then placed in the general archives of the Carmelites of the Observance in Rome. The text is simple and sparse, indicating that she, who when speaking of prayer was often

extravagant with words, was frugal with them when writing laws.

Autograph for her Nuns

As for Teresa's constitutions for her nuns, the oldest text preserved is an expansion of the first constitutions and speaks of Carmels in the plural and of lay Sisters. It represents a stage in an evolving process. The autograph of this text, conserved in the general archives of the Spanish congregation of discalced Carmelites in Madrid, was lost in the last century. Fortunately, a copy of this lost autograph had been made for the general archives of the Portuguese congregation. Another copy of these early constitutions is preserved in the monastery of nuns of the primitive rule of Carmel founded by Maria de Jesus in Alcala. A third copy comes from one of the first historians of the order, Jeronimo de San Jose. From various ancient copies of these constitutions, Padre Jeronimo constructed his own text published in 1635. Editors of Teresa's works have made different choices with respect to these copies... When compared with what one can estimate concerning the first text for St. Joseph's alone, this later text shows an increase in length of little over a half, due mainly to a penal code, certainly not authored by Teresa, and surely taken from some version of already existing Carmelite constitutions which Teresa simply accepted as this section does not represent Teresa's mentality or her style.

Two Major Sections

The first deals with the daily schedule and way of life of the new family; the second, with the penal discipline required in religious codes of the time.

These two sections are followed by an epilogue and two more prescriptions that are out of place, surely drafted later.

First Section

This part, written by Teresa, is simple and balanced. There is no intention here of inserting her spiritual laws. She simply drew up some general guidelines for community life. The spiritual commentary on her constitutions must be sought principally in the *Way of Perfection*.

What stands out in these guidelines for the Teresian life is **balance**. We find an

interweaving of work and contemplation, solitude and community, of liturgical and extra-liturgical prayer. Even the apostolic life is integrated into the contemplative life, in conversations, in prayers, and penances. The practice of asceticism and enclosure are tempered by a family spirit and by gardens and pleasant views. In receiving and educating novices, stress must be placed on prayer and virtues, only persons of prayer should be admitted to the postulency.

Contemplative Life

In tracing her program of contemplative life, Teresa without a doubt took into consideration the primitive Carmelite rule as well as the Carmelite constitutions then in force. She did so independently though, refusing to tone down the new spirit that issued from her own extraordinary life of prayer. In fact, she reacted against a whole gamut of practices observed in her former monastery. Even in regard to the Carmelite rule, she allows herself a certain freedom, with the law as important as the great silence, which she reformed so as to make room for evening recreation. She says: "**Almost everything is set up in conformity with our rule,**" intimating her role as legislator.

As legislator, she was also in fact the prioress, and thus understandably "**the Mother Prioress should be the first on the list for sweeping.**" As for her own method of governing and the spirit in which she wrote her laws: "**these things should be done with a mother's love**".

Exceptions to the Rule

As Teresa went on founding new Carmels, she found she had to make exception to rules.

Copies Multiplied

As Carmels multiplied, copies of the constitutions multiplied and as these multiplied fidelity to the original text diminished. There were prioresses who found no problem at all in adding and omitting whatever seemed suitable to them. The appointment in 1569 of apostolic visitators for the Carmels affected Teresa's Carmels as well. It is sufficient to fulfill the obligation set by the Church, without imposing another on top of it, as nuns tend to

get scrupulous (obsessive) which harms them.

More Rules

In September of 1576, a new monitor for the friars was named. Teresa learned that he would also be monitoring the houses of her nuns. She reacted strongly in a letter to Gracian: **“This is what my nuns fear: that overbearing superiors will come along who will crush them Just reading these new regulations tires me out; what would I do if I had to follow them?”**

On the whole, it must be admitted, that the apostolic visitators respected Teresa’s views and consulted with her, issuing no new orders without her knowledge.

The Church itself was in a state of reform after the Council of Trent, and the religious orders had to incorporate the new law that had been drawn up such as the new rules regarding cloister.

Discalced Independence

Teresa desired a clearer presentation of all this legislation. Her chance came at the chapter of 1580 when calced (traditional) Carmelites would form their own province and the new provincial, Gracian, would legislate for the nuns. Teresa makes a few recommendations. She wanted one body of law and some other changes.

She also gave a voice to the houses, reviewing their suggestions for change before sending them along to Gracian, her provincial. The resulting constitutions are nowadays referred to as the Constitutions of Alcala completed in 1581.

Teresa, a woman lawmaker

In a letter about these constitutions, Gracian does not mention Teresa as the author of the main source of these constitutions of Alcala. Why? Well probably because in the mind of the men involved it was simply not feasible to include a woman among the lawmakers of the order.

The first constitutions drafted for St. Joseph’s in Avila amounted to about thirteen pages, the later ones considerably more. But since they were not drafted by Teresa, editors usually do not include them among her complete works as they don’t represent Teresa’s final word. Scholars are not in agreement as to how well the constitutions of

Alcala represent the mind and wishes of Teresa.

Teresa’s Constitutions in Print

What made Mother Foundress happy when she received the Alcala constitutions was that she finally had an established and approved document with the signatures she most desired. And now, she wanted them printed. The first edition in pocket size appeared in 1581, in Salamanca.

The constitution of Alcala remained in force for no more than a decade. When the first supply of copies was exhausted, as the number of Carmels increased, Ana de Jesus had them reprinted in Madrid in 1588.

Two years later, they were approved by Sixtus V and published in Latin in Rome. But in 1592, the vicar general of the Spanish congregation of discalced Carmelites denied that these constitutions of Alcala were Teresa’s constitutions and changed them. He subsequently obtained papal approval for his own version. From then on, the constitutions of Alcala were never again used as law in the order, though Ana de Jesus brought them to France and they continue to be published in French translations.

Teresa’s Completed Works

It wasn’t until the second half of the last century that Teresa’s earlier constitutions were given a place in her completed works. Our translation is of this earlier text of Teresa’s constitutions and follows the one made for the Portuguese congregation from the autograph now missing. This text is also used by Tomas Alvarez and Fortuantor Antolin in their critical editions.

K.K.

