

## Response to a Spiritual Challenge by Teresa of Avila

### Introduction

This work takes on the form of a tournament and is cast in the model of those jousts of the Middle Ages in which knights participated. Here the contest regards the world of the spirit. While Teresa was prioress at the Incarnation, a spiritual challenge arrived from “**the knights and the daughters of the Virgin,**” probably from the discalced friars and nuns of Pastrana. It was addressed to the nuns at the Incarnation.

In her reply, Teresa gave notice that her nuns would enter the contest only under certain conditions. The text of the challenge is unknown, but considering its source, it probably included some eccentric and extreme forms of penance and austerity, things that were foreign to Teresa’s feel for balance and humility. Thus, the responses from the Incarnation lean toward the unexceptional and emphasize what is more authentic.

Out of the twenty-four answers, one is surely from St. John of the Cross, who was then confessor at the Incarnation. At the end, the serious tone is broken by the amusing touch of wit in Teresa’s response. The time of the writing is not certain, possibly at the end of 1572 or early 1573.

A copy of the original work can be found in the National Library in Madrid. This copy has provided the text of editors of Spanish editions and is used in our work as it is a close as possible to the original work.

K.K.

### Response to a Spiritual Challenge

**1.** After reading the challenge, it seems that our forces would be incapable of taking to the field against such valiant and strong knights. They would surely win and leave us with no provisions and maybe even intimidate us so much as to prevent us from doing the little we could.

**2.** We resolve to do what lies in our strength. It could be that with the help of those taking part, we might be able to sign the agreement in a few days.

**3.** We will sign under the condition that the defender not turn his back and enter those

caves, but he must take to the field of this world where we are. Perhaps seeing himself always at war where one cannot lay down one’s arms, grow careless or have a moment of safe rest, he will not be so filled with fury. There is a great difference between the two, between speaking and acting. We will shortly understand the difference between them.

**4.** Come out from the pleasant life. They may so quickly stumble and fall that it might be necessary to help them get up. It is a terrible thing to be loaded down with arms and without food. The defender provided so well that he quickly sends the food he promised. Should he win by starving us, he would gain little honor or benefit.

**5.** Any knight or daughter of the Virgin who asks the Lord daily to keep **Beatriz Juarez** in His grace and makes the effort never to speak inadvertently and to direct all things to the Lord’s glory will be given the merit she had gained in two years while caring for Sister with very painful illnesses.

**6. Sister Ana de Vergas** says that if the said knights or brothers ask the Lord to remove the opposition she is undergoing and give her humility, she will give them all the merit she will thereby gain if the Lord should grant it.

**7. Mother Sub-prioress** asks that those mentioned beg the Lord to take away her self-will and says that she will give them what she may have merited in two years. Her name is **Isabel de la Cruz**.

**8. Sister Sebastiana Gomez** says, that if those mentioned would look at the crucifix three times a day in memory of the three hours the Lord hung on the cross, and so obtain for her the grace to conquer a strong passion which torments her, she will apply the merit she gains (if the Lord grants it), in the conquering of that passion.

**9. Mother Maria de Tamayo** will give to those mentioned, a third of her sufferance if they recite daily an Our Father and a Hail Mary that the Lord might give her patience and conformity to His will in the endurance of her illness; this she will give daily. Her illness is very serious; for more than a year she has been unable to speak.

**10. Sister Ana de la Miseria** says that to any of the knights or daughters of the Virgin who ask Jesus Christ, while considering His poverty on earth, that spiritually she might

give what she promised to His Majesty, she will give all the merit she might have before the Lord despite the faults she commits in His service.

**11. Sister Isabel de Santangelo** will give a share in what she has gained from the trials of soul she has undergone, to any of the knights and daughters of the Virgin who accompanies the Lord during the three hours He remained alive on the Cross and obtains from His Majesty the grace for her to keep her three vows with perfection.

**12. Sister Beatriz Remon** says that she will give a year of her merits to any brother or daughter of the Virgin who asks our Lady each day to grant her humility and obedience.

**13. Sister Maria de la Cueva** gives three years of her merits to any knight or daughter of the Virgin who prays to our Lady for her each day in faith and light and grace. (I know that Sister's merits are many, for she suffers great interior trials.)

**14. Sister Maria de San Jose** says that she will give one year of her merits to anyone of those mentioned who asks of the Lord humility and obedience for her.

**15. Sister Catalina Alvarez** says that she gives to anyone who asks the Lord to grant her self-knowledge one year of her sufferings, which is a great deal.

**16.** For any knight or Sister who prays to our Lady to obtain the grace from her Son so that **Sister Leonor de Contreras** might serve Him and persevere, this latter Sister will recite three *Salves* each day as long as she lives, and thus they must pray for her each day.

**17. Sister Ana Sanchez** says that for any knight or daughter of the Virgin who daily asks the Lord to give her His love she will recite daily three Hail Marys in honor of the purity of our Lady.

**18. Sister Maria Gutierrez** says that she will give a part of all her merits with the Lord to any of those mentioned who pray she be granted perseverance and perfect love of God.

**19. Sister Maria Cimbron** says that those mentioned who pray each day for a happy death for her will have a part in all she merits through her suffering: it has been a long time since she has been able to stir from her bed, and she is close to the end.

**20. Sister Ines Diaz** says that for any of those mentioned who prays that she might share in the Blessed Virgin's feelings at the foot of the cross she will recite, each day that they do so, five Our Fathers and Hail Marys.

**21. Sister Juana de Jesus** says that to any of the knights and Sisters mentioned who ask the Lord each day to give her contrition for her sins she will give a share in what she merits from her many trials, which are certainly many, and the affronts she has suffered because of them.

**22. Sister Ana de Torres** says that to those mentioned she will give what she merits this year if they pray each day that through the torment the Lord suffered when He was nailed to the cross she might be given the grace to succeed in serving him and to obey.

**23. Sister Catalina de Velasco** says that to anyone of those mentioned, who asks the Lord, through the pain He suffered when He was nailed to the cross, to give her the grace not to offend Him, and that our order continue to grow, she will give those times that she spends with our Lady each day; they are indeed many.

**24. Sister Jeronima de la Cruz** says that to anyone of those mentioned who prays that she be given humility, patience and light to serve the Lord she will recite three Creeds each day and offer a year of the trials she has suffered. This petition must be made for her each day.

**25. A knight-errant** says that if the Grand Master of the field obtains for him the grace he needs to serve the Lord perfectly in all that which obedience asks of him, he will give in return all the merit he gains this year in serving the Lord through obedience.

**26. Sister Estefania Samaniego** says that for any knight or daughter of the Virgin who prays to our Lord that she might serve Him and not offend Him and be given living faith and meekness she will recite each day the prayer of honor of the name of Jesus and offer the merits gained from a year of illnesses and temptations that she has suffered.

**27. Sister Antonia de Aguila** says that to any knight or daughter of the Virgin who recalls our Lady's sorrow for a time each day and prays that she might be helped in a matter of great need for her soul and that our Mother prioress, Teresa of Jesus, live long and for the increase of the order, she will

give a third part of her trials and illnesses for the rest of her life.

**28. Teresa of Jesus** says that to any knight of the Virgin who makes each day a very resolute act of willingness to suffer all his life from a superior who is very wicked, vicious, gluttonous, and badly disposed to him she will give, each day that he does so, half of what she merits that day both in her Communion and the many sufferings she bears; in sum, her merits in everything which will be very little. He must consider the humility with which the Lord stood before the judges and how this Lord was obedient even to the death of the cross. This contract is valid for a month and a half. **Amen**