

## *Interpreting Saint Teresa of Avila*

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## PART 1

*'Oh, what a good friend You make, my Lord.'*

In her writings St Teresa of Avila reflected theologically on her own spiritual experiences. For her, mystical theology is a theology of love. Real prayer is nothing other than the expression of a relationship of friends. Time and again she mentions this as encouragement for persevering on the road leading to heaven. 'And if he perseveres, I trust then in the mercy of God who never fails to repay anyone who has taken Him for a friend,' she wrote in her Life. She added, 'For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends. It means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. In order that love be true and the friendship endure, the wills of the friends must be in accord' (Life 8, 5).

About her own experience, she wrote 'A much greater love for and confidence in this Lord began to develop in me when I saw Him as one with whom I could converse so continually. I saw that He was man, even though He was God; that He wasn't surprised by human weaknesses; that He understands our miserable make-up, subject to many falls on account of the first sin, which He came to repair. I can speak with Him as with a friend, even though He is Lord' (Life 37, 5). This relationship of Teresa with Jesus was at once real and practical. In describing this experience, she could point out for ordinary people, such as her Carmelite Sisters, how different it was from the situation in the world around them. 'I know that He isn't like those we have as lords here on earth, all of whose lordship consists in artificial displays: They have to have designated times for speaking and designated persons to whom to speak. If some poor little creature has any business to be done, what roundabout ways they must go through and what trials and favours it costs them in order to get to speak to this lord.' And regarding the King? For people who are poor or who don't have noble connections, to speak to him or get near him is impossible.

At the beginning of such a relationship with Jesus as Teresa enjoyed, a path of prayer, words and images express our faith. Aided by reflections on the events of the gospels, one recites the usual prayers of our thinking and imaging. As one grows in faith and knowledge, the prayer life becomes more consoling and the friendship of which Teresa speaks becomes a reality in the sense of a presence of God, leading to deeper faith. For Teresa, the most important thing was imitation of Jesus and love of neighbour; more even indeed than the sublime heights of prayer, which she had experienced. St John of the Cross stresses this same point when instructing beginners of prayer. 'First, have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life in order to know how to imitate him and behave in all events as he would' (Ascent I, 13, 3). Teresa would tell her Sisters not to bother about the ecstasies or mystic heights - but to sweep the corridors and wash the dishes.

The relationship of friends, in the sense that Teresa wishes to recommend, is basically rooted in and sustained by love. The great theologian, Hans von Balthasar, writing about prayer, states that 'love wants to be in the presence of the beloved and love desires to have the beloved before its eyes.' He is describing the noble aspirations of the human heart. But for the one who wishes to contemplate Jesus, the Beloved, it is necessary to employ the powers of his 'inner senses' to affect the image. 'This picture' he says 'is not meant to be a realistic photograph, but love's picture, solely concerned with love, the divine love of the Father, which is here manifested in the Son and in the concreteness of his whole earthly life.' This would concur with the sentiment of Teresa. She explains in her Life (Life 22, 1) how she had mistakenly followed a path of prayer which was not for her. It was based on 'strong advice to rid oneself of all corporeal images and to approach contemplation of the Divinity.' Later she describes the result. 'When I began to experience something of supernatural prayer, I mean of the

prayer of quiet, I strove to turn away from everything corporeal' (Life 22, 3). She appeared to get consolation and felt some benefit so that 'there was no one who could have made me return to the humanity of Christ. As a matter of fact I thought the humanity was an impediment.' She was to learn how great a mistake this was. She realised that she hadn't the companionship of Christ to help her 'in her trials and temptations.' She records that the Lord had rescued her from the path she was following.

Once more the humanity of Jesus becomes important and she walks with Christ at her side. 'Whoever lives in the presence of so good a friend and excellent a leader, who went ahead of us to be the first to suffer, can endure all things. The Lord helps us and never fails; He is a true friend. I see clearly, and I saw afterward, that God desires that if we are going to please Him and receive His great favours, we must do so through the most sacred humanity of Christ in whom He takes His delight. Many, many times have I perceived this truth through experience' (Life 22, 6). Once she had come to understand this truth, she studied then the lives of some of the saints, the great contemplatives, and found that they had taken the same path. St Francis through the stigmata, St Anthony with the Infant, St Bernard, St Catherine of Siena etc. Now Teresa, instead of looking at Jesus outside in whose presence she walked, allows the life of Jesus to fill within; and with St Paul, she can say: 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives within me' (Gal. 2:20).

## **PART 2**

*'The soul can place itself in the presence of Christ and grow accustomed to being inflamed with love for His sacred humanity.'*

(Life 12, 2)

St Teresa in 'The Way of Perfection' (Way 40, 3), treating of the petition of the Our Father "Deliver us from evil", says that "those who truly love God, love every good, desire every good, favour every good, praise every good. They always join, favour and defend good people. They have no love for anything but truth and whatever is worthy of love. Do you think it is possible for a person who really loves God to love vanities? No, indeed, he cannot; nor can he love riches or worldly things, or delights or honours or strife or envy. All of this is so because he seeks only to please the Beloved." This truth, the result of Teresa's sensitivity to the sufferings of Jesus for us and of her fidelity to the practice of reflecting on the gospel events, enabled her to make her own contribution, to put her own special stamp, on Christian spirituality. Her concern was primarily to help people grow in the friendship of God; and she strove to discover how best Jesus Christ, God made man, was to be communicated and integrated in the lives of Christians of her time. She was a product of her world, Spain of the 16th century, when books and even instruction on religion were limited. Her family background as well as the existing institutions of Church and State were to cause her much anxiety and at times pain.

After entering the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation at Avila and receiving the habit in 1536, she had years of great physical sickness. At the beginning of this period, she had made great progress in prayer and at times experienced extraordinary intimacy with the Lord, what she believed to be "union" with God. The weakness and depression that was associated with her illnesses took a toll on her prayer life and for a period of years she abandoned private prayer almost completely. It was ten years later - in 1554 - that she experienced a "conversion". She was entering the chapel one day and was confronted, as it were, by the "Ecce Homo" statue of the Suffering Christ, which had been borrowed for a special celebration in the Convent. Teresa writes (in Life 9, 1): "It represented the much wounded Christ and was very devotional, so that beholding it I was utterly distressed in seeing

Him that way, for it well represented what He suffered for us. I felt so keenly aware of how poorly I thanked Him for those wounds that, it seems to me, my heart broke. Beseeching Him to strengthen me once and for all that I might not offend Him, I threw myself down before Him with the greatest outpouring of tears.”

After that experience, Teresa became more sensitive to God’s eternal plan of consuming the evil of the world’s sin in the fire of suffering love which is seen in the terrible passion of the Son, always intent on the eternal good in which the world too should participate. Teresa was to learn more about the mystery of the Cross. She wrote: “If you are experiencing trials or are sad, behold Him on the way to the garden: what great affliction He bore in His soul; for having become suffering itself, He tells us about it and complains of it. Or behold Him bound to the column, filled with pain, with all His flesh torn in pieces for the great love He bears you; so much suffering, persecuted by some, spit on by others, denied by His friends, abandoned by them, with no one to defend Him, frozen from the cold, left so alone that you can console each other. Or behold Him burdened with the cross, for they didn’t even let Him take a breath” (Way 26, 5).

Teresa portrays Christ as our primary teacher and by identifying His prayer with ours, as He did in giving us the Lord’s Prayer, He teaches us still and continues the work of the Word-made-flesh into the very heart of our world. She writes: “And when I say, ‘Our Father’, it will be an act of love to understand who this Father of ours is and who the Master is who taught us this prayer” (Way 24, 2). Furthermore God wants us to remember Him often when we say this prayer, even though because of our weakness we do not do so.

Teresa acknowledges that she found her post-Communion reflection the heart of her prayer. Though in later life she experienced fewer ‘raptures’, she records in her Spiritual Testimonies several occasions when intellectual communications occurred after receiving Communion. One of these, which occurred probably in Seville in 1575, enhances her Eucharistic Theology as described in ‘The Way of Perfection’. She writes: “Once after receiving Communion, I was given understanding of how the Father receives within our soul the most holy Body of Christ, and of how I know and have seen that these divine Persons are present, and of how pleasing to the Father this offering of His Son is, because He delights and rejoices with Him here -let us say - on earth. For His humanity is not present with us in the soul, but His divinity is. Thus the humanity is so welcome and pleasing to the Father and bestows on us so many favours” (Spiritual Testimonies N. 52). She is saying that the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is present in the soul but by the coming at Communion of the Son in his humanity into the soul the communion graces, which God wills for us, are bestowed. In this way, on our earthly journey, the joy of eternal life is realised.

### **PART 3**

*‘Do not be frightened by the many things you need to consider in order to begin this divine journey which is the royal road to heaven.’*

(Way 21, 1)

While St Teresa of Avila focused her spirituality on the human Jesus, it was done in the context of the wider picture of growth in the spiritual life that involves the whole self. In her book ‘The Way of Perfection’ she makes it clear that she did not feel constrained by the attitudes of some Ecclesiastics who belittled women for trying to improve their prayer life. On the contrary, she strove to encourage and enlighten them to aspire to their full capacity ‘without giving oneself airs’. Even in a light-hearted way she deplores the objections that were expressed about women: ‘it’s not for women for they will be

susceptible to illusions'; 'it's better they stick to their sewing'; 'they don't need these delicacies'; 'the Our Father and the Hail Mary are sufficient' (Way 21, 2). However, Teresa wholeheartedly agreed with this last statement, adding 'The prayers from the mouth of the Lord' are sufficient.

Constantly in dialogue with her nuns, she writes to encourage them to develop and to aspire to better things and to learn to pray in such a way that the whole self is involved. There was a practical difficulty for the ordinary Christian trying to find out how Christ, the Word-made-Flesh, comes into their lives and their world, since the only spiritual books available were in Latin, and in fact spiritual books in the vernacular were banned by the Inquisition. Indeed Teresa, with tongue in cheek, several times assures her nuns that 'No one will be able to take from you the 'Our Father and the Hail Mary'' (Way 21, 5).

In setting out to teach about prayer, she explains that this is simply a recognition that God is accessible to the ordinary individual; that God, unlike the nobles of her time, looks on the person, because 'here below, people in paying honour don't take into account the persons themselves, but their wealth' (Way 22, 4). With God every person is important. If someone should raise objections or discourage them, the Sisters are to tell them 'that you have a rule that commands you to pray unceasingly - for that's what it commands us - and that you have to keep it.'

She explains how our own development, our own appreciation and knowledge of ourselves comes through Jesus. For Teresa, Christ is our primary teacher. In 'The Way of Perfection' (Way 6) she describes her vision of what perfect love might be. Basically it is the imitation of the love of Jesus, lived with Christian maturity in our daily lives. In a centring on Christ one discovers the richness of one's own self, endowed continually by God with creative grace that ensures human growth in understanding and love. In 1988 Pope John Paul II in a homily spoke about seeking this 'interior equilibrium'. "It is a question of gradually and patiently coming to know what dwells within us, of harmonising the various components of our person which makes us original and unrepeatable. Holiness passes by way of reconciliation of soul and body'." Commentators point out the closeness of Teresa's vision to that of St. Augustine. Later in 'The Way of Perfection' she refers to the holy Doctor specifically, saying 'that he sought Him in many places but found Him ultimately within himself' (Way 28, 2). She dismisses the fainthearted with 'there is no need to go to heaven in order to speak with one's Eternal Father or find delight in Him (Way 28.2). All one need do is to look at Him within one's self and not turn away from so good a Guest but with great humility speak to Him as a father.

#### **PART 4**

*'It's as though Jesus tells the Father that He is now ours since the Father has given Him to us to die for us; and asks that the Father not take Him from us until the end of the world; that He allow Him serve each day.'*  
(Way 33, 4)

St Teresa in commenting on the petition of the Our Father, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is quite practical and blunt when she tells her nuns: "Look, daughters, His will must be done whether we like this or not, and it will be done in heaven and on earth. Believe me, take my advice and make a virtue of necessity" (Way 32, 4). For Teresa, our human will is the faculty by which we form an attitude to what is around us and create a relationship which reflects our wanting, our desires and our hopes. The will of God is the mind that was in Christ. "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (Phil.2, 5). Such a will is rooted in love - love of God and love of neighbour. This inevitably involves a suffering we cannot control. Since it is God's will, it

results in openness to God rather than planned self-directed desires. The thrust of Teresa's writing was directed toward the complete gift of ourselves to the Creator, the surrender of our wills to His and detachment from creatures. "Unless we give our wills entirely to the Lord so that in everything pertaining to us He might do what conforms with His will, we will never be allowed to drink of the living water" (Way 32, 9).

Teresa begins Chapter 33 of 'The Way of Perfection' by stating that "Jesus understands what a difficult thing it is He offers us. He knows our weakness, that we often show that we do not understand what the Lord's will is. We are weak and He is merciful." In fact we are slow to let go our own mentality because of our selfish purposes. She cites the case of a rich person living in luxury who is told to be moderate at table so that the hungry may have something to eat; and he replies with a thousand excuses for not understanding this. Or a backbiter, told that it is God's will that he love his neighbour as himself, becomes annoyed and cannot understand. But Teresa reminds us too of a religious who has grown accustomed to freedom and comfort that he should remember his obligations and keep in mind that it is God's will that he be faithful to his vows. It seems so difficult to do God's will.

So Teresa explains. "Once Jesus saw the need, He sought out a wonderful means by which to show the extreme of His love for us, and in His own name and in that of His brothers He made the following petition: "Give us this day, Lord, our daily bread."

Teresa devotes the three following chapters (Way 33-35) to the Eucharist, explaining how we could not even begin to do God's will without the companionship and faithful presence of Christ who prays with us to the Father. This presence that is required is not merely the individual's spiritual communion or the result of personal devotion. Recognising the difficulty people have in doing God's will, she sees that it was necessary for us to see His love and courage in order to be awakened -not just once but every day. "Thy will be done" is addressed by Jesus to the Father: and Teresa says that "since by sharing in our nature He has become one with us here below, He reminds the Father that because He belongs to Him the Father in turn can give Him to us." (Way, 33, 5). And so Jesus says our bread". He doesn't make any difference between Himself and us.

Teresa then considers the word "daily". The petition has the words "Give us this day our daily bread", referring to one day which "lasts as long as the world and no longer." She sees the Eucharist as the Blessed Sacrament, which witnesses to God's desire to be with us. "Since the Father has given us His Son and sent Him into the world, the Son, just because He wants to, desires not to abandon us but to remain here with us, to the greater glory of His friends and the affliction of His enemies" (Way 34, 2). The Sisters are to receive the Blessed Sacrament and to "ask the Father together with the Lord to give you your Spouse this day so that you will not be seen in this world without Him." She explains that "receiving Communion is not like picturing with the imagination as when we reflect upon the Lord on the Cross or on other episodes of the Passion. In Communion the event is happening now, and it is entirely true. There's no reason to go looking for Him in some other place farther away. Since we know that Jesus is with us as long as the natural heat doesn't consume the accidents of bread, we should approach Him. If when He went about in the world the mere touch of His robes cured the sick, why doubt, if we have faith, that miracles will be worked while He is within us and that He will give what we ask of Him, since He is in our house?" (Way 34, 8).

For Teresa herself the post-Communion meditation and thanksgiving were in fact the heart of her prayer life. Since God desires to be with His creation, the Eucharist is for her the one true and contemporary sign of this reality linking the theology of the Cross to the Eucharistic presence.

## PART 5

*'I often say that however small the point of honour may be, the concern for it is like that of sound coming from an organ when the timing or measure is off; all the music becomes dissonant. This concern is something that does damage to the soul in all areas, but in this path of prayer it is a pestilence.'*

(Life 31, 21)

It is clear from the many studies of St Teresa that, she was unique in the development of the spirituality of the religious of her day, she was also a product, though not typical, of the social and political world that was characteristic of the turbulent sixteenth century, in particular in Spain. Attitudes that are perfectly normal and so accepted in our modern world were then the cause of longstanding and narrow prejudices that pervaded a slowly changing society.

In medieval Europe, Spain existed as a vast structure of small kingdoms, Christian or Muslim, independent though generally living in uneasy peace. Over the centuries there was a gradual annexation or 'reconquista' of the areas controlled by Muslim rulers, reaching a climax in 1492 with the capture of the Moorish City of Granada in the south. In the former Muslim areas where scholarship and architecture flourished, there was a Jewish population, cultural and prosperous. Fierce anti-Semitism existed from the end of the fourteenth century pressurising the Jewish families to convert or be expelled. Over the years the conversos, the families who had converted, improved their social position by marrying some of the old aristocracy. Growing in wealth and political influence, they became in time objects of hatred and suspicion. Decrees were passed against them, barring certain posts in civic life and in the universities and even in Religious Orders. More than at other times, what was termed 'purity of blood' or *limpieza de sangre*, referring to intermarriage, was demanded for a family's reputation.

While Teresa was aware of her Jewish blood, she doesn't appear to know much about her ancestry. Her family was among the minor nobility and her father was one of the wealthiest in Avila. While their members appear in her writings as normal, serious and religious people, they must have been affected occasionally by social and racial tensions that sometimes erupted. Her father, Don Alonso Sanchez (which seems to have been a recognisable converso name in some places) at his first marriage added to it his wife's family name "de Cepeda". When widowed after a brief first marriage, he followed the same custom in marrying into a distinguished Castilian family Dona Beatriz de Ahumada. Teresa was to call herself 'Dona Teresa de Ahumada' until she was forty-seven.

The important thing for the Church is that her Jewishness coloured her spirituality and challenged her instinctively of relationship with Christ, her Lord. It is the key to certain themes in her writings, such as honour. Modern culture treats honour in the context of self-respect, honesty, uprightness and fidelity. At Teresa's time, the honour of the family was preserved by observing standards and public image, so that it was necessary to withstand all that would denigrate or seek to degrade its members, even to the point of vendettas and killings. When one reads the numerous references of Teresa to "honour" in her writings, (considered by some of her critics as "a disproportionate concern"), it is clear that her observations have to be understood not objectively but rather in the context of lineage and of her mentality towards "*limpieza*", the good or bad blood. In her society failure to refute accusations or defend oneself, automatically indicated a loss of honour.

In the practical situations and sometimes in the legislation of religious communities, there was discrimination against conversos or against reformed penitents, but also when superiors or officials vacated their offices in accordance with the Church Law. Writing in a passage on the petition "Forgive us, Lord, our debts as we forgive our debtors" Teresa observes: "It seems that like children

we are making houses out of straw with these ceremonious little rules of etiquette. Oh, God help me, Sisters, if we know what honour is and what losing honour consists in. Now I am not speaking of ourselves . . . but of myself at the time when I prized honour without understanding what it was. I was following the crowd” (Way 36, 3). Further in n.4 of this Chapter, she alludes to practical situations that she was to abhor. “(The devil) also invents his own honours in monasteries and establishes his own laws. There people ascend and descend in rank just as in the world. Those with degrees must follow in order, according to their academic titles. Why? I don’t know.” Openly she declared “Well now among ourselves; the one who has been prioress must remain ineligible for any lower office; a preoccupation about who the senior is – for we never forget this – and we think at times we gain merit by such concern because the Order commands it” (Way 36, 4).

The humanity of St Teresa comes through the irritation she must have felt at the attitudes and practices of some Sisters who were affected by the concern of rank, prestige, education, family etc. “All of our perfection”, she reminds them, “doesn’t consist in the observance of what has to do with our honour. The fact is that since we are inclined to ascend – even though we will not ascend to heaven by such an inclination – there must be no descending. O Lord, Lord! Are You our Model and Master? Yes, indeed. Well then, what did Your honour consist of, You who honoured us? Didn’t You indeed lose it in being humiliated unto death? No, Lord, but You won it for all” (Way 36, 5).

For Teresa, love of God “doesn’t consist in great delight but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything, in striving, insofar as possible, not to offend Him, and in asking Him for the advance of the honour and glory of His Son” (Interior Castle IV, 1, 7). “We are striving to be joined with God through union, and we seek to follow His counsels coming from Christ, who was weighed down by injuries and testimonies against Him and we desire our honour and credit to remain intact? It’s not possible to reach this union, for we aren’t taking the same road. The Lord comes to the soul if we make the effort and strive to give up our rights in many mailers. Some will say: “I have no occasion to practise this detachment from my rights, nor does any come along.” I believe that the Lord will not want anyone with the determination to practise this detachment to lose so much good. His Majesty will ordain so many things by which the soul can gain this virtue that it will not want so many. All hands to the task!” (Life 31, 21).

## PART 6

*‘From all these occasions and dangers God delivered me in such a way that it seems clear He strove, against my will, to keep me from being completely lost, although this deliverance could not be achieved so secretly as to prevent me from suffering much loss of reputation.’*

(Life 2, 6)

Throughout the Church, St Teresa of Avila is readily acknowledged as one of the great spiritual women who has come to the fore in the history of Christianity. For the ordinary followers of Christ she is an outstanding figure of holiness that continues to inspire people; and to encourage everyone who wishes to grow in their closeness to Christ. But the fact is that the Teresa that is known to most people is the Carmelite nun of fifty years and more who wrote about the God who abandoned divine status, even becoming defenceless and rejected, in order to present the love of God in our everyday world.

Her early years as a teenager and particularly the first decades of her life as a Carmelite nun, portray her as an ordinary person of her time with peculiar struggles, but normal struggles, that anyone might have had to face. When Teresa began to write the “Book of her Life”, she was nearly fifty years old.

Because she had been experiencing some mystical graces, which she tried to have explained to her by “professional” expert counsellors, she was obliged to give an account of her life which reflected nothing more than one would expect of a person of her time and society. She failed to describe the mystical life she had begun to experience. Later she wrote in her *Life*: “For a long time, even though God favoured me, I didn’t know what words to use to explain His favours; and this was no small trial” (*Life* 12, 6).

At the instigation of Garcia de Toledo, an outstanding Dominican authority who seemed to know her well and who received the first copy of her book, she included several additional chapters. Later she explains this: “For it is one grace to receive the Lord’s favour; another, to understand which favour and grace it is; a third to know how to describe it” (*Life* 17, 5).

Teresa gives a clear account of her youthful years in her book, but it is in the hindsight of her older experience and surely with an eye on the people who will read it – the Inquisitors. We know from her biographers what she was like as a teenager. “Cheerful and friendly whom people found pleasing to hear as well as look at”. She admitted that when she was about thirteen years old her religious fervour began to grow cold. She became more interested in romantic tales of chivalry and in cultivating her natural feminine charms. After her mother’s death in November 1528, she caused an upset in the family by her affection for her cousins, sons of her aunt, Dona Elvira de Cepeda, and her friendship with some relative, not identified, that would not enhance Teresa’s piety. The vain company and dangerous enticements that she was entangled in caused great worry to her father, Don Alonso. However, when in 1531 his eldest daughter married, he used the occasion to find a solution. He entrusted Teresa to the care of the Augustinian nuns of Our Lady of Grace in Avila. Teresa was sixteen at the time. She recognised God’s hand in this. She says in her *Life* that “*from all these occasions and dangers God delivered me in such a way that it seems clear He strove, against my will, to keep me from being completely lost although this deliverance could not be achieved so secretly as to prevent me from suffering much loss of reputation and my father from being without suspicion*” (*Life* 2, 6).

When Teresa was at school in Avila, there was a Sister in charge of the girls who was gentle and friendly, Dona Maria Briceno. A woman of deep prayer, she made a lasting impression on Teresa. With reference to her, Teresa says: “I understand the great profit that comes from good companionship” (*Life* 2, 5) and further on: “Beginning then to like the good and holy conversation of this nun, I was glad to hear how well she spoke about God, for she was very discreet and saintly” (*Life* 3, 1). Teresa acknowledged that the influence of this nun was such that she began to get rid of the habits that the bad company had caused. She began to turn her mind to the desire for eternal things. Over the year and a half that Teresa stayed at the convent school, she gradually lost the resistance that she strongly felt within herself against becoming a nun. In fact she began to recite many vocal prayers and besought everyone to pray that God might show her “the state in which I was to serve Him”. However fervent she appeared to have become, she states “I still had no desire to be a nun and I asked God not to give me this vocation” (*Life* 3, 2). By the end of her time at school, the thought of being a nun was more favourable to her, although it was not for that convent because she considered the virtues practiced there to be extreme. In her *Life* she states that “I looked more to pleasing my sensuality and vanity than to what was good for my soul” (*Life* 3, 2).

Because she became seriously ill, Teresa had to return to her father’s house. When she got better, she was brought to see her sister who lived in a little town, not far from Avila. On the way they visited her uncle, her father’s brother, Don Pedro Sanchez de Cepeda. He prevailed on her to stay with him for a few days. He was a holy man whose talk was mostly about God and the vanity of the world. He asked his niece to read to him which she did, though she admits that she did not like the books, although

she pretended otherwise. The few days she spent with Don Pedro made a lasting impression on her. (Later he retired to the Monastery of the Jeronimites. It was there he died). While the thought of becoming a nun was still not attractive, she saw that the religious life was “the best and safest state, and so little by little I decided to force myself to accept it” (Life 3, 5). During the following months she tried to convince herself that the nun’s way was the best. Her reasoning was all wrong and her choosing was motivated more by servile fear than by love (Life 3, 6). However when she informed her father of her intention, he flatly refused her. Even after her persistence, she got his final answer: “After his death she could do whatever she wanted but not now. His attitude was quite understandable since Teresa had been ill for most of the time with high fever and “great fainting spells”.

Despite this setback, she went with her brother Antonio when she was twenty to the Convent of the Incarnation in Avila to see a Sister, Juana Suarez, who was a friend of hers. She entered the following year to begin her postulancy, a period of probation. What this cost her she readily recalls. “When I left my father’s house, I felt that separation so keenly that the feeling will not be greater, I think, when I die.” One year later, on 2 November 1536 Teresa received the habit of the Carmelite Order and began her novitiate. It was a moment of great joy. Of God, she says: “Within an hour, He gave me such great happiness at being in the religious state of life that it never left me up to this day, and God changed the dryness my soul experienced into the greatest tenderness” (Life 4, 2).

## PART 7

*‘It happened to me that one day entering the oratory I saw a statue they had borrowed for a certain feast to be celebrated in the house. It represented the much-wounded Christ and was very devotional so that beholding it I was utterly distressed in seeing Him that way, for it well represented what He suffered for us. I felt so keenly aware of how poorly I thanked Him for those wounds that, it seems to me, my heart broke.’*  
(Life 9, 1)

After Teresa had made her profession in the Carmelite Order having completed her preparation and novitiate, she experienced a great sense of joy of being in the right place. She wrote in her *Life* that God “gave me such great happiness at being in the religious state of life that it never left me up to this day” (Life 4, 2).

The Monastery of the Incarnation at Avila had a large community, made up of nuns canonically obliged to choir office and enclosure, as well as others who were bound to recite the Divine Office but not to the obligation of enclosure. In addition there were servants and relatives of the nuns, the total numbering about two hundred people. Some commentators writing of the situation of the Incarnation Monastery of the time when Teresa entered in 1535, then twenty years old, describe it in an unfavourable way from the point of view of religious life, although it was in fact quite austere. Each week had its days of fasting and abstinence. Silence was stressed in order to encourage and maintain a spirit of prayer. The Divine Office, celebrated solemnly and according to detailed rubrics, was demanding especially on those in their early years of religious life.

For the formation of the young religious, there was regular instruction on the spirit of the Carmelite Order and on devotion to Our Blessed Lady and the Carmelite Saints. Teresa admits that despite her satisfaction and even delight in her Carmelite life, her prayer life was lacking – she didn’t know how to meditate or engage in mental prayer.

Not long into her professed life, she began to be afflicted by strange illnesses. When at school in Avila she had become seriously sick, she had to return home to her father's house. Now as a young nun her fainting spells returned. She states also that "I experienced such heart pains that this frightened any who witnessed them; and there were many other illnesses" (Life 4, 5). Her father sought medical help and doctor's remedies at Avila without any success. Eventually he brought her to the town of Becedas about 50 miles away, which was known for cures. This painful sickness, with at times excruciating pain, was to last for three years. The effect of the treatment and the potent medicines nearly killed her. "I was so shrivelled and wasted away that my nerves began to shrink causing such unbearable pains that I found no rest either by day or by night (Life 5, 7). After months of intense suffering and at death's door, her father and her companions even prepared her grave. From 15th August 1539 she suffered a paroxysm, which lasted four days. Gradually she improved and the sharp continuous pains ceased. Teresa made the Sisters bring her back to the convent. "The one they expected to be brought back dead they received alive," she wrote (Life 6, 2). Her body was crippled with paralysis, a condition that lasted another three years. Since she felt that she would serve the Lord much better if she were in good health, she decided to seek a cure from the "heavenly doctors," in particular earnestly recommending herself to St. Joseph. She always proclaimed later that anything she asked of the glorious Saint, he never failed to grant. Throughout her life, she credited St. Joseph not only with the cure of her body so that "I could rise and walk and not be crippled," (Life 6, 8) but also that he was her teacher and master regarding prayer. She advised: "Those who cannot find a master to teach them prayer should take this glorious saint for their master, and they will not go astray" (Life 6, 8).

It is clear that after this period of her terrible illness, during her early twenties, Teresa became more fervent in the practice of religious life, faithful to her duties though painfully sensitive to the sinfulness of her life, talking with others about prayer but in a very distracted context. She records how undisciplined her life was becoming. "Since I thus began to go from pastime to pastime, from vanity to vanity, from one occasion to another, to place myself so often in very serious occasions, and to allow my soul to become so spoiled by many vanities, I was then ashamed to return to the search for God by means of a friendship as is that found in the intimate exchange of prayer" (Life 7, 1). She is really making a judgement on the social activities that were accepted as normal for nuns, clever and with good connections, in her sort of community –gossiping, gatherings, visiting etc. She acknowledged that all of this need not be harmful to a mature person but sees it as a major problem in any community trying to develop the spirituality of the individual members.

From her uncle, Teresa received a book, "Third Spiritual Alphabet", first published in 1527 by the Franciscan friar, Francis De Osuna, treating of the prayer of recollection. For Teresa struggling to take off on a better understanding of "real" prayer that is beyond mere vocal prayer, Osuna's basic scheme was a start. There were three stages (i) vocal prayer with the Our Father as the model, (ii) reflection and meditation, that is, prayer which consists of holy and devout thoughts on the passion or other mysteries of the Lord, of the Church etc; (iii) mental or spiritual prayer. Osuna distinguished the second and third levels by the resulting devotion. It taught persistence and fidelity for producing fervour, which causes a response in the individual of simple expressions of a felt love of Jesus. Teresa, in the account of her life at that time, had failed in moving from vocal prayer to meditation, to even imagining the humanity of Jesus. She explains that she had such little ability to represent things with the intellect that "if I hadn't seen the things, my imagination was not of use to me" (Life 9, 6). While she seems to have failed with Osuna's directives on her own, she realised that while she used a book, "I began to collect (my thoughts) and my soul was drawn to recollection" (Life 4, 9). It is obvious that at this time Teresa was trying to put some order in her prayer life but all her arguments indicate that she was greatly confused or bewildered about her situation.

Following her months of terrible suffering and the experience of her “cure”, she became an exemplary religious for her community, although very conscious of the distracted atmosphere through the social life then permitted which prevented intimacy with God. In the context of her later life, it is clear that she judges herself rather harshly perhaps to emphasise the great graces she received and somehow disdained. She gives her judgement:

*“During my life no good should be said of me. After my death there would be no reason for doing so.”*

(Life 10, 7)

For a time after her serious illness, the scars and effects of which she would carry to the end, she was worried about her prayer. She was always eager to talk to others about God but was easily distracted by the society and social life to which she had access. In a sense of being lost, though it is clear that she was exemplary in her community exercises, she is scrupulously sensitive to her sinfulness. She prays but how is not clear. Since this state continued for many years – at least eighteen according to herself – Teresa for many people remains an enigma. She herself describes her situation: “Since I thus began to go from pastime to pastime, from vanity to vanity from one occasion to another, to place myself so often in very serious occasions, and to allow my soul to become so spoiled by many varieties, I was then ashamed to return to the search for God by means of a friendship or as is that found in the intimate exchange of prayer. And I was aided in this vanity by the fact that as the sins increased I began to lose joy in virtuous things and my taste for them. I saw very clearly, my Lord, that these were failing me because I was failing You” (Life 7, 1). While she could help her father in the practice of prayer, she herself was helpless in her own regard. In his final years and particularly before his death, her father displayed a saintly union with God despite his sufferings; and his Dominican confessor assured Teresa that “he was in no doubt but that her father had gone straight to heaven.” Though she was greatly encouraged by her father’s obvious happiness and relationship with the Lord, as he died (Life 7:15), she continued to judge herself harshly but tried to improve her practice of prayer. But what in fact was her practice of prayer? Teresa stated that in the long years of her early religious life, “except after Communion, I never dared to begin prayer without a book, with a book I began to collect them (my thoughts) and my soul was drawn to recollection” (Life 4, 9). Without the aid of a book, she had to sustain the many thoughts (which was) “a battle and conflict between friendship with God and friendship with the world”. She explains her own difficulties and what she suffered so that “one may understand how if a soul perseveres in prayer in the midst of sins, temptations and failures of a thousand kinds the Lord will draw it forth to the harbour of salvation as it seems He did for me”(Life 8:4).

## **PART 8**

Teresa was now over twenty years in religious life and aged over forty. She had come through periods of very ill health and now was well. But she wasn’t happy about her spiritual life, always struggling to improve herself. In her Autobiography she admits that her intellect was so poor that it could never, never imagine heavenly and sublime things”. She says: “I had such little ability to represent things with my intellect that if I hadn’t seen the things, my imagination was not of use to me.” It seems she had no photographic mind. Then something special happened to her. One day as she entered the oratory, she saw a statue of the wounded Christ, the Ecce Homo of the Passion. It struck her forcefully. “I was utterly distressed in seeing Him that way for it vividly represented what He suffered for us. I felt so keenly how ungrateful I was for those wounds that I thought my heart would break. I threw myself at his feet with the greatest outpouring of tears” (Life 9, 1). Her reaction to seeing this statue may have been the result of a growing awareness of her need to do something about her prayer. “Since I could not reason this out, I strove to picture Christ within me.” She found more comfort in the garden scene of Gethsemane where Jesus was more alone and afflicted. There she strove to be His

companion, a person in need – so that He had to accept her. She thought of the sweat and agony and desired “to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced.” Yet she admits: “There were many distractions that tormented me.”

She explains that her method of praying requires less dependence on reflection; yet it makes more progress, because “it advances in love”. It deepened her relationship with the suffering Christ. Those who follow this way, she says, “will find that a book can be a help for recollecting oneself quickly.” It was during this period of renewed spirituality that she got a copy of the Confessions of St. Augustine, probably the translation published in Salamanca in 1554. She was very fond of the great Saint, especially because he had been a sinner whom the Lord had healed. What he had done for Augustine He could do for her. One thing left her inconsolable:

Sinners like Augustine, the Lord had called only once and they did not fall again, whereas “in my case, I had failed so often that I was worn out.” As she read the Confessions, she prayed more to St. Augustine for help for herself. When she came to the account of his conversion and of the voice in the garden, it seemed to her that “it was I the Lord called. I remained for a long time totally dissolved in tears, feeling within myself utter distress and weariness” (Life 9, 8). She seemed to drain herself of her past, the times when she was weak, vain, when her love was fragile, her service mediocre. What happened seemed to be a decisive step towards the Lord. It was like a drastic conversion with effects in her external life; community room chats and pastimes immediately decreased; her prayer became more constant and her solitude increased.

Here was the beginning of the transformation that changed an ordinary nun into the contemplative that has become a Doctor of the Church. From then on Teresa felt that the Lord was Preparing her for exceptional graces, granting her great favours, especially in the life of prayer, without any merits on her part. In Chapter 10 of her Life she begins to tell about the favours she received in prayer. Sometimes as she pictured Christ within her “in order to place myself in His presence”, she experienced “the presence of God unexpectedly so that I could not doubt that He was within me or I totally immersed in Him”. She says that they call such an experience “mystical theology” (Life 10, 1), a term she probably found in Osuna’s Alphabet. The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. What she means is that the will loves but the intellect or memory or understanding do not function. Yet it does understand what God represents to it.

Where theology is accepted as a “knowledge of God”, *speculative* if it is a knowing obtained by reasoning and argument, *mystical* if it is a knowing obtained in the soul by God’s own action, it is taught only by God. Teresa is saying that she acquires the knowledge merely by being receptive rather than active or by reasoning. She acknowledges that “everything is given by God”; but you can help God as it were, “by considering our lowliness and the ingratitude we have shown towards God, the many things He did for us, His Passion with such terrible sorrows. If some love accompanies this activity the heart is touched with tenderness” (Life 10, 2). Teresa is explaining the graces the Lord had begun to give her in prayer.

## PART 9

All her life, St Teresa suffered from a variety of illness and on her own judgement she wished that those who hear her own account of what she termed ‘the careless life’ ‘would abhor me when they see a soul so pertinacious and ungrateful towards him who bestowed on her so many favours’ (Life 8, 1). She described in her writings ‘the failings and risings. . . . in a life so beneath perfection.’ She seems to have had no comforts in prayer and a dread of any intimacy with God. In 1554 she had the

experience of being confronted by the Ecce Homo statue of Jesus in His Passion. She was dramatically affected by sorrow for her ingratitude to His love. 'I threw myself at His feet in tears and implored Him to give me the strength never to offend Him again' (Life 9, 1). She admitted that she profited much from this experience. 'I think I then said that I would not rise from there until He granted what I was begging Him for. I believe certainly that this was beneficial to me, because from that time I went on improving.' She began to pray in earnest. She now developed the habit of imagining Christ in His time of suffering and solitude, associating her sufferings and those of others with His, taking refuge in Him, and yet strongly believing that Christ Himself was in need. Of her new found prayer, she wrote later: 'I only begged Him to pardon my great sins and to give me the grace not to offend him.'

She begins to record that she perceives Christ, as it were, lonely or in need, isolated and fragile as He must have been in the garden at Gethsemane (Life 9, 4). In such situations 'I strove to be His companion there,' she wrote. As she thought of His sufferings, she desired to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced, but never dared 'since my sins appeared to me so serious.' She was greatly distracted and acknowledged that she was poor at recollecting images or scenes, no matter how much she read about them. 'I was like those who are blind, in the sense that they know with certainty the other person is there, but they do not see him'

It was at this time that she got a copy of the Confessions of St. Augustine. Teresa had always been devoted to the Saint, probably because she was a girl at the Augustinian School in Avila, but also because Augustine was a model of the sinner whom 'the Lord called only once' and he never looked back. She saw herself as one who 'had turned back so often that I was worn out from it' (Life 9, 7). She never lost confidence in the Lord's mercy. As she read the Confessions, she saw herself more and more in them, reflecting her own responses to the favours offered. When she got to the account of Augustine hearing the voice in the garden, it seemed to her, 'according to what I felt in my heart that it was I the Lord called. I retained for a long time totally dissolved in tears, feeling within myself utter distress and weariness.' This event which she called her Conversion took place during Lent in 1554. She was 39 years old. From then, her external life showed rapid changes. Pastimes were ignored and more importantly, she began to pray seriously and more contentedly. She later summed up the event: 'May the Lord be praised who freed me from myself' (Life 23, 1).

## **PART 10**

One might wonder why St Teresa in her forties was consulting so many learned friars and priests. She was experiencing especially from about 1555, extraordinary visions and heavenly favours. She was getting to know more about mystical theology and of the different degrees of prayer. As her prayer life progressed she began to be afraid 'since at that time other women had fallen into serious illusions and deceptions caused by the devil' (Life 23, 2), referring to those condemned by the Inquisition in Cordoba, Seville and Valladolid. She felt great sweetness and delight in her prayers but later would be troubled in case she was deceived by the devil.

In 1560 at the direction of her Dominican confessor, Pedro Ibanez, a professor of theology in the College of St Thomas at Avila, Teresa prepared an account about the state of her soul and her progress in the spiritual life. Of him she wrote later: 'He was so learned I was able to feel fully assured with what he told me' (Life 33, 5). Another Dominican friar, Domingo Banez, a recognised mature and prominent theologian, who later became Consultor at the Holy Office in Valladolid, took over from Ibanez as Teresa's confessor. But just before Christmas 1561, her religious Superiors seconded Teresa to act as a companion to a noble lady in Toledo, a widow Dona Luisa de la Cerda whose

husband had died early in the year. When still greatly distressed at his death she heard about Teresa, she immediately used her influence to obtain permission from the Carmelite Provincial for Sr. Teresa to travel and stay with her to help her overcome her loss. The most influential ladies – many of them the most powerful in the land – visited her house. Here Teresa was to meet several matrons of noble families who were to be involved in her later life. One of them was the Princess of Eboli who would in later years cause her endless trouble.

The most important thing during her time in Toledo was that Teresa began to write her autobiography. This was at the insistence of her new confessor. He was another Dominican and one whom she knew well in Avila. He was Garcia de Toledo, a learned aristocrat and highly talented, who had held various offices in his Order. Of all her acquaintances he understood Teresa better than most. It is acknowledged that he was so influenced in helping her that he grew in holiness and became an outstanding spiritual director of souls. Of him Teresa wrote: 'If I hadn't seen it, I would have doubted that in such a short time the favours of God so increased that he was so occupied with God that he no longer seemed to live for anything else on earth' (Life 34, 11).

St Teresa many times alludes to her Dominican confessor Fr. Garcia who had encouraged her to write the story of her own life in order to explain her growth towards God and the method of her prayer. She had developed her spiritual life through the action of God but always acknowledges that the confessor was God's instrument. He had teased out every difficulty with her and gained enormously himself as a result. She wrote of him; 'Within four months the Lord had brought him further than I got in seventeen years. This person has prepared himself better and so without any labour of his own the flower garden is watered with these four waters' (Life 11, 8). What had happened was extraordinary. During the six months she spent in Toledo, Teresa had completed a redaction of her life story and gave it to Fr. Garcia to assess. The draft had long accounts of her slow progress until she began to master the way to the love of God, a way that involved intellectual visions, raptures, mysterious locutions and ecstatic favours. Fr. Garcia recognised that the spiritual experiences marked a development that Teresa did not explain, only stating the phenomena that she felt or witnessed. Obviously from her discussions with him and her clarification in detail of what she had learned, he too grew towards the Lord. However, as a result of his insistence Teresa had to now write an account of her prayer life which she describes as an analogue of watering a garden where the soul is the gardener who must secure the supply of water for the plants to grow. This additional material now forms Chapters 11 to 22. These 'Four Degrees of Mental Prayer' are the preparation for a better understanding of what the Saint describes in the following chapters.

## **PART 11**

### **Her Four Degrees of Praying**

Fr Garcia de Toledo, the most important of St Teresa's spiritual directors, had been given the manuscript of her autobiography in order to check it and counsel her on its contents. He recognised that the value of writing her story was to explain the work of God in her and in her own growth towards God as a consequence. The actual success of her prayer life was the result of a spirituality, which she believed the Lord wished her to follow. Fr. Garcia insisted that she insert an account of this in the manuscript, explaining all that she undertook, the nature of the progress made and her own response at the different stages.

She readily set about this task and the result is the series of chapters from 11 to 22 which were inserted into the manuscript of her life. It diverts from the account of what had happened to her in

order to explain mental prayer and its different degrees, necessary for a better understanding of what she described in the remainder of her story.

“Let us speak now of those who are beginning to be servants of love”. For Teresa to be such a servant is to follow by a path of prayer Him who has loved us so much. She stresses that we must desire to attain this “perfect love”, but too often “we desire it with our hands folded, as they say.” She is forthright in speaking of the initial stages of those who are determined to seek out this good, stressing that it involves a lot of hard work. “It is the beginner who works while the Lord gives the increase” (Life 11, 5). While in all of the degrees of prayer, the enjoyment is most sustaining, yet “all bear their crosses.” Teresa sought to get a simple model or allegory to describe the development of a prayer life and observed that “beginners must realise that in order to give delight to the Lord they are starting to cultivate a garden on very barren soil, full of abominable weeds” (Life 11, 6). She adds “with the help of God we must strive like good gardeners to get the plants to grow and take pains to water them so that they don’t wither but come to bud and flower and give forth a most pleasant fragrance to provide refreshment for this Lord of ours” (Life 11, 6).

So Teresa sees that the garden can be watered in four ways. “You may draw water from a well”. If the well is deep, it is hard work and tiring. The second method is by a water wheel, a large mechanical device used in Teresa’s time, made with small tilting buckets attached on the rim. As the wheel rotated, the buckets in turn filled with water, were carried to the apex at which the buckets in turn tilted and emptied into a channel or reservoir. The third method is to tap the water from a stream where there is plenty in supply. It can easily be distributed throughout the garden in a controlled way without too much labour of the gardener. The fourth way, the simplest and most effective, is to use the rainfall. “The Lord waters the garden without any work on our part.” Here God freely empowers the soul through the gift of prayer.

Gardening involves a lot of hard work, firstly in conditioning ourselves. Teresa recognises that most of us are easily distracted, and tire ourselves in trying to control our feelings and senses. We are to recollect constantly on the purpose of our labours and of the owner of the garden, the Lord Jesus Christ. To help us overcome the many distractions, beginners have to discipline themselves by thinking of Jesus, of his life, actions and instructions so that with God’s help they can succeed in developing their awareness and devotion. As in the case of an actual gardener, the watering of the soil and the flowers brings its own satisfaction and encouragement – and an encouragement to keep going. These are the things we can do of ourselves, with the understanding that we do so by the help of God, for without “this help as we know well we cannot have so much as a good thought”, Teresa says. At least we are already doing our part -watering the garden.

But what happens when the well goes dry? The sheer effort to get water becomes useless – and in the spiritual sense, one feels nothing but dryness, disappointment, anxiety, even the sense of giving up. Teresa points out that sometimes for reasons known only to God when “we, like good gardeners, do what lies in our power, He sustains the garden without water and makes the virtues grow” (Life 11, 9). She also warns that if the gardener doesn’t keep in mind that his work serves the Lord (owner of the garden) and gives Him pleasure (this tedious and monotonous letting the bucket down to the bottom of the well and drawing it up empty) he will give up trying the impossible as he sees it. Teresa is stressing all the time that our effort at prayer, symbolised by the carrying of water from the bottom to water the garden, pleases the Lord and gives Him praise. “The gardener helps Christ carry the cross and reflects that the Lord lived with it all during His life” (Life 11, 10). He is so determined, even though this dryness lasts a long time, not to let Christ fall with the cross. The seemingly fruitless effort is not wasted because he works for the good Lord and the gardener knows he is satisfying Him.

Teresa adds, “He doesn’t fear that the work is being wasted. He is serving a good Master whose eyes are upon him.”

In this first way of praying, Teresa is saying that it is not enough just to recite prayers. The essence consists of establishing or fostering some consciousness of the person of Jesus Christ and a stronger relationship with Him which will help us to overcome periods of dryness as well as distractions and even sickness. In modern times this form of prayer is encouraged by centring ourselves in God, by bringing order and peace in the midst of the intense bustle of human life.

## **PART 12**

In the analogy that St Teresa uses to describe the cultivation of prayer, she says that we must strive like good gardeners to cultivate the garden of our soul, which may consist of very barren soil, wild with lots of dreadful weeds. Cleaning it up demands a lot of our energy but there is no hope of getting plants to grow and produce fruit unless the garden has water. Here we treat of the second method Teresa suggested for providing a water supply – the second degree of praying, according to her model. A water wheel, not uncommon in Teresa’s time for supplying water to a garden, consisted of tilting buckets attached to the rim of a large mechanical wheel, which was rotated by a flowing stream or some other device. As the wheel rotated the buckets were filled with water carried to the top at which the buckets in turn tilted and emptied the water into an aqueduct. There were lots of advantages with this over the first method where water was drawn from the bottom of a well when available, normally involving great labour, “Now the gardener obtains more water with less labour” (Life 14, 1) she adds. Teresa warns: “Here the soul begins to be recollected and comes upon something supernatural, because in no way can it acquire this prayer through any efforts it makes itself”. She acknowledges that as in the model with the wheel the water is at a higher level in the earth so that much work is not required to raise the water to the garden. She explains that in the spiritual application the “water is closer because grace reveals itself more clearly to the soul” (Life 14, 1).

Obviously Teresa considered that during his earthly life, Christ’s humanity was the instrument of the Word for giving grace and life, whether it was in curing a leper (Matthew 8:2) or one deaf and dumb who received his speech (Mark 7:32). It was by his word that Christ restored Lazarus in the tomb to life. She writes at length on how the humanity of Christ advances our prayer life even to the most sublime contemplation. He is the owner of the garden we are to cultivate. Certainly “everything depends on the favour the Lord grants to each soul” (Life 22, 8). Consequently “whoever lives in the presence of so good a friend and excellent leader can endure all things”. It was only later that she was able to treat of the reality of Christ’s presence for our prayer and “hear the infinite Word in the finite and see the eternal imageless model in the finite form”, as Dom Marmion expresses it.

Teresa appreciated that all of us at every moment must be aware that the mystery of Jesus Christ transcends all the experience of God accessible to us as human beings. It transcends the moving experience of God displayed in the Old Testament because its theology was restricted and limited to the natural knowledge of God. Given the preparation for Christ’s coming evident in the Old Testament, there still remains an infinite chasm between God and creature which in faith is the essence of contemplating God-made-man. The absolute Being that God is shows itself in the human life of Jesus Christ. This is such a great mystery that one is not surprised at the reaction of his contemporaries when the paralytic was cured: “they were astounded and praised God saying, we have never seen anything like this” (Mark 2:12). Even for Christians today, there is always a danger of perceiving Christ as an example of perfect humanity rather than contemplating the Word-made-Flesh. When we contemplate the Son we are always faced with the Divine. Even his mother when she found

him in the Temple after being lost for days, was overcome and said “My child, why have you done this to us?” Jesus replied “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father’s affairs”. She didn’t understand what he meant. Mary stored up all these things in her heart. At the Last Supper, to Philip’s query, Jesus replied: “To have seen me is to have seen the Father. I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:9).

Regarding the Second Degree of Prayer, our communication with Jesus touches the very essence of our being. “There is nothing here to fear but only something to desire”, Teresa says, explaining: “For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an imitate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him whom we know loves us. In order that love be true and the friendship endure, the wills of friends must be in accord” (Life 8, 5).

For Teresa the important thing was to keep the owner of the garden – Jesus Christ – always present with us (Life 12, 3). The soul can place itself in the presence of Christ and grow accustomed to being inflamed with love for his sacred humanity. It can keep him ever-present and speak with him, asking for its needs and complaining of its problems; being glad with him in its enjoyments but not forgetting him because of them; trying to speak to him, not through written prayers but with words that conform to its desires and needs (Life 12, 2). What she asks of us is to converse with the Lord.

Teresa shows clearly that she was well aware of the psychological mechanism of our human nature though in terms of modern science it was limited. In explaining her systematic approach to conversation with Christ, the principal faculties are the intellect and the will, the former related to thought and reasoning, the latter related to acts of doing or wishing such as love and affection. The intellect supplies the information or knowledge of something for the will to love. Anything loved by the will has been perceived and understood by the intellect. To this intellectual process, Teresa adds a function known in psychology as the intellectual memory or imagination, that is, the formation of images from the memory and reasoning or consideration. The process produces conversation with Christ as a work of the will.

So Teresa advises, regarding discursive reflection: “I say they should not pass the whole time using their reasoning powers. They should place themselves in the presence of Christ, and without tiring the intellect, speak with and delight in him and not wear themselves out in reasoning arguments; rather they should tell him their needs, acknowledging how right he is not to allow us to be in his presence” (Life 13, 11).

As a conclusion to her account of the Second Degree of praying, Teresa wrote: “This prayer of quiet is the beginning of all blessings. The flowers are already at the point in which hardly anything is lacking for them to bud; and the soul sees this very clearly. In no way is it able to believe at that time that God is not with it. When it sees again the cracks and the imperfections in itself, it then fears everything. And it is good that it is fearful” (Life 15, 15).

## **PART 13**

When St Teresa, using the analogy of watering the garden, described the different grades or ways of praying, she was conscious that some twenty years before as a novice or young professed, she was struggling to develop her prayer life. She acknowledged that she failed God during this period by not seeking support from the pillar of prayer: “I suffered the battle and conflict between friendship with God and friendship with the world” (Life 8, 3). In time she realised that if one makes an effort, God bestows his mercies and favours, lavishly repaying anyone who has taken him as a friend. She realises

she has been specially blessed that the love for her Lord causes her to focus in a very human way on who He is – a friend. “Oh, what a good friend You make, my Lord... You wait for others to adapt to Your nature, and in the meantime You put up with theirs” (Life 8, 6).

In all of this instruction, she uses the term ‘mental prayer’ and explains what she means by it: “For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends: It means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. In order that love be true and the friendship endure, the wills of the friends must be in accord” (Life 8, 5). When she had begun the practice of prayer, especially as she advanced in a conscious relationship with her ‘friend’, she was at times tormented, realising that “I wasn’t what I should have been”. It was at one of these times that on entering the oratory, she saw the statue that had been borrowed for a coming feast. This statue portrayed the wounded and suffering Christ, so that when she saw it she was greatly distressed, such was the impact of realising Christ’s sufferings. “it seemed to me, my heart broke, ” she records “I threw myself down before Him with the greatest outpouring of tears”. This was a dramatic time in her life but adds; “From that time I went on improving” (Life 9, 3). She explains the way she prayed after this experience. “Since I could not reflect discursively (through meditation) with the intellect, I strove to represent Christ within me, and it did me greater good, in my opinion, to represent Him in those scenes where I saw Him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as a person in need, He had to accept me. I had simple thoughts like these” (Life 9, 6).

Like any normal person, distracting thoughts tormented her (to use her own phrase). Teresa recognised that where there is no discursive reflection (that is using the intellect to recall the teaching of Jesus or of Gospel events) the use of a book can be a great help in recollecting ourselves. She admits that she had little ability “to represent things with my intellect” and never to think of Christ within herself. She was like those who are blind, she says, who spoke with a person because they know the other person is with them.

After she had received a copy of ‘The Confessions of St. Augustine’, a saint she readily admired and appreciated, she read it critically with regard to herself. Certainly she began to spend more time with the Lord in the prayer she knew. It seemed, as she notes, “His majesty began to favour me”. She received grace so that “when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in His presence . . . that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt he was within me or I totally immersed in Him” (Life 10, 1). This is what she alludes to in ‘The Way of Perfection’ (28, 2), where she writes; “Consider what St. Augustine says, that he sought Him in many places but found Him ultimately within himself.” She herself added: “However softly we speak, He is near enough to hear us. Neither is there any need for wings to go to find Him. All one need do is to go into solitude and look at Him within oneself. Beseech Him as you would a father; tell Him about your trials, ask him for a remedy against them” (Life 28, 2). Teresa writes in a conversational mode – light, but as in any conversation, the meaning proceeds from an idea involving thinking deeply and broadly on important issues or the truth of our statements. For her meditation may be defined as a mindful praying, using reasoned reflections, especially on some of the great teaching of Jesus and the mysteries of His life and death. It is interpreted especially as conversation with God, and she asserts in different places that in prayer, whether mental or vocal, we talk to God so there must be some interior communication. At the beginning of the ‘Interior Castle’, she states: “insofar as I can understand, the door of entry to this castle is prayer and reflection” (Interior Castle 1.1, 7). If it is to be prayer at all, the mind must take part in it.

What is now termed ‘discursive prayer’ or meditation is the prayer of beginners, the first level of mental prayer. It is ordinary and active and ultimately depends on our own efforts, with the help of grace. Although very natural, it is in itself an enormous achievement since it develops an intimacy

with God. In 'The Way of Perfection' (Way 26, 3) Teresa explains how one proceeds to recollect oneself in trying to concentrate on some incident in Christ's life. "In the measure you desire Him, you will find Him. He so esteems our turning to look at Him that no diligence will be lacking on His part."

## **PART 14**

Very much in keeping with St Teresa's thinking, many people in modern times wish to enjoy realistically the company of Jesus Christ, the Lord, in their daily living. By baptism consciously dedicated to God, they try to give themselves to Jesus by faithful and practical service of their whole life, whether married or otherwise. But to be enlivened with the spirit of Carmel and the zeal of our saints, one must truly be a friend of Christ, having an intimate friendship with Him by means of a life of love and generous concern for all. As the Little Flower expressed it: "We have only one thing to do here below - to love Jesus and to save souls so that He may be loved".

Teresian doctrine concerns everyone, although it refers more directly to those who are more generous and more open or prepared to accept it. For her and for all Carmelites, it is impossible to conceive of a real love of God that is not accompanied by the love of souls. A great love of God demands a very generous concern for souls. This is why Teresa prepared 'The Way of Perfection'. Since Jesus offers to all the fountain of living water, He will give the generous soul this water to drink, at least according to their spiritual need. Despite the sublimity of this truth, Teresa recognised the individual "scatter-brain" with minds that wander and have difficulty concentrating in trying to talk to the Lord in prayer. As a result, she sets about teaching us "one of the ways of greatly slowing down the mind and recollecting the soul" (Way 28, 1), spelling out the nature of "prayer of recollection".

She comments on the most common of prayer "Our Father." It opens with "Our Father who art in heaven." Our fundamental faith accepts that God is everywhere and, as Teresa believes, "wherever God is, there is heaven" (Way 28, 2). Immediately she refers to St. Augustine who "says that he sought Him in many places but found Him ultimately within himself." This must have pleased her heart because she observes as a consequence "that there is no need to go to heaven in order to speak to one's Eternal Father or find delight in Him". The Lord is readily present to us. "All we need to do is go into solitude and look at Him within ourselves and speak to Him as a father. Beseech Him as you would a father; tell Him about your trials; ask Him for a remedy against them, realising that you are not worthy to be His daughter or His children.

She decries any false sense of humility, on account of which some people plead that they are unable to speak with God; they make excuses of unworthiness and neglect to respond to His graciousness and favours. She says that "we are to speak with Him as with a father or a brother or a Lord or as with a spouse" (Way 28, 3).

There is at the beginning a psychological barrier in trying to focus on the person of Jesus, concentrating on Him and at the same time trying to withstand the distractions of the senses and to calm a perturbed mind or imagination. However Teresa herself notes that "without one's realising it, the eyes close so as to avoid seeing them and so that the sight might be more awake to things of the soul (Way 28, 6). At the beginning the effort is demanding and the concentration may not be so intense. But gradually, depending on the individual and the grace of the Lord, "the soul should get used to this recollection." The Saint assures us that if one perseveres in practising this prayer over and over several days, it will prove more successful and satisfying, the benefits being more obvious; all

without any effort on our part, because it is the Lord's will that in return for our own effort, our soul can rule the senses and we more easily become recollected.

For St Teresa this path of recollection enabled people to understand that we can create within the soul something incomparably more precious than anything we can see outside ourselves. God enlivens our body through our soul and the more we embrace the soul through the domination of our senses, the more fitting we are to possess the Lord and praise "Our Father who art in heaven". She acknowledges that "I understood well that I had a soul. But what this soul deserved and who dwelt within it I did not understand because I had covered my eyes with the vanities of the world" (Way 28, 11). Obviously thinking in human terms, she tries to assess the great blessing she had received from the King of Heaven in His coming to her. "But what a marvellous thing, that He who would fill a thousand worlds and many more with His grandeur could be perceived and understood according to our nature. Being the Lord, since He loves us, He adapts Himself to our size" (Way 28, 11). According to Teresa, the Lord accommodates the human limitations by enlarging our capacity little by little to receive His various graces. We should, therefore, give ourselves to Him with complete determination, emptying ourselves of all that might inhibit or prevent our receiving and using what is His. "He doesn't give Himself completely until we give ourselves completely" (Way 28, 13) and a reminder - "Don't think that things in heaven are like they are here below".

As she focuses on "dwelling" with the Lord, she teaches a detachment from everything that is not God. It is an ascetical practice that is most necessary for acquiring a sense of a loving intimacy between the soul and our Father. Recollection or the concentration of our mind and soul on the divine matches our awareness of God within us. In encouragement she says; "There is a withdrawing of the senses from exterior things and a renunciation of them in such a way that, without one's realising it, the eyes close so as to avoid seeing them and so that the sight might be more awake to things of the soul" (Way 28, 6). Although, when praying before a statue or picture, she normally kept her eyes open as a stimulus to prayer, Teresa observes with respect to the prayer of recollection "anyone who walks by this path keeps his eyes closed almost as often as he prays." She saw great worth in striving not to think of worldly things or affairs, helped by the concentration resulting from closing the eyes.

This is the prayer of recollection, because by gathering the faculties together and concentrating as well as we can on the mystery of God, "the soul enters within itself to be with its God, and its divine Master comes more quickly to teach it and give it the prayer of quiet than He would through any other method it might use". She warns us that we are not to be distracted by the senses, by recalling former occasions or happenings, natural to a wandering mind. Even though one's prayer may not be very good at first, "they do what they can during that time to get free by recollecting their senses within. If the recollection or concentration is true, it is felt very clearly for it produces some effect in the soul" (Way 28, 6).

## **PART 15**

### Three Living Virtues

It is clear from her writings that St Teresa wished that all Christians would not only be followers of Christ but truly be his friends, and this through an intimate awareness of his love and concern in their daily lives. To help her nuns primarily and in time all her readers, she shared with them her own spirituality and way to the Lord, in order for individuals to grow in their closeness to Jesus in the practical situations of their lives. She discovered over many years in Carmelite religious life that

though she meant well, her efforts to be holy were inadequate. Focusing on improving her spiritual life, especially as regard her prayer, she began to realise that she was not really sensitive or serious about what she wanted – communicating with God, speaking to Jesus. St. Paul had written to the Christians in Galatia and Rome about a similar search. “I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith. I want to know Christ” (Phil 3, 10). The Scripture records how much this cost the Apostle. For Teresa the search for perfection which for her culminated in following the way of prayer “established and observed by our Holy Fathers” (that is, in the Carmelite tradition) was rooted in the practice of three habits – “The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which, even though I speak of it last, is the main practice and embraces all the others” (Way 4, 4). These three living virtues were stressed by Jesus in his preaching and teaching. Love of neighbour was special to him; a new commandment, his commandment. “By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34).

Teresa then says: “Now let us talk about the detachment we ought to have, for detachment, if it is practised with perfection, includes everything” (Way 8, 1). She means “everything”, so that “if we embrace the Creator and turn our back on the whole of creation, we will be showered with graces, enabling us to give ourselves entirely and without reserve to God”. Teresa encouraged the Sisters in their isolation from family and relatives and friends. She reminded them that “when it seems we have done all there is to do, Sisters, do not feel secure or let yourselves go to sleep”. It demands going against our will and a remedy here is “to bear in mind continually how all is vanity and how quickly everything comes to an end”. Instead “remove our attachment to trivia and centre it on what will never end”. For Teresa, focused on the person of the suffering Jesus, there was no fear of anyone or anything, “for his is the kingdom of heaven.” Such a person doesn’t care if he loses everything, so long as he doesn’t displease God.

The teaching of St Teresa on detachment may sound very severe by modern practice but it has to be understood in the context of practical living in a community of thirteen nuns and the clear evidence that the members lived a very happy life despite the inevitable hardships of their chosen vocation. The man who finds a hidden treasure must give up his/her all if he would possess it. The merchant who would acquire the pearl of great price must sacrifice all else to get it. The virtue of mutual love, the very core of Christianity, is the life of Teresa’s communities.

The third habit that the Saint demanded was humility. She recognised that prayer is enhanced and there is real spiritual growth when we imitate Jesus who set the example for all, for he “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7). She wished that her Sisters would develop the virtue of humility so that through obedience, united with self-knowledge of our own weakness and limitations, we are given the chance to enjoy the service of the Lord. Teresa felt that “here is where love will be seen; not hidden in corners but in the midst of the occasions of sin. And believe me that even though we may often fail with some slight lapses, our gain will be incomparably greater.” In her book of The Foundations, the Saint faced the difficulties that Sisters had concerning prayer because they were engaged in active works, too busy to pray. She acknowledged firstly the danger of very subtle self-love that does not allow one to understand what it is to want to please ourselves rather than God. But she acknowledged that the active works they were worried about “were all spent in the fulfilment of the duties of obedience and charity, ” adding: “know that if it is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans, helping you both interiorly and exteriorly” (Foundations 5, 8).

What Teresa crystallises in the account of these three habits or virtues merely highlights the teaching of Jesus for all his followers. It is basic to the teaching of the Church throughout the centuries and was canonised in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ‘Lumen gentium, Number 5’ of Vatican II: ‘The Church, endowed with the gifts of her founder and faithfully observing the precepts of charity, humility and self-denial receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of God’.

About the love for one another that St Teresa encouraged from her nuns, she wrote “if this commandment were observed in the world as it should be, I think that it would be very helpful for the observance of the other commandments... In a community which is made up of no more than thirteen nuns, all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped. But let us not be dominated by that affection. Let us have the virtues and interior good, and always studiously avoid paying attention to this exterior element” (Way 4, 7).

## **PART 16**

### **Our Daily Bread**

One of the great truths, which St Teresa stressed for her Sisters and readers, was that Jesus made us His sisters and brothers. During His passion and death we readily see His humanity. When He teaches us the “Our Father”, He clearly is at one with us creatures, especially when He asks us to unite our lives and service to His gift to the Father, assured that He will not leave us empty-handed. And so Jesus prays the Father on our behalf: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. St Teresa acknowledges our human reaction, saying to Jesus: “If you hadn’t made the petition, the task would seem to me impossible” (Way 32, 2). If earth has become heaven, yes – it will be possible. But the reality – the earth hasn’t and with our world “as wretched and barren as mine” there is little hope. But it is Jesus, our Saviour, who offered this prayer to His Father on our behalf, yours and mine. As we pray: “Your will be done”, we should realise that “Jesus acts here as our ambassador and that He has desired to intervene between us and His Father, but at no small cost of His own” (Way 32, 3). Teresa was comforted by the knowledge that Jesus didn’t have to depend on her will. The obedience of the Son to the Father’s will covered “the trials, sorrows, injuries and persecutions He suffered” leading to His death on the Cross – the Father’s will for the Son He loved most. Teresa appeals to our human hearts no matter who we are directing us to make a complete gift of ourselves to the Father, as is done in Baptism. She asks us to renew this surrender of our wills to His with a detachment for our world around.

St Teresa had her own experiences, so she prays for us too. “Your will, Lord, be done in me in every way and manner that You, My Lord, want. If you want it to be done with trials, strengthen me and let them come; if with persecutions, illnesses, dishonour and a lack of life’s necessities, here I am” (Way 32, 10). We must not forget that the emphasis is on God’s will – not on personal suffering. There is plenty of the latter in all of us. Those closest to the Son, Teresa says, are strengthened by the knowledge that Jesus gave the Father our wills when He gave His own in the name of us all. The greatness and importance of this gift is that “He becomes one with our lowliness, transforms us into Himself and effects a union of the Creator with the creature (Way 32, 11). Teresa takes her strength from her knowledge that Jesus knows our weakness, that, in fact, we often do not understand what the Lord’s will is in our regard. Even accepting readily God’s will, doing the Father’s will was difficult for most people. Though we are aware that many in our population are dying of hunger, we ignore the need to help them by moderation and sacrifice at our own meals. Teresa points out to all – from religious to ordinary lay people – that they fulfil their natural obligations of charity according to

God's will. She reminds us that sometimes we promise one thing but do the opposite. Yet our prayer is "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". She dogmatically pronounces that "there would have been only a very few who would have carried out these words He spoke for us to the Father" - Your will be done. Given this tragedy, she says that Jesus sought out a wonderful means by which to show the extreme of His love for us. He made the following petition: "Give us this day, Lord, our daily bread". He must remain with us "not just one day but every day". The result is the gift of the Eucharist, His presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Her reaction to the Father's consent is very strong but understandable in the context of the Church's experience in her time, when rejection and abuses, "insults committed today against this Most Blessed Sacrament..., irreverence from these heretics were reported". But Teresa prays "O Eternal Father, what treasure do we have that could buy Your Son? The thirty pieces of silver. But to buy Him, no price is sufficient. Since by sharing in our nature He has become one with us here below, He reminds the Father that because He belongs to Him, the Father in turn can give Him to us. And so He says 'our bread'. He doesn't make any difference between Himself and us" (Way 33, 5). Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter on "The Eucharist and the Church" stresses the tradition in Vatican II and the Doctors of the Church, stating: "Our union with Christ, which is a gift and grace for each of us, makes it possible for us, in him, to share in the unity of his body which is the Church. The Eucharist reinforces the incorporation into Christ which took place in Baptism through the gift of the Spirit" (II, 23).

For Teresa, the gift of the Eucharist, "Our Daily Bread", was to enable and empower us to do the will of the Father, in our own regard. "He, in fact doesn't remain with us for any other reason than to help, encourage, and sustain us in doing this will that we have prayed might be done in us" (Way 34, 1). She saw that through the Eucharist, He could be found "at will" but to temper the great satisfaction that we receive "its sufficient that He remain disguised in the accidents of bread and wine". Teresa's advice to anyone disappointed was: "Beg Him not to fail you, and to give you the dispositions to receive Him worthwhile".

She explained her wishes for her Sisters. "Let us ask the Eternal Father that we might merit to receive our heavenly bread in such a way that the Lord may reveal Himself to the ways of our soul and make Himself thereby known, since our bodily eyes cannot delight in beholding Him, because He is so hidden (Way 34, 5). The knowledge we receive is the sustenance that satisfies and delights and maintains our spiritual life. One thing she stresses is the receiving Communion is not like picturing with the imagination or when we reflect upon the Lord on the Cross. In Communion, the event is happening now, and it is entirely true" (Way 34, 8). She states clearly that Jesus is here with us as long as the accidents of bread remain. If during Christ's earthly life, "the mere touch of His robes cured the sick", similar miracles will occur when we receive Him in Holy Communion.

## **PART 17**

### The Humanity of Jesus Christ

If we try to understand the spiritual experiences of St Teresa, for instance when she received the graces of rapture and ecstasy, we, ordinary humans, are more spellbound than confused. Yet the object in writing the "Way of Perfection" and "Interior Castle" was to help the likes of us, ordinary people, to have intimate friendship with God, sustained by the contemplative ideal of loving union with God, rooted in practical and solid virtue. In a sense she explains this because of the favours the Lord granted her in prayer, which she wishes us to share. "It used to happen, when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in His presence, or even while reading, that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within

me or I totally immersed in Him” (Life 10, 1). The humanity of Christ must be the means to the most sublime contemplation. In opposition to those who held that for all advancing in prayer “corporeal images, even when referring to the humanity of Christ, are an obstacle or impediment for the most perfect contemplation”, Teresa felt that “to withdraw completely from Christ or that this divine body be counted in a balance with our own miseries or with all creation, I cannot endure.” She goes on to explain how God led her, despite the influence of other ways, to experience “something of supernatural prayer”. The result was that she “strove to turn” aside from everything corporeal, especially in the practice of recollection of Christ’s presence and she was delighted. “Since I felt that benefit and consolation, there was no one who would have me return to the humanity of Christ” (Life 22, 3). She attests that the Lord “to remedy the matter “ sent her the Dominican spiritual director, Garcia de Toledo, who, “drew her away from this error” and “whoever lives in the presence of so good a friend and excellent a leader who went ahead of us to be the first to suffer, can endure all things.” And Teresa assures us: “The Lord helps us, strengthens us and never fails; He is a true friend. And I see clearly and I saw afterward that God desires that if we are going to please Him and receive His great favours, we must do so through the most sacred humanity of Christ, in whom He takes His delight” (Life 22, 6).

Here was her method of prayer at this time. ‘The soul can place itself in the presence of Christ and grow accustomed to being inflamed with love for His sacred humanity. It can keep Him ever present and speak with Him, asking for its needs and complaining of its labours, being glad for Him in its enjoyments and not forgetting Him because of them, trying to speak to Him, not through written prayers but with words that conform to its desires and needs” (Life 12, 2). This, Teresa acknowledges, is an excellent way of making progress. It is unselfish prayer streaming from her faith. “We shouldn’t care at all about not having devotion”. She adds: “This way of praying keeps Christ present with us, but its success depends on rooting it firmly in humility”.

The place of Christ in our spiritual life is so vital and central that it is hard to understand how in Teresa’s time some spiritual directors forbade the use of Christ’s humanity in our prayer life, disregarding or belittling the imaging of the Lord during His earthly life. Referring to those foolish directors, she says: “They give strong advice to rid oneself of all corporeal or bodily images and to approach contemplation of the Divinity (Life 22, 1). Such priests seem to have been ignorant of St. Thomas teaching, canonised by theological schools throughout the ages. In the Summa Theologica (Tome 3, 8, art 1), he wrote about the Grace of Christ, as Head of the Church:

*“Hence Christ as God can give grace (or the Holy Spirit) in His own right. As man, He can give it, but instrumentally. For his humanity was the instrument of His divinity. And so His actions brought salvation to us through the power of the divinity. They caused grace in us both by meriting it and by some kind of efficient causality.”*

St. Thomas works out the details of this meritorious and efficient causality in his theology of the redemption and in his sacramental theology. The nuns with Teresa evidently seem to be unaware of this instruction. About their mentors, Teresa continues: “They give strong advice to rid oneself of all corporeal images. They say that in the case of those who are advancing, these images, even when referring to the humanity of Christ are an obstacle or impediment to the most perfect contemplation . . . They think that since this work is entirely spiritual, any corporeal thing can hinder or impede it, that one should try to think of God in a general way, that He is everywhere and that we are immersed in Him” (Life 22, 1).

For Teresa to turn her back on the human Christ or to count His divine Body in a balance with our own miseries would be unendurable. She acknowledges that if she had kept to this restricted practice she would not be where she now was. She explains what happened. When she began to experience a

more advanced form of prayer (prayer of quiet), she tried to blot out everything corporeal or bodily. But it seemed to me that I felt the presence of God and I strove to recollect myself in His presence” (Life 22, 3). While she wanted to keep the image or painting of Christ before her mind, she could not do so because “I thought the humanity was an impediment”. As she had been devoted to Christ all her life, so now, she readily returned to her custom of “rejoicing in the Lord, especially when I received. Is it possible, my Lord, that it entered my mind that you would be an impediment to my greater good” (Life 24, 4). Teresa is ever conscious that Christ was the Way, the Truth and the Life. “No one knows the Father except the Son and those whom the Son chooses to reveal Him”. As she advised her Dominican director, Garcia de Toledo, so she advises each of us. She wrote to him:

*“Even if you are at the summit of contemplation take no other path than that by the Sacred Humanity of Christ. In this you walk safely. This Lord of ours is the one through whom all blessings come to us. He will teach us these things. Look at His life: He is the best model, what more do we desire than to have such a good friend at our side who will not abandon us. When one is in the midst of business matters, and in times of persecutions and trials, when one can’t maintain so much peace, and in times of dryness, Christ is a very good friend because we behold Him as man and see Him with weaknesses and trials – and He is company for us.”*  
(Life 22, 7-10)

## PART 18

### Lineage and Social Status Matter Not

It is generally recognised that the life lived by Carmelite Sisters is centred on and devoted to prayer. The monastic reform that saw their origin in 16th Century Spain helped to make personal prayer more contemplative, frequently accompanied by authentic religious experience for which many at the time believed women incapable. For Teresa a life of prayer was not something that could be acquired like passing an examination. For her such a life whether of the ordinary lay person or a committed religious was rooted in the imitation of Jesus and was primarily aimed at the ordinary service of the Lord, in their links with the whole Christ. It was to fulfil God’s will that Christ’s mission would spread across the world and through all the ages to come. For Teresa the redemptive work of Jesus – his life, sufferings and death – was the price by which all humankind are redeemed, objectively in fact “were redeemed”. In and throughout time, his work of our redemption continues to be applied for the salvation of souls. St Teresa’s appreciation of this truth was grounded in her concept of God, perceived by her as immensely compassionate and wholeheartedly directed to the saving of souls, to the concern for the well-being of humankind and their immediate and ultimate good.

Throughout her long life, Teresa was always ready to criticise, even challenge, various important aspects of acceptable practices in either religious or social life. The position of women in Spain and in the Church of her day had not improved very much over the centuries. She herself was a literate Castilian in a well-to-do middle-class family, though of Jewish stock with aristocratic connections. Like others of her class and position (later as a religious), she displayed a selective awareness regarding her society and those who composed it. Scholars have remarked that in her writings, labourers or workmen get little mention, implying it seems, a bias or prejudice on her part. Beggars got little mention either. However she wrote in her ‘Foundation’: “Our Lord desired to give me light in this matter, and so at one time he told me that lineage and social status mattered not at all in the judgement of God. He gave me a severe reprimand for listening to those who spoke to me about this” (Foundations 15, 16).

The lives of the Carmelite Sisters were to be centred through prayer on God's will for themselves and for the Church, especially their friends in the world; developing a closeness to God that inevitably creates a deep concern for and a thorough commitment to intercede for the world and its peoples, conscious that the Word became flesh and lived amongst us for our redemption. Certainly one had to absorb the mind of Christ, according to one's capability, holiness and graces. Members of the Carmelite community were not to be selective in their witness to the Church. Given the particular time in the Church, the appearance of new religious family and the reform movements in society that would produce spiritual forces opposing the secular indifference that would undermine the stability of old kingdoms, it is clear that the people involved, religious and lay, often came from middle-class well-to-do families with upper-class connections. For many people, like Teresa, there was an added drawback, being a converso, that is with Jewish antecedents or "blood". Practical problems arose for her but with her own spiritual experience, she gives a freshness and healthy enthusiasm to the changing situation. But there were always problems.

For the Church in Spain at Teresa's time, 'the pure blood' policy advocated by many began to give rise to a real problem. Some religious orders in the acceptance of new members now provided statutes for the admission process, demanding evidence of 'pure blood' of aspirants. From the beginning Teresa solidly refused to permit such statutes. Despite criticism of lowered standards of education and diluted quality of religious service as a consequence, Teresa herself was very definite about such discrimination. "Such an attitude doesn't belong here. In this house, please God, may there never be any thought about such a thing; it would be a hell. But the one who is from nobler lineage should be the one to speak least about her father. All the Sisters must be equal" (Way 27, 6).

Teresa had come to Toledo in Spain to establish a new Carmelite convent for women according to her reformed practices in the Carmelite tradition. Its primary purpose was prayer and simple fidelity to the Gospel. She had been promised the entire inheritance of a merchant Martin Ramirez and was so sure of her position that she rented a temporary residence for her new community and proceeded to arrange permissions, license, etc., to make the new foundation. Furious opposition came from some prominent noble citizens of Toledo, insulted by the efforts of the Ramirez family, whom they alleged were trying to establish themselves in the city.

The converso origin of the Ramirez family added to her difficulties. This was probably the Ramirez family trying to enhance their prestige in the traditional way, endowing the Church. Teresa writes about the frustrating situation in her book of 'The Foundations' (Foundations 15, 16). "I didn't know what to do, for after the foundation was made they again took up the negotiations. But since the house was already founded, I arranged to let them become the patrons of the large Chapel and settled things in such a way that they would have no connection with what pertained to the monastery, as is now the case". She obviously didn't know how to get out of the difficulties. However, "Our Lord desired to give me light in the matter, ... He gave me a severe reprimand for listening to those who spoke to me about this —concerns of this sort were not for those of us who had already despised the world" (Foundations 15, 16). She solved the problem by making the negotiators patrons of the Chapel. She then proceeded to secure a new house that became the Toledo Carmel. In her book: 'The Way of Perfection' Teresa wrote of this work: "Let no one in this house speak of any other father but him. And strive, my daughters, so to behave that you will deserve to find your delight in him" (Way 27, 6).

For Teresa, the invitation of Jesus was to all his followers; everyone is called to be holy, to be like Jesus and with Jesus in the ordinary situations of our everyday life. Everyone needs to live the Gospel humility, poverty and commitment to Christ in the way that Teresa and saints of our time live these virtues.

In her Spiritual Testimonies (N. 5), Teresa wrote about God's standards and how different they are from the world's. She had been concerned during the time of the Toledo Carmel's foundation about the advice given to her not to grant a burying-place to one who did not belong to the nobility". She recorded: "The Lord said to me: you will grow very foolish, daughter, if you look at the world's laws. Fix your eyes on me, poor and despised by the world".

## **PART 19**

### Becoming a Carmelite Nun

Many admirers of St Teresa of Avila have little knowledge or appreciation of the actual real situation of the Carmelite Sisters in the Monastery of St. Mary's of the Incarnation where our Saint became a novice in 1535. In fact, the Incarnation, where Teresa entered Carmel, was the newly built monastery outside the walls of old Avila to which the Carmelites had transferred on its completion in 1515. After the cramped conditions in the former old convent, the community now possessed a spacious residence which contained ample accommodation including a refectory and infirmary as well as proper dormitories and large garden and Chapel. At its inauguration, the Carmelites must have been very satisfied for it was a modern building, spacious but inevitably austere, that would enable the nuns to follow their spiritual programme in a quiet atmosphere of the Carmelite regular life. That was in 1515, the year in fact in which on March 28, Teresa de Ahumada was born in the old city of Avila. Nearly twenty years later it was to this monastery of the Incarnation that she applied to enter as a novice.

In 1535 religious life of the monastery had dramatically changed from that envisaged at its opening. From the outset, many women applied to join the community and despite the obvious pressure of increasing numbers, few were ever refused. When Teresa joined, there were as many as 180 women living there. Research has shown that while many Sisters remained faithful to the religious aspirations of the Carmelite Rule - and certainly some groups were models in the practice of Carmelite prayer and mortification, religious life on the whole must have been in disorder. For with the increase in numbers with many from Avila noble families, the problem of 'fixing up daughters' for life was solved by providing a prolonged sojourn in the monastery. Unbelievable as it may seem to people nowadays, the young ladies brought with them the trappings of their world, sometimes joined by some friends and even servants. The social standing of entrants enabled them to secure better accommodation and amenities in the convent. In addition, there were a great number of lay-sisters but reports do not give their number.

With the large increase in numbers, rules and discipline generally must have been affected through efforts of harmonising the needs and aspirations of so many women of differing cultures, ages, backgrounds and needs. Reports do not give the number of lay-sisters who were part of the community which also included old pious ladies who were committed to the Order, invalids of different years who were unable to follow the normal programme or time-table of the community as well as problem or odd people.

The inevitable decline in religious observance resulting from the differing expectations and practices of the members would have produced enormous difficulties for making any spiritual progress by the individuals. The overcrowding at the Incarnation Monastery must have inevitably caused friction; and bickering and other reactions are reported. Rules and discipline must have been generally affected and harmonising the demands of so many women of different ages, needs and backgrounds and the

consequent demands of the religious life to which they were each consecrated, made for impossible personal demands in the spiritual life.

At the time that Teresa was thinking of entering such a “society” she describes her own antagonism toward becoming a nun (Life 3, 1). She didn’t get much strength from her prayers. Then, she states “The Lord sent me a serious illness so that I had to return to my father’s house During this time, she began to worry about her salvation, about the nothingness of all things, the vanity of the world and how it would soon come to an end” (Life 3, 5). She reasoned that “the trials of being a nun could not be greater than those of purgatory”. At this time, she developed a high fever, with great fainting spells. But with the support of her spiritual reading she decided “to tell my father about my decision to take the habit”, to become a nun. So great was his love for Teresa, she says, “in no way was I able to obtain permission from him”, even through the support of other people that she asked to intercede with him for her. After his death, she could do whatever she wanted, was his regular reply. But she was determined to be a nun. With the help of her brother, she met as arranged with a friend, Juana Suarez, a nun at the Monastery of the Incarnation, to be admitted to the Carmelites. Teresa states that when she left her father’s house that morning, I felt the separation so keenly that the feeling will not be greater, I think, when I die” (Life 4, 1).

She received the habit and became a novice on 2 March, 1535. “As soon as I took the habit, the Lord gave me an understanding of how he favours those who use force with themselves to serve Him. He gave me such great happiness at being in the religious state of life that it never left me up to this day and God changed the dryness my soul experienced into the greatest tenderness” (Life 4, 2). She would often say in after years “all the things of religious life delighted me” reflecting her love of the service of the Lord and the joy of her espousal to Jesus.