

The Journey of Teresa

People called her a saint, but in own view she was far from that. Her struggle was with mediocrity. For all her apparent observance she was enduring an eighteen-year malaise “trying to reconcile God and the world” (*Life* 8,3). True, she looked good; she did the right things in her pious convent existence. But in her own words she was not living, but struggling with a shadow of death. “I wanted to live,” she said, “but I had no one to give me life, and I was unable to catch hold of it” (*Life* 8,112).

The would-be saint was Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda (1515–1582), the famous Teresa of Avila, first woman doctor of the Church along with St. Catherine of Siena since 1970. The time was three years after her entry into Carmel, the period from 1538 to 1556. This part of her life was a long plateau in which she was no longer moving upward but only sideways, in a horizontal fashion. At least that was her evaluation as she wrote some years after traversing this “stormy sea.” Eventually she identified this part of the journey as the “Third Mansion” (out of a total of seven) in her final masterpiece, the *Interior Castle*.

Do these years say anything to the Charismatic Christian? How do they relate to the baptism in the Spirit? Do they precede or follow such a baptism? Or was Teresa so baptized? In short, do these years represent the unfolding of the implications of conversion to the Lord? Or are they the impasse which was resolved only later, at around age 41, precisely by a deeper, second conversion, which can aptly be related to the baptism in the Spirit?

Two Possibilities

The picture is not immediately clear. Contrary to a superficial impression from the first eight chapters of her *Life*, Teresa had always been a fervent Christian. There had

been ups and downs in her early teens, at least in comparison to the austere demands of her rigorous father or in the light of the deep compunction of the full-blown mystic who was writing these memoirs. Her upbringing and the year-and-a-half in a convent school at age 16, especially her contact with a fervent sister there, Dona Maria de Briceho, had ignited a strong desire for a prayer life and planted the seed of her religious vocation. The *determinada determinacion* that was at once her definition of love and the touchstone of her life had brought her to the convent door in the face of paternal objections, and made her an exceptionally fervent postulant, novice, and young religious.

All this, of course, does not prove that Teresa had received what is called today the baptism in the Spirit. But she does speak of the “great happiness” which God gave her at the taking of the habit and the “greatest tenderness” she experienced as a result. This euphoric state gave her an abiding delight and joy as well as the power to turn fears and weakness into victories (*Life* 4,2). All this is no mean fervor.

Teresa, however, defaulted and her health broke as well. But she maintained her initial thrust in large measure. On the occasion of the illness, she learned the centering prayer as taught in Francis of Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet* and received the infused prayer of quiet and even of union at times. So strong were the effects of these prayer experiences that she “trampled the world underfoot and pitied those who were following after it” (*Life* 4,7).

All this belongs to the period of her mediocrity. The graces of prayer were countered by Teresa’s own weakness in the face of occasions of sin, her lack of a spiritual director, and her inability to understand an appropriate way of praying for this time. As a

result Teresa was pulled in opposite directions. On the one hand she had an unrealistic demand for instant union with God; on the other she was unable to negotiate the pull of her worldly interests.

How are we to interpret these experiences in the light of the questions posed above? It is thoroughly possible that the original surrender of Teresa which culminated in her religious vocation was the equivalent of the baptism of the Spirit. In this case the 18 years would be a period in which the falling in love of the baptism was consolidated concretely and existentially into a life of love. The early mystical graces in this period would be initial calls, soundings that were anticipations of better things ahead, which Teresa interpreted as lures or enticements to the soul. Of such graces Teresa writes:

There are souls whom God knows He may gain for Himself by this means; seeing that they are completely lost, His Majesty wants to leave no stone unturned to help them; and therefore, though they are in a bad way and lacking in virtues, He gives them consolations and emotions which begin to move their desires, and occasionally even bring them to a state of contemplation, though rarely and not for a long time. And this, as I say, He does because He is testing them to see if that favor will not make them anxious to prepare themselves to enjoy it often. (*Way of Perfection*, ch. 16)

Such clusters of graces could well pertain to an experience of the baptism in the Spirit. In this case the plateau would illustrate how long it takes to be authentically converted to the Lord in one's whole being.

If, on the other hand, a more stable and definite conversion is envisaged as the baptism in the Spirit, then we should look toward the end of these plateau years, to the resolution of Teresa's ambivalence and inconsistencies as the *locus* of the baptism. In this case, the deeper conversion triggered by Teresa's experience of the Savior's love in the symbol of the *Ecce Homo* statue (1554) and the transfer of her trust from herself to God would be the baptism in the Spirit experience. In either case the experience of Teresa is a

caveat that instantaneous, immediate conversions are mere beginnings of a process and that there are in God's ordinary providence no magic transformations even by mystical graces that bypass the historical nature of human change. Key graces are mere milestones in a gradual process.

The Eighteen Years

It is rewarding to analyze the difficulties Teresa experienced in these years and her method of coping with them. The basic problem is ambivalence. Need-loves rather than the free, outpouring, oblation love of a mature Christian characterize the motivation. So Teresa wants instant union with God, yet she is unable to give up certain frivolous friendships and silly parlor gossiping. Her extroverted nature follows its own law and thus comes into conflict with the sentiments of total surrender to God. It is not a question here of moral disorder but of working through human limitations and imperfections. A director, a spiritual friend, or a supportive community would have been able to steer her through this morass with less frustration and self-recrimination. In the absence of such persons, Teresa herself had to forge from her own experience the kind of program that could deal effectively with these growth pains.

Teresa's program is delineated in all her works but especially in the *Way of Perfection*, ch. 4, and the "Third" and "Fourth Mansions" of the *Interior Castle*. The central insight of the program is acceptance on every level of life, acceptance of self, of others, and of God.

Teresa gives her own names to this triple acceptance. She calls them detachment, humility, and fraternal charity respectively. It is not difficult to see equivalencies here. Detachment is self-acceptance; humility is acceptance of God, or more clearly, it is expectant faith; and fraternal charity is acceptance of others.

One simple example will suffice to illustrate this interpretation. In the "Third

Mansion” she describes a rich man who makes a bad investment and loses part of his fortune, but not so great as to jeopardize his family responsibilities. If he is deeply disturbed and agitated by this mistake, says Teresa, how can the Lord deal with him? The problem obviously is attachment; the solution detachment and humility. Unlike the will power response, Teresa’s solution manifests her Christian insight:

If this man cannot resign himself because the Lord has not led him thus far, well and good, but he ought to realize that he lacks this freedom of spirit and in that case he will pray for it and prepare himself for the Lord to give it to him. (“Third Mansion,” ch. 2)

Here detachment or freedom is accepting the real about oneself; expectant faith is the source of power.

Teresa distilled this program from her life experience. She learned the hard way to fix her eyes on Jesus and accept peacefully her own powerlessness. These attitudes led her into the peak experiencing of God’s overpowering love symbolized in the suffering Christ and the releasing of a river of special graces. More and more her faith blossomed into mystical experience in the infused prayer of quiet (*gustos*) and union. Yet even here the end was not yet. A great deal of work in personal transformation remained to be done. The major tasks were accomplished with the astute guidance of some young Jesuit spiritual directors and under the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The Charismatic Experience

There might be a temptation to identify without distinction Teresa’s second conversion and baptism in the Spirit. The program which disposed Teresa for conversion is like a Life in the Spirit Seminar. The honest recognition of one’s powerlessness, the need for a personal savior, the faith that expects the outpouring of the Spirit, the presence of a praying, supportive

community, all these dispose one for the realization of God’s love and power and presence in the baptism in the Spirit.

But perhaps identity is better not pressed. There are similarities, yes, but significant differences as well. God led Teresa in her own way and he leads each individual person both within the Charismatic Renewal and outside it in an equally unique way. The confluences, however, can be very instructive for contemporary Charismatics. Teresa’s life and teaching validate the Charismatic approach to the Christian life. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the “pure gospel” as Pope Pius XI characterized St. John of the Cross’s teaching, is the real warranty for this traditional Christian way to God. The good news is the promise of salvation beyond our wildest dreams or desserts, a salvation that occurs historically in the body of Christ. Teresa and John of the Cross simply exemplify that public teaching of the gospel.

Some insights from Teresa’s life and reflection are very practical. Her works deserve patient study precisely because they illustrate the process of salvation. Teresa reminds us, for example, that there is no cheap grace, that however much the work of holiness is God’s work in our souls in the context of community, it takes place slowly and often painfully as the assimilation of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Teresa reminds Charismatics to be realists, to be as honest and humble as possible. She encourages us to start with the frail quality of our human life, to work with that life with a patience like that of our merciful Father Himself, and to let the saving power of Jesus be mediated to us through brothers and sisters in the Church. Teresa puts flesh and blood on these bare bones of basic truths. She is therefore excellent reading for Charismatics. By the same token, an experienced and informed Charismatic spiritual director in her own time could have saved her a lot of grief.