

## Saint Teresa of Avila: My Lifetime's Quest

This article is a personal sharing of my experience studying and teaching St. Teresa of Avila. The editor of the *Sword* kindly invited me to do an essay in her honor for the IV Centenary of her death (1582-1982). I reflected on my own story *vis-a-vis* Teresa, and the present personal witness and tribute resulted. It is one man's experience with a great Saint of the Order.

For historical reasons Teresa has not been "Holy Mother" to the Carmelites of the Old Observance. But she is a sainted sister and supreme teacher of prayer. Titus Brandsma considered her the "foremost exponent" (though not the founder) of Carmelite spirituality (*The Sword*, 19 (1956) 21). One of his last compositions was a biography of St. Teresa written in his first prison cell at Scheveningen between the lines of another life of the saint. Our Dutch Province has been more active than the American provinces in promoting Teresa's cause. They have done translations and studies right along, so that Otger Steggink, the contemporary Teresian scholar of the first rank, is simply continuing a tradition with his creative monographs and his collaboration with Efren J.M. Montalva de la M. de Dios, O.C.D., in editing texts and doing historical studies. He and Efren have blazed new pathways in Carmelite ecumenism. They have published a definitive text of Teresa's writings (*Obras completas*, Madrid: Editorial Catolica, 1975, fourth manual edition) and the most complete biography to date of the saint (*Tiempo y vida de Santa Teresa*, Madrid: BAC 1968, second edition).

### Personal Manifesto

My teaching experience goes back to Whitefriars Hall in the 1950's, when I introduced reading courses in Teresa and John of the Cross. There were more questions than answers in those days, as some of my students may painfully remember. The project was

criticized by at least one, perhaps only one, contemporary who was reacting against some of the primitive, intemperate history of the Reform and thought Teresa of Avila, in his words, "almost destroyed the Order." I should add that this individual was quite chauvinistic and innocent of the facts in Teresa's life.

American Carmelites of our observance have focused on "Little Thérèse, an influence evident in her dark night of faith and her deceptively simple "little way." From one point on in her life, John's works became her only spiritual reading except for the Bible and *The Imitation of Christ*; her own writings are a modern transposition of his teaching. But she is also a daughter of Holy Mother. Anne of Jesus, Teresa's *alter ego*, who brought the Teresian Carmel to France intact, as little customs such as community skits, which are Teresa's trademark, illustrate. Anne of Jesus was also the confidante of St. John of the Cross. It was for her that he wrote the sublime commentary, *Spiritual Canticle*. So Carmel in France was blessed by the riches of a double patrimony and the Little Flower was heir by direct line to the complementary treasures of Teresa and John.

### Seminary

But if we American Carmelites have not distinguished ourselves in Teresian or Sanjuanist studies, we have felt the influence of these saints. In my own seminary experience, for example, Teresa was no stranger. Fr. Leo Walter allowed us to read her works in the novitiate, though not those of

John of the Cross, sage advice for our age level at that time. At Niagara after novitiate Fr. Norbert Piper urged us to read Teresa and other Carmelite writers, introducing me at the time to *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa's primer on prayer. One reaction I recall was the conflict in my mind over Teresa's seemingly harsh attitude toward love of relatives. Only later did I discover that her nuanced doctrine on human love was totally compatible with close ties.

This experience illustrates the joy and the pain of reading Teresa. She has a profound teaching, but it has to be mined carefully. She treats the elusive issue of healthy versus unhealthy human loves in four self-enclosed chapters (chs. 4 to 7) of *The Way*. They are a golden treatise on friendship, but available only in precious nuggets from her observation of the human scene. Her mind is so quick and concrete, her understanding so dialectic in moving back and forth among the apparent contradictions of human behavior, that her writing is like a mirror of life: complex, subtle, both-and rather than either-or. Don't expect facile oversimplifications in Teresa; she is too close to life.

Her insights are immensely helpful, but they are purchased at a price: digging out her categories and definitions, staying with her as she meanders down one wandering path after another, striving to grasp her 16th century world view, and all the while enjoying her sure touch and sense of humor. (Readers of Spanish are at an advantage here, though the new translations, two-thirds complete with a third volume to come, by Kiernan Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., and available at 2131 Lincoln Road, N.E., Washington D.C. 20002, make for easier reading than the E. Allison Peers' translations of the late 1940's). The problem is hermeneutics, as with every old text, but the reward is that we are dealing with the spiritual masters rather than their derivatives.

In mystical theology classes at Whitefriars with Fr. Kilian Healy, Teresa was an important albeit controversial source for the one question that mesmerized spiritual theologians of those times, the normalcy of contemplation. This problematic involved the theological nature of contemplation in a scholastic framework, with Garrigou-Lagrange vying for equal time with DeGuibert and the vote usually going to the *via media* Carmelite School sometimes represented by Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen. Fr. Joachim Smet brought the historical and literary element to the mix with his lectures in Order History. His early researches, which have since culminated in the exciting and balanced account of Teresa and John in the Order in his second volume of *The Carmelites* (1976), helped bring theology and history together and allowed us to claim both these saints as truly our own.

### Teaching Teresa

This trip down memory lane, which I trust raises nostalgia as well as gratitude among us *anciens élèves* serves to situate my own attempts to read the texts in theology classes of the 1950's at Whitefriars and in graduate courses at Catholic University in the 1960's. It was only in the 1970's at Kino Institute, in Phoenix, Arizona, that I was able to develop a practical and pastoral approach to St. Teresa. This occurred through adult education classes and especially by attempting to design a directed retreat in a Teresian-Sanjuanist mode rather than an Ignatian one. The first experiment took place in Phoenix in the summer of 1975; the retreat lasted four weeks and some 15 persons, both religious and lay, participated. A second experiment along this line occurred at Aylesford the following summer, and Carmelites were the participants along with a few outsiders; there were about 23 of our own province, eight nuns of both observances of the Order, cloistered and non-cloistered, and five "observers" from

other orders. Since that time I have been able to develop the basic themes that emerged in those retreats in a multiplicity of different ways, in one-day meetings, weekends, sessions of one or two weeks, and in various forums such as college campuses, retreat houses, and parish facilities.

The format changes, but the methodology is basically the same. The approach followed is described in my article in *Review for Religious*, May, 1981, entitled "A Method for Reading the Spiritual Classics." Ideally the inquiry begins with the personal experience of the group, their individual stories; this is related to the normative story of the Scriptures; then, and only then, further illumination is sought in the works of Teresa. Most of the time the procedure is somewhat short-circuited, because there is not enough time for the first two steps. They must be left up to the ingenuity and responsibility of the participants; the input on Teresa becomes the preponderant task of the group meetings. Sharing sessions, the liturgy, and prayer services help to personalize and internalize the whole experience, but better integration of the three steps of the method remains a *desideratum*. Even so, the workshops receive good feedback and participants find it easy to identify their journey with the struggles Teresa experienced along that same route. Teresa's experience is every Christian's experience "writ large."

### Why Teresa?

So much for the background. A more substantive question remains: Why struggle with Teresa at all? "Honor her, revere her, but get on with our own times," it may be said. "Go to people who talk our own language, a Thomas Merton or Henri Nouwen, and leave the 16th Century to the scholars."

My response is the authority of Teresa of Jesus both in the Order and in the Church. Contemporary writers stand under the

judgement of the tradition, and not *vice versa*. Not that the moderns have nothing to add. They have a great deal to say, but their contribution must be in basic continuity with the past. Even the quantum leaps that occur occasionally in spiritual writing as in a Teilhard de Chardin or new discoveries in parallel fields like those of Freud or Jung need to be related to the experience of the saints. It is rewarding, though not surprising, to find these correlations. Chardin, for example, for all his love of the world or Freud for all his agnostic materialism, teach the same basic attitudes toward self-gratification as John of the Cross (according to Francis Kelly Nemeck for Chardin and Charles Maes of Duquesne for Freud).

Fr. John Welch has illustrated the point very well in his lectures on Teresa from the Jungian point of view. Both in classes at the Washington Theological Union and elsewhere and in our annual week-long seminars at Aylesford each August since 1978, he has shown the confluence (rather than identity) between Teresa and Jung largely through a study of the symbols in Teresa. Some of his work will appear in his forthcoming book from Paulist Press, entitled *Perspectives on Spirituality: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila. An Introduction to the Psychology of C. G. Jung and the Spirituality of Teresa of Avila Through an Exploration of the Symbols of The Interior Castle*. Jung enlightens Teresa, translates some of her experience into more intelligible terms, corroborates basic insights, and fills out aspects of her teaching. But he does not establish the Christian or Carmelite tradition or even necessarily witness to it. For that we go to our own sources and to contemporary experience and reflection in the giants of our time—inside and outside our own tradition—for deeper understanding and more effective communication.

The convergence of Teresa with modern investigators argues to the very attractive human quality of her experience.

She is basically at home with whatever is authentically human. She is historically conditioned and limited as are all writers, ancient and modern, but she provides a standard and criterion of Christian spirituality, especially now as a doctor of the Church. The correlations one does discover between a Jung, a Kohlberg or an Erickson and St. Teresa are “confirmations” in some real sense. They are also correctives and helps in exposition for both parties of the comparison. Recently I have sensed an identification between the last four stages of Erik Erickson’s eight-stage developmental framework and Teresa’s “III to VII Mansions” I have stated the argument in an article to appear in a German *Festschrift* in honor of the IV Centenary, edited by the Bavarian provincial, Josef Kotschner, O. Carm. I hope the article will also appear in an English language publication. The thesis needs further careful documentation, but even the data collected so far shows that Teresa is talking about the same full human development in the upper mansions as Erickson; she is not a far-out mystic, whose sensational, extraordinary states place her outside the frontiers of ordinary human experience. She is in the mainstream of life, and our questions are her questions.

### **Spirituality of St. Teresa**

Teresa models and expounds Christian spirituality in a Carmelite mode. For her life in Christ is centered in prayer, i.e., in contemplation. The contemplation is not any one particular form or stereotype; it is a lived relationship with the Trinity, a personal, loving knowledge of God. This relationship thrives only when there are generous portions of quiet space and time to nourish it, but its thrust is a transformed life. Teresa’s great contribution is to show us that all authentic Christian life comes out of the Divine Presence within us. Prophecy originates there, since prophecy is witnessing to the presence

of the living God in human affairs; the true prophet recognizes God first within, and because of the affinity or connaturality that emerge, he can recognize Him outside, for example, in the struggles of the poor and the oppressed. This contemplative and prophetic stance in turn is born out of and grows with self-discovery, the realistic appraisal and acceptance of weakness and grandeur, and it seeks support and discernment in a community of brothers and sisters in touch with their weakness. So the circle of the spiritual life begins in God and transcribes the other two angles of self and others at the base of an inscribed triangle.

Teresa has a marvelous expression of this life. The key for her is self-acceptance, which can come only in the loving ambiance of the experienced love of God in prayer and the mediated experience of that same love in human community. Teresa describes her own struggle to achieve this state in her *Life*, chapters 7 to 10, and 23 to 24. The whole book as well as her other works, especially the *Way of Perfection* and the *Interior Castle*, play on these same themes. Teresa proposes a most relevant Christianity, as authentic as the New Testament and as contemporary as Alcoholics Anonymous’ Twelve Steps.

### **Friendship**

One of the most appealing among many formulations of her spirituality is friendship both with God and with one another. She constellates her whole doctrine around this concept. Mental prayer itself, the central piece of her way to God, “is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.” (*Life* 8:5). Eventually that presence is permanent, a spiritual marriage, in which one walks with God as both Martha and Mary, so that “the soul is always aware that it is experiencing this companionship.” (“VII Mansions” 1:9, Peers’ translation). This experience is “not for

our enjoyment but for service,” particularly in the local community and reaching out from there (“VII Mansions” 4:12,14). Teresa fostered strong bonds of friendship within each community, this intimate, “spiritual,” i.e., wholistic love being one of the reasons for her opting against large communities and favoring small groupings.

This quality of friendship has been identified by observers as something particularly Carmelite. Years ago John Jordan, teacher and basketball coach at Mt. Carmel High School in Chicago before going on to Nore Dame, and friend of a whole generation of Carmelites, used to tell a story on the banquet circuit about the special charisms of each religious order. God gave brilliant scholarship to Jesuits, preaching ability to Dominicans, simplicity to Franciscans, and to the Carmelites he gave friendship. Johnny would orchestrate the story with great skill, and climax his telling with his own experience of 13 years at Carmel. He found friendship there within the community and liberally shared outside. John was at home in the refectory or rec room of the community as he was in the faculty room; he could walk into anyone’s room in the monastery and borrow a shirt, bum a cigarette or just sit down and talk. Carmelites for him were distinguished for their openness and availability, their simple welcome to others.

This little story rang true, certainly in our own wishful thinking. I think it is true of the Carmelite Order in a deeper charismatic

sense, and Teresa of Avila is warranty for this claim. Friendship is no cheap grace. It is realism about ourselves in a healthy acceptance of our weakness and brokenness and allowing the bond of relationship with God and with others to empower and support us in our search for the fullness of life.

## Conclusion

Teresa is a most rewarding subject of prayerful inquiry, precisely because she is so Christian, so Carmelite, and so contemporary. One needs to get beyond the sensational in her life, whether this be diabolical manifestations (plentiful enough in spite of her advice in her life, Ch. 25, that the less we think about the devil the better) or extraordinary mystical phenomena. Without denying the truth of these experiences, they are in some respects part of her historical conditioning. Beneath the turbulence we find a fellow searcher, a companion on the same journey as our own. She has views on all the current spiritual issues, from forms of centering prayer through self-discovery to communities of psychological intimacy. She even touches theme like peace and justice, at least by emphasizing the rootedness of all ministry in a centered life. Teresa is a woman for all seasons, a brilliant star in the Carmelite universe, a charming, lovable, holy woman of God, who will entertain us and challenge us, and who can give us excellent direction in a time of change.