

Life by St. Teresa of Avila

The work known as 'The Book of her Life' which is an autobiography written by St. Teresa of Avila, had an interesting pre-history. In the Collected Works we find a section entitled 'Spiritual Testimonies'. The first two of these might be considered as the beginnings of the life as we have it now. These sketch out for her confessor the stage she was at in her prayer life. One of her confessors, Garcia de Toledo, asked her to expand on this kind of testimony and so Teresa wrote a longer account on the lines of a letter which we may regard as the first draft of the Life. This has now been lost. Garcia de Toledo asked her to write a still longer account of her spiritual life and include in it an account of the foundation of the first convent of Discalced Carmelite nuns at St. Joseph's in Avila. This second manuscript was greatly expanded and Chapters 11 - 22 constituted in themselves an independent treatise on prayer.

The most colourful anecdote recorded by Teresa about her early life concerned her desire for instant martyrdom in order to see God. She conspired with her brother Rodrigo to invite the Moors to do them this honour but they had only got as far as the four columns outside Avila when they were returned home by a sharp-eyed uncle.

Teresa entered the Convent of the Incarnation in Avila at an early age. She experienced chronic ill-health however while still only about twenty years old. One of the books that influenced her greatly at this point was The Third Spiritual Alphabet by Francisco de Osuno which dealt with the prayer of recollection. Teresa herself writes regarding her approach to prayer. "I tried as hard as I could to keep Jesus Christ our God and our Lord present within me and that was my way of prayer." Teresa was drawn to solitude and contemplation from an early stage.

She tells us that she found it almost impossible to go through the exercise known as meditation. Perhaps it was partly her feminine intuition and partly a kind of 'premature progress', which made her ripe for the kind of loving contemplation about which St. John of the Cross speaks. Because of her inability and disinclination to meditate discursively, she found it helpful to have a book with her at prayer in order to anchor her thoughts. The very fact of having the book to hand was enough to spark off a deep sense of recollection.

Rather surprisingly the condition persisted for eighteen years of her life until she was thirty-eight years old. At the beginning of her spiritual life Teresa suffered a long and painful illness which completely crippled her. She felt she was eventually cured of this illness through the intercession of St. Joseph.

"Anyone who cannot find a master in prayer should take this glorious saint for his master and he will not go astray.(Ch 6) . Even after these experiences however Teresa accuses herself of continued infidelity to her calling, by becoming involved in useless friendships. She tells us,

"I was then ashamed to return to a search for God by means of a friendship as special as is that found in the intimate exchange of prayer"(Ch.7). She felt that by simply engaging in the usual vocal prayers she fulfilled her obligation and need not seriously apply herself to mental prayer and intimacy with God. However her protestations of indifference are not to be taken too

literally, for she does admit that she often threw herself into solitude to pray and read and she conversed a lot about God with her friends. Teresa tells us that she continued for a long time somewhat divided in her approach - neither wholly belonging to God nor wholly given to the world. Consolation in prayer was one of her sharpest trials because it underlined for her the extent of her ingratitude to God .Teresa makes a strong plea that people who take prayer seriously should engage in dialogue with others who have similar leanings so as to encourage each other to grow spiritually.

She feels she has to make an apology for this against people who insisted that the desire for sharing involved 'vain glory'. Evidently this practice of sharing was frowned upon in the spiritual climate of her day.

Teresa sums up her own dilemma during this twenty year period of her life:

“When I was experiencing the enjoyments of the world, I felt sorrow when I recalled what I owed to God. When I was with God, my attachments to the world disturbed me.” (Ch 8).

Teresa feels that the desire to hold on to prayer, come what may, is the real lifesaver. She writes again in Ch. 8 "I recount this also that one may understand how, if the soul perseveres in prayer, in the midst of sins, temptations and failures of a thousand kinds that the devil places in its path, in the end I hold as certain, the Lord will draw it forth to the harbour of salvation as - now it seems - he did for me."

Teresa goes on to make a powerful appeal to us to immerse ourselves in prayer. During the course of this appeal she makes the wonderful observation:

"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" (Ch. 8.)

The whole object of prayer is for us to accommodate ourselves to a patient Lord who waits for us to grow. In spite of our unfaithfulness, all that is necessary is to wish to spend some time each day in the company of the loving Lord. Under the inspiration of St. Teresa, two hours meditation each day, one in the morning and one in the evening became the norm for Carmelite houses, both of men and women. We need also to remember while reading her life that Teresa felt the necessity to put up a defence of mental prayer which was under suspicion in her day.

In the year 1554 when Teresa was 39 years old, she had a touching spiritual experience which she calls her 'conversion'. One day when she entered the oratory she saw a statue of the 'Ecce-Homo' which aroused in her deep devotion. Presumably she had noticed this statue previously but it did not make an impact on her until this particular day. The statue in question can still be seen at the convent of the Incarnation in Avila. The sight of the suffering Christ caused her heart to break. She threw herself down at his feet and vowed she would not rise until she **had** obtained the grace to change. In this experience Teresa identified herself with Mary Magdalen at the feet of Jesus.

A great deal has been written in books on prayer and spirituality about 'method', and how to proceed in making meditation. At this point Teresa tells us what her method was. She tried to picture Christ within her because of her inability to reflect discursively and she favoured scenes such as Jesus alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. Though she found no help in the traditional discursive methods of meditation, Teresa was helped in other ways.

"It helped me to look at fields or water or flowers. In these things I found a remembrance of the creator".

This is very reminiscent of St. John of the Cross in the way he praises the beauty of creation in the Spiritual Canticle. In her encounter with the Lord in prayer at this time, Teresa gives us a striking image of her experience;

"I was like one who is blind or in darkness; he speaks with and sees that that person is with him because he knows with certainty that he is there, (I mean he understands and believes that he is there, but does not see him); such was the case with me when I thought of our Lord." About this time someone gave Teresa a copy of the '*Confessions' of St. Augustine to read. This book had a great influence on her and she felt, as in the case of Mary Magdalen, that she identified with him in his conversion experience in the garden. We find in her life now a renewed application to prayer, to spending time with the Lord, as she would put it. Now in Chapter 10 of her 'Life', Teresa begins to relate what happened when she gave herself unreservedly to God. When she was engaged in prayer, a feeling of the presence of God would come on her unexpectedly and this feeling would carry deep conviction of its authenticity. It was the conviction of a kind of mutual presence to and in each other. This is a mystical experience by which the individual is drawn

outside himself. For Teresa, this feeling resulted in a great suffusion of tenderness, accompanied by a liberal shedding of tears. She felt herself the recipient of great gifts from the Lord and she says that it is important to recognise that we are being loaded with gifts by the Lord,

Teresa, now plans to give an anonymous account of the mystical graces with which God showered her after she had made her final surrender to him. The better to communicate this to us, however, she first proposes to give a more ordered account of prayer itself and this will interrupt the narrative of her life.

From Chapter 11 to Chapter 22 then, I as I said, we are dealing with a separate unit which in itself is a little classic on prayer .