

St Teresa: her prayer, choices and mission

St Teresa's personal quest for the God of acceptance and love shaped her foundation of the Discalced Carmelites. I will examine the choices she made in her life and founding activity in the personal and historical context of her times which shaped all her life choices. To live the Teresian charism today does not mean primarily replicating practices of the past but having a loving personal relationship with God, while living in a loving community of friends who are also friends of God and responding creatively to the pressing needs of our time. The Teresian spirit begins with a profound interiority. It is deeply personal but not individualistic. It grows through interpersonal relationships of mutuality and is socially aware and involved.

In my reflection on the achievement of St Teresa I have been struck by how the choices she made were timely rather than timeless. Her decisions were made in the context of her time and were personal responses to particular challenges she faced in life. Teresa's life can be understood as a long and demanding quest for the true God, of her own self-knowledge and the discernment of her own gift to the church and the world. We call this gift the Teresian charism which is the defining characteristic of Discalced Carmelites. This gift is both contemplative and prophetic. While it is possible to understand the contemplative aspect in a timeless way, even though this understanding is not Teresian, the prophetic aspect is always grounded in history and necessarily timely.

Nowadays in religious life we all too easily engage in talk of charisms. The Teresian charism, both for religious and secular Carmelites, can be seen as a timeless ideal without relationship to history or personal biography. Charisms, as ideals, exist as abstract life forms within a conceptualised idea of the Church. The Teresian Carmelite ideal could be real without anyone actually living it. Neoplatonic philosophy, with its affirmation of existing ideal forms, is behind this way of seeing things. St Teresa however does not give us an ideal but rather she gives us a witness- pre-eminently the story of her own life and her foundations. She is a narrative theologian who uses wonderful images and rests her spiritual teaching on her own personal experience and consequent reflection. Knowing her story and how it fits into its historical context is important if one is to share her spirit. It is my belief that in appreciating the timeliness of St Teresa's responses we can use her example to help us in our own responses to the problems and issues of our own times.

Teresa has been presented in different ways, often as one of the great heroes and exemplars of the Catholic Counter Reformation and of the Spanish nation. Did she not die saying "I die a daughter of the Church"? In 1939 at the end of the Spanish Civil War Padre Silverio published a book called *St Teresa of Avila, Supreme Synthesis of her Race* which included a chapter entitled 'For God and Spain'.¹ From this viewpoint she is presented as an old Christian aristocrat who unquestioningly accepted her place in society and all that the leaders of the Church decreed.

However, in 1946 Alonso Cortes published the 'Pleitos de los Cepeda'. This was a document he had discovered which showed Teresa's paternal grandfather Juan Sanchez was in fact a wealthy converso merchant who was prosecuted by the Toledo Inquisition in 1485 for being a *judaiizante*, a secret practitioner of Jewish customs. He was found

¹ Margaret Rees, *Leeds Papers on St John of the Cross*. Leeds: Trinity and All Saints, 1999, 66.

guilty and forced with his sons, including Teresa's father Alonso, to do public penance.² For seven consecutive Fridays Juan and his sons paraded through the streets of their city wearing the dread garments of shame called sanbenitos. In between the sanbenitos with their names on them were hung in their parish church. A more thoroughgoing public shaming and loss of honour could scarcely be imagined. It is no wonder that Juan moved away from Toledo as soon as he could and made a new life for himself and his family in Ávila. To be a converso meant to be a target of resentment, fear and envy. It was such a cause of shame that Alonso her beloved father lived a lie his whole life by attempting to pass as a pure-blooded Old Christian noble.

Far from being a complacent aristocrat Teresa had the critical eye of one on the margins. Teresa's social critique focused on the concept of honour- *honra negra*. Honour is the recognition that one's social legitimacy resided in the opinion of others. It was fragile, proverbially as easily shattered as glass. Honour could be lost by suspicion of sexual impurity, a failure to keep the demeanour appropriate to one's social position, or through public acknowledgement of Jewish or Moorish ancestry.³ From her insecure place within Church and society Teresa saw her times with fresh eyes.

Her personal quest for God and love

Teresa's long slow spiritual journey to freedom, creativity and fruitfulness was also a quest for love and acceptance. Looking at her life in the Monastery of the Incarnation Teresa evaluates it as twenty lost years. Her heart was divided between wanting the love and acceptance of the world and the love and acceptance of God. Teresa sees it as a conflict between friendship with God and friendship with the world.⁴ Teresa sincerely desired communion with God but found she could not bring herself to simply trust him. She desperately searches for remedies to her situation but can find none. Sermons and spiritual exercises bring some comfort but even more anxiety. Her spiritual life is out of control, "I wanted to live (for I well understood that I was not living but struggling with a shadow of death), but I had no one to give me life, and I was unable to catch hold of it"⁵. Teresa is in the midst of what today we might call a mid-life crisis. She is at a cross roads. The road she is travelling leads to self-torture and the other road she is too frightened to begin to walk along. Who will save her from this impasse? What can now give her life meaning and purpose?

An image of the suffering Christ brings her to a felt awareness of how much our salvation cost Jesus. With her tears there comes an emotional breakthrough. Encouraged by the example of the penitent Magdalene she places all her trust in God. She lets go and has a sense that Jesus will not despise her tears. It is trust that sets her free from having to work her own salvation. Because Teresa places her trust in the abundant love of God she can allow God to do the work in her. By focussing on the suffering of Christ her shadow of suffering is brought to consciousness so as to be healed.

² Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious reform in a Sixteenth Century City*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1989, 109.

³ Alison Weber, "The Fortunes of Ecstasy", *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Volume 28 Number 4, 1999,

⁴ *Life*, 8.3.

⁵ *ibid*, 8.12

Teresa's temperament can glimpsed in her spiritual struggle. Her meditation on the suffering and lonely Christ is effective because it enables her to bring her own hidden melancholy to be healed. What this feels like for Teresa is acceptance, "it seemed to me that alone and afflicted, as a person in need, he had to accept me"⁶. However unworthy she might have been he, being who he was, had to accept her. Her shame is taken away, her heart is unified, and her life becomes integrated around the mission the Lord has given her. This is a personal transformation and unleashes Teresa's "passion for creativity, emotional depth, and a profound desire for authenticity"⁷. Her personal quest for authenticity as a religious leads to her desire to reform herself and then invite others to join her foundations. The Lord whom Teresa encounters is the Risen Lord but who still bears the marks of suffering in his body. For Teresa, as in the Scriptural post-Resurrection appearances, the encounter with the Risen Jesus is forgiveness, liberation, healing and commission. Because of her union with God in prayer Teresa becomes amazingly effective in the external world.

The wounded Christ speaks to Teresa more effectively than did the angry, judging Christ whose disapproval of a friendship left her frightened and disturbed⁸. The neediness of the suffering Christ means that she is needed and welcome as a human companion, "whose mere presence might be a grace or comfort in the suffering of another"⁹. The suffering Jesus poignantly brings Teresa to a life enhancing encounter with the God of abundant love. This encounter makes possible her friendship with Christ, and her ability to forget her honour as she was to be solely concerned for Jesus' honour. Now that she knew herself as completely known by another and yet still accepted and loved she can be free of her shame and free to live and love. Being known and accepted by God enables Teresa to come to accept herself. His pain allows her to come to terms with her own pain, the pain of her divided heart seeking the approval of both God and the world, the pain of not being part of a race that was regarded with suspicion and the pain of being a woman in a world that despised them. With self acceptance there comes the possibility of change and growth. She finds her own voice and learns slowly how to speak the message given to her.

On the whole the Spanish clergy of her time had a more 'objective', less experiential understanding of God. Because of their need to rid the Church of any possible threat they were suspicious particularly of conversos, those who claimed spiritual experience, especially women. Mental prayer was considered a very dangerous practice. It was unnecessary and women were never to be encouraged to engage in such interior prayer. Inevitably such a mentality would have spiritual consequences. Their desire to control meant they were more accustomed to speaking, either teaching or preaching, than listening. Their God was not the God of abundant mercy and love but a God with very scarce resources which he distributed in a parsimonious way. The God they held sacred may have been theologically correct but he did not act or relate with people as did the God of Jesus.

Teresa's personal breakthrough made her more Christian than those who ruled the Church. She is a witness to the necessity of the charismatic element in the Church if the Church is to live. What is striking is that Teresa's came about was mental prayer and that she was determined that as it had saved her life so it should be available for many others.

⁶ *ibid*, 9.4

⁷ Mary Bast and Clarence Thomson, *Out of the Box*, Louisberg, Kansas: Ninestar, 2005, 6

⁸ *ibid*, 7.6

⁹ Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991, 53

Her books are first a witness to how this grace had worked in her life in the *Book of her Life* and then her practical and theological reflections on this grace in the *Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*.

Teresa's process of finding her own voice was thus complicated as her confessors were frightened of her mystical experiences and advised her she must treat such experiences as if they were from the devil. Their spiritual discernment says much about the ecclesial climate of the time and their deafness to what it is that Teresa has to say, the message she believes that the Lord is giving her. They hear her but do not really listen. Women who claimed spiritual experience were treated with great suspicion. If what they said was true then they had direct spiritual authority outside of the normal jurisdiction of the clergy. This period throws Teresa into a trying period in which her spirit is sorely tested by her being not trusted. Teresa is tested until she makes the happy discovery of a young Jesuit priest. Because he, like all Jesuits, had undergone the Spiritual Exercises he was not afraid of spiritual experience. What a difference this was for Teresa to go from being considered a dupe of the devil to a person who God had chosen for his friendship. It shows how sensitive and responsive spiritual direction that comes from someone who is also a friend of God (who has experience) can be a means of God's grace and mercy.

In her championing of the fundamental importance of the personal, mystical element of religion Teresa is prophetic. However for all her difficulty with the Inquisition she is not bitter or angry. She does not, like Luther, break communion. She remains a faithful Catholic whose faith is nourished by her personal relationship with Christ, the liturgy and the Scriptures (even if the Gospels were available to her only through Ludolph the Carthusian's *Life of Christ*, which in its Spanish version was a rich synthesis of the Gospels) and conversations with friends who were theologians or people with spiritual experience. Teresa continuously reflects, seeks to understand and integrate her experience of life and prayer.

Teresa's style of Catholic faith then is different from that of the Inquisitors and leaders of the Church of her day. In what follows I have been greatly helped by the thought of the Dutch American Jesuit Frans Jozef van Beeck¹⁰. They wanted people to have a simple faith, based on what the Church taught through the clergy. This way of faith is based on the truth that we do not invent our faith we receive it as a gift. However it is in danger of making faith backward looking, clerically dependent, impatient (you must believe this or else) and inhospitable in that it is concerned more with guarding clear boundaries than in reconciliation. The reformers of the Church had a more prophetic faith. Faith for them was not just something to be believed but also something to be lived. It meant the following of Christ and service of the world and its needs. This type of faith has great energy and direct relevance in ways that remind me at least of adolescence. It sees what needs to be done and so is activist but also often angry. People with this type of faith can often work so hard they burn out. While this style of faith is hospitable it is often very impatient. Luther, for example, had many keen theological insights but lost patience with the actual Church. At the present time many people speak of a polarisation within the Church. Whether one side is named as conservative and the other as liberal does not greatly matter. I believe the two styles of faith I have outlined here describe the basic dynamics involved.

¹⁰ Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J. *Catholic Identity After Vatican II, Three Types of Faith in the One Church*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985.

For Teresa, in contrast, faith had a mystical dimension. It was a relationship of union with God in prayer. Contemplation is a way of seeing. Teresa, to use a simple image, learns to see with the eyes of Jesus. She sees herself with the eyes of Jesus as loved and accepted. She sees God with the eyes of Jesus as a merciful Father. And she sees others not with eyes of judgment and condemnation but with the eyes of Jesus, with clarity and compassion. Seeing the world through the eyes of Jesus Teresa can be patient and not want everything contentious in the Church and the world to be resolved immediately. She can transcend the narrow mindsets of her time because she has a sense of 'God's time'- the fullness of time in the reign of God.

Teresa can be hospitable in welcoming the other who is different from her. She believed in the apostolate of friendship by which someone with experience of God could awaken the eyes and hearts of those, like so many of the clergy, whose faith was not based in a personal relationship with Christ. Her hope was for a new clergy who would have a deep prayer life, a personal faith and who lived a Gospel life of simplicity, humility and non-violence. This new type of clergy would with God's grace help bring about a renewed Church. Teresa's faith was also hospitable in that she did not exclude from her friendship those who were rejected because of their lack of purity of blood. I believe that Teresa saw the Church's best means of converting heretics, which she saw as the great challenge of her time, was to have Catholics of Christian authenticity who would engage them in spiritual friendship. Mystical prayer and faith in a Teresian perspective is not strange or esoteric it is deeply personal, realistic and transformative.

Teresa's spirituality is one where we find God in the human heart. The humanity of Christ can never be transcended or forgotten because for her Christian life, faith and prayer is incarnational. Teresa rejects the Platonic spiritual way which focuses on the divinity of Christ and a sense of the spiritual that was opposed to the physical. For Teresa the spiritual was a way of living in the body in communities of real people. The humanity of Christ is of primary importance in bringing God to us in our humanity. Teresa therefore has a humane concern for the whole person. She rejects the extreme asceticism of the Discalced Franciscans whose example inspired many of the early Discalced Carmelite friars. She comes to believe in moderation in penance. If we are to fulfil the mission the Lord has given us then we need to preserve our health by not engaging in excessive fasting, sleep deprivation through prayer vigils or lack of cleanliness and hygiene. Teresa combats these tendencies among the friars pointing out she prefers character or virtue to penance. Teresa was as concerned with psychological as physical health. Her comments on melancholia show a shrewd use of the prevailing Galenic theory of bodily humours. In doing this she normalises what was often discerned as demonic possession and treated punitively. Teresa's by contrast is more understanding and therapeutic in her approach.

Now Teresa is free to be truly herself, she does not have to act out the social role of an aristocrat. She can now walk in the truth of who she is, she can live humbly. Humility is linked by her to self knowledge and authenticity. She now names how destructive is *honra*. It undermines the spiritual life and introduces blaming, competition and envy into social life. However she does not speak with the anger of a victim denouncing as villains those who have caused her pain. She does not see herself as a victim, as she has been set free. She no longer identifies with society's ways of distinguishing between classes of people. It makes no difference to her whether a person has noble status, is a poor peasant or a Jewish converso. What does matter is the character of the person, whether or not they are a person of virtue. When Teresa comes to make her first foundation of

San José she changes the style by which she chose to be known. She was no longer Doña Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda but Madre Teresa de Jesús. If you wanted to know who she was, where her 'honour' lay do not look to her 'aristocratic' ancestors but her relationship with Jesus.

Teresa's relationship with God has a delightful effect in her life. Her humour is one of the personal characteristics of Teresa that most people note. She prayed, "Lord deliver us from sour faced saints". She does not take herself seriously, she often tells us she laughed as she saw the absurdities of life and she could even joke with God.

When Teresa came to found her first community she wanted it to be a free place of freedom and friendship for her sisters. They were to have the freedom to develop a personal relationship with God in interior prayer. Like any relationship this needed time, so Teresa reorganised the Carmelite timetable to give priority to silent, personal prayer. Elaborate liturgies were avoided in favour of simple ones, the liturgy of the hours was to be sung in monotone rather than polyphony. Cloister also saved the community from the waste of time through frivolous social visits. Teresa's emphasis on the interior life meant however that her constitutions were more open than previous one to the use of the parlour for spiritual benefit. The pre-Teresian constitutions required a sister to be in the locutory listening to any conversation. Teresa repeats this injunction but then adds, however when it is a case of spiritual benefit the sister will withdraw and the enclosure curtains opened. From her own experience Teresa received spiritual help from both priests and laity. Just as importantly her conversation gave spiritual benefit to both priests and laity. Her friendships were forms of spiritual accompaniment. Her constitutions recognise this ministry.

Teresa wanted her community also to be free of interventions by clerical superiors who did not understand her charism. What were particularly galling for her were the actions of such superiors who felt that a visitation was not complete unless extra penances were added to the lives of the sisters. The spiritual leader of the community was the prioress not a visiting prelate. The prioress was also the spiritual director of the community. While the sisters were free to choose a confessor they were also to speak with the prioress about their spiritual lives each month/week. This is an important female empowerment. It is justified by the fact that the prioress holds a spiritual rather than an administrative position in the community and that the prioress lives with the sisters and so knows them better than a priest who only knows them through their self-presentation in the confessional.

They were to be free of the burdens of a society based on *honra* with its pride and class and racial divisions. Here all were equal, "all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped"¹¹. This makes sense of Teresa's prohibitions against talk of family which in her experience had turned into aristocratic boasting and rivalry. For those who were not of aristocratic origins there was the danger of resentment and envy. Teresa wanted her communities to be communities of friends. She dreamed of her Church and society being homes where all were friends.

Friendship firstly is mutual and egalitarian.¹² A friend can render any service to another without any implication of humiliation, dependence, or condescension because equality

¹¹ *Way*, 4.7

¹² cf. Sandra Schneiders, *Selling All, Religious Life In A new Millennium*, New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2001, 290f for a discussion of evangelical friendship.

renders such categories irrelevant. Second, friendship is historical and developmental. It must continue to grow and deepen or it will stagnate and die. Third, friendship is particular and individual. It is more than general benevolence and each relationship is particular. Some are richer than others, some challenge one's capacity to love. This implies communities of mutual sharing and is incompatible with a structure of domination and subordination. There should be no governing classes. Superiority and inferiority among human beings is a human invention not a divine institution.

Many people nowadays seek relief from the stress of contemporary life by practices of meditation. The contemplative life is seen as an escape from the problems of life. On the contrary, for Teresa, God is found in the centre of a person's life. The spiritual journey is from a life on the surface to a life lived from the centre where Christ dwells. The point of departure is the realisation that one is greatly loved by God and hence our self worth is a gracious gift. The God Teresa believes in is the Blessed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So that union with God is marked by an incarnational and pneumatological character. In setting out on the journey she advises "turn your eyes towards the centre"¹³ set our eyes on Christ"¹⁴. The goal of the journey is intimate union with Christ. However such union is creative and dynamic through the power of the Spirit. It transforms us and impels us into love in action. "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, for spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works."¹⁵ Union with God means sharing the passion of God for the salvation of the world. The passion of Teresa for helping others come to God and her apostolic spirit come from her union with the living God.

She was outspokenly critical of the way women were treated in the Church of her day. She was critical of the use of the 'secular arm' (that is violence though coercive state force) in spiritual and theological disputes. She was critical of confessors, theologians, and bishops who were without spiritual experience. Teresa felt the fact that women's gifts were not valued by these men who ran the church simply because they were women. In a world where women were distrusted she founded communities that empowered and protected women's religious experience. These communities were founded on trust and relationships of mutual respect rather than control. They were 'little colleges of Christ', models of what the church itself was called to be.

Most daringly, in the face of the Inquisitorial guardians of orthodoxy, not only did Teresa write books teaching interior prayer, itself a highly suspect activity, but she wrote a book of Meditations on the Song of Songs. This was the most controversial book in the Bible. Luis de Leon, an Augustinian professor in Salamanca, was to suffer imprisonment from 1572 to 1576 for translating the Song of Songs into Castilian and circulating his manuscript. At a time when women were expected to obey the Pauline injunction to 'be silent in the church' Teresa assumed the role of a teacher of Scripture, recollection and interior prayer. Teresa had found her voice and spoke with surprising confidence. In many ways Teresa then was a prophetic figure within the church. It is in this context that she died marvelling, "at the end, I die a daughter of the church".

Teresa's critical horizon was shaped ultimately by her relationship to Christ in interior prayer. Teresa and the leaders of the Church shared a common Catholic faith and yet the effects in life were different. The Jesus whom Teresa knew intimately did not despise

¹³ *Interior Castle*, 1.2.8

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 1.2.11

¹⁵ *Ibid.* VII.4.6

women nor did he reject anyone because of their race. The Jesus of Teresa reveals the merciful and inclusive heart of God the Father. No one is excluded from his love. He invites all to live in love. To live in love is to be in growth mode.

However the magisterium of the church of Teresa's time and place, the bishops, theologians and Inquisitors, proclaimed another vision God. For them God and the Church were to be 'defended' by fear and violence. The peace and security of the Church was maintained by fear, suspicion, and the threat of persecution.

The Church in reaction to the Protestant Reformation was in 'protection mode'.

Scientists tell us that there are two modes of being known for all systems and beings: 'protection mode' or 'growth mode'. When a system or being is threatened it needs to be in protection mode but that uses a lot of energy. Remaining in protection mode for an extended period actually undermines and weakens the system. The church of Teresa's time felt itself threatened and in crisis. The major casualty of being in protection mode, after the lives of many who suffered violence was that for the ordinary faithful the image of God as merciful and loving was greatly obscured, if not lost. God is seen as being very strict. One who demands the exact profession of formulas of faith before he will grant his love to the small number of the elect he saves from an evil world. It is a very conditional love which gives birth to religious fundamentalism and an ecclesial climate of suspicion. Faith when accompanied by fear and violence becomes a false sacred. In this climate interior prayer as it was for Teresa is a way of liberation. And as such it was considered controversial and viewed by the authorities with suspicion. It opens the person to unmediated union with God in a relationship characterised by trust, humility and love. Teresa's own motto witnesses to her profound and life-giving Christian vision of God: *I will sing forever the mercies of God*.

Because of her intimate relationship with Christ in prayer through which he taught her the ways of love she could speak with authority. Jesus accepted her and loved her and was her companion on life's journey. For Teresa God's love is so abundant that it sets her free and makes her optimistic about the human potential for responding to God in love and obedience. God's love creates a community of trust and friendship. In a curious way Teresa shows us how the Inquisition had reason to fear *oración mental*, interior prayer. Interior prayer is a personal relationship with God that is unmediated by the clergy. Its home is the personal and interior realm beyond the outside control. Her relationship with Jesus in interior prayer set Teresa free to be creative and fruitful.

In these reflections I have tried to enter into St Teresa's own experience of God and to trace how that experience shaped her response to the crisis of her times. If today we were to live the Teresian charism I suggest we need to have a relationship with the living God dwelling in the centre of our being. Our prayer will be lived through Christ in the Spirit. We will have a vision of the abundant God who is a giver of life in its fullness which leads us to live in a supportive community of friends. We will see our world and those who are other to us, contemplatively through the eyes of Jesus. We will be moved to oppose any racism or the use of domination against any others. We will be free to respond creatively to the issues facing the Church today such as the status of women and how to witness to the Gospel and to work effectively for the coming of the Reign of God in our world. Our contemplation will not cause us to escape the world but we will share the passion of God for all his people.

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