

## St Teresa of Avila: Representing Christ within

### **Who was St Teresa?**

St Teresa of Jesus was born of a well-to-do merchant family with Jewish roots. She lost her mother at an early age, and asked Our Lady to be her mother. She had exalted desires from her early years, persuading her brother to run away with her so they could be martyred by the Moors! She joined the Convent of the Incarnation in Avila, believing religious life was the best way to save her soul. The convent was large, poor and had become quite relaxed. The nuns were forced to go out begging, ingratiate themselves with benefactors and visit family in order to be fed. Teresa later reproached herself for the amount of time she dissipated in the parlour in superficial conversation, feeling she was living a double life, at odds with the extraordinary favours the Lord had granted her.

She had a profound second conversion experience around the age of 40, following which she gave herself more totally to Jesus and to prayer. She had mystical experiences of Our Lord who called her to set up a Monastery where enclosure, silence and prayer would be observed more strictly in greater austerity by a smaller group of nuns living in a family atmosphere.

She was greatly troubled by the numbers of people in the New World dying without knowing Jesus, by doctrinal challenges coming to the Church and by profanation of the Eucharist. She desired that her nuns would live the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience) to perfection in order to counter-act these ills, and especially to secure by their prayer and sacrifices the holiness of priests, who would in turn save a large number of souls. The Foundation of St Joseph's Convent and the 16 others that followed it immersed her in numerous trials, difficult journeys, beset as she was by ill-health, false accusations, and opposition at every turn, though always doing everything under obedience. She is regarded as one of the Church's greatest teachers on contemplative prayer and is now a Doctor of the Church.

### **Virtues help our prayer**

The nuns of St Joseph's asked St Teresa their Foundress to write for them about prayer. The result is her wonderful book *The Way of Perfection*. It is significant that she devotes the first sixteen chapters to the life of virtue, as she believes the way we live our daily life is so important to how we pray. The three virtues she regards as most essential are humility, love and detachment/mortification (which enable us to stand free of over-riding dependencies).

### **What is Mental prayer?**

'Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing but an intimate conversation between friends; it means conversing frequently and 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... How much He loves you. ... Oh, what a good friend you make, my Lord!' (*Life* 8.5)

St Teresa did not really have a method of prayer, but an approach she recommended to others and used herself is this:

'Since you are alone (at prayer), daughters, strive to find a companion. Well what better companion than the master Himself who taught you this prayer? Represent the Lord Himself as close to you and behold how lovingly and humbly he is teaching you. Believe me, you should remain with so good a friend as long as you can. ... If you become accustomed to having Him at your side, and He sees that you love to have Him there and

are always trying to please Him, you will never be able ... to send Him away'. (*Way of Perfection*, 26). 'I try to think of Jesus as present within me' (*Life* 4.7)

'The important thing is not a lot of thinking but a lot of loving; so do what best stirs you to love' (*Interior Castle*, iv, 1.7).

St Teresa used Gospel scenes to put herself in contact with Christ – living within her soul:

'This is the way I used to pray... I would try to picture Christ within me, and it did me greater good – in my opinion – to picture 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 many simple thoughts of this kind. I found the scene of his prayer in the Garden especially comforting; I strove to be His companion there (*Life* 9.4).

### **Look at Him**

There is a great deal of freedom in Carmelite prayer. Two central motifs in Teresa's prayer are gazing at Jesus, and familiar conversation:

'Turn your eyes and look at Him, ... look at Him on His way to Gethsemane ... look at Him bound ... or look at Him burdened; and He must look at you with those beautiful and compassionate eyes ... just because you go along to comfort Him and have turned to look at Him' (*Way of Perfection* 26.4-5)'.

'Look at Him within yourselves and do not turn away from so kind a guest... speak with Him as with a father, or a brother, or a lord, or a spouse; sometimes in one way, sometimes in another. He will teach you what you must do to please Him. ... we can tell Him our troubles, beg Him to put them right, and yet realize that we are not worthy to be called His child' (*Way of Perfection* 28.2-3).

As we grow in prayer, it becomes simpler and the mind more quiet. Speaking gives way to listening:

'It is good to reflect awhile and think about the pains He suffered ... But one should not always weary oneself in seeking these reflections but just remain there in His presence with the intellect quiet. One should, if possible, occupy oneself in looking at Christ looking at oneself; one should speak to Him, ask Him for things, humble oneself, and delight in the Lord's presence, remembering meanwhile that one is unworthy to be there' (*Life* 13.22).

### **Praying while working**

The experience of prayer is not to be confined to the hours set aside for prayer:

'We must retire within ourselves even during our ordinary occupations... If I can recall the companionship I have within me for so much as a moment, that is very helpful' (*Way of Perfection*, 29.6). 'The Lord is there among the pots and pans' (*Foundations* 5.8).

### **by Dolgellau Carmel, Wales**

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This piece draws heavily from quotes selected by Fr Tomas Alvarez, 'Living with God: St Teresa' Concept of Prayer' (Carmelite Centre of Spirituality, *Living Flame*, volume 11).