

Carmelite Communities Associated

TERESIAN PRAYER

A Document From our Leadership in Rome

We have only to look to our Holy mother to discover the elements that make up our Carmelite vocation and to find out how to live them in an adequate way. With much more reason this applies in the area of prayer, the centre and characteristic mark of the Teresian life and charism and, because of this, the principal component of our place in the Church.

Without a doubt, St Teresa speaks prayer to us. Her person and her message cannot be explained without it. Carmel today cannot be explained. While the study of Teresian prayer gives us access to the whole of her life and teaching, at the same time it opens out for us a more radical understanding of our vocation.

It is this word also -- or rather the experience, the lived out word -- that the person of today has the right to expect from us. This is because, through St Teresa and in her, we have become known in the Church as an Order specially linked with prayer, a praying community.

All the elements that go to make a qualified teacher of prayer are to be found in St Teresa: a wealth of **experience**; profound **understanding** of the grace received from God; ability to **communicate**, that is the capacity to put her experience into words. With great precision she writes: «For it is one grace to receive the Lord's favour; *another*, to understand which favour and grace it is; and *one more*, to know how to describe and explain it» (L 17:5; cf. L 12:6; 23:11; 30:4). These three mystical graces make Teresa a qualified teacher of prayer, while at the same time map out for us the subjects for studying Teresian prayer: **experience**, **doctrine** and **pedagogy**.

1. -- TERESA'S EXPERIENCE OF PRAYER

We all know that knowledge of our Holy Mother's experience is necessary if we are to understand her word, her message. This is because experience is **the** source of her knowledge, because in her experience she saw the fundamental elements of Christian life. She thought about this and reflected on it to unearth these ways along which the history of salvation advances, in the loving relationship of each one of us with God.

A few words suffice to outline this experience in a schematic way to help us get inside her word and message. Three periods are apparent in the development of St Teresa's prayer.

-- *First period*: easy and spontaneous prayer. Teresa took to prayer. (cf. L 1)

-- *Second period*: of difficult and testing prayer that lasted from her adolescent crisis brought on by the death of her mother up to the definitive conversion that occurred in 1554 (L 9). The difficulty she experienced had a two-fold source: on the one hand her inability for discursive reflection along with thoughts that ran wild (L 4:8,9; 9:4); and on the other hand her resistance to embarking on the way of whole-hearted love, and the contradictions in her lifestyle. In speaking of this time she relates: «It seems I desired to harmonize these two contraries so inimical to one another such as are the spiritual life and sensory joys, pleasures, and pastimes» (L 7:17). More acutely and incisively she says: «to *practice* prayer and to *live* for my own pleasures» (L 13:6). Here was a real inner drama for Teresa that made her live torn between God and creatures. She confesses that «I don't know how I was able to suffer it even a month, much less for so many years» (L 8:2). She chose to give up prayer for a year or so (L 7:11; 19:4). Afterwards she described this abandonment of prayer as: «the greatest temptation I had» (L 7:11), «the greatest evil» (L 19:10). She was in a moral rut: «The time in which I was without prayer my life was much worse» (L 19:11). «What I call a true fall is abhorrence of the path by which one gained so much good» (L 15:3).

-- *Third period*. With her entry into the mystical life the third period begins, now always in the ascent and never falling back. The starting point was 1554, the year of her definitive conversion. She began to avoid occasions of sin and to give herself more to prayer, and God lavished his attention on her in a palpable way. She repeatedly mentions this

connection: «Now, then, when I began to avoid occasions and devote myself to prayer, the Lord, as one who desired, so it seemed, that I be willing to receive them, started to grant me favours» (L 23:2; cf. L 19:7; 9:9; 10). A careful study of mystical prayer, in all its forms and manifestations, leads us to discover that, over and beyond the phenomena and psychosomatic effects, mystical prayer is a communication of God, a personal communication to the human being, and that the latter «experiences» it, each time at a greater level inwardly, until it becomes personal communion. It stands out in clear outline that mystical prayer for Teresa is prayer in which there is «a Person to person relationship», «a friendly communication», and that God is more active in the prayer than the person. In friendship, persons, friends take first place. Everything else inevitably is secondary. With this we begin a few words on the «method» of prayer which Teresa lived from her first steps in «relating» with God.

2. -- TERESA S METHOD OF PRAYER

We have few indications of Teresa s 'method' or 'manner' of prayer, but what we do have is valuable and precise: 'I tried as hard as I could *to keep Jesus Christ... present within me*' (L 4:7). 'This is the method of prayer I then used:' I strove to represent Christ within me' (L 9:4). This way of praying assumes an extraordinary realism at the moment of Eucharistic communion. Speaking about herself in the third person she confesses she: 'entered (her poor home) to be with Him' (W 34:7). Praying means: attention to the Person, and this within, where personal encounter takes place. To pray is: to be with Him, 'to draw present' or 'to represent ', that is, to revive, to reactualize His presence. 'I remained with Him' (L 9:4). It means to make contact with the Person. When she converts her experience into teaching, all she need do is to change the subject of the sentence: 'One should just remain there in His presence' (L 13:22). She was later to call this way of praying 'the prayer of recollection' and had this to say of it in the *Way*. 'I never knew what it was to pray with satisfaction until the Lord taught me this method' (W 29:7). She became an untiring advocate of this method, with a conviction rooted and nourished in a wide and rich experience. She sets it out in the *Way*, chapters 26 29.

Her own experience of prayer leads her to equate prayer and perfection. If it is to be a 'friendly relationship ', prayer is a commitment of one's entire life. Prayer-friendship is totally demanding and absorbing. To pray is to opt for God as a friend. She pinpoints the explanation for her crisis and the key to a solution when she writes: 'For if I would have paid back something of the love You began to show me, I should not have been able to employ it in anyone but You; and *with that all would have been remedied*' (L 4:4). To pray is 'to seek to be servants of love' and 'to follow resolutely by means of this path of prayer Him who has loved us so much (L 11:1), living for another, the Friend: 'Once you are placed in so high a degree as to desire to commune in solitude with God and abandon the pastimes of the world ... Let His Majesty lead the way along the path He desires. *We belong no longer to ourselves but to Him*' (L 11:12). Prayer follows the kind of life we lead. We are what our prayer is, which is to say, what our friendship with God is. For this reason, prayer is a 'relationship of friends', it is to bring about and deepen our friendship with God.

3. -- TERESA S VIEWPOINT ON PRAYER

From her personal prayer experience Teresa set out her teaching. Prayer is 'an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us' (L 8:5). Leaving aside the enormous biblical resonance in this definition and the 'revolution' which it entails in the history of spirituality, we wish now to call attention solely to something which is obvious apart from this. It is this: the entire emphasis in the Teresian concept of prayer is on the persons, who here and now live engrossed in one another in a friendly way. The definition shows that to pray is to reach out to the Person with one's entire person; welcoming and giving, listening and speaking; 'intimate sharing'.

When in the *Way* the direct question is asked, 'what is mental prayer' (cf. W 22: title), she does not take the definition given in the *Life*, but revealingly at the end of the chapter she

will say: 'This is mental prayer.... to understand these truths '. A careful reading of the chapter shows us that 'these truths' are not an abstraction. They are 'the truths ' about God and the human person, about the 'who' of God and the 'who' of the human person. It is a discovery leading to an existential encounter, to 'conform my way of life to His' (W 22:7).

Teresa wants all the attention of the one praying focused on the divine Person, 'looking at' the Person. "I'm not asking you to do anything more than look at Him' (W 26:3); 'With the intellect quiet . . . look at Christ who is looking at us' (L 13:22). What is said or how it is said is not important. What matters is 'being with Him', the action of being present.

We said, attention to the Person, with very Teresian shading: paying attention to God's love for us. It forms part of her definition: 'who we know loves us'. Carefully, Teresa notes that **the** first lesson of Christ, Master of prayer, is the love He has for us: 'In the first word (of the Our Father) you will understand immediately the love He has for you' (W 26:10). To know one is loved, is the starting point for a loving response: love begets love' (L 22:14). Therefore, it is always necessary to look at the love God has for us: 'do that which best stirs you to love' (IC IV 1:7).

Prayer is a loving encounter, an encounter in truth: God's truth and our truth. In prayer God reveals Himself to us. He shows us his truth: that He loves us, that He gives to us. God loves to give. 'He never tires of giving' and 'without measure '. 'He goes around looking to have someone to give to.' This is the God Teresa discovered in prayer. We get to know people God included only when we reach the intimate sharing of friendship with them.

This goes also for self-discovery. To pray is 'to enter' within ourselves, 'to get to know ourselves ': our richness and our misery, our moral state. The first words Teresa entices us with at the beginning of the *Interior Castle* are about 'our marvellous capacity', 'dignity', 'beauty', that we are 'a palace made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal'. 'We have the power to converse with none other than God' (IC 1 1:6).

Prayer also reveals to us our moral state. Of herself she tells us that 'through the practice of prayer... I knew... the bad road I was following' (L 19:12); 'in prayer I understood more clearly my faults' (L 7:17).

Because it is a personal encounter, prayer is also a transforming encounter. Prayer creates new people. 'Intimate friendly sharing' means that the friendship grows stronger and is consolidated. This is the thesis defended by our Holy Mother in all her Works. The *LIFE* defends the thesis that prayer is transforming, and in proof of this statement she points to her own life, the fruit of prayer. The external structure of the work corresponds with this thesis. The *WAY* deals with the same thing: prayer, the way of perfection. The *INTERIOR CASTLE* presents prayer as a movement inward, of approach to the centre of our beings where God is abiding, of deepening our relations with Him.

The best prayer will always be that which most renews one's life: 'I would not wish for any other prayer except that which makes me increase in virtue'. 'Oh!, that this is true prayer and not just something that pleases us and nothing more' (letter to Fr. Gracian, 23.10.76). Therefore, it is necessary to look to one's life to discern if prayer is real. Again, when dealing with mystical prayer: 'It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer; there is no better crucible for testing prayer' (IC IV 2:8; cf. IC VI 8:10; ST 58:16). In practice, it is necessary to look to a person's life to discern if their prayer is true: 'What each of you will understand, daughters, if you are advanced, will be that you are the most wretched of all (...) and not in having more delights and raptures in prayer, or visions, or favours of this kind that the Lord grants; for we shall have to wait for the next world to see the value of such experiences' (W 18:7).

Since it is a friendly encounter, prayer is essentially open to growth and development. Prayer is not something over and done with. Prayer is a *living reality, dynamic, ongoing*.

It is particularly important to highlight this dynamism of prayer so as not to impede but rather to support a person's prayer positively in every stage of the process.

Our Holy Mother has spoken graphically of the dynamism of prayer with the use of comparisons: various ways of watering the garden, in her *Life*; of the various levels of communication in the history of the interpersonal relations between God and human beings, in the *Interior Castle*. In both comparisons one sees a progression in the definition of the two protagonists: God and the human person. God's activity increases and, consequently and in parallel, the 'passivity' of the human person increases. In her *Life* the Saint points out that the 'work' of the gardener (the human person) becomes increasingly less, yet the 'harvest' is greater. God progressively gains control of the scene until finally he commands it. In the *Interior Castle*, where she is speaking of prayer as an inward movement, the levels at which this encounter takes place are more in evidence: God and the human person 'share intimately' at ever more intimate and profound levels (this is the meaning of the different 'mansions').

Mystical prayer is the 'field' par excellence of Teresian teaching. She tries to fill an existing lacuna in books on prayer (IC I 2:7; L 14:7). Which is, to state what is most important in this friendly encounter but which is often passed over in silence: God's part in it. He is the principal agent.

In this way the person is led to an attitude of *passive activity*, one of receptive listening. For Teresa, prayer from the person's part is fundamentally a time of listening, a time of God's manifestation -- epiphany, unveiling. From this she points out the fundamental comparison with which she weaves the exposition of the *Way of Perfection*: Christ, the Master; the person, the disciple. By this she indicates the attitude with which one must approach the rendezvous of prayer when she writes: 'Draw near, then, to this good Master with strong determination to learn what He teaches you' (W 26:10). God-Christ 'teaches' in prayer 'to anyone who wants to be taught by Him in prayer' (W 6:3; cf. IC II 1:3; MS 4:3; L 16:1; W 28:3; etc.).

When prayer is seen as an interpersonal encounter, as mutual love, we have a radical solution to a 'problem' which has always vexed the practice of prayer: distractions and aridity. Teresa never tires of telling us that distractions and aridity are no bar to prayer, although they certainly make it more difficult. Prayer is not a question of psychology but rather of theology. She reiterates that one can 'be' with God 'with a thousand disturbances from worldly cares and thoughts' (L 8:6). Hence, she said: 'he doesn't pay any attention to bad thoughts' (L 11:10), '(that if they can't even get a good thought, they shouldn't kill themselves' (L 22:11; cf. IC II 1:9). 'And so it isn't good for us to be disturbed by our thoughts, nor should we be concerned' (IC IV 1:11; all of this chapter, beginning with n.7, is extraordinary).

4. CHRIST IN TERESIAN PRAYER

Everything said about Teresian prayer must show clearly its Christocentric dimension. Christ is not a 'theme'. Christ is the obligatory, unavoidable presence in the entire process.

Her prayer, from beginning to end, was always centred on Christ (cf. L 4:7; 9:4), Christ the MAN (ib.9:6). She tells us of her 'custom of rejoicing in this Lord' (L 22:4), that she had been 'so devoted all my life to Christ' (ibid.). She counsels beginners that they can 'place themselves in the presence of Christ, and grow accustomed to being inflamed with love for His sacred humanity and keep Him ever present' (L 12:2). She calls those souls 'advanced' who 'strive to remain in this precious company' (ibid.), while at the same time exhorting them not to neglect to reflect 'often on the Passion and life of Christ from which has come and continues to come every good' (L 13:13).

Mystical prayer confirms this Christocentric orientation of Teresian prayer (IC VI 8:1). Hence, Teresa enters the discussion about the presence of the sacred humanity of Christ in the entire spiritual process with the power and conviction of her experience, declaring that it is the path and gate to all good, and that 'I wouldn't want any good save that acquired through Him from whom all blessings come to us' (IC VI 7:15).

The Christocentric orientation of Teresian prayer is definitively affirmed by a decisive event: Christ presented Himself to her as the 'living book' or 'true book' in which she

learns 'what must be read and done' (L 26:5). A series of mystical graces (visions, locutions, etc.) with Christ for their object deepen this line of thought. Christ leads her to spiritual matrimony and into the mystery of the Trinity (IC VII 1:7; 2:1).

From the 'set your eyes on Christ' (IC I 2:11) to the 'appearance' of the Lord in this centre of the soul (IC VII 2:3), prayer progresses as a revealing of God and of the person in Christ, a Christifying encounter: 'Let us walk together...' (W 26:6).

5. TERESIAN TEACHING ON PRAYER

Prayer is learned by practice. Therefore, the immediate concern of Teresa is to teach how to pray, to place and coordinate the pieces to make a praying person.

Prayer is a gift. But it is granted to a free person. What this means is that, like every seed, prayer needs soil and care to grow and mature.

The *Way* is the book *par excellence* on Teresian prayer. The internal arrangement of the book reveals the intention of the author. She spends a long time explaining the 'things necessary' for those who 'seek to advance on the way of prayer'. She knows how anxious her readers are for her to speak to them about prayer, and yet every so often gets sidetracked from the explanation

(cf. W 16:1; 17:1; 20:1; 21:1).

She is categorical: no one can be a contemplative without the following things: charity, detachment and humility. Anyone who thinks differently is much mistaken. On the contrary, anyone practicing them 'will be very advanced in the service of the Lord', even though she is not very contemplative, that is to say, even though her prayer as such is poor and does not reach mystical states.

How are we to present the teaching of Holy Mother? We believe that we can say that for her to teach prayer is to teach someone how to live, or simply how to be. It is not a question of teaching a technique not as such and only then in a secondary way -- but it is a matter of renewing the person inwardly. To make someone a person of prayer is to pay attention to the person praying. With this basis, Teresa shows herself very consistent and logical in her definition of prayer: 'an intimate friendly sharing', a radical and total option for God. In this way the three 'necessary things' aim directly at promoting attitudes that define the new person, the friend of God, while at the same time being radically opposed to the sinful person, who is no friend of God:

egocentrism charity virginity

possession detachment poverty

pride humility obedience

We can state in the saint's own words what the aim of her teaching is: 'Do not be surprised about the many things I have written in this book so that you may obtain this liberty' (W 19:4). It is a liberty which is total giving: 'Because everything I have advised you about in this book is directed toward the complete gift of ourselves to the Creator, the surrender of our wills to His' (W 32:9; cf. 28:12). It is the first word with which she begins the little treatise on prayer: If we do not give ourselves completely the treasure of prayer will not be given to us (L 11:1-4).

A discussion of every one of these 'necessary things' would go beyond the scope of our present intention. But we can say simply: by the call to charity Teresa wishes people to learn to relate with one another by being friends, by being open to others in order that their 'relations' with God keep maturing. By *liberty* or *detachment* from everything created, Teresa is exhorting us to break what binds us, to overcome the possessive 'appetite', to be free from all things. By *humility* she teaches us to allow God to be the protagonist of our lives, to allow ourselves to be led by Him, not seeking to impose on Him, nor even to 'counsel' Him, about the way He should lead us.

Together with these 'necessary things', our Holy Mother has spoken to us insistently about 'resolute determination'. This is a key piece in her teaching. It is a resolute determination against fears from without, against certain theologians who say to us 'there

is no need of mental prayer'; and also against the indolence and lassitude within, resistance to undertaking the way of love, because 'we are so miserly and slow in giving ourselves entirely to God' (L 11:1), 'quick to be generous but afterwards so stingy' (W 32:8).

What does the Saint mean by 'resolute determination'? It is a movement of the whole being to free us from ourselves and direct us to Him. To be determined is to turn to Him. That is to say, it implies an attitude of pure love, love without a price. Even to beginners on the path of prayer she offers this rule: 'his intention must not be to please himself but to please the Lord' (L 11:10).

In practice this means bearing with robust courage, without attention-seeking drama, the cross of aridity, of difficult prayer. Personalizing this, which the Saint is so given to doing, 'to be determined' is 'to help Christ carry the cross', 'not Letting Him fall with the cross'. This is how she answers a big question in defining the prayer of beginners: 'But what will they do here who see that after many days there is nothing but dryness, distaste, vapidness, and very little desire to draw this water...?' (L 11:10). She answers: 'He will rejoice and be consoled.... because He (God) sees that without any pay he (the person) is so careful about what he was told to do...and *he helps Christ carry the cross* ... and so he is determined ... not to let Christ fall with the cross' (L 11:10). Some chapters later she will tell them again: 'It is an important matter for beginners in prayer to start off by becoming detached from every kind of satisfaction and to enter the path solely with the determination to help Christ carry the cross like good cavaliers, who desire to serve their king at no salary' (L 15:11). She will counsel her nuns to have this disposition of pure love: 'Take up that cross, daughters. Don't mind at all if the Jews trample upon you, *if His trial can thereby be lessened*' (W 26:7). This will be *the task*, the only essential thing; everything else is accidental. 'Embrace the cross your Spouse has carried and understand that this must be your task... As for other favours.... thank Him for it as you would for something freely added on' IC I: 1:7).

This resolute determination must be *radical* (L II: 1-4), *irrevocable* (W 20:2; 23:1-2), *persevering* (IC II 1:6). In general, we could say that it should place the person in line with God. If the friendship is to last and the love to be true, the conditions must be met (L 8:5).

God is only looking for this determination (L 11:15; IC LII 1:7; IC IV 1:7).

Together with this presupposition or premises for prayer, which we might well call theological, intrinsic requirements for the prayer of friendship, Teresa stresses other no less important elements. We would call them psychological presuppositions. Among these, *solitude* stands out. It is an integrating element in the definition of prayer: «intimate sharing in solitude». Friendship-- and prayer is a «turning to God of human friendship» -- seeks the stamp of solitude, and it creates solitude. In fact all prayer is essentially, always in solitude.

We must train ourselves to solitude. This is a necessity for being a praying person, for being a person. It is necessary for savouring our experiences and for discovering aspects of reality which escape us. It is necessary for other dimensions of the development of our being. Solitude is for 'listening to Him', to get down to levels of our own self which elude us and which we do not turn to account because we do not know they are there. Solitude is for knowing whom it is we are with. It is an inhabited solitude: 'Then, since you are alone, strive to find a companion. Well, what better companion than the Master Himself who taught you this prayer?' (W 26:1). Praying alone is not fleeing from anyone but going towards Someone. It is not absence but presence.

The link between prayer and solitude is so close that Teresa considers it a sign for the discernment of prayer: 'this desire (of solitude) is continually present in souls that truly love God' (F 5:15). Growth in prayer is manifested by an increasing desire for solitude. With regard to *Physical* solitude she says: 'to get used to solitude is a great help for prayer' (W 4:9). She refers to the practice and teaching of Jesus: 'you already know that His Majesty teaches that it be recited in solitude. This is what He always did when He prayed' (W 24:4).

Spiritual solitude is solitude from loves and presences which vitiate at source meeting with Him. Spiritual solitude is eager attention, loving attraction towards the Friend, presence of one's entire being to Him. This culminates in 'not going out from that centre'. 'The essential' and 'the best of the person is always with Him'. Spiritual solitude is inwardness (IC VII, 1:10; 2:4).

Our Holy Mother also speaks of seeking 'association with other persons having the same interest', 'shared prayer' (L 7:20-22; W 20:3). Friendship with those who practice prayer -- and in the first place with those of one's own community -- safeguards and strengthens personal prayer, it trains one to pray.

The Saint speaks about a diversified group (L 16:7) and a stable, praying community, which 'engages' in prayer and has no need to hide its identity from outsiders (W 20:4-6).

She attributes extraordinary importance to the group in the promotion, safeguarding and demands of prayer 'the complete remedy of a soul lies in consulting the friends of God' (L 23:4), that is, with people of prayer. 'It is a wonderful thing for a person to talk to those who speak about this' (IC II 1:6). Teresa rejoices about the conduct of her sisters: 'Sometimes it is a particular joy for me to see these Sisters gathered together and feeling such great joy at being in the monastery that they praise our Lord as much as possible' (IC VI 6:12).

Linked with this is the importance of a 'teacher of prayer'. She is convinced that without 'a wise and experienced teacher' it will be almost impossible to make progress in prayer. She complains that they are not available, at least not as good as she would wish. Her teaching seeks to supply in some way for this possible lack.

Conclusion. - Prayer defines and embraces the *entire* spiritual life, according to Teresa. In questioning ourselves about prayer we are questioning ourselves about what characterizes us and identifies us in the ecclesial community.

ABBREVIATIONS

(All quotations taken from the ICS Publications edition of the collected works of St. Teresa.)

F = Foundations

IC = Interior Castle

L = Life

MS = Meditations on the Song of Songs

ST = Spiritual Testimonies

W = Way of Perfection