

Fr Matt talking on Saint Teresa of Avilla's book
'The Foundations'
Sat 17th March 2012.

Series of talks by Fr Matt at Regional days.



General Introduction:

The first talk was at the regional day in Oxford during the previous week, this then would be the second talk of Saint Teresa's book 'The Foundations' with a possible further three different talks to follow.

The talk would start with a general introduction to the book from a particular view point, followed by focussing on a certain chapter in the book.

Saint Teresa was asked to write a book on the foundations of her convents as she had already written the book of her life in which she wrote about her foundation in Avilla, and her experiences of this foundation during years she lived there and how this project came to fruition.

At the time of her first foundation Saint Teresa had no idea this project was to go further, ultimately growing into something bigger. At the time of writing this book of her foundations she had seven communities of Nuns, and two communities of Friars up and running, developing and living the Carmelite life.

With further communities to be founded St Teresa would continue to write the book of foundations for the rest of her life and it would evolve accordingly. In the book she would factually explain the events and the people who would influence her decisions and importantly the motivations to these foundations.

Saint Teresa would gain a wealth of experiences in founding these communities. this would be a steep learning curve for her, in which she would relate the failings, challenges, dangers, problems and learning points experienced before the successes of the communities and the

good that was being achieved by them all was evident, in their contribution to building and boosting the whole wider Church.

Saint Teresa realised and believed that by carefully relating her factual experiences, these would be used by those who were to follow her in a future school of knowledge, Christian spirituality, understanding, compassion, love and prayer, as a work of God, therefore as a work of God it had to be written and related as a guide and teaching tool.

It is vitally important that the motivation be there in any vocation to prevent anything going wrong either for the community or the individual. When we lose sight of the motivation all signs of selfishness and self-centred, self-seeking occur. Every one of us must be a foundation that the building can be built on.

Whenever a new member comes into the community then the community, Church is re-founded and it begins again the charism is re-founded. Each person carries in them the gift that is the Church. It is for that reason that anyone coming into the Church must know what Saint Teresa has written and is saying to them, and understands her writings. For Saint Teresa it is essential that we understand this, as for vocation we must understand this and not just live the life of Carmel, understanding is essential.

Here we are nearly 450 years later daughters and sons of Saint Teresa living the Carmelite life in her spirit, everything written in her book is for us, with us in her mind. It is just as essential for us to understand her book today as it was the first readers.

It is a moment of grace for us as an Order, to be engaging in the reading of St Teresa's works at this time, having read 'Her life,' 'The way of Perfection,' we are now working on the foundations.

Focussing now on a particular part of St Teresa's book of Foundations:

Chapter four the Vocation:

Picking on one paragraph in the book of Foundations where St Teresa is speaking of detachment and how this is essential for the Vocation. So many root problems are highlighted in living the vocation, this can be seen through a lack of detachment or an incorrect understanding of the discernment of detachment.

Chapter Six:

The Early part of the foundations:

Teresa tells us of her motivations she has been visited by a Franciscan friar named Fray Alonso Maldonado who had been a missionary, she tells of her service and mission to the Church and the great needs of the Church world wide. She tells of her first foundation 'Media El Campo.'

Saint Teresa goes into several chapters explaining the life and meaning of the life in these foundations of how good this is and how fruitful and some of the difficulties as they arise.

In chapter five that very important chapter concerning prayer St Teresa teaches us what perfect prayer is. Interestingly St Teresa does not choose Carmelite Nuns as her perfect example or Carmelite Friars she chooses lay people, specifically she chooses ones who because of their obligations and commitments have no possibility of living the quiet, solitude life that the nuns and Friars experience.

These people have no possibility to experience quiet and solitude yet the Lord leads them to perfect prayer.

Handout Marked Chapter six.

(Fr Matt will now refer to the handout marked Chapter six, were he will quote a number of St Teresa's writings that are important. The handout is included in these notes and are displayed bullet marked and in bold italics)

Fr Matt relates from Teresa's writings:

"It is so important to understand this Chapter well, that even though writing about such a matter may be a tiresome thing to do, it doesn't tire me. Nor would I want whoever does not at first understand this to grow tired in reading it many times, especially the prioresses and the mistresses of novices who must guide the sisters in prayer. For the sisters will see that if they do not walk carefully in the beginning, much time will be required afterwards to remedy similar weaknesses."

Teresa here leaves us in no doubt that what she has just written is very important, Fr Matt states that he agrees with St Teresa for a number of reasons, one being that his roll during the last twenty years in the Carmelite order, that if anyone were to ask him what the single biggest difficulty he had encountered during his position of supporting, helping and guiding the secular Carmelite order, it is the problem that St Teresa is speaking about here. There is nothing that can damage or compromise community like this can.

St Teresa states that it is very difficult both to write of the problem or explain it.

Fr Matt states that what St Teresa wonderfully brings forward in this chapter are a number of case studies to help us understand and discern it both culturally, religiously and historically even if these are slightly out of context for us at today's regional day.

What St Teresa explains in this chapter is a whole nature of holiness, and of a holiness that is destructive, or the destruction of community through holiness in other words people with a kind of holiness that is in reality self seeking a turning in on oneself that is not Christian, it is a misunderstanding of Christian holiness. St Teresa states that these are not bad people but good people for whom something has gone wrong, they are mad or ill. We would not use these terms today, but this was the language of her day.

St Teresa states a number of possible causes for this selfishness, the first being:

- ***"The Lord begins to give delight, and our nature is very fond of delight, the soul becomes so occupied in the pleasure that it does not want to stir or lose the experience for anything".***

People can be very complex they are in every community and parish The lord gives the light that is very good and they are in the first beginnings of prayer and try to maintain the first high's of conversion. St John of the cross teaches that the Lord has to step in and remove that feeling of pleasure and the spiritual high that spreads out into a physiological and physical fervour of existence of selfishness.

St Teresa is therefore speaking of people who practice the extremes and cannot let go of this selfishness. These people might practice extremes of devotions, penances, fasting ect to experience the spiritual high of our Lords first light. These people in order to gain what they think they have lost might change from Carmelite to Benedictines to Franciscans read more books in order to obtain what the Lord is taking away from them, this then is how people practice extremes and become selfish in their spiritual lives.

St Teresa goes right to the core of the problem when stating:

- ***"Refraining from doing one's own will is more fitting than the experience of consolation."***

Denying one's will becomes a spiritual thing, St John of the Cross calls this a spiritual sweet tooth. If a person is unable to do this, it leaves to a life of complete uncontrol, a spiritual fanaticism that is very dangerous both to the person and those around them.

St Teresa states an important principle that:

- ***“Even in good things we need rule and measure so as not to ruin our health and become incapable of enjoying them.”***

Anybody who is really good at anything knows the above statement to be a fact.

We can be destroyed by the gifts we have, everyone needs rules in everything as we also need rule and measure in the spiritual life.

This is one of the great gifts of the Carmelite life, we do not come to Carmel to be Holy, but to give the holiness we have, a discipline, a structure, a fruitful place in which it can grow. It is God that gives us the Holiness, It is Carmel that gives us, if we truly listen and live it right, the discipline to live it right and well, without that it is simply some kind of self seeking masquerading as holiness or spirituality. We can be obsessed with holiness as much as anything else in life, it then becomes an addiction and is no less dangerous than any other addiction.

St Teresa demonstrates this danger in her following statement:

- ***"A madman when he goes into some frenzy, is not the master of himself, cannot divert his attention, or think of anything else, nor are their reasons that can move him to do this because he is not in control of his reasoning power. The same thing could happen here."***

God has not given us reasoning powers as just some additional gift they are an essential, an essential for living our spiritual lives daily. These are not to be used as a mad man in a frenzy, as this person is beyond reasoning therefore we cannot reason with them. Any spirituality where you cannot reason with them means that there is something fundamentally wrong.

St Teresa goes on to say:

- ***“Believe me, it is clear that a love of God [I do not mean that it is really love but in our opinion it is] that so stirs the passions that one ends up offending the Lord, or so alters the peace of the enamoured soul that no attention is paid to reason, is in fact self-seeking.”***

This is hard to see for the person who is so convinced and is also very convincing, is where the real damage occurs, not just the damage to the individual but to others who are convinced by them. This love of God and the great prayer life that the person appears to have deep down is disturbing, as it alters the peace of the soul.

Anything that so controls us points to, and should tell us that, our reasoning is not free and therefore it must be held suspect. This is true not just for spirituality but with anything else in the World.

St Teresa's next quote is from one of her case studies:

- ***“Anything that so controls us that we know our reason is not free should be held as suspect.”***

Some of St Teresa's sisters wrote to her concerning a problem and asked her advice, in response to their letter St Teresa stated that she would not give them an answer by letter, but would visit them in order to better confirm her suspicions as to what the problem might be.

- ***“He was so humble that as soon as I went there and spoke to him he agreed with me. The other one was not so spiritual, hardly at all in comparison. There was no argument that could persuade him.”***

St Teresa's visit found that two people who were also the confessors to the community had been influenced by controlling misconceptions. St Teresa spoke to both of these people, finding one of the Men to be quite humble and agreed with St Teresa counsel. But the second Man was hardly spiritual and would not be swayed by any argument. This is a very good indication of the damage and influence that can happen. The first person listened to St Teresa, believed her and acted on her advise, the second Man would not listen to reason therefore could influence others in his false beliefs. St Teresa in this chapter would give a graphic account on her opinion of this second Man.

In another one of St Teresa's case studies she quotes:

- ***“The more I saw that they were not submitting themselves to obedience [because in their opinion they could not do so] the more clearly I saw that the desire was a temptation.”***

This is a very perceptive comment by St Teresa. At one of her communities she found that some of the sisters were not submitting to obedience but there was a very clear sign that something spiritually was seriously wrong.

The problem was that their conviction would not allow them to conform, as they were convinced they were right, therefore their actions were from God.

St Teresa could see their desire was a temptation. I have to do this for my spiritual life irrespective of what other obligations, commitments and needs that others around them require.

This attitude and conviction that I am right and all around me are wrong can be seen daily by people who think they are beyond others understanding, that all around them have the wrong opinion. This is a temptation and is the Devil working on the person who has this type of inclination.

St Teresa now speaks of the obedient person:

- ***“She was obedient; she did what he said. As soon as she began to gain strength there was no more thought of rapture.”***

St Teresa here is talking of the Sister experiencing false raptures and how one of the tests to determine if these are real or false is by the persons own health. If prayer or devotions are exhausting the individual there is something wrong.

Prayer should give life, energy and rest, true spirituality gives inner health and strength.

If a person just becomes lukewarm and self seeking, more and more obsessed with their spiritual lives, then something is wrong. The person quoted here was not in a rapture because she was destroying her own health.

When she started to obey her counselling, then physical health strength were restored to her, this was a sure sign that something had been wrong. The desire comes more from wanting our own satisfaction than from the love of God.

In Conclusion

St Teresa's answer to the problem

- ***"The desire came more from wanting my own satisfaction than from love of God."***

This cannot be tolerated, it must be dealt with in a strong fashion as it destroys community and the lives of people who come into contact with these individuals, it does great damage to people who are influenced by them.

People who are responsible for formation and community have to deal with it in a timely and strong manner to prevent it creeping into their community.

St Teresa does not deal with the problem in a harsh way in respect to the individual, as she has real sympathy and a profound understanding of their problem, as she states they are not bad people but very unhappy badly damaged and wounded individuals.

In the old Monastic systems these people were simply sent to the gardens for physical work. St Teresa would stop and ban them from praying realising they needed sympathetic help for their own sake and the good of others.

By and large these type of people are not suitable for community, this in know way is a reflection on the individuals it is the nature of how God has created them, they need another kind of environment.

Community and prayer feeds their extremes, but sometimes people can grow through this problem, some in her communities do in fact accomplish this but others do not. An understanding of the problem enables us to recognise the signs of this problem in others.

As Carmelites it is of the utmost importance that we understand the spiritual life and the nature of it.

It is for this reason that St Teresa states, it is never enough to come into a community, to come into the Order thinking I have a vocation, every body else thinks I have one, wonderful, and get on with it. Prayer and spiritual life must be understood and how it operates, what the dangers are and the potential difficulties and the wrong roads that might be taken. The great damage through misunderstanding, deviation, not only for the individual but to others.

St Teresa in writing chapter six displays her own experience and understanding of this problem



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Through faith, baptism, and loving obedience, we share in the life of the Holy Trinity: Elizabeth Wang

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