

The Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality

Maria de San José Salazar

A talk by Fr Matt Blake OCD – 31st July 2022, Boars Hill



Maria de San Jose

CONTENTS

First talk

Introduction – who is Maria?

Donna Luisa de La Cerda, Teresa and the foundation at Malagón 3

Teresa and Maria in Seville 5

The fate of Teresa's manuscripts: her *Life* and the *Interior Castle* 7

Second talk

Maria's writings: *The book for the hour of recreation* 8

Maria – defender of Teresa's legacy 9

Carmelite clashes – Nicola Doria 9

Maria's exile 10

Maria's written portrait of Teresa 11

Teresa's letters to Maria 12

Source material 14

Maria de San José Salazar

A talk by Fr Matt Blake OCD – 31st July 2022, Boars Hill

Introduction – who is Maria?

As you are aware, we are speaking this afternoon about one of the daughters of St Teresa, Maria de San José Salazar. This takes us back to 16th century Spain to the beginnings of the Discalced Carmelite order, to the work of St Teresa.

I want to begin by setting out what we need to do; we are considering the life of this woman and what one realises once one starts to learn a bit about her is that this is rather complex. I will give you a certain amount of information about her – there's quite a lot of information available and I could fill these two talks with the information. The difficulty with that is that it's information that requires understanding and understanding is the major challenge. Speaking about the life of anyone, it's not enough to simply know about them, we need to at least try to understand. When it comes to Maria, it is particularly important. We are twenty first century people, we have a certain mind-set, a certain world-view and we come to whatever we're looking at with that.

Here we are speaking about a 16th century Spanish woman who lived a very particular way of life, so we are immediately drawn into the whole history of that time. There are certain things we need an understanding of if we are to understand Maria. We need some understanding of what life was like for a woman in 16th century Spain; we need some understanding of what was happening in that world in her lifetime; we need an understanding of what was going on in the Church at that time and in particular what was happening in the Carmelite Order. In just saying that I become very aware that we are entering into a very complex web that we could really get entangled in and never really be able get out of. So we have to be careful to try to understand, yet also accept that we do not know everything – there is so much information we do not have. We must not fall into the trap of trying to fill in pieces and we must be careful and respectful in how we understand and interpret things. We can't fully get into the mind-set, the way of thinking of that time in history and the issues that occupied and pre-occupied Maria's life.

There's a further complication to this and that is why are we speaking about Maria de San José? For one reason and one reason only: she is a daughter of St Teresa. Without Teresa we would never have heard of her, so we can't speak about her without speaking about Teresa, but in addition to that, there's another woman who comes into the story and she's really the link between the two of them and that is Donna Luisa de la Cerda. So inevitably this talk is going to be about three 16th century Spanish women – the relationship between them, the world that they inhabited, the difference that their lives made and how their lives are intertwined – with each other, with history, with the Carmelite Order and with the Church of that time. The other difficulty that I have in setting out to give this talk, and I put it out before you immediately, is that I can't really take all of these systematically, so this talk is going to be a circling around a number of

themes, coming around and coming back to things, because I have to try and balance what's being done and the various aspects of this complex person and this complex subject. So that's a kind of general disclaimer at the beginning.

To begin, I will just give a very brief picture of this woman's life so that we know where we are and who we are talking about. I will give a very brief run-over of the chronology of her life. In 1548 she's born. From early childhood – we don't know exactly when – she lived in Toledo in the home of Donna Luisa de la Cerda. In 1562 St Teresa goes and lives for seven months in the home of Donna Luisa de la Cerda. The reason for this is Donna Luisa's husband has died; he was one of the most powerful men in Spain at the time and she herself was an extremely powerful woman and she persuaded the Provincial of the Carmelites to order Teresa to go and stay with her to console her after the death of her husband. Maria is now 13 or 14 years of age and it was during Teresa's time in the house that they got to know each other.

Initially Maria is fascinated by this nun staying in the house, but it is only gradually over time and long after Teresa had gone back to Avila that Maria started to think about her vocation to become a nun. In 1570 she enters Teresa's third foundation in Malagón, a foundation initiated and sponsored by Donna Luisa de la Cerda in her husband's hometown, a hundred kilometres south of Toledo. Maria enters there and Donna Luisa provides a dowry for her. In 1571 she completes her novitiate and makes her profession as a nun. 1572 she is elected prioress of Malagón. Three years later in 1575 she accompanies Teresa on the longest journey of Teresa's life, first of all to Beas and then all the way to Seville. Maria will stay as prioress of the Seville Carmel, which was founded on May 29 1575, and Teresa will live with her there for 13 months.



Maria de San José Salazar

And then on goes Maria's life. She is prioress of Seville – I will come back to this with more details later – she corresponds with Teresa, but they will never meet again after Teresa left Toledo in June of 1576. Up to Teresa's death in 1582, they will correspond and there is a very rich correspondence – Teresa's letters to Maria, which thankfully Maria kept, are a great treasure for us. Then in December 1584 she leaves Seville to make the first foundation of Discalced Carmelite nuns outside Spain in Portugal, in Lisbon, where she will spend most of the rest of her life. She will be prioress there many times. At the end of her life she moves to Cuerva near Toledo where she dies in 1603. So 1548-1603 are the approximate dates of Maria's life.

Maria is a mystery. As to her parentage there is no reliable information. What we do know is that from a very young age she lived in the palace in Toledo of Donna Luisa de la Cerda, who was of the very highest nobility with connections to the Spanish and French royal families, so almost royalty, and then married to one of the most powerful men in the entire kingdom. Maria is often referred to in biographies as a servant girl. She is very intelligent and highly educated, which leads to the suspicion, though there is no evidence or proof, that she may have been an illegitimate child of a member of the family. It was common in those days that an illegitimate child would be brought up by a relative living elsewhere. She learns to read and write to a very high degree. She is clearly a better writer than Teresa for example, who was considered one of the

best writers of the Spanish literature of that era. Clearly Maria has had a much more formal education. Those who have studied Maria's writings will say that she has clearly studied poetic texts and has a number of techniques, unlike Teresa, whose poetry, which although valuable spiritually, is amateur poetry. Maria also can at least read and write both Latin and French. She is also very complex; people speak of her aristocratic ways in relating to people; she is very competent, highly intelligent and a very good leader of people, so we are talking about a very highly talented girl that Teresa got to know when she was staying at Donna Luisa's house.

Donna Luisa de la Cerda, Teresa and the foundation at Malagón

We come to Donna Luisa de la Cerda and her part in this story. She's an older woman who brought Teresa to Toledo and will play an important part in the rest of Teresa's life. A sign of the importance of Maria was that Donna Luisa provides the dowry when she enters Carmel. It is why, when Teresa stays at the home of Donna Luisa de la Cerda, she writes her first book, the book of her life, which has not come down to us. She re-wrote the book four years later when she was living at San José in Avila. Of course Maria, being part of the household, would have witnessed Teresa writing her book. Maria was there with Teresa from a very early stage and undoubtedly they talked and she was influenced. Teresa was drawn to this young girl and Maria in turn was drawn to Teresa. Initially she doesn't seem to have an interest in a vocation, to become one of Teresa's nuns, and we know nothing about the how or the circumstances in which Maria eventually decides that she wants to become one of Teresa's sisters.



Donna Luisa de la Cerda

Donna Luisa prevails upon Teresa and persuades her to make a foundation at Malagón. Teresa didn't want to for a number of reasons, because it went against so many of the principles that Teresa had regarding foundations. She had founded San José in Avila; she has founded Medina del Campo and had a plan to found a foundation in Valladolid – and in between this third foundation in Malagón. Why does it not fit Teresa's blueprint for her foundations? It was in a small village, whereas Teresa wanted her foundations to be in cities or towns where there would be many people who would support them with donations and charity where they wouldn't have to take an income from a founder or a benefactor. Teresa did not want that, because there would be the danger of too much control; she had seen the influence that whoever paid had on the community and she wanted her sisters to be free – primarily it was to protect the freedom of her sisters. She also wanted her foundations be in towns – as she said of San José – *to be a star* – in other words to be surrounded by people. Medina del campo was her ideal location because that was a place where the markets were, where so many people came. Not only will they support the sisters, but the sisters' influence and prayer would be seen by so many. So now she is going to a village and so many things have to be adapted, but Teresa realises that the life is being lived there. Malagón will become a very special place for Teresa; she will visit it many times on her travels; it will become a source of some of her most influential sisters. When Teresa went around making foundations, she took sisters from all the different Carmels but she seems to have taken more from Malagón than from anywhere else. It was a real centre of Teresian formation

and Maria was one of the first formed there but then becomes one of the most influential sisters of the reform, though there are many others at Malagón.

Malagón has one other unique claim to fame – it was the only Carmel for which Teresa built the foundations. Donna Luisa had given them a house in Malagón, but Teresa struck a very hard bargain – the house was not suitable, so Teresa insisted that Donna Luisa paid for the building of a new house. She bought a new site and Teresa did all the designing. Teresa was architect of the building and the building took a long time to be completed, far longer than Teresa had anticipated. There is a story Teresa eventually turned up in Malagón for the opening and the builders told her it would take at least another six or seven months. Teresa then pulled out the plans, went over them, checked out everything and announced that the opening would be in eleven days' time. So quite literally, day and night she supervised the builders and she got the job finished. It's Teresa's vision in architecture, it's one of the great legacies; the plans have been sent all over the world over the past four and a half centuries. It was Teresa's ideal, created in architecture and that was all paid for by Donna Luisa de la Cerda. That's the Carmel that Maria enters and a year later is elected prioress.

One thing we need to note when we are speaking about Teresa in the context of these talks on the Daughters of Teresa is that of leadership. When we look at the many great leaders in the world, unfortunately the majority of them feel threatened by other great leaders around them and consequently very few of them allowed any to emerge around them. When we study Teresa, and study closely her reform we see a whole number of really talented women emerging and growing around her. Maria is obviously one of them. Teresa not only seems to be a great leader herself, but a great inspirer and guide and formator for other leaders. Looking at some of the prioresses of her Carmels and the ones who continued her work after she died, Maria stands out as one of the most gifted, but there were a number of others. We can safely say that we're speaking about Maria today thanks to Teresa and her ability and her courage to allow others to grow around her and at times to surpass her – she recognises that Maria is more talented than she is in many ways. What we have got to remember when speaking about the relationship between these two women is that for almost thirteen months Maria was Teresa's prioress. When they lived together in Seville, Maria was elected prioress of the community that was founded. Teresa would live there for another thirteen months, and very difficult months they were. Whenever Teresa was in a house, founding it, she always came under the jurisdiction of the prioress who was there. Teresa did not act as prioress, so she lived under Maria, never the other way round.

How did Maria end up there? What were the circumstances behind all of that? To step back a little: in Avila in 1567, the General of the Carmelite order gave Teresa permission to found communities of Carmelite nuns, but she was not to found any in Andalusia. The reason he said that was not to restrict her work but to protect her work because he had just come from Andalusia and there were great difficulties there in the Carmelite order and he did not want Teresa's reform pulled into that. Teresa made a mistake, she went to Beas, however the situation with Beas was rather ambiguous because it came under Andalusia politically but was under Castile ecclesiastically. Her other intention then was to go to Caravaca to make a foundation there and Maria was earmarked to be prioress – something that did not happen until later. In the meantime,

in Beas, Teresa met for the first time the very influential Carmelite, Fr Jeronimo Gracian, who would be her collaborator for so many years, and he persuaded her to go and make a foundation in Seville. She knew it was against the wishes of the General of the order, but he at this stage had the power of a nuncio to order her to go and she felt she had no choice. Maria explains this very well in her writing, when she wrote a detailed account of all that – something we can't go into now – and that was how she ended up in Seville. It was not Teresa's original intention and she describes it as the most difficult of all her foundations, difficult for many reasons. Both Maria and Teresa have left us written accounts of their journey from Beas to Seville and both accounts are wonderful – Teresa in the *Book of her Foundations* and Maria in her *Book for the Hour of Recreation*, in which she left a detailed account of that journey, full of all kinds of adventures and dangers and made in the month of June in the intense heat. For them it was like entering into alien territory.



Jeronimo Gracian

Teresa and Maria in Seville

Seville will be where Maria will spend almost ten years and it will be difficult. The difficulties they ran into there are complicated, but I will try and keep them as simple as possible. Everywhere Teresa went there were difficulties making the foundations. There were difficulties getting a suitable house, there were difficulties initially obtaining permission from the archbishop, even though they believed they already had it, he went back on his word. It was difficult at the beginning, however he came round and became very supportive of them. At the official opening of the Carmel, when he came to bless it, the story is told that Teresa went to him and asked him for his blessing, which he gave to her, and then, as an indication of the esteem in which he held Teresa, and much to her embarrassment he knelt down in front of her in public asked her to bless him which she very reluctantly did.

Teresa would end up spending thirteen months in Seville. The difficulties around making the foundation would be part of it, but the other reason is that she was reported to the Inquisition, so in Seville she has got to appear before them. There are all sorts of difficulties there and she has to defend herself, so she is detained there for quite a long time. Great financial difficulties arise, partly because it is the year 1575, the year of the famous bankruptcy in Spain – the royal family, the government went bankrupt and ceased paying interest on their loans from all the nobility and all the business people. Therefore the people who were supporting Teresa's foundation were no longer able to do so and this had a direct effect on their purchasing of the available properties. In addition to this the other major difficulty that arises – and Maria writes extensively about it – is the difficulty within the Carmelite order. Up until now the General of the order in Rome was very supportive of Teresa. Now of course she has gone against his wishes and has gone to Andalusia and though she felt she had no alternative and was forced to do so he didn't see it like that, and he issues a very negative order to her to stop making foundations, to go to one of her foundations in Castile and stay there effectively in isolation. But she can't do it of course until the business with the Inquisition is finished; therefore she is detained there.

So Seville was a very difficult period in Teresa's life and Maria as prioress is in charge of all of these dealings. On the one hand Seville should have been one of the easiest places for them to go to but it turns out to be the complete opposite. One is that they had no contacts there; everywhere in Castile Teresa was well known, she knew the nobility there; in Seville she didn't, the culture was very, very different. But they would get established there under Maria's leadership and for a while things will go very well, then Maria runs into other difficulties. A very unsuitable sister enters the convent, eventually leaves but then reports Maria to the nuncio and to the Inquisition. Maria is deposed from office, removed as prioress and the person who makes the complaint is made prioress – a very unsuitable person. A very difficult period in Maria's life, but to cut the story short she gets through it, she is eventually reinstated and will continue as prioress there until 1584.

So Seville and Maria's time there form the part of her life we know most about, mainly because she very carefully kept most of the letters Teresa wrote. Not all of them have come down to us, but she carefully kept the great treasury letters from Teresa. Teresa unfortunately never kept any letters as she would receive a big pile of letters every day and she would read them and then burn them. That was her practice so we don't have the other half of the correspondence. Teresa took a keen interest in Maria and the work of the Seville Carmel. But it was also very important to Teresa for other reasons, one being that Seville at this time was at the height of its powers and wealth because it was the gateway to the New World, to America. The foundation is saved while Teresa is there because her brother Lorenzo comes back from America and brings a lot of money with him and initially helps the Carmel in Seville financially. But Maria de San José will become Teresa's eyes towards America: *Tell me when the fleet is leaving*, she would write, because she would want to send letters to her friends in America, to her brothers and to other relatives in America. She was very interested in everything that comes from America when the fleet came in, *tell me when it is coming, tell me what news you have etc.*

In addition to that the Carmel in Seville would receive a lot of exotic gifts from America, things like coconuts, potatoes and other completely new things that had come from America and she would send them off to Teresa or tell Teresa about them and Teresa is fascinated by them. I remember being told some years ago by a horticulturalist that one of the first written references to the potato in Europe was in one of Teresa's letters to Maria de San José, thanking her for having sent the potatoes. These were the first potatoes to arrive in Europe. Potatoes of course would save Europe from starvation they will become very quickly the most important food in Europe. There is a lovely story about the coconut when Teresa asks what to do with it – what is it, how do we open it? So she had her eyes on America. Teresa also takes a great interest in how things are in Andalusia, she was fascinated by Andalusia, it was like going to the ends of the earth for Teresa. Things were very different down there and Maria, she said, was absolutely the right person for that job because it was going to be such a difficult one.



The fate of Teresa's manuscripts: her 'Life' and the 'Interior Castle'

One final contribution. In 1577 Teresa writes her *Interior Castle*. The first edition of Teresa's *Life* she wrote in the palace of Donna Luisa de la Cerda in Toledo; the second edition she was to write in San José in Avila. That book eventually was taken by Donna Luisa to Juan of Avila in Andalusia, who approved the book. It was then given to the Inquisition, who approved it but did not release it, so the Inquisition still had it. At least two very poorly made copies were going around the place, but Teresa really had no access to this book. When Teresa wrote the *Interior Castle*, she took no risks, as she wrote it and in the last month in Avila in November of 1577, she would write a page, hand it to a sister who would make a copy who would then hand it to another sister and immediately when it was finished, it was sent right down to Andalusia to be put into the hands of Maria de San José. That was the safest place for it, She knew Maria had the astuteness to make sure it did not get into the wrong hands, that they were not losing this book. Copies of it would be sent around the place, but it would not get lost. So Teresa's great treasure, *Las Moradas – The Interior Castle*, is put into the hands of Maria de San José. The king, having just built the Escorial palace, wanted to get hold of the original manuscript and of course the Inquisition want this too, as do others, but it stays safe in Seville for a while. Eventually they have to give it to a friend of the community for safer keeping. When the king tries to get it there seems to be a case of collective amnesia and nobody knows where the book is. But then, as the decades go on, there's difficulty in getting the book back. The man to whom it was given had four daughters and he had wanted one of them to become a Carmelite nun, but none of them had any interest in doing so at that time, but after he died one of them decides to enter Seville Carmel and brings along with her the *Interior Castle*. So, thanks to Maria and Seville Carmel, the *Interior Castle* is there to this day, the original housed in a beautiful castle, the greatest treasure of the Carmel at Seville.



Manuscript of *The Interior Castle*

Maria's writings: 'The book for the hour of recreation'

Welcome to the second session about Maria de San José, 'daughter' of St Teresa.

I would like to say a little bit about her *Book for the hour of recreation*. It is her only book to have been translated into English. She has two other books that have been published in Spanish in recent times. It's a wonderful insight into the Carmelite life as it was lived in the years immediately after Teresa's death. The powerful influence of Teresa, the defence of the life, the importance given to detail – even in that little introduction, the detail of the life mattered – the everyday life, the kind of people that these nuns were. It is a reinterpreting of Teresa's own thinking, but within the confines, the limits, of women and women's religious life at that time. So she is operating within the limits of history, the limits of the situation that she finds herself in and hence that kind of apology which is not really an apology for using scripture, all of that acknowledging the restrictions they were under. She says that she never expects this book to be published, but like Teresa she would have liked it to be published.

Let's now listen to her own words. This is part of her introduction to her '*Book for the hour of recreation*'.

I have wished, my sisters, that all persons would know of this angelic life, for indeed, even if my knowledge and ability were greater, it would be difficult to make known to those who have not enjoyed them the favours of a heaven that are found in these divine gardens where the celestial bridegroom takes his recreation.

I believe I must explain two things: first, why, given my intention of telling the life of our holy mother and the greatness of Carmel, should this subject be mixed in with a variety of matters, for many things that I include here seem irrelevant, and serve only to make the work long-winded, such as quarrels between the nuns and other extraneous conversations that are mixed in beside the points. In this regard I declare that my chief intent is to portray the nuns' friendly conversation and way of life, their humility and simplicity and mortification, their continual practices of prayer, their contempt of fine dress and their selflessness, along with their happy and holy diversions. It did not seem to me that this could be indicated by words alone, however earnestly I might speak them, but rather that I would have to create some sort of living representation though at the same time as if this were all painted.

The second point she makes is to apologise for making use of sacred scripture, which she as a woman should not be doing. In this book we get a sense of what we could say is Maria's mission, certainly from the time Teresa died to the end of her life. Among the many things that she will do, the most important and the theme running right through the rest of her life is her defence of Teresa's legacy and her founding and promoting and explaining the lives of the sisters. In the introduction to this fascinating book she sets out what she wants to do. She wants to explain this life and how beautifully she puts it in her lovely prose: *these divine gardens where the celestial bridegroom takes his recreation* – the Carmels and what kind of a life goes on within them. She describes the life, not as some kind of theory, but grounded in real life,

which includes the conflicts of the nuns and all the other tensions and difficulties that take place and she proceeds to write the book as a work of fiction. It's a fascinating book – three sisters meeting for recreation, and she is telling them all about Teresa and the history – going right back to the beginnings of the order on Mount Carmel and the Teresian reform, and things like the journey from Beas to Seville, the problems there were within the order and all the various difficulties – and does so as a living portrait, a living reality, *like painting a picture*. She wants to paint a picture – the genius of this woman – creating this wonderful book in which she sets out her vision. Unfortunately it is incomplete, some of it having been lost in history.

Maria – defender of Teresa's legacy

Going beyond this, she is the great defender of Teresa's legacy and this will get her into great difficulties. One of the things she explains very well in *The book for the hour of recreation* are the circumstances around the Discalced Carmelites becoming a separate province. That was really the first step toward independence, done in Teresa's lifetime in 1581, the year before she dies. And it is a rather complex picture, but she explains it very well: two friars had to be sent to Rome and live there for a year, negotiating with the Pope and others to help bring all this about. And she said it was the nuns who funded it and the biggest contribution was made by Seville Carmel and that the friars should acknowledge the debt they owed the nuns. She doesn't mean just financially, she means it was really the nuns who were responsible for bringing about the fact that the Discalced had now their own independence, their own autonomy, could run their own affairs and had the possibility of growing and developing.

What she is touching on there is a major issue in the background to this whole story and that is not just the relationship between the nuns and the friars of the Discalced Carmelites – that's part of it – but behind that is the relationship between men and women in religious orders and indeed in the whole Church, and in particular the unique situation of the Discalced Carmelites, an order of women and men founded by a woman. Something that Maria points out here is that in the official document establishing the Discalced Carmelites there is no mention of Teresa, not a mention of her, no mention of the fact that the Discalced had been founded by Teresa. It is as if she has been already wiped out from the official history of the order. Maria of course is Teresa's great defender, not just defending Teresa's role, but in particular Teresa's spirit. Having said that, Maria of course very much welcomes the separation and the independence that the Discalced now have.

Carmelite clashes – Nicola Doria

However, what is now going to happen is that the Discalced Carmelites are going to clash with each other; there are going to be two very different interpretations of Teresa's legacy, Teresa's charism, of what it means to be a Discalced Carmelite. Maria and her nuns are going to be on one side of this and are going to be very much pulled into it. So once more she will be deposed from office, will be confined to the prison cell of the Carmel in Lisbon. Carmels of course had their prison cells, as all religious houses had in those days. They weren't so much for sisters or friars who had committed crimes, but more for those going through difficulties, they were more for solitary confinement, those living a hermit life – so out of context, she is put into solitary confinement. The background to this is that Nicola Doria, who becomes General Provincial of the

Discalced, wants to change Teresa's constitutions and bring the nuns under the jurisdiction of the friars.

One of the revolutionary things that Teresa did in her reform was to set up the nuns in such a way that they are very much protected from the interference of men – whether they be Bishops, confessors, friars – whoever is in charge – nuncios and other people. Her system of enclosure: nobody could go in, they had to keep out; within the convent the nuns had total autonomy over their lives and each Carmel is autonomous. The nuns have total freedom in choosing their confessor and chaplains, and whoever is confessor, their role is confined to the spiritual and they had no other role or power over the community. Very often they exercised an enormous amount of power over the community; the same of course applied to benefactors, as we have already seen with Donna Luisa.

Nicola Doria wanted to change that and bring the nuns much more under the friars' jurisdiction, giving him as Provincial much more power over the affairs of the nuns, and in particular the power to amend the constitutions of the nuns. The nuns resisted this in what came to be known as the Nuns' Revolt. Maria and Ana de Jesus wrote to the Pope to get him to overrule Doria, which he did, but the following year there was a new Pope who rejected that. And so on went the story.



Nicola Doria by Tintoretto

Maria's exile

Towards the end of Maria's life she was ordered to leave Lisbon, effectively sent into exile again and unfortunately she soon dies in 1603. More or less immediately after her death she is virtually wiped out of the story. We don't even know where she is buried.

In the 17th century a Carmelite historian produced two lists: a list of the main writers in the Teresian reform and a list of the hundred most important nuns and friars of Teresa's reform. Maria's name does not appear on either list – she should be at the top of both lists. She is the first writer to succeed Teresa; a number of Teresa's other sisters also wrote but she is virtually the first to continue Teresa's tradition of writing. As I have already said, she had an exceptional gift of writing though very few of her writings have actually come down to us, though some of her poetry has. She is almost the first of writers, successors to Teresa yet her writings just get ignored down through history. And of course the contribution that she makes is enormous to the order and the handing on of the Teresian charism. So history almost wipes her out.

It's not until 1999, nearly four hundred years after her death, that she is finally rehabilitated. The Superior General, Camilo Maccise, made an apology on behalf of the order for the way she and Ana de Jesus were marginalised down through history and he lifted the expulsion from the order of Father Gracian. So the three were rehabilitated in 1999.

Maria's written portrait of Teresa

However, an extract from the book has been published and that is her poem about Teresa. She says in this introduction that the entire work is like painting a picture – a picture of the nun's lives. She leaves in it a penned picture of Teresa that is often quoted, which I will read in a moment. When Teresa was leaving Seville, after living for thirteen months with the nuns there and going through great suffering, of course having journeyed together from Malagón to Beas and Beas to Seville in all that heat and the adventure and the nuns knew they would never see her again. Teresa found it particularly difficult to leave – she would call it her 'far away Carmel', the one she knew there was no possibility of ever visiting again. Before she left they persuaded her to sit for a portrait. One of the friars, Juan de la Miseria, did a portrait – not very good artistically – but it is the only genuine portrait of Teresa that has survived, in fact the only genuine one that was ever done. But we can combine it with the pen portrait that Maria gives us here in this book, which I am going to read. It is the most quoted piece of Maria's writings, the one bit that hasn't been ignored.



Portrait of Teresa of Avila
by Juan de la Miseria

Here's how she describes her; she knew Teresa so well, having known her for quite a number of years:

Our saint was of medium height, more on the tall side than short. In her youth she was known as a great beauty and until the end of her days this was evident. Her face was far from ordinary but rather quite extraordinary, of a sort that could not be called either round or narrow. It was evenly proportioned, the forehead wide and schooled and very beautiful. Her eyebrows broad and slightly arched, were a dark blood colour that bore little resemblance to black. Her eyes were black, round and lively, not very large but very well placed. Her nose was round and went straight down between the corners of her eyes and the top of it was small and laid back with her eyebrows, forming a gentle space between the brows while the point was round and slightly tilted down with little nostrils arched and small and overall not very prominent.

Scarcely can the pen portray what perfection was hers in all things. Her mouth, which was of a very good size and an intense straight upper lip with a thicker lower lip with a slight arch, which had a lovely grace and colour and her face looked thus to the day she was of a great age and had many illnesses. So it was a great pleasure to look at her and listen to her, for she was very gentle and witty in all her words and actions. She was more robust than thin and well proportioned in all ways. She had very lovely hands, though they were small. On the left side of her face she had three moles, raised like little warts all in a straight line, beginning with the largest one below her mouth and the next between her mouth and nose and the last on her nose, closer to the bottom than to the top.

And then she goes on to speak about the painting that they got her to sit for. It's a lovely portrait, written with great love, detail, clarity of memory. We can just think of the many times that she sat listening to Teresa. She used to listen through the door when she was in the home of Donna Luisa de la Cerda when she was a young teenager

and the times of listening to Teresa's teaching and being present when Teresa was writing some of her writings and all the time they spent together and the deep love that was there, love that she wants to do everything that she possibly can to translate.

Teresa's letters to Maria

The other very important source consists of Teresa's letters to Maria. They are a real resource and thanks to Maria for keeping these letters, because so many of Teresa's letters have been lost. Apart from Fr Gracian, she is the one who has kept the most of Teresa's letters that have come down to us. But there is a real treasury there because here we have two Carmelite nuns going through so many difficulties, sharing so many experiences with each other, trusting each other, confiding in each other, being concerned for each other. It is part of Teresa's vision, we might say. She founded these Carmels, she wanted them to be communities of communities, keeping regular contact with each other, supporting each other. That didn't always happen, but here we see a great example of it happening. We find in these letters all sorts of things, there's a great richness in them. Of particular importance are the ones around 1576, 1577, after Teresa has left Seville and is going through very difficult times and they are sharing with each other what is happening. I want to start with the second to last letter, dated 6th July 1582. Teresa is now in Burgos, about to leave there and the letter covers an enormous range because they talked about all sorts of things:

Jesus, the Grace of the Holy Spirit be with Your Reverence, Amen, Amen.

What a lovely way to begin a letter, *Jesus, Amen, Amen*: prayer. To refer to her as *Your Reverence*. Though of course Teresa says over and over again Carmelites should never use titles, Teresa always used titles for others and there's a certain amount of smiles and fun behind this – there's a bit of teasing behind it. *Yesterday I received a letter from you, which although there were only a few lines, brought me the greatest delight but I was very afflicted over what they told me about so many people dying. I am praying urgently to God for you, as they are doing in all these houses for I sent to ask them for all their prayers. I have been anxious at every moment to think of you amidst so many trials.* And that was because there was a pestilence, afflicting Andalusia at that time and a lot of people had died. This was very common in those days – 16th century, pestilence, plagues. We have just come out of this Covid, but in those days it was a regular occurrence, but it tended to be more in a regions, people didn't travel so much so a lot of people had died in Andalucía at that time, including one or two the friars and the Vicar Provincial had died in Seville. Teresa had got word of this; luckily the community were OK.

In the third paragraph she writes *I would have liked to have been told of this letter so that my answer could have been in my own hand, but I was informed only now that the letter carrier is here to leave and my head is very tired, as I have been writing the whole afternoon. But even if they aren't in my own hand, I didn't want to neglect sending these few lines.* So she got the secretary to write because she is just too tired – she's dying at this stage.

One more little paragraph: *I haven't mentioned how amused I was by your complaints about the Mother Prioress in Granada* and that of course is another great Carmelite nun, Ana de Jesus, for whom John of the Cross wrote the *Spiritual Canticle*. She has

made the foundation in Granada and Maria de San José has sent two sisters to Granada to become part of that community and Mother Ana had written back complaining about the mode of transport. *But she should rather be thankful for what you did in sending the nuns in so a dignified manner and not riding some donkeys for God and the whole world to see.* Teresa tried always to use the best mode of transport; now transport was very limited in those days and it was very difficult to get around. Now Maria de San José, in Teresa's spirit, sent them in the most expensive mode of transport possible and of course, Ana of Jesus, being more idealistic, took umbrage at this because as poor Carmelite nuns they shouldn't be using such luxuries, but Teresa and Maria obviously agreed that this was the right thing to have done: *Even if you had sent them by litter I wouldn't have been upset if nothing else was available. May God preserve you, my daughter, but you did very well.*

And interesting in that letter, as an aside to it when she is handing the letter on to history, Maria de San José wrote in the margin: *our holy mother says this because of the criticism that two nuns were sent by coach from Seville to Granada for the foundation there. Here one sees the opinion of our mother.* Maria wanted that handed down in history. While Carmelite nuns take vows of poverty, they should not put people in danger, they should use the best means of transport. There are certain things that nothing should be spared on and this was one of them, so the right decision was taken here. *And don't worry about it if someone thinks otherwise,* Teresa goes on to say, *they are only quibbling. She must have been displeased, because in the making of that foundation things weren't done according to their plan, but I think everything will be all right, even if there is some trial, the outcome isn't worse for that reason.*

Ana had worked closely with John of the Cross in the making of that foundation and they didn't follow Teresa's advice on everything and things went wrong and Teresa wrote a very harsh letter complaining to them that they hadn't followed her advice. In a sense there's a bit of *wasn't I right* behind all of this. But then she goes on to say, speaking about Burgos, which was her last foundation: *This house is in very good condition, well established and paid for* – it was flooded not too long before this, almost up to the roof it was flooded, but they have obviously got that sorted – *and the nuns for many years will have no need to work to support themselves. So I think I will soon start on my way back to Avila. Pray to God for me. My throat continues as usual as do my other infirmities.* But she will never make it back to Avila of course, she will die en route. It's just one little glimpse of one of her letters and the kind of relationship that existed between Teresa and Maria de San José and the detail that went into these letters and all about them and the whole life that was shared between them.

This is a just a fragment a letter sent 17th March which is a bit earlier on, again written from Burgos. It is a lovely little vignette: *I was amused by the authority you show with your bell and if it gets one convert, as you say, you are right. I hope in God that your house will advance far. [suffer much... unintelligible] You say everything so well that if my opinion were followed, they would elect you foundress after my death, and even if I were living, I would be eagerly in favour, for you know much more than I do and are better – that is the truth. I have the advantage over you through having a little experience but not much attention should be paid to me anymore for you would be startled to see how old I am and how incapable...*

That is the only bit of the letter that came down to us. But it is Maria through Teresa's eyes, who she is and the respect that she holds her in. The house has suffered much at Seville and Teresa is looking to the future; Teresa spotted they were going to elect her as foundress, but of course they didn't do that and there was no real successor to Teresa, which maybe with hindsight there should have been, but there wasn't. But Teresa sees that Maria of all her sisters is the one who could really succeed her, has the ability to do that, and as I said earlier, recognises that Maria in fact has more ability than she has in many respects. The one thing that Teresa has, she said, is experience, but Maria has everything else.

We just get a glimpse there that those letters are fascinating. It is well worth reading them, exploring them; they give an insight into the whole of life of 16th century Spain and the attempts that these women are making, not just to found monasteries and convents, but to found a whole new way of living and of relating with each other, that's what they are doing. Their concern is primarily with human relationships and relationships with God. All the history that I mentioned at the beginning that their story gets tangled up in is in a sense peripheral. Their priorities – whether it be Teresa and now Maria de San José – it's the life of prayer, Carmelite life, the spirit, the charism, given to St Teresa that they are living in these communities for nuns and friars. And she wants this lived and passed on authentically, that's what her life was all about, that is the purpose of her life. All the rest somehow got pulled into that, but perhaps it also helps us in a sense to see the power there is, the power that she really sees in Teresa's charism and the richness that is in it and the need to pass it on.

We might think isn't that obvious, all these centuries later, but when you live with someone, when you're with someone so closely, when you go through so many problems, face so much opposition and difficulties, criticised by very powerful people, put into all kinds of difficult situations; to remain faithful, to believe steadfastly in what really matters, that's the greatness of this woman. And finally, hopefully, history is beginning to acknowledge that and hopefully in years to come she will become better known and better understood.

And I come back to the point I made at the beginning, which has been on my mind, which has preoccupied me: to convey a right understanding. We have to understand the kind of situation she found herself in, the world she was in, the kind of Church she was living in, the obstacles that were piled up in front of her and yet what she achieves is truly extraordinary.

© Fr Matt Blake OCD – 31st July 2022

Source material:

The Book for the Hour of Recreation

by Maria de San José Salazar, Alison Weber (ed.)
University of Chicago Press, 2002

The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Avila, Volumes 1 and 2

Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD
Published by ICS, Washington DC

The book of the foundations – Volume 3, The Complete Works - St Teresa of Avila. Translated and edited by E. Allison Peers.
Burns & Oates 2002