

Aylesford retreat

Thursday 28th July, 2022 am 6th talk

We continue to look at the story of Teresa's life – a story of Teresa's growing and developing as a teacher and guide of prayer. In these chapters that we are to focus on this morning, Chapters 32 – 36, we see that she is also becoming a founder. We glimpse into the story of the founding of St Jose [St Joseph], Teresa's first foundation.

You may wonder why Teresa inserted the founding of St Joseph in the *Book of Her Life* and recounted it at such great lengths. It is because this is a story of her life/her soul and also of her vocation of founding. This is the fruit of the work of God taking place in her as she responded from the deepest depth of her soul to God's calling to found these foundations of prayer. This vocation of founding happened in the midst of her mystical experiences of God, as we have seen earlier in Chapters 21-23 and 27.

Now In Chapter 32, she talked of her profound experience of hell, as God had intended to show her. This is not the work of the devil. 'I understood that the Lord wanted me to see my place in hell; I well understood that it was a great favour and that the Lord desired me to see with my own eyes the place His mercy had freed me from.' (Ch 32:3) That experience gave birth to her founding and the start of the discalced Carmelites.

Let's consider these contrasts for a moment: In order to know love, we've got to know what's not love. In order to know good, we've got to know what's evil. In order to know God, we've got to know the devil. In order to know heaven, we've got to know hell. To know life we need to know death. We've got to know the opposite. The monastery of St Joseph is the light coming out of the darkness. In order to know the light, we need to know darkness. Therefore Teresa had to see the darkness of hell.

The Founding of St Joseph – It is God's work

After her mystical experience of hell, Teresa had great impulse to save souls. 'From this experience also flow the great impulses to help souls ...' (Ch 32:6). She was thinking what she could do for God; she was contemplating leading a religious life more in conformity with the primitive rule. At that time, she and a few nuns and her friends met at the Monastery of the Incarnation to pray together. They had the similar wish: 'if we couldn't be nuns like the discalced (the 'Descalzas Reales' - a new reformed order of groups of nuns who led the reformed way of life), it would still be possible to found a monastery'. (Ch 32:10) Teresa was not too hopeful for the realisation of this desire, but the companions 'agreed to pray fervently to God on this.' (Ch 32:10) They were committed to the idea. Teresa discussed this idea with one of her companions, Guiomar de Ulloa, a widow, who had some money, the contacts and the resources to help her with the foundation.

And God intervened. That's the pattern in Teresa's life. 'One day after Communion, His Majesty earnestly commanded me to strive for this new monastery with all my powers.' (Ch 32:11) Note this phrase 'with all my powers' – this was mentioned in several places in Teresa's writing. For instance, at the founding of the last foundation in Burgos, the Lord said this to Teresa: 'Use all your powers and ingenuity, and I will help you,' This is the way Teresa operated – she used all her gifts and resources: her initiative, charm, diplomacy, her contacts, etc. Teresa gave her all and God did the rest. We see in these chapters, in particular, Chapter 33, that she encountered many setbacks and obstacles, but God was behind the founding.

The purpose of founding the monasteries was that 'God will be served'. When God wants something, it always happens, '... and He made great promises that it would be founded and that He would be highly served in it.' (Ch 32:11)

God told Teresa that 'it should be called St Joseph and that this saint would keep watch over us at one door, and our Lady at the other, that Christ would remain with us, and that it would be a star shining with great splendour.' (Ch 32:11) The community would be the holy family of Nazareth. Mary and Joseph are in charge and are protecting the home. Teresa had two images of the foundation: the family at Nazareth and the first Christian community of the 12 apostles gathering around Jesus. (Teresa's ideal number for the community is thirteen.) These two ideas she had in mind all the time. Teresa re-created the community with Jesus at the centre, where he is served, and given honour and glory. The community would be at the centre of a populated town like a star shining with great splendour in the darkness, shining out on all the activities and daily life in the town and drawing people to it like a star. Teresa intended that all her monasteries should be founded in populated areas where there was a demand for the foundation and it would do good for all the people.

A digression – friendship with God and with others (a central theme of Teresa's)

Chapter 34 is a digression from her narrative of founding. In this chapter, she told us that she was moved away from Avila to Toledo. In Toledo she wrote the first version of the *Book of Her Life*. It seemed providential that she was sent away from Avila where it was engulfed in controversies and persecutions. This is an important chapter as it explained one of Teresa's main themes – friendship, friendship with God and friendship with others. She emphasized friendship in *The Way of Perfection*, 'in this house ... all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped.' (WP 4:6) This theme and the other, her defence of mystical experience of God in one's life (i.e., the friendship with God), ran right through her book.

So, in this chapter, she wrote of her encounter with the Dominican friar, Garcia de Toledo, whom she had met before and became good friends. The account illustrates her friendship with Garcia de Toledo and friendship with God. He became one of Teresa's Spiritual Directors, but in fact, Teresa was guiding him in prayer. In her account, she was instrumental in doing God's bid in bringing Garcia de Toledo closer to God. 'He resolved very sincerely to dedicate himself to prayer, even though he didn't do so at once. Since the Lord had wanted this person for Himself, He sent him some truths by means of me, which, without my understanding them, were so apropos that they amazed him. And the Lord must have disposed him to believe they were from His Majesty.' (Ch 34:11)

The establishment of the community of St Joseph

Teresa resumed telling about the establishment of the community of St Joseph in Chapter 35. In Chapter 36:5, Teresa recounted the founding of the community: 'When everything was ready the Lord was pleased that on St Bartholomew's day the habit was received by some and the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, and with all due authority and power our monastery of our most glorious father St. Joseph was founded, in 1562.' 'The Blessed Sacrament was reserved' – that is always the moment for her when the foundation was made, that this is now God's house where He is given honour and glory and the foundation is now irreversible. The most important thing for Teresa is that the Lord is served and this is the great work of God.

For a broader mission

Chapter 36:6: We are given a little of Teresa's thinking. These 'four poor orphans ... and four great servants of God (for this is what I had in mind from the beginning, that persons would enter who by their example of prayer and a very perfect life would be a foundation upon which we could achieve our goal).' Teresa is very aware that there should be a charism for being a founder. She also tells us in various ways as in here that everybody is a founder. The life one lives is a foundation stone for the future. In this sense, we are all founders; the quality of how we live affects those who come after us. This is a conviction she had of herself and of the community that she was founding, of every Christian and in particular of every Carmelite. Her main concern is '... to see a work accomplished that I knew was for the service of the Lord ...' (Ch 36:6) The service of the Lord is for the whole world

– it is the Church’s vision. This global vision of Teresa’s would be expanded further a few years later. For Teresa, it is important that the life of these four ‘orphans’ [nuns] and the foundation will be a witness to life. It will change the world because a life well-lived changes the world. Therefore, a life well-lived is a great service of God. This is another aspect of this book – *Life*. When a person comes to life, he/she changes the life of others. These nuns are becoming alive in the monastery, and the monastery will be a witness. It will build up the Church and will make Christ better known. Teresa had in mind a bigger purpose – a vocation for the mission of the Church, that is, the work of God in the world. She is convinced that we will not live this vocation unless we ourselves have this bigger purpose. It is Teresa’s intention that all who read this book must know this.

The calm in the midst of storms

[In life], conflicts and oppositions will arise, but God will always bring us to a safe place. Reflecting on the founding of St Joseph as she was writing this book, Teresa observed, ‘The main disposition required for always living in this calm is the desire to rejoice solely in Christ.... to be alone with Him alone ...’ (Ch 36:28) That is peace and calm even in the midst of crises and battles. ‘And by the great happiness and joy and small amount of hardship we have had during these years spent in this house, in which we find all of us have had much better health than usual... that is what is fitting.’ (Ch 36:38) The community was flourishing amidst all the difficulties and opposition, for it was the work of God. It happened; it was brought about.

This mirrors Teresa’s prayer life. She encountered so many obstacles and difficulties. Her prayer life was so misunderstood by the so-called experts, spiritual directors and theologians, but it bore great fruit. She became the great person of prayer and a great teacher of prayer. Her work of founding was opposed by everybody – her superiors, the theologians, the town councillors of Avila, the local people, the community she was living in. They were against everything she was doing, and the way she was going about it. Just like with her prayer life, the foundations bore great fruit. Boldly she followed the light inside her, listened to and was open to what God was doing in her. She was attentive to the work of God which is beyond human understanding. Boldly, she brought forth the great work of God.

This is a fascinating story, full of details. The details are important because this is an account of the great work of God. It is worthy reading it over.