

St Teresa of Avila's *Book of her Life*

Retreat given by Fr Matt Blake OCD
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PART ONE – *Background*

Welcome to you all. As we gather here to reflect on Teresa's writings, this weekend it's the book called *Life*. Over these four weekends we're going to look at each of Teresa's writings in the context of the fifth centenary of her birth.

You will notice on the retreat programme – some people suggested this to me when it came to discussing these particular four weekends, people came up with these two questions to give the weekends a certain focus. What is Teresa's purpose in writing this book? And how can the reading of this book help us today in our lives of prayer? Now I am not setting out to directly answer those questions, but rather to keep them as a background or a focus, because it is for each of us to answer for ourselves, but also we each have our own questions, we come with our own needs, but at the same time they are good questions and questions that give us a certain focus as we reflect on this book of Teresa's.

The purpose of these weekends is to help with not just a reading of Teresa's writings, but what I would call a right reading of them. We can read her writings and get a certain amount from them, but what I will be focussing upon is what think is helpful to reading these books correctly, reading them in a way in which we will come to an understanding, and more importantly profit ourselves from our reading of them. Maybe another word I should use that people will find helpful with Teresa's writings in terms of not so much reading Teresa as listening to Teresa, because that's how her early readers heard her. Teresa wrote at a time when the vast majority of people couldn't read or write and in her convents and monasteries her books were read out, and people listened to them and what she has written is what she would have given over and over again in her oral teaching. So we listen to her.

So the book we are considering this weekend, the book which we call *Life – Vida*, it's not the title that Teresa gave the book – she never gave it a title – it's a title that's been given more or less from the time that it was written and it is an appropriate title, not so much that this is autobiography, though there's quite a lot of autobiography in it, or even spiritual autobiography, which is a term often used about the book. Yes it's that, but it's much more than that, what I would say is that it is a book about life, about Teresa's own coming to life, coming to the fullness of life. We'll come back to that.

To begin with, I need to begin with giving a certain amount of background to this book. Books, particularly Teresa's books, don't just fall from the sky. They have a story, they have a history, they have a life of their own and this book has that. So we are celebrating the fifth centenary of Teresa's birth in 1515. And she tells us at the very end of the

book of her *Life*, in the accompanying letter at the end of the book, she tells us this book was finished in June 1562, so Teresa is forty-seven years of age, which in those days would be considered far older than it would be today. We could probably add twenty, twenty-five years by life expectancy, so she has lived a lot of life by the time she writes this. However, when we read the book we realise of course that it wasn't finished in 1562. This book was written twice; the first version of it was finished then, because when we read the book we realise there are events that had not yet taken place, which she has written about and not even Teresa could write about events that had not taken place – so this book has been written twice. The first version of it, the version that she refers to in that letter has not come down to us. The first version of the book she wrote in 1562, she is forty-seven years of age; she has lived for twenty-seven years in the monastery of the Incarnation in Avila. And what might that say about those twenty-seven years that have brought her to this point of writing this book?

Over those years there are many struggles in Teresa's life, but the most fundamental of those struggles is around prayer. Teresa is a woman who wants to pray, but can't. Or to put it another way, she cannot pray in the way that the experts were teaching her to pray. In those days you were taught how to pray, there were certain methods of prayer that were right, that were approved, that were taught; there were other methods that were dangerous and you could be led astray and you don't go there. But she struggled to pray according to the methods that were there. But as she tells us, *I was praying without knowing that I was*, or *I was learning to pray without knowing that I was*. She couldn't follow the methods, but she was learning how to pray, but not only that, but she was having all kinds of experiences of prayer and they were real signs that this woman was growing in prayer, but she lived at a time when there was a great fear that she was misled – it could be the devil – she could not only be misled herself, but she could be misleading others. There was that sort of culture of fear, and so she had to turn to what she called *these learned men* – confessors, directors, theologians – for their help and advice and initially the first one she turned to said she was misled, this is the devil, this cannot possibly be right, even some who knew her well, who she highly respected. But then gradually she found others who began to see the value in what she was doing, in what she was saying.

And it's out of that that she begins to write. That's the kind of context that Teresa begins to write about her prayer life. In fact the first writings of Teresa's that come down to us are accounts written for her confessors, that they can then go and show to others and say is this woman really on the right road or is she not? What also has begun to happen in Teresa's life, is that at the monastery of the Incarnation some sisters and some other people also are talking with Teresa, discussing prayer. People were coming to her for help, but out of these discussions also there emerged the idea of founding a community. Wouldn't it be good if we could found a small community that could live by the ideas that we are discussing dreaming of? So that idea is starting to emerge and in 1551 steps are being taken quietly, behind the scenes, with the help of some friends to bring this about. And what then happened to Teresa is that towards the end of 1551 she is ordered by her superiors to go to Toledo to stay with a woman who has just been widowed, Donna Luisa de La Cerda, who has heard about this holy nun in Avila, and she is so distressed at the death of her husband she wants this nun to come and console her, and accompany her and help her. So on the face of it this would appear to be disaster – she has been taken away to a different city, a different place from her convent, into the home of a noble lady and all of that. But it is during those six to seven months

that she spends there at the home of Donna Luisa de La Cerda that she writes the first edition of book of her *Life*, as I said, the book that has not come down to us. In June she finished writing the book. In August she returns to Avila and her community begins. About six months later she then moves from the Incarnation to her new community in San José.

So three years later she is asked to re-write the book, and as we don't have the first edition we don't know how much of the first has gone into the second, but probably quite a lot. Undoubtedly the second one has so much more material, particularly the account of the foundation of her first community, which she couldn't have written before that. So a whole journey has taken place; she re-writes the book or writes a second edition and that is the book that we are looking at, reading and reflecting upon this weekend, the book that she finishes towards the end of 1565.

But the book then takes on its own life. In that letter at the end she's asking one of those who asked her write this, and probably the person whom the book is most addressed to, the Dominican theologian Garcia de Toledo, she's giving him the book and asking him to take it to the foremost theologian in Spain at the time – he's now a canonised saint, Juan de Avila – to take the book to him, write it out himself first so that her handwriting won't be seen and ask him is this OK. Of course he doesn't do that and it will be years later before the book will get to Juan de Avila. When Teresa finishes the second edition of the book and gives it again to Garcia de Toledo, it goes here, there, all over the place, eventually yes it does get to Juan de Avila, he gives a very strong approval of the book. Luckily that he did because he died shortly afterwards. But then, after that the book falls into the hands of the Inquisition – there isn't the time to go into the details of that now. And so for the rest of Teresa's life this book is very much on her mind. She clearly does not want it to be lost, she wants to get it back, she wants others to see it and read it, but she won't get it back, even though the Inquisition never condemned it, they actually approved it, but wouldn't release it. So it is a book that is the fruit of the first fifty-one years of Teresa's life, not so much an account of her life as the account of her coming to life. And then its presence, its existence, and particularly its absence will form a very important part of her life right to the very end. And why, we might ask, would that be? There may be a variety of reasons for that, but probably the most fundamental one is what she says to Garcia de Toledo in this letter. She says to him that she's entrusting to him her soul: *do what you think what is best and remember you are obliged to one who has so entrusted her soul to you*. Her soul. She never gave a title to this book, but maybe that's as close she's ever going to get to giving it a title – *her soul*. This is precious to her and when we read this book, I think it's important for us to remember that. This book is an invitation to enter into Teresa's soul. She's inviting us into the most intimate place within her. Probably more important to our point of view is that she is inviting us into her soul at the time in her life when there is greatest struggle there, or she's inviting us to see the struggles of her life, her whole journey of human and spiritual growth and maturing from within, from the perspective of her soul, of that deepest place within her. So we need to read this book with a profound sense of privilege. We are in a privileged place when we're reading this book.

Next thing I want to say in terms of introduction is that as we pick it up today and read it, we can find ourselves rather bewildered. I suppose initially, of Teresa's four main writings it's the most difficult book just to pick up and read and there are a number of

reasons for that. And it can appear to us maybe at first reading to be rather disorganised, scattered, jumping from one topic to another. We can get almost bogged down with it, we can lose the sense of what she's doing here, where is she going to, what's happening here. It's a book that appears to be dealing with a whole number of subjects at different levels. The reality of course is that it's not that, this is a very carefully thought through book, very carefully structured and if we are to read it well we have to keep the structure in mind and that's what I've put there in that sheet I've given to you. I give a structure to this book, which will help us to navigate through it.

I am just going to briefly run through it now and leave it then, we will be picking it up as we go along over the weekend and I will be looking at various parts of this structure, but we need to keep the overall structure in mind if we're to read it well. There's a Prologue and an Epilogue, which most books would have, I will look at the Prologue tomorrow morning. But the one thing we need to remember about the Prologue in Teresa's writings is that unlike modern writers, Teresa wrote the Prologue before she wrote the book, modern writers tend to write the Prologue after the book is written. It was common practice in Teresa's day to write the Prologue before the book was written. But the structure of the book is such that the real beginning of the book – there are forty chapters to this book – and in a sense we could say the real beginning of the book is Chapter 23. And I will just put here what she tells us; *a new book begins here, I should say a new life*. And she tells us that the life she had lived up until now was her life. The life from now on was the life of Jesus Christ in her. Jesus is the life. Coming to life, coming to the fullness of life meant for Teresa living the life of Jesus, he is the life; he is the life of the person fully alive. Her thinking here is very much influenced by St Paul, who profoundly influences Teresa. We could do a whole series on the way that Paul influences Teresa. Paul's famous statement: *it's no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me*, the 'I' being the ego, the false self, and the new, free liberated self is the one of Jesus living in her, he lives in her. That's the life that brings the fullness of life.

To understand Teresa – this might be another way to understand her – we have to remember that there's a before and an after in her life. In other words, she has the mentality of a convert. It's not that she's a convert in the sense that we might use the term today, somebody who has maybe converted from one religion to another, atheism to Christianity or whatever – not in that sense, but in the deeper sense of the word. It is a person who lives a profound sense that their life has been changed; their life had been changed by meeting with Jesus Christ. And of course this is again very much St Paul – before he's met Jesus and after he's met Jesus – two different lives. Teresa very much has that – there was a before and an after. There was a decisive change of direction. Now in the *Book of her Life* there are number of experiences that one could say are conversion experiences. We will pick up on a few of those over the weekend. But more importantly than what experience exactly it was is the fact of her consciousness that *my life has been changed by meeting with Jesus Christ*, or *my life has been changed by his meeting with me* would be the way she would put it – *his coming into my life*. Life has been profoundly changed by that and that is what Teresa wants to write when she sets out to write the *Book of her Life*, the life of Jesus in her, life after it has been fundamentally changed and transformed by Jesus. But Teresa realises of course that she can't start there.

In my interpretation of Teresa I have named three introductions to the first three parts of the book, three things we need to know and understand if we are to understand Teresa, understand her life. The first section, the first ten chapters, are about her early life, family, vocation, early years in religious life, the beginning of the life of prayer, crisis, struggles, conversion experience – at least the first of them. The Lord began to awaken the soul. In those chapters there is a gradual awakening of her soul by the Lord, Jesus. She is learning to pray, she is gradually coming into her life, he is intervening. It is a gradual getting to know Jesus, awakening to his presence. So she is giving us there her story, in a sense, but it is as if then she realises, ah, that the story can't be understood if the reader does not understand what prayer is. There is no understanding Teresa if we do not understand what prayer is, there's no understanding this woman or what she is saying if we don't know what prayer is. We have to have a right understanding of prayer and so she gives us what is sometimes called a book within a book, the tenth chapter, teaching on prayer, laying out her famous four means of drawing water – we'll go there later. But it's just the fact that it's there that's important because she's saying to us there's no understanding me if you don't understand prayer. Prayer is her life, what she's searching for, struggling with, the priority in her life and it is what has brought about this change that she wants to write about. Prayer has brought about the change that brings her to the point that she could see her life as a before and an after.

But that's not enough either, she then gives us a third introduction, a very important chapter in Teresa's writings, Chapter 22. If you read no other chapter this weekend, read that, Chapter 22. I remember somebody one time saying that Teresa is the most Christian of saints. I thought what does that mean? Surely a saint is Christian, surely they are all Christian? But there is a sense to that statement; she is the most Christian of saints. What's meant by that is that prayer, if we're to understand prayer as Teresa teaches it to us, and more fundamentally if we are to understand Teresa, Jesus is at the heart of it. When she moves from the convent of the Incarnation to San José, she changes her surname to Teresa of Jesus. For Teresa, prayer is not prayer if Jesus is not at the heart of it, life is not life if it is not in relationship with Jesus. We grow and we change through relationship. Teresa grows and changes, discovers who she is, her whole sense of identity through Jesus, and Jesus human and divine.

To come in to the next section of the book, which I have entitled *Life of encounter with Jesus Christ*, or maybe another way I could have put it is instead of putting *of*, I should have put in *is* – *Life is encounter with Jesus Christ* – *Life* is meeting with Jesus. So those chapters are whole series of experiences with Jesus in her life – profound, startling, challenging – at times very confusing, liberating – the transforming presence of Jesus Christ. We are brought into that deep meeting, we're really in her soul now, we're in her soul's struggles, we're in the struggles that are bringing about growth and transformation in Teresa's life. But, Teresa being Teresa, it is never just about her, all of this has a purpose. Years later, twelve years later, when she will write the *Interior Castle* she will tell us that *the purpose of prayer is works, works, works*. And here in this book she will go from this account to the founding of her first convent at San Jose and yes, she tells the story and in a sense it is like a historic story, but it's not history she's speaking about here, she's speaking about how this came about and it came about through her own prayer life. Life gives life, life begets life, people who are living bring life. The life that's coming from this relationship with Jesus is life-giving, it's a giving birth, giving birth from that profound place within her. So in the overall context of this

book it logically hits you. For her, the work of founding was not her project, not her work, it was a work of God, it was as much a work of God as prayer. Yes, it involved all kinds of practical things and struggles and property and lawsuits and all kinds of conflicts, but it was a work of God, it was as profoundly a work of God as the deepest and most profound prayer.

Then after that we will go on to another section, in a sense how she is living now at the time of writing. After making this foundation she is now living there two, nearly three years, the community is formed. What is happening within her? It's not in a sense that something new is now happening but rather she going more deeply into what is happening, so in these last chapters she's looking back at what she's written and looking at it from a deeper place. And in these chapters there's a sense that, on the one hand something is coming to an end, but on the other hand we're at the beginning of something. If you look at the hallway in the other building, just at the bottom of the stairs there's a copy of a painting by Rubens of Teresa and the dove. And there's a story that she tells here towards the end of the *Book of her Life*. It is what has often been called Teresa's *Pentecost experience*. What Pentecost is in the New Testament – the story of Jesus is 'over', we might say, the resurrection, ascension – but actually the story of Jesus is really only beginning. This is only the real beginning – the Church, that's what matters – the story of Jesus that goes on in our world, and there's that here in these last chapters, a sense that something has happened, is completed, but actually we are only at the beginning of something, but we don't know what we're at the beginning of, neither does Teresa know what she's at the beginning of at the time of writing here. But history will show that.

What I will do over these next sessions – I am not setting out to explain all of this – rather what I am going to do is I'm going pick out things, I will probably pick out something at different times from each of these sections. They are like pointers to alert people, pointers to help with reading this, hearing it in the right way.

Transcribed from the YouTube video of the talk:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ejGvnyqleU&list=PLoucQTSx_Zp-mH6077vqAq6bWuhvyxxXV&index=1

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PART TWO – *Prologue*

What I want to begin doing this morning is just to have a look at the Prologue, because this will help us to have certain pointers towards how we might read this book well. As I mentioned last night, unlike modern writers, Teresa wrote the Prologue before she wrote the book. It's a very simple two paragraphs but it sets the tone for the whole book. She starts off by telling us: *since my confessors commanded me* – those are strong words, she's commanded, she's ordered, to write this book. Now we need to be careful how we understand that. There are two things going on here; one is, there's a certain sense of camouflage going on. Here's a woman writing, in the context of the times she lived in there's a certain sense of self-protection going on here: *I was ordered to write this, this is not my initiative, I was ordered, I am obeying orders in writing this*. There's a certain sense of self-protection going on here, but there is also truth in it. She is asked to write this and she wouldn't have written it if she hadn't been asked, so she's asked or ordered or commanded to write this. We'll come back in a few minutes as to who these people might be. And she gives us in a very short phrase what she's going to write: *To write about the favours and the kind of prayer the Lord has granted me*. The favours, the gifts, the blessings that God has given to her and the kind of prayer. That's what she's going to write about, therefore this is not about herself or what she has done, it is not focussing on self, its focus is upon God, what God has done in her life and the kind of prayer that he has given to her, and that is very important. It's not the type of prayer that I do, or the type of prayer that I feel drawn to, or the type of prayer that I like, or the type of prayer that I'm able to do. It's what God has given to her, the prayer that God has given to her and that becomes very important as we read through the book. It is what God is doing, what God has given to her, that's her prayer.

She then goes on to say *I wish they would also have allowed me to tell very clearly and minutely about my great sins and wretched life*. This is something that perhaps leads to one of the many misunderstandings in this book. When Teresa starts to speak to us about her sinfulness, what a great sinner she is and a wretched sinner and over and over again she uses very strong language describing her sinfulness, but never does she tell us what her crimes were, what terrible things has she done and clearly of course she hasn't done anything terrible, hasn't committed any serious crimes – that's not what she's telling us here. In one of her letters when she refers to this book, she describes it as *the book of the mercies of God*, and that's an important description or title that Teresa gives to this book. It is about the mercy of God. She has a profound sense of God's mercy. I mentioned last night that to understand Teresa we need to remember that she had the mind or the mentality, or the worldview of a convert – there's a before and an after – God has had mercy upon her.

Let's just listen to a little of this Prologue here: *this would have been a consolation but they didn't want me to and in fact I was very much restricted in those matters, and so I ask for the love of God whoever reads this account to bear in mind that my life has been so wretched that I have not found a saint among those who are converted to God in whom I can find comfort. For I note that after the Lord called them they did not turn back and offend Him. As for me, not only did I turn back and become worse, but it seems I made a study out of resisting the favours His Majesty was granting me. I was like someone who sees that she is obliged to serve more, yet understands that she can't pay the smallest part of the debt*. So there's this profound sense of God's gift to her,

God's mercy upon her, and that's what she wants to speak about, a merciful God, God of mercy. Not only does God have mercy on her, but she becomes increasingly aware that this is the characteristic of God, a God of mercy and to come to God we come as people in need of his mercy. And we have as our gospel today – and I will say more about this at mass time – that story that became very important for Teresa, the two people coming to the temple to pray, the publican and the Pharisee, *Lord have mercy on me, a sinner*; the prayer of the publican, whose prayer was much more profound. This sense of God's mercy and that's going right through this book. This is a book that's written by somebody with a profound sense of God's mercy. It's not that she's done something terrible, but the more she meets with the loving and merciful God, the deeper her own sense of how undeserved, unmerited this is, how unworthy she is of this mercy.

So in this Prologue, like any good author – every author hopes that the whole world is going to read what they write – to write a good book one needs to have a specific readership, audience in mind. Who is the person writing for? And one of the peculiarities – and here we meet it now and we meet it in all sorts of different ways throughout this book – one of the peculiarities about this book is that Teresa never names people or places – she doesn't even mention herself here at the beginning. Everything is anonymous in the book *I met a person, I went to a particular place, I was in a convent, I grew up in a town*. It is interesting that there are only two people named in the book, who are now canonized saints: Francisco di Borgia, who was the third Superior General of the Jesuits and Pedro de Alcantara, a Franciscan. In her letter at the end, in her Epilogue, she names Juan de Avila, a Doctor of the Church, just like Teresa – they are the only people she names in the entire work. But who is she writing for? She's very clear that she has certain people in mind. *My confessors*, and later in the book she will also speak about *the five of us who are very close*, whom she addressing very personally at times. In certain sections of the book it's clear that she is writing for one individual, like a letter to an individual. So the most important of these is Garcia de Toledo, a Dominican, he's the one to whom she is addressing quite a lot of the book. There are a number of confessors who clearly she's writing for, there's also a few other very close friends, part of this little group. So she has various people in mind. She also has Juan de Avila, who was the main theologian in Spain at the time. She wrote the book to be given to him and the person who had given that order or that instruction was the head of the Inquisition at the time, Francisco de Sota, who was a friend of Teresa's and very favourable to Teresa, who had known Teresa's family, he was a native of near Avila. When she went to him for advice he advised that when you write this give it to Master Juan de Avila and if he approves it I will be happy with it. So they're in her mind as well as she writes this, but clearly also she has more than that, she said *whoever reads this* – she has a wider audience in mind – anybody.

All of Teresa's writings have at various times been described as being letters, they are personal, and we could read this as a personal letter to us. She doesn't write from a distance, in an impersonal way, she's very personal. But there's another reader she has got in mind as she writes this and that's God. The second paragraph of the Prologue is addressed to God, the first paragraph to the readers. And this is typical of Teresa's writing and in this book it is no different, she is effortlessly switching from addressing her readers to addressing God, directly and indirectly – writing about prayer is prayer, writing about God is dialogue with God – the two go together, they are part of the one reality. Teresa's reality is always looking at both; she's in both worlds all the time. So

in the second paragraph she will simply begin it: *May God be blessed*, it is a praise of God, it is a prayer and she finished the Prologue with *I* – it is prayer. So she is writing to God and to people.

So she is ordered to write this, she tells us. It is clear she has particular people in mind as she writes it. Her purpose is to write of what the gifts, the favours, the mercies, the blessings, that God has given to her, the kind of prayer that he has given to her. And how is she going to write it? She tells us: *with complete clarity and truthfulness*, and that's a phrase we will find a few other times in this book – *I am writing with complete clarity and truthfulness*, including at the very end. So great care is being taken with clarity and truthfulness about herself and about God in her life. And we could say that there are two reasons for this or two objectives. Very important for Teresa in her teaching on prayer is what she calls self-knowledge. The more we come to know ourselves, the more we come to know God, the more we come to know ourselves, the more deeply and more fully and more truthfully we live. So writing about herself and her life with clarity and truthfulness is, we could say, a journey in self-knowledge. Teresa is going to come to know herself more deeply and more clearly through writing this and in doing that she will be living more fully and more completely and more truthfully. So the writing of this book is a journey in self-knowledge.

But there's another objective and that is her confessors, assessors, advisers, theologians. She needs an answer to the question is this right? Am I on the right road? Is it truly God that is leading me on this road? Am I being misled? So writing with complete clarity and truthfulness, she's asking this question, this question is being asked, but also it's being answered. The question is more being asked than being answered, because writing it, in a sense she's answering her own question. At other times she's going to very explicitly do this, even to the extent of advising her confessors as to how they should deal with people who will come to them with these kinds of issues; she becomes the teacher of those who are teaching her. Or another way of putting it is she is writing the book that would have helped her, the book that she needed that wasn't available or didn't exist, and in doing so she's writing the book that many other people also need, the book that will become so helpful to so many people down through the centuries. So she's answering the question as well as asking it. So the question needs to be asked, the question is always there. So that's a second objective for this writing with clarity and truthfulness, to get to know herself more deeply and get to know the ways of God to answer this question: is this right?

We come back again to the issue that she's ordered to write this book, but is that really why she's writing it? And this is where Teresa is saying an enormous amount in this very short Prologue. *I know too that even the Lord has for some time wanted me to do this, even though I have not dared*. So she knows and has known for some time that the Lord wants her to do this, that God wants her to do this, that writing this is a call, is a vocation, is a response to the work of the Holy Spirit in her. It is not just or merely somebody else out there saying *write this*, it is coming from within, it is coming from that deep place within her – it's a call, it's a vocation. Teresa herself is a natural writer, she's a woman of words; words are so important to her, she's only happy when she's got a new book. There is evidence that she wrote a novel as a teenager, maybe even more than one; she was a prolific letter writer, she loved words.

But there's another background, which is not mentioned here, but would have been very much on her mind at this time because it happened only a few years before this. In

1559, and she will tell us about it in the book, when the books are taken off her, because of the Index of books and so many of the books that were so helpful to her have been taken off of her and all burned. For this woman who loved books, this would be traumatic, but then, shortly after that, she hears the Lord telling her: *I will become the living book for you, do not worry, do not be afraid, I will become the living book.* So the living book isn't just Jesus, it's more specific than that: it is the presence of Jesus in her life and we could say that what's she's writing here in this book is that living book, the presence of Jesus in her life.

At the time that Teresa was writing, if somebody wanted to write a book about prayer they would go off to a library and they would have pulled down books, put stuff together and they would write it in a very particular way, in a very particular style and language. Teresa doesn't do any of that – not only that, but there's evidence right here in the Prologue that she is distancing herself from that – and how we know that is what she tells us here when she speaks about her wretched way of life and all of that, and then she refers to these other saints who were converted to God: *I can't find comfort in any of their stories, she said, because when they turned to the Lord, they never turned back again, but I have turned back over and over again and become worse and worse.* Teresa would have read over and over again from quite a young age, the lives of the saints, common reading in those days, and these lives of the saints were a sort of hagiography, presenting these people as more perfect than perfect, when they converted, they converted and everything was right and good and wonderful from there on. *I'm not like that, she said.* She doesn't go as far as to say that these accounts weren't very truthful, she doesn't say that, but in a subtle way she says that this book is different, this book is clarity and truthfulness. This is someone who has really struggled with the ways of God in her life, there's no instant conversion here or fast track to holiness, it's a long, slow struggle. And so she's making a conscious decision here that she's going to write about Jesus and the presence of Jesus in her life – not as the books in the library, say, or even what the ones that were burned had said that she still remembers – she's going to write it from the living book that is herself and his presence in her life, the Jesus that she comes to know, or Jesus as he reveals himself to her.

There's something else she's going to do, and this is probably the most revolutionary or radical thing she's going to do in this book and in all of her books, and that is the style in which she's going to write. With this book, she is going to change the whole style of how her spiritual books are written. I have already pointed to one change of style; she's going to write about the life of somebody that God has had great mercy upon in a way that is clear and truthful, without polishing it up in any way. It's not going to be like the books that people read about the saints that the saints have written. But more importantly, she's going to write in the language that people use, ordinary, everyday language, down-to-earth. This is for everybody; spirituality, the profound ways of God, the wisdom of God are for everybody. So Teresa is going to write this as Teresa, as the person that she is, in a language that is going to be comprehensible to the people around her. Yes, these theologians have ordered her to write this, but she's not writing in the theologians' language, she's writing it – to use an often quoted expression that she uses her *Book of the Foundations* many years later – she's writing of *the God of the pots and pans*, the God who was to be found in the reality of everyday life, that's how she's going to write this. This is Jesus in everyday life and that's how of course Jesus himself lived, the human Jesus, how he himself and his mother and the saints truly lived. So she's going to write

this as Teresa, and not as the theologian or the person who is aspiring to be like some of these saints who have written before her, she's going to write it as herself, from that profound place within her. She concludes this little Prologue by saying: *may this account render Him glory and praise* – that's God; ultimately it's a prayer, a prayer of praise to God – *and from now on may my confessors* – she's addressing God here – *knowing me better through this narration help me in my weakness to give the Lord something of the service I owe Him, whom all things praise forever. Amen.* So they will come to know her better. Coming to know her better will help her, that she may give something of service and of course as the book goes on and particularly at the end of the book, she will see that this is truly rendering service to the Lord.

So what did these confessors think, then? I am just going to give one little point from Fr Domingo Banez, Dominican, a good friend of Teresa's, certainly one of the people she's writing for here. Years later, he'll be given the book by the Inquisition and asked to write an assessment of it, which he does, and which has come down to us. The two things he is asked to assess it on, two questions: one, is this woman on the right road? Has she got it right, is this right? And secondly, is this book suitable to give to others? On the first question he gives a very strong yes, this woman is on the right road. To the second question he gives a nuanced answer, yes, the book is suitable to be read by others, but, he said, by mature Christians, and what he has in mind are people who have education, otherwise one could misread it, one could misunderstand it. We might think differently nowadays, but maybe there's a certain truth in it that we can bear in mind, that this is a book for mature Christians, and I don't mean by that people who are highly educated intellectually, but for people who are taking the following of Jesus Christ seriously. This is for people who have a wisdom that comes from that, because, yes, there are many things in it that could be misinterpreted. We have to go beneath the surface with many of the things in it, but it is a book for mature Christians, it is a book for people who, like Teresa, are serious about the following of Jesus Christ, are serious about prayer, the life of prayer, people who seriously want to get to know themselves, the truth of who they are; people who are serious about coming to know the God who is present in their lives, who is active in their lives, who is relating with them. This is written by somebody whose relationship with Jesus Christ is everything for her, and that's what she's communicating.

Just one final thought and I'll stop then. Somebody asked last night after we had finished, when this was published? It was published after 1587, five years after Teresa's death, and the editor who published the first books of Teresa was Friar Luis de Leon, the famous Augustinian, professor at the University of Salamanca. And in his prologue to this first publication of Teresa's writings he says in it that he never met Teresa in person, but he said *but I have come to know her in two ways, I have come to know her through her daughters and sons, and I have come to know her through her writings.* In other words, the lived experience and the writings, and both of those we find in this book. Obviously it's her writing, but also in the midst of it, as I said last night, is the story of her first foundation – the lived experience being passed on. Teresa is passing on a living experience. This is a book about life, writing it, she's giving life and it brings us right into the two ways in which Teresa passed on life – through the written word and through the wisdom and way of life – and inspiration that she passed on to people.

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PART THREE – *Prayer*

What I want to look at in this section are Chapters 8 and 9. You will notice in this book, indeed in all of Teresa's books, at the beginning of each chapter there's a little summary and Teresa wrote those herself and she wrote them after she had finished the book. In a sense Teresa wrote her own reading guide to her book and it's worth paying attention to them. In fact a good exercise to do is just to read those. In most editions of the books in the table of contents they give the headings and just to read down through the headings one gets a quick reading guide to the book, written by the author herself.

Here in Chapter 8 she has been telling us about her life. She's now 38-39 years of age at the point she is now writing here; she's a fifty year old woman looking back on this and she has come through this long stage of struggling with prayer and here, in Chapter 8 she makes this very strong statement about prayer. It's worth noting the heading of this chapter: *Treats of the great good it did her not to turn from prayer completely and thereby lose her soul, and of what an excellent means prayer is for winning back what is lost. Tells how it is so highly profitable and even though one may abandon it again, there is a great value in giving some time to so great a good.* A very strong statement, this, and it has come out of the experience of many years of struggling with prayer and here she is defending the fact that she persevered. It was worth persevering. Over and over again she tells us in her writings that the worse thing anybody could do is to abandon prayer and she, as we might say, has learned over the years prior to this just how tragic that is. Teresa will tell us when she writes the *Way of Perfection*, which is the next book she will write after this, that she only writes from personal experience and everything she is writing here is from personal experience. She is not saying don't abandon prayer, as if from some theory, she has lived through the pain and tragedy of abandoning prayer, of drifting away from it. She has seen from experience the tragedy that this is, so it is a heartfelt plea here. She is as she is because she did not abandon prayer and *thereby lose my soul.* That's a strong statement; it's losing who she is, losing her deepest identity. She keeps repeating *it's an excellent means; it's a great good.* It's not just about herself now, she's teaching, urging everybody, out of her experience. And I mentioned this morning the radical or innovative nature of Teresa's writings, and this is another characteristic of her writings that was again new at the time, and that is writing from experience, this woman who writes from experience. People didn't do that, but it would become something after many years – many others will follow Teresa in this. A woman writing from experience and only writing from her experience or to be more specific, what she has experienced, what others have experienced, what the experience of God has shown her. Here she is speaking strongly, urging everyone to practise prayer, how *it is highly profitable.*

In Chapter 8, which we haven't got the time to go into in detail, there's a very strong statement about prayer. Prayer is the subject of the whole book, but here she has come to this point. Teresa effortlessly shifts from addressing her readership – all of us – to God. Here in the middle of this chapter she puts this lovely prayer in the beginning of Paragraph 6: *O infinite goodness of my God, for it seems to me I see that such is the way You are and the way I am! O delight of angels, when I see this I desire to be completely consumed in loving you! How certainly You do suffer for the one who suffers to be with You. Oh, what a good friend you make, my Lord! How You proceed by favouring and enduring. You wait for the others to adapt to Your nature, and in the*

meanwhile You put up with theirs! You take into account, my Lord, the times when they love You, and in one instant of repentance, You forget their offences.

There she is addressing the Lord and she is putting into it what her understanding of prayer now is, or the understanding of prayer that she has arrived at over these thirty-eight years of life. And we can see the chief characteristics of it: *Oh! what a good friend You make, my Lord!* Teresa was a woman of friendship, her friends are so important to her, but the greatest friend is Jesus – *what a good friend you make, my Lord.* In the paragraph before this she tells us *that prayer is nothing more than an intimate sharing between friends*, an often-quoted remark of Teresa's. Another key characteristic of prayer is *friendship with one who we know loves us*. That is very important for prayer, one has to know one is loved, one can only pray to one whom we know loves us – it's not prayer otherwise. And again, this is not theory; this is something she's learned over these years of struggle, she's learned that He loves her. And she beautifully puts it here in this prayer: *You wait for the others to adapt to Your nature* – you wait for me, you, Lord have been patient with me, you waited - *and in the meantime You put up with theirs* - Oh my God, a God who will wait, a God who waits, a God who is patient. And what she desires: *I desire to be completely consumed in loving you* – the natural response when one knows one is loved is to want love, to desire to respond with love. That's what prayer is, it's not about following some method, it's not ideas, which she really struggled with, it's not about practices and rituals, it's knowing that one is loved and responding with love. And she has arrived now in a sense at the real beginning, the beginning of life.

The last paragraph of this chapter I think is a very important one. *I wanted to live, for I well understood that I was not living, but struggling with the shadow of death and I had no one to give me life and I was unable to catch hold of it.* *I wanted to live* – that sums up Teresa's desires, she is a woman who wants to live. And it is prayer, it is perseverance with prayer, it is an arrival at a right understanding of what prayer is, that's what she's got here, she comes to this right understanding. Prayer is now fitting into the jigsaw, the pieces are fitting into place – they weren't up until now, it's love, it's friendship with God. Now she's ready to change, but she still isn't able to. *I want to live (for I well understood that I was not living but was struggling with a shadow of death)* and she has quite literally struggled with that shadow in this earlier part, even physically, to the point of almost dying physically, but much more what she's concerned with here is her spiritual dying. We can be physically alive but be living a shadow of death, not really living. This woman wants to live, and live from the deepest place within her. She has nobody – the way she puts it: *no one to give me life* – Jesus of course becomes the one who will give her life. *I was unable to catch hold of it* – she couldn't do it herself. Up until now she has been trying to do it herself, prayer has brought her to the realisation *I cannot do it myself*.

So we will go on to the next chapter and if you are reading the chapter headings, you will notice a shift in heading for Chapter 9: *Treats of the means by which the Lord began to awaken her soul and give it light amid such thick darknesses and strengthen her virtues that she might not offend him.* The important thing here: *The Lord began to awaken her* – that's God. In the chapter headings up until now the focus was upon Teresa: *Treats of the great good it did her not to turn away from prayer...* Back to some of the other ones: *Treats of the way by which she lost the faith...* Each of them focus upon Teresa; now in Chapter 9 the focus is upon the Lord, and from now on it's what He's doing. The shift in focus takes place here. This chapter is often described

as Teresa's conversion experience – it's one of them, there are others later on. There's a shift here: her prayer has taken her as far as she can come, now it's God's intervention, it's his work from now on and there are two things that bring about the change in Chapter 9. One is an experience in prayer before a statue of Jesus and her reading of St Augustine's *Confessions*. The statue is one of the wounded Jesus and both of these experiences in a sense set her free.

One of things if we need, if we are to read this book well, we need to understand how important images were for Teresa. In Teresa's time, the Catechism, the faith, were taught very much with images. The vast majority of people would say yes, they couldn't read or write, and they would be taken into the churches, into the cathedrals, and they would be shown and they would be taught and that's how Teresa was taught her catechism. And images, statues, paintings, works of art were very important to her right throughout her life. The nuns would complain the convent would be very short of money but Teresa would spend all the money they had on some new statue that she liked. Artwork was very important. It wasn't for the brilliance of the art but for the prayer, the devotion that they brought about. And in this book there are many stories of visions or experiences of Jesus and descriptions of these experiences. I remember some years ago at the National Gallery in London there was an exhibition of 16th century Spanish art and it was mostly sculptures, and I remember I was walking around looking at these and I thought these are Teresa's visions, she describes the Jesus that she saw, it was the art. Because she is now at the time when most of the books were taken from her, images, statues, became more and more important. And in her more profound experiences of God, of Jesus, these statues, these images become alive. Visions are somehow entering very deeply into the reality that is depicted there in art for her. And here in Chapter 9 we find this statue of Jesus somehow helping her to enter very deeply into this relationship. This is the Jesus who is going to change her, this is the Jesus who is going to change her life – there's a before and there's an after.

And there is the story of St Augustine. Teresa tells us that she felt particularly attracted to saints who had converted, for whom conversion experiences were important, even though, as she has told us already in the Prologue, and she will tell us here again, she of course turned back many times, these didn't. These readings from the *Confessions* of St Augustine had a profound effect on her: *As I began to read the Confessions, it seemed to me I saw myself in them. I began to commend myself very much to this glorious saint. When I came to the passage where he speaks about his conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it only seemed to me, according to what I felt in my heart, that it was I the Lord called. I remained for a long time totally dissolved in tears and feeling within myself utter distress and weariness. Oh, how a soul suffers, God help me – she just effortlessly turns to God – Oh, how a soul suffers, God help me, by losing the freedom it should have in being itself – losing the freedom it should have in being itself – that's what she didn't have up until now, the freedom to be herself, that's what she perceives that she had lost, or had not yet arrived at, the freedom to be herself. That's what this encounter with Jesus was giving her; only Jesus can give her this freedom, this inner freedom to be herself. The weariness, the distress it causes, by losing the freedom it should have. If a person really is themselves, living truth, profound self-knowledge, relationship with truth itself, that person has freedom. I marvel now at how I could have lived in such great affliction. May God be praised who gave me the life to rise up from a death so deadly. This is a dying and a rising. God who gave me the life to rise up from a death – it's a dying and a rising, a death to an*

old way of life, a rising to a new way of life. This woman who wants to live – now Jesus is bringing her to life and it's a journey into a death and a rising – it's how St Paul describes baptism, a dying and a rising. So this woman who wants to live is coming to life, is being brought to life. And then she would finish the chapter by giving us some of the indications of this, the signs that she's now beginning to live. And she's told us in that opening paragraph what they are: her virtues, the virtues, the way she's living, the effects. And all the time – and she will go into this in much more detail later in this book – when she's describing any experiences of Jesus, it's the effects. If there's a real growth in charity, in justice, in any of the virtues, the good effects, the experience of God always leaves good effects. That's how she knows she's starting to live.

So this experience that she's describing here is going to profoundly affect her, this changes her life and changes it forever. And, as we saw, she spent the previous chapter telling us about prayer, making a very strong statement about prayer, but then she's going to go on – as you will see in the outline that I gave you – and insert into her book a whole ten chapters on prayer, a whole treatise. It was prayer that brought her, her own personal perseverance in prayer that has brought her, led her, disposed her, prepared her for what God does in her now. But she is saying to the reader, you readers, you've got to understand what prayer is, if you're really going to understand what I'm speaking about. So she will now go on to explain what prayer is. It's all centred around this experience of conversion of dying and rising, coming to new life; perseverance in prayer. What God does in prayer would not happen otherwise. For Teresa, prayer is the difference between life and death – nothing less than that. It's only prayer that could bring her there – and the point she had to be brought to was knowing that she was loved, knowing that Jesus is the friend who loves her, then she can relate with him. She couldn't relate with him up until then. She tried to, and tried every possible means to, with varying degrees of success, but only the total acceptance that he loves her, that she can relate to him as a friend, a friend who is with her, wants to be with her, wants her to be with him, wants her to respond with love. Prayer brings her there, then he brings about in her this awakening, this rising to new life. And this is the Teresa that is writing this book; this is the Teresa that the author herself wants us to know, the one that now has the freedom to be herself. She could not acquire this herself. *Up until now*, she said, *I had no nobody to bring me to life and I couldn't grasp it myself*. Now Jesus brings her to life and this, more than anything else in this whole book, is what she wants the reader to understand. She's going to take the reader now into this long treatise on prayer, because you've got to understand, if you don't grasp this, you don't grasp the book, you don't grasp who Teresa is. She is a woman who wants to live, and is now living. She couldn't do that herself, only Jesus, only the love of Jesus could bring this about in her, and he does.

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PART FOUR – *The central place of Jesus Christ*

This time we're probably delving into the most difficult part of this book to understand, or the most difficult part for us nowadays to be comfortable with. Going back to this outline of the book that I've given you, Teresa has brought us to this point where she begins to live the life of Jesus Christ within her. In Chapter 22, which we haven't really got the time to look at in any detail, she makes a very strong statement there of the central place of Jesus Christ in the the prayer life of a Christian – Jesus, human and divine – because the spiritual life, the life of prayer is always a relationship between the divine and the human, God and the person. It's always going to be that, and while we can maybe to a certain extent have an understanding of our part, we can learn to do this and that, we can commit ourselves to our lives of prayer, our Christian lives, but as we see here, the principal part, the most important part is the divine, what God is doing.

We already saw this morning that when she begins to speak about prayer, her starting point is God's love for us. We have to know we're loved and it is *friendly conversation with the one we know loves us*, and the one who loves us communicates with us, and this is where the difficulty comes in, because clearly the divine is outside of our realm. In Chapter 22, Teresa makes something very, very clear and that is that we're not angels, we're human. We do not try to be angels, we've got bodies, we're human beings, our feet are on the ground, we shouldn't try to be anywhere else – we experience God as human beings. But the wonderful gift of Jesus Christ is that he is both divine and human, and in the historical context of the church that Teresa lived in there were tendencies in certain teachers who taught that when you advanced in prayer, then you left aside the humanity of Jesus and tried to relate to Jesus as divine. She said no, he's both divine and human – we must never depart from the humanity of Jesus. The Cross – that's the greatest place to be – at the foot of the Cross, as seen in the lives of those who were closest to Jesus in the gospels. So Teresa is firmly rooted in the gospels, in the scriptures, in Jesus as he is revealed to us there.

If we look at the way I have structured this here: from Chapter 23 onwards up to Chapter 31, this is life meeting with Jesus – this new life. I want to have a look at a little bit of this. Teresa is caught in this dilemma between what should be happening in the thinking of those who should be experts, and what is really happening, the path that she is on. I want to read a little bit here from Chapter 26: number 5: *As often as the Lord commanded something of me in prayer and my confessor told me to do otherwise, the Lord returned and told me to obey my confessor; afterward His Majesty would change the confessor's mind, and he would agree to the Lord's command.* It's a lovely way of putting the kind of struggle that was going on and indeed goes on in everybody's spiritual life – the human and divine. And God speaks through books. Any one of us at any time can feel called by God to do something – some sense of calling or vocation – but we need human advice, human counsel, human wisdom, otherwise we could be going astray – it may not be of God. God speaks through both – through inspiration that he gives to the person and the advice and counsel of others, who are in God's place. But equally, those who are the so-called “experts” – advisors, leaders of the Church, can be controlling and manipulative, not allowing the spirit to speak, or trying to control what the spirit is saying in a person. So here is Teresa caught in this: the Lord is

speaking to her, calling her, inspiring her, communicating with her. She has experts and confessors and spiritual directors telling her something else, and the advice always is, go, obey them, obey. But if something is truly of the Lord, they will come round, and she has this experience over and over again in her life and particularly in later years, when she is making her foundations and – will I do this, will I not do it – she would always look for some inspiration from the Lord to do it, but she would never act until her advisors and superiors and counsellors and bishops and theologians or whoever would advise her to do it. So the human and the divine. And now these humans do something catastrophic, taking the books from her. Let's hear her account of this: *When they forbade the reading of many books in the vernacular, I felt this prohibition very much* – so this principle that she was living by would have been tested very much. It would have been traumatic for this woman who loved books. Teresa could read and write, she was highly intelligent, she did not have formal education, she understood some Latin, but not enough to be able to read in Latin. *I felt this prohibition very much because reading some of them was an enjoyment for me, and I could no longer do so since only the Latin editions were allowed. The Lord said to me: "Don't be sad, for I shall give you a living book." I was unable to understand why this was said to me, since I had not yet experienced any visions.*

I have already spoken a bit about that and Jesus becoming the living book for her, but what is also very significant here is that she had no visions before this traumatic experience. So when we try to make some sense of these visions that Teresa has we have got to connect them to this. Prior to this she had no visions, it is only after this traumatic experience, when so many of the helps and supports that she had were taken away from her that she had to rely at a much deeper level upon Jesus Christ, upon his presence. Her trust is tested here very profoundly. The human experts, leaders of the church that she feels so strongly part of, were acting in a way that to her was incomprehensible, very painful, removing the very helps and supports she most needed. She put the trust in God here.

So we're in 1559 going into 1560, and what I want to look at is just to delve in here to Chapter 27 and have a look at this chapter to help us make some sense of this whole area and how she navigated these experiences of God. *Well, to return to the account of my life. I was enduring this difficult affliction, and, as I have said, many prayers were offered up that the Lord might lead me by another safer path since this one, they told me, was so suspect* – they are telling her the path she was on was so suspect. *The truth of the matter is that even though I was beseeching God and however much I wanted to desire another path, it wasn't in my power to desire it.* So she's praying for something but she doesn't really want what she's praying for, it's not even in her power to desire what she's praying for, but the experts are telling her she's on the wrong path so she had better pray for the right path. But it's not even in her power to pray for the right path because the Lord is giving her this reassurance. And why is she so reassured? She is so reassured because she said: *I saw that I was a completely different person. I could not desire another path, but I placed myself in the hands of God that He would carry out His will completely in me; He knew what suited me.* So she's going in here to a much deeper place of trust, these circumstances, these events are pushing her. But she's praying – on the one hand she's praying for another path, but on the other hand she knows that this is the will of God. She's praying to her saints, she said, invoking saints, making novenas – all of this.

And then there comes an event. I won't say that it changes Teresa's life, because there are a number of these events along the way, but it's really the one that confirms the change that is taking place. If we think of Teresa in terms of conversion, it's not just one event, there are a series of events and this one some commentators call the decisive event, the one that somehow guides everything. I'm going to read first what she tells us: *After two years of these prayers of mine and those of others offered for the said intention. Here's what happens: Being in prayer on the feast day of the glorious St Peter, I saw, or to put it better, I felt Christ beside me; I saw nothing with my bodily eyes or with my soul, but it seemed that Christ was at my side – I saw that it was He, in my opinion, who was speaking to me.* So, she sees, or she doesn't see, Jesus Christ beside her, but she said *I saw nothing with bodily eyes or with my soul* – so it's seeing but it's not seeing. She now has to in several paragraphs convince herself of what's taking place and find a way of expressing it. *It seemed to me that Jesus Christ was always present at my side.*

So she sees him at her side on this one occasion but what is really shown is that he is always there, he is always at her side. *But since it wasn't an imaginative vision, I didn't see any form. Yet I felt very clearly that He was always present at my right side and that He was the witness of everything that I did. At no time in which I was a little recollected, or not greatly distracted, was I able to ignore that He was present at my side. I immediately went very anxiously to my confessor to tell him. He asked me in what form I saw Him. I answered that I didn't see Him. He asked how I knew that it was Christ. I answered that I didn't know how, but that I couldn't help knowing that He was beside me, that I saw and felt Him clearly, that my recollection of soul was greater, and that I was very continuously in the prayer of quiet, that the effects were much different from those I usually experienced, and that it was very clear. I could do nothing but draw comparisons in order to explain myself.* And she goes on to try and do this: *For if I say that I see it with the eyes neither of the body nor of the soul, because it is not an imaginative vision, how do I know and affirm that He is more certainly at my side than if I saw Him? It's incorrect to think that the vision is like that experience of those who are blind or in the dark who don't see the other at their side. There is some likeness in this comparison but not a great deal, because in such a case these people experience with their senses: either they hear the other person speak or stir, or they touch them. In the vision there is nothing of this, nor do you see darkness; but the vision is represented through knowledge given to the soul that is clearer than sunlight. I don't mean that you see the sun or brightness, but that a light, without your seeing light, illumines the intellect so that the soul may enjoy such a great good.* [Chapter 27:3]

So language fails her here. It's the one time I know of in Teresa's writings when she cannot come up with an image. Right throughout her writings she's always going to come up with an image of whatever she wants to say, even in the highest of mysticism and the most difficult things, she'll always come up with an image. Here she can't, she completely fails to come up with an explanation, yet she's absolutely certain, more certain than seeing a person, more certain than hearing, more certain than sunlight – absolute certainty that this is Jesus at her side and yet it's not anything seen, it's not imagination, it's not a dream, it's not any kind of a vision in the sense of seeing something or hearing something, but there's a certainty in the experience and it changes her, and the sure sign that she always uses is the good effects that it has upon her. So she struggles to explain this and of course the struggle to explain here has two

dimensions to it. She has to try and explain it to herself, she has to express it. The experience of God has to be expressed, we have to find some words or images.

Elsewhere in this book, back in the midst of her treatise on prayer, which we haven't looked at, she gives us an important principle about the experience of God. She tells us that many people have these experiences, very few know what they are and fewer still are able to express them. Teresa gradually over time grows into those three gifts, has the experience, yes, as many people have – very few know what they are, fewer again can put words to them, can express them. So we can see here she knows what it is, has absolute certainty that it is Jesus, but she can't find the words or the imagery or anything to explain it, so she tries to explain it to herself, but she has the problem of these confessors – she's got to convince them, she's got to tell them. So that's the second problem she's got here. The other thing she tells us about this experience – it's nothing like other kinds of experiences of God, like somebody might feel great fervour or feel great closeness to God in prayer; in different kinds of prayer the person might have the experience that God is very close. This is nothing like that, this is not at the feeling level, there are no feelings here, none of the senses are anywhere involved.

Then she goes on, the poor confessor she then has to try and convince. She said: *Then the confessor asked me who told you it was Jesus Christ? He told me many times, I answered, but before He told me He impressed upon my intellect that it was He, and before doing this latter He told me He was present – but I didn't see Him.* So she has to try and convince the confessor of this. *The Lord desires to be so engraved upon the intellect* – this is a very strong expression that she is using – *that this vision can no more be doubted than can what is seen, and even less.* It is so engraved – even something that can be seen could be doubted, but this cannot be doubted. This is a characteristic of an experience of God that she gives – it cannot be doubted, the person just cannot doubt it – nobody can talk the person out of this, this is so engraved. But it hasn't come from anything human, it is the divine and the human, the divine is so engraved there is a certainty here. It doesn't mean of course that she can now depart from human means, human advice, human support, human help; she needs that very much, hence the real struggle to explain it, some explanation that she herself could be comfortable with that would come some way to expressing something of the truth of what has taken place. But she can't do that, she fails to do that; something that she could explain to her confessor, convince him, she will struggle to do that.

So what else is there? She goes on then, God has another way of communicating: *Hence, there is another way in which God teaches the soul and speaks to it, different from the manner of speaking described previously. It is a language that belongs so to heaven that here on earth it is poorly understood, no matter how much we may desire to tell about it, if the Lord does not teach us through experience.* So she goes on – experience – if we have experience, we know the truth. On the one hand there is truth that can be written about, can be explained, can be taught. There's another kind of truth that can only be known by experience, if it's not known by experience it will seem illogical, unreasonable, contradictory, paradoxical to those who are reliant on what can be taught. So she now in a sense takes a leap from her struggle to explain to say those who have experience will know, will understand. We are dealing with a different language, a language that belongs to heaven, not to earth, so to try and explain the language of heaven, to translate it into the language here on earth just can't be done, it would be so poorly understood. *The Lord puts what He wants the soul to know very*

deeply within it, and there He makes this known without image or explicit words. There is no image, there are no words, but it's known, because at a human level for everything we know, we have to have an image or words, we can't deal with it otherwise, but here there's neither. And this manner in which God gives the soul understanding of His desires and great truths and mysteries is worthy of close attention. Often this is the way I understand when His Majesty explains some vision He wishes to represent to me. [Life: Chapter 27:6] So the Lord is speaking to her, and she then goes on to say the devil cannot get in here, this can't be mistaken because it is not coming in any human way. So she is trying to explain God communicating Himself, the presence of Jesus in her life and she goes on then also to the mystery of the Trinity, the whole reality of God and how we might know this.

Then she goes on to in a sense bring us into another dimension of this. *Returning then to the discussion of this kind of understanding, it seems to me that the Lord in every way wants this soul to have some knowledge of what goes on in heaven. I think that just as in heaven you understand without speaking (which I certainly never knew until the Lord in His goodness desired that I should see and showed Himself to me in a rapture), so it is in this vision. For God and the soul understand each other only through the desire His Majesty has that it understand Him – the lover – these two lovers gaze directly at each other – this she takes from the Song of Songs. Then, as she so often does in her book she switches from addressing the reader to God. There's a lovely little prayer in here to express this: O admirable kindness of God, You allow me to gaze upon You with eyes that have so badly gazed as have those of my soul. May they, Lord, become accustomed through this vision not to look at base things, so that nothing outside of You might satisfy them. O ingratitude of mortals! To what extremes will you go? For I know through experience that what I say is true and that what can be said is the least of what You do, Lord, for a soul You bring to such frontiers. So she's calling to God now, saying I know what you're doing is true, I know what you're saying is true. O souls that have begun to practice prayer and have true faith, what good things can you still seek in this life – leaving aside what is gained for eternity – that could compare with the least of these favours? So God is giving. Reflect that it is indeed certain that God gives Himself in this way to those who give up all for Him. He shows no partiality. He loves everyone. Nobody can have any excuse, no matter how miserable they may be, since the Lord so acts with me in bringing me to such a state. So anyone who exposes themselves, who gives up everything for him, he gives – even she, herself – the mercy of God. [Ch.27:11-12]*

So now, she comes to the next issue. She has been trying to explain it for herself, she has been trying to explain it for her confessors. Now another dimension – this must be taught, this experience is not for her, it's for teaching. So she addresses the confessor that she is most writing this book for, Garcia de Toledo. She never names him here, but she says: *Your Reverence ought to cry out these truths since God has taken from me the freedom to do so. For she can't teach, being a woman; she can't preach, she hasn't the freedom to; but your reverence has.* Fr Garcia de Toledo and indeed the other confessors and experts, they must cry out this, they must teach this. So now she has gone from being totally unable to explain something, trying to convince her confessors that this was OK, turning to God for his reassurance, and now saying you've got to teach this, you've got to use this in your teaching, you've got to use this in your work of preaching, so important is this. *I should like them to be proclaimed to me always; yet I've been so slow myself to hear and understand God, as will be seen in*

what is written here, that it is very embarrassing to speak about this; as a result I desire to be silent. I shall only say what sometimes comes to mind, may it please the Lord to bring me to the goal that I might enjoy this blessing. So once she has this thought she's going to step back. So she wants everyone to know about this.

And then she goes on to something else. When she had this experience around 1561, she turned for advice and reassurance from St Peter de Alcantara. By the time she's writing this, he has died, but his support and reassurance for her was vital at this time and so she now relies on that. Although he is dead she gives us a long section here, almost a hagiography of this man, and of his life and what a wonderful man he was and what a loss it is since he has died. But it is really her way of saying to anybody who doubts this, if such a great saint had this experience, why could it not happen to me, but more importantly, if such a great saint knew and understood this and supported it and taught it, then it must be taught, it must be spoken about.

And then she concludes: *But what a discourse I have got into!* She knew exactly what she was getting into. This is really Teresa at her very best. *May it awaken your Reverence* – again this word *awakening*. God has been doing the awakening, several times, God awakening, awakening, now may what I say *awaken your Reverence*. She has without any doubt now become his spiritual director; she makes no apologies for it. *May it awaken your Reverence so that you will not esteem anything pertaining to this life* – what she has put into that prayer in the middle of this extract – *as though you didn't know and weren't already determined to abandon all, and hadn't already put this renunciation into practice!* You're already doing this, but you've got to...so she's teaching him. *I see so much perdition in the world that even though my writing about it brings me no more benefit than to tire me out, I find rest in doing so.* She liked writing this chapter – *I find rest in doing so*. There are a few other times in her writings when she tells us that. It's a real sign Teresa considers what she's writing here very important. Something very difficult to write about, but I don't tire writing about it, *I find rest in doing so*. She struggled at the very extremities of language here, can't come up with comparisons, knows that she's really up against it to convince those who have the power over her here that this is OK; the audacity to say they should use this in teaching. *For everything I have written is against myself* – camouflage again, you know I'm only a little woman here, it's not against herself at all... but it is; in another sense it is total mercy of God, there is nothing here that she has done anything to bring about – total gift of God, mercy of God. *May the Lord pardon me for the offences against Him in this matter, and may your Reverence do so too, for I tire you unintentionally. It appears that I want you to do penance for my sins in this matter.*

It's a marvellously written chapter where this woman has the courage, the audacity, to probe the very depths of the relationship between Jesus and us as human beings, speak about it and teach about it. This how Jesus, she has come to see, is working in her life and if he works like this in her life then he works like this – not in imitation of her – but in a very real and very profound way in everyone's life. And I mentioned already last night that one of the great discoveries Teresa makes in writing this book is that her experience can be used for teaching. And here, despite how difficult it is to write about this, she knows it's important to write it because it can be used in teaching. It's needed.

We've probably done enough for this evening. But that's just dipping into this particular part of the book which many people find difficult – what is this woman

talking about? – visions and all these experiences – what’s it all about? It’s taking us to the reality of God and what prayer truly is – it’s the relationship, the communication between the divine and the human and the more we human beings go into it the more incomprehensible it becomes, but also the more real it becomes, and the more good that it does and consequently the greater the need there is for this to be proclaimed, to be taught, to be spoken about, to be used. She comes back to the world and how much the world needs this and how everything else in the world is worthless beside this. Amen.

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PART FIVE – *A journey into a new life*

I will try and pull together a little bit the process that's going on here. Here is Teresa, the woman who desires to pray, wants to pray, struggles to pray, but as the process goes on, what then happens is that this experience of prayer changes her. It's one thing to learn how to pray, but the next stage is accepting that this is going to change you. Prayer, as she discovers it or lives it out here in its reality and its consequences effectively is a journey into a new life. Or another way of putting it is we cannot pray and expect to grow in prayer without accepting the fact that this is going to change everything. Nothing is ever going to be the same again. It is a journey into an unknown world.

What most of this book is about, and what Teresa is trying to communicate in this book are the consequences of that. When we really put ourselves into the hands of God, or what it means to live before the face of an incomprehensible God – but not just an incomprehensible God – but a God who loves intimately and in a limitless way. So she's before a God of limitless love but also whose ways are totally incomprehensible, but the process does not stop there, the process goes on to another stage and that is that this gives life, this takes a person out of their little world into something much bigger. So hence what happens in this process that Teresa is bringing us through is that Teresa becomes the writer, the teacher, the founder etc. Not only is her relationship with God totally transformed, but her relationship with the world, with humanity – everything is transformed. That's where prayer takes her to – from learning how to pray or failing to learn how to pray – to actually changing the world through her prayer. And that is ultimately Teresa's discovery. This is what changes the world, this is what the world most needs. So that's the journey that she's giving us here and she's telling it to us from within – not from a distance, not from outside – but from the midst of the experience so we're traveling with her in all the ups and downs of the experience. The struggle with each stage, with each new development.

So this morning we want to go to what is probably the best known episode in this book and it has really become well-known thanks to Bernini and his sculpture of Teresa in ecstasy, which some of you may have seen in Rome at the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. It is a very important episode in this book and comes to us in Chapter 29, which is only two chapters after what we were looking at last night. But it's a new stage. If the issue in what we were dealing with last night in Chapter 27 which was all around the call of Jesus in her life, how he was relating with her, now the issue becomes much more personal. Last night's issue was around the words and calling and relating – now it becomes physical. What's being explored here by Teresa is the relationship between the spiritual and the physical and we nowadays would probably add into that the psychological. That word did not exist in Teresa's day, though she understood it and struggled with it, there was no language to speak about it. It's only in the past hundred and fifty years that we have acquired a language – whether we have acquired more understanding or not is another matter – but a language we have acquired. So that's the fundamental issue – what is the relationship between the spiritual and the physical? We have already seen how Teresa put such a strong emphasis upon the physical. We're human, we're not angels, Jesus was human and divine, he had human body, he lived human life. Here we have a whole series of events she's recounting to us about God making his presence known, Jesus making his presence known, and that

presence is experienced in all sorts of ways and interestingly in both experiences of his presence and his absence and she describes it in terms of wounds and wounding – love wounds.

I will read the particular experience that Bernini tried to depict in his famous sculpture. She has given us a series of experiences prior to this of a similar nature, but this is a very particular one. This is in Chapter 29, paragraph: 13. *The Lord wanted me while in this state to see sometimes the following vision: I saw close to me toward my left side an angel in bodily form. I don't usually see angels in bodily form except on rare occasions; although many times angels appear to me, but without my seeing them, as in the intellectual vision I spoke about before.* That was the one I looked at last night, a different kind of vision. *This time, though, the Lord desired that I see the vision in the following way: the angel was not large, but small; he was very beautiful, and his face was so aflame that he seemed to be one of those very sublime angels that appear to be all fire. They must belong to those they call the cherubim, for they didn't tell me their names. But I see clearly that in heaven there is so much difference between some angels and others and between these latter and still others that I wouldn't know how to explain it. I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to be that this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying it off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share some of it, and even a great deal. The loving exchange that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg Him in His goodness to give a taste of this love to anyone who thinks I am lying.*

That's her account of this event and unlike like the one last night [Chapter 27] where she had absolute certainty and nothing visual, here she has got very definitely something visual, yet that visual isn't quite explaining what's happening here. So it's not physical and that is very important, but yet the physical is affected by the spiritual. We relate with God with every dimension of who we are – our bodies, our mind, our hearts, physically, psychologically, emotionally – every dimension of who we are – that's how we relate. God relates on every dimension, the spiritual in that deepest place within us, but the physical partakes of that. Before going on further I want to read from another passage from Teresa, not from the *Book of her Life*, but from an article she wrote ten years later, because when she writes it here she's writing not long after the event, but ten years later, looking back on it, it's interesting how she tries to explain it. *Another type of prayer quite frequently is a kind of wound in which it seems as though an arrow is thrust into the heart, or into the soul itself. Thus the wound causes a severe pain which makes the soul moan; yet, the pain is so delightful the soul would never want it to go away. The pain is not in the senses, nor is the sore a physical one; but the pain lies in the interior depths of the soul without resemblance to bodily pain. Yet, since the experience cannot be explained save through comparisons, these rough comparisons are used (I mean rough when compared to what the experience is); but I don't know how to explain it any other way. For this reason these are not things to be written about or spoken of, because it's impossible to understand them unless one has experienced them. I mention the interior depths this pain reaches, because spiritual sufferings are extremely different from physical ones. From this fact I deduce how*

much greater the suffering of souls in hell and purgatory are than what can be understood of them from bodily sufferings here on earth. [Spiritual Testimonies: 59:17 - The degrees of infused prayer.]

So there, looking back at the experience with ten years of reflection on it she is in the same dilemma: on the one hand there is no other way of explaining this in bodily terms, yet it is not bodily, the pain is not in the senses. Bodily pain is used as a comparison here; we are dealing with something quite different and it's more pain and great delight, something that one would want to have and never want to lose – so pain in some very different way. So she is struggling to explain something, but there's another dimension to this and this is more important in the course of Teresa's explanation here. Whatever takes place, whatever event has taken place here is spiritual, is incomprehensible to the person. What we can see and have an understanding of are the events and that's always what Teresa looks for, the events, because that is always what a person has. Whatever experience of God is spoken about, whether it is in the scriptures, in Teresa's writings or anywhere else, it is always the effects that are spoken about and it's interesting if you look closely at Bernini's statue, this is something he gets right. In Bernini's statue the angel is there holding the arrow and the arrow is pulled out. Whatever happened has already happened, Bernini is not trying to depict the event that took place, he is depicting the aftermath – and that's what we've always got in any spiritual experience – the aftermath. And everything that she's trying to describe here, that's what it is, because a human being can never engage directly with an experience of God, but with the result, the aftermath, and here what is going to be is this delight, this pain, this sense of having been wounded, this profound experience of love that has gone to the deepest place within the person, but then has an effect on the entire person – every dimension of the person, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically – it cannot possibly be doubted – there's a certainty that it has taken place, there's a certainty that it changes everything. A person cannot go back to what they were before and there's a purpose to this. Though the person may not see the purpose immediately, there will certainly be evidence of a growing in love, a growing in virtue, a giving of life in some way. And what is significant here – this comes in Teresa's book here, just before, chronologically, the foundation of her first convent, San José in Avila. In the next chapter she'll start the preparations for this.

Somebody mentioned John of the Cross before we began this. John of the Cross doesn't know Teresa at this stage, they haven't yet met. But years later, after Teresa's death, when John will be writing his *Living Flame*, and there he deals with some of the rarer gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to certain people, and one of those rare gifts is that certain people are called to be founders. Certain people, he said, who are given a spirit, a spiritual gift of God that bears fruit in their followers. It's a gift that's given to an individual, but this is a gift that's going to bear fruit in many, many followers. And he uses there a traditional image that the church has often used, he describes this gift of the mustard seed in the gospel that grows and bears fruit. But John then interestingly links his explanation with this event here. He doesn't mention Teresa, but undoubtedly it's Teresa he's got in mind and by then John has almost certainly read the *Book of her Life*. And he tells that this seed is planted with a fire, with a dart, in the middle of the heart, in the centre of this person, right in the depths of the person the Holy Spirit plants this seed with a dart, to use this imagery here, that will grow and develop. A rare gift, he said, given to individuals, but not for the individual but for many, many people. So that's how this event here with Teresa, this deep wounding of the love of God somehow

leads us into bearing fruit, which of course she could not have seen – whether she consciously linked them or not. A person who encounters God, meets with God, has experience of God, has to act upon it. There's always a purpose to these experiences, the person has to do something, there's always a fruitfulness, a bearing fruit. Because the great gifts of God aren't given to an individual to be some a kind of personal possession, they're given for the Church, for the world, for humanity, they are given to do good, to bear fruit. And that's what happens here, that's where this event goes to. This little fire – whatever is set on fire within – this fire gives fire.

She goes on to reflect a little bit on the experience: *On the days this lasted I went about as though stupefied. I desired neither to see nor to speak, but to clasp my suffering close to me, for to me it was greater glory than all of creation.* There's a turning in, she wants to hold onto this, wants to clasp it – *close to me*. The desire to be alone, that's another strong indicator. Twelve years later, when Teresa writes the *Interior Castle*, a strong indicator of an experience being of God is when a person has a desire to be alone, a pull toward solitude. To want to spend time alone is an indicator that this is of God. But of course it doesn't work like that and even in a very superficial way Teresa here is reminded of this: *Sometimes it happened – when the Lord desired – that these raptures were so great that even though I was among people I couldn't resist them.* This happened among people, she didn't want this, but the Lord desired it – *to my deep affliction they began to be made public.* The person doesn't want this, yet the Lord desired it, interestingly. She doesn't want this to be made public but she has a sense that the Lord desires it. She is entering ever more deeply into being God's servant here, God's instrument, something being made known, even though for her the whole pull is away from all of that. *After I experience them I don't feel this suffering so strongly; rather I experience what I mentioned before in that other part – I don't recall which chapter – which is very different in many respects and more valuable.* So she goes in and out of this. *But when this pain I'm speaking of begins, it seems the Lord carries the soul away and places it in ecstasy; thus there is no room for pain and suffering, because joy soon enters in. May He be blessed forever who grants so many favours to one who responds so poorly to gifts as great as these.*

So this gift is not for her, in the sense that this is what the Lord desires – it's not for her. It's becoming public and it's becoming public in many ways – not so much what is happening deeply within her, because that cannot be, who else can know that, she struggles herself to know that, but the fruits of it, the results, taking the form of teaching, founding, writing. The influence she has on so many other people is really happening from now on. Her prayer is out there. The gifts of God can never be held onto by a person, the gifts that God gives can never be personal possessions. She's learning here, she's giving herself to God at an ever deeper level, she has less and less control and understanding of what's going on. She has a growing sense that this is what God wants and this is bearing more and more fruit. There's a bigger purpose to this, a bigger purpose that she cannot see but that God sees, and that is an important dimension of prayer. The person who prays is opening themselves more and more to the bigger plan of God, both for their lives, but more importantly, for the bigger plan of God for humanity that they are part of. There's a bigger plan for her life but she is part of a bigger plan that God has. And these experiences are in one way and another opening her up to this.

This brings me to my advice for somebody reading this, particularly Chapters 23-31. Don't get too bogged down in the detail of the events she's recounting, but try rather to see the bigger picture. What is changing here, what is taking place? She is changing; her life, she tells us, is unrecognisable from what it was – it is a new life. This is a woman who has landed on a new planet and is trying to find her way around the place, the planet where God is working in her life. So don't get too caught up in trying to understand the minutiae of the experiences, but rather see a bigger picture, a human being struggling to relate with a God who is making himself known in all sorts of ways, but more importantly, a God who is preparing her for bigger works, bigger tasks that lie in the future, but that at the moment are unseen and not even imaginable. And for all of us, and anyone who sets out on this road of prayer, that's where it takes us, to more and more God's plan taking over in our lives and our becoming part of the much bigger plan that God has, yet always unseen. It's like groping in the dark here, struggling with two things all the time - these profound experiences of love in which one often experiences pain as presence, as absence, and the total inability to comprehend or to express what's going on.

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