

Letters of St. Teresa No. 1

This is the first of a series of twelve reflections on St. Teresa's letters. The purpose is to help with the reading and reflection on all of her letters. This is the next stage of our journey to celebrate the fifth centenary of her birth.

Over the past four years we have listened to Teresa's four major spiritual writings. Now we listen more personally and intimately to the Teresa who wrote those books. We are given privileged access to the life Teresa was living when she wrote: problems, adventures, concerns, challenges, etc. We also meet a great variety of other people whose lives cross with Teresa's for a vast range of reasons. Teresa's letters are also a rich history of life in 16th century Spain and particularly the Church and Carmelite Order in that era of history.

The first letter chosen is one that is usually published as an epilogue to the book of her **Life**. It is also **Letter No. 5** in Volume One of Kiernan Kavanagh's collection. [References, dates, number, etc. of letters tend to vary. I will try to give as clear information as possible to help you find the letters I choose!!] I have chosen this letter for a number of reasons:

- **Life** is the first book we listened to. This takes us back to the beginning of our preparations to celebrate Teresa's centenary and reminds us of the journey we are on together.
- The Letters shed light upon the life experience out of which her spiritual teaching emerges.
- The importance of this book for Teresa and her concern for its welfare will be a pre-occupation of Teresa right up to her death.

Background This letter is almost certainly addressed to Garcia de Toledo. He was of aristocratic background, a Dominican and theologian. He became Teresa's confessor sometime around 1555 when he was a member of the Dominican community in Avila. He was Teresa's confessor in Toledo in 1562 when she is writing the first edition of her *Life* [this book has not come down to us]. He asks her to write a new and expanded edition and it is this that she is entrusting to him now in the autumn of 1565.

The motive and urgency of this letter is a request by Don Francisco de Soto, the Bishop of Salamanca and Inquisitor General, that the book be given to Juan de Avila and that Teresa abide by his response to the book [Juan de Avila was the foremost theologian in Spain at the time. He is now a canonised saint and doctor of the Church].

Letter

The Letter is to accompany the most important document Teresa will write in her life. She tells Fr. Garcia: *“You are obliged to one who has so entrusted her soul to you”*. She has, of course, entrusted her soul to him many times as her confessor but that is not what she means here. This book is her “soul” and she will be concerned about it right up to her death. It will be a few more years before it gets to Juan de Avila through the help of another friend. Juan de Avila will very strongly approve the book. However it will later fall into the hands of the Inquisition and will not become available for distribution and publication until after Teresa’s death.

From the letter we get a sense of the close relationship between Garcia and Teresa. She is as much his spiritual director and he is hers. His relationship with Teresa forms a very important part of his spiritual growth. For example, read Chapter 16 and 17 of the Book of her Life; here she addresses Garcia very directly, gives him advice, refers to him as “my son”, etc.

For reflection/Discussion

What must it have felt like for Teresa handing over this book? It is the account of her most intimate human and spiritual experiences. It is the story of God’s mercy and her weakness, vulnerability and struggles. She writes as a sinner who has been redeemed by her relationship with Jesus Christ. She, a 16th century woman, takes the risk of not only speaking about prayer but also teaching about prayer. It is the story of the first 50 years of her life but she is acutely aware that the rest of her life depends on the fate of this book.

Let us take ourselves back to Teresa’s cell at S. Jose, Avila. The community is just over three years founded. They have just got through a law suit and the community is flourishing. Years later she will write in the book of her foundations that these are the most peaceful years of her life.

Teresa is very aware that the book of her **Life** is a precious, but vulnerable, treasure. What does it mean for us today?