

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Her Way of Perfection



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St. TERESA OF AVILA (Of JESUS)

Her Way of Perfection

[Based on my presentation notes]



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INTRODUCTION

My theme throughout this presentation is Teresa's underlying *attitude* toward prayer and contemplation that vivified her extraordinary actions in the world. We will look at some illustrative episodes, such as her personal experience with the Spanish Inquisition and the founding of her first monastery, St. Joseph's, against much opposition. Given her historical situation both as a reformer of her Carmelite Order and as a woman in that highly patriarchal society, I raise the question of the paradox of what I call her "docility" and her "determination," both founded on her attitude of love, detachment and humility.

We will see how her *docility* led her, in the face of her own fear of the judgments of some truly spiritual men about the state of her soul, to consult some of the most learned men of her time, quite before she founded her first monastery or wrote her spiritual masterpiece, *Interior Castle*. We will see, too, how her *determination* led her to act intrepidly to fulfill her inner calling. We will see, finally, how she increasingly integrated both her docility and her determination—beyond any binary logic—through her experience of prayer and contemplation.

In Part One I will illustrate the interplay of her docility and determination, giving special attention to her founding of her first monastery, since this episode in her life demonstrates how she combined docility and determination in action when she was at the center of grave controversy. We will glimpse what her life looked like at that moment from her own point of view, as she herself tells it.

In Part Two we will turn our attention to the book she wrote shortly thereafter, *The Way of Perfection*, on the attitude necessary for prayer and contemplation. In so doing we can deepen our understanding of the relation between the key *events* of her life we have previously examined as well as her underlying *attitude*, which she drew upon in withstanding and overcoming the opposition of formidable foes. In this way we can better understand how she integrated contemplation and action in the world.

She wrote *The Way of Perfection* for her nuns. She wrote it out of obedience to a Dominican theologian, Domingo Báñez, who had forbidden her nuns to read her autobiographical *Life*, a work he deemed too dangerous for them, as unlearned women. You have either read, or might read, her two spiritual classics, her *Life* and her *Interior Castle*. We will focus here on her book *The Way of Perfection*, a great introduction to all her works, because in this highly readable book she explicitly *teaches* the foundation of prayer. We can thereby approach her other works from the vantage point of what she considers *foundational* to prayer and contemplation. Since Teresa was the first mystic to address the actual inner workings of mystical experience, in its various states of consciousness, all the more reason do we need to appreciate what she teaches about the proper attitude toward such experience.

We need, as well, to appreciate how Teresa herself developed over *time*. Let's bear in mind that before she ventured forth on those risky roads to found seventeen

convents and several monasteries for men, she had to wonder about her own sanctity and sanity. The fact that so phenomenally a productive person, who became a canonized saint and Doctor of the Church, was once so suspect among pious people, reminds us that we don't always see, in our own time, exactly where we are going. But it is helpful to see, in hindsight, how Teresa got to where she was going.

So we need to see how she put together her “docility and determination,” as I identify this paradox, grounded in her love, detachment and humility, which led her to amazing action. We will see what she personally went through, in her consultation with spiritual directors who were men, concerning her own personal experience of the divine, an experience that in time led her increasingly to trust her own inner wisdom.

Historical Consciousness

The year 2015 will mark the 500th anniversary of Teresa's birth. Those of us who read her in English are dealing with a different language of a different time. There are vast specialized studies of Teresa, which not only interpret her texts in the light of various disciplines today but often use specialized lexicons even within these disciplines. My task here is simply to raise our *historical consciousness* of Teresa's life and teaching on prayer and contemplation, so we can better see our own era and our own experience as a product of history as well as a process of history.

In articulating her own experience and consciousness from within the language of her own tradition, Teresa gave testimony to that tradition in a way that both transmitted and transformed it as a living tradition. That is, in her own lived experience of that tradition, she embodied it in a way that continues to deepen understanding of it and to develop it. In this living sense of history as contemporary history, Teresa can teach us far more today than she could have taught her own time. To take poetic license with a metaphor from her, let me put it this way: her teaching over the centuries has emerged from its suspect cocoon in her own time into a white butterfly, and her wings would no longer fall off at the thought that she was a woman.

So, with the sense of history that this course—Roots of Christian Mysticism—cultivates, let us see what we can now learn from Teresa.

Times have changed now that she is a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, one of only three women. Catholic theologians were in the midst of debating whether it is possible to make a woman a Doctor of the Church when Pope Paul VI ended the debate by declaring her so in 1970. Let's use our historical imagination. We can imagine not knowing this outcome while Teresa was living. Her greatest trials were from good, orthodox spiritual people with considerable clout in the Roman Catholic Church of her era. A declaration of her as *Doctor Ecclesiae* would have shocked the highly patriarchal society of sixteenth century Spain, especially the officials of the Spanish Inquisition.

Teresa lived during a time when personal, direct communication with God was suspect in several forms of heresy, including especially Lutheranism. She began to doubt her own experience. Although she was steeped in some of the vernacular literature of Christian mysticism, Teresa as a woman was uneducated in Latin—locked out of that learned tradition; and the Spanish Inquisition later in her life banned some of the vernacular spiritual books she had most relied on in her understanding of Christian mysticism. So she, a so-called unlearned woman, quite docilely—and wisely—sought out the counsel of learned men.

When Teresa started her work reforming the Carmelite order, people had to wonder what she was doing. I think I would have wondered myself. Let's put ourselves in the position of the townspeople who were scandalized by her, as were so many nuns she was deserting to found a new monastery. At one point she chose to obey her spiritual director, a man less than half her age, in disobeying the authority of the General of her Carmelite Order. We will take a closer look at this case because it so strikingly illustrates both her docility and her determination in action. Here is an example, it seems to me, of how her combined docility and determination, founded on the virtues of love, detachment, and humility, acted in dynamic tension, often enough overcoming, quite by surprise, impasse after impasse. She demonstrated that she was detached from the opinion of the world and trusted the action of God. Indeed, she had to be so detached in attitude to dare to do practically everything she did in that day. In her case, action was indeed the fruit of contemplation.

PART ONE
LIFE AND WORK

Earlier Life

In reflecting on her life, we might ask ourselves the same question that William Walsh once raised (1943:1) in the opening page of his nearly 600-page biography of Teresa:

What manner of woman was this, who lived sixty-seven most useful and productive years in spite of diseases and afflictions that would have kept most persons bedridden; who was seen poorly clad on the roads of Spain, mounted on a mule or in a peasant's cart in parching heat or numbing cold; who seldom had enough money to buy a decent meal, yet founded seventeen convents. . . . to what principle shall we appeal to explain the levitations and other strange phenomena in the life of one so richly endowed with the more common human qualities? For Teresa had beauty, charm, literary genius of a high order (though uncultivated), an administrative ability second to none; humor and tenderness and common sense; the courage and resourcefulness of a great soldier, with the patient obedience and humility of a saint.

In response to this biographer's thought-provoking question, we begin here with selected events in her life that help us focus on her combined docility and determination, in her attitude embracing the way of perfection. As a historian of modern Europe, I have found Walsh helpful in his close attention to sixteenth century sources, and I have drawn here from his biography, as well as from recent works. At the same time, I have found that only in reading Teresa directly can one begin to fathom her *own attitude* that makes her so real to us as a human being. Beyond all biographies, we have her own words about her life, in her own context, so I often cite her, accordingly, to shed light on her own experience.

We already see Teresa's determination by age seven. She noted that joys of this world don't last, so she looked to the joy of eternity as her home and talked her eleven-year-old brother into agreeing to run away with her to be beheaded in martyrdom by the Muslims. But their uncle caught up with them in time, outside the walls of Avila.

She suffered her first great loss when her mother died. Teresa was only thirteen. As a teenager of sixteen she certainly had no intention of becoming a nun, even though she admired the Augustinian nuns who educated her.

But a few years later (the exact date is disputed) Teresa ran away from home a second time, this time to enter religious life probably at age twenty. With her absolute resolution, she stood up to her father to enter religious life. Devout as he was, he loved her greatly and opposed the idea, no matter who interceded for her. As Teresa puts it, “The most we could get from him was that after his death I could do whatever I wanted” (1565: Ch. 3: 63). She herself was a dutiful daughter who greatly loved her father, so she was in a double-bind, or impasse, given her determination to follow her vocation. The historical roots that sanctioned the headship of man, moreover, ran deep, as evidenced, for instance, in Gratian’s codification of canon law: “Thus, it appears most evident that man is so much the head of the woman that she may not offer herself to God by any vow of abstinence or religious life without his permission.” (Gratian c.1140: columns 1255-56.)

So Teresa courageously ran away, this time shaking in her boots, so to speak, to the Carmelite convent. But the Mother Prioress refused to admit her without her father’s consent. When her father saw how truly determined she was, he consented. She tells us that this victory was not without pain. She felt the separation from her father “so keenly that the feeling would not be greater, I think, when I die. For it seemed to me that every bone in my body was being sundered” (1565: Ch. 4: 64). Yet no one noticed her struggle for detachment, and everyone thought she was pleased. Then as soon as she took the habit, she experienced great happiness from then on at being in the religious life. When she would recall this joy, she tells us, “. . . there is no task that could be presented to me, no matter how hard, that I would hesitate to undertake. For I have already experienced in many ways that if I strive at the outset with determination to do it, even in this life His Majesty pays the soul in such ways that only the one who has this joy understands it” (1565: Ch. 4: 64-65).

In her early twenties she fell so ill she remained paralyzed for three years, unable to walk. The headaches, pain and daily vomiting would continue throughout her life,

throughout her rustic covered wagon rides across the rugged roads of Spain to found monasteries, as well as even in her writing of her masterpiece, *Interior Castle*.

For a long time she struggled with mental prayer, and she became discouraged enough to give up on it out of a false sense of humility until, when she was age twenty-eight, her Dominican confessor told her to continue to practice it. She underwent a conversion which she related to St. Augustine's conversion experience.

Her mystical life began when she was about forty. After visions of rapture and of herself in hell, she determined to found a small community of nuns, based on the primitive rule of the twelfth century and modeled on the practices of the early hermits of Mount Carmel. Quite sociable indeed, she had had enough of non-cloistered social life within and outside the confines of her large Carmelite monastery. She found a "detachment" from creatures indispensable to Carmelite contemplative life. So she began to take to heart the virtue of detachment from social entanglements and found her support from within herself. At the same time she deeply valued good spiritual friendships and continued, with the docility as characteristic of her as her determination to follow the way of perfection, to consult learned men about the state of her soul and about what course of action to take in the world, given her inner calling to found a reform monastery.

State of her Soul

After Teresa's mystical life began, a burning question arose among spiritual and learned men privately consulted concerning the suspicious state of this woman's soul. Not all spiritual men had kept confidences, so Teresa's extraordinary experiences were the talk of the town. As one of her contemporary biographers (Gross: 1993: 134) put it: "I cannot but tremble at the thought of saying something about the status of women in Spain's Golden Age. I find myself thinking of Virginia Woolf cursing the libraries at Oxbridge, when she was refused entrance."

Teresa had first consulted spiritual men who were terribly disconcerted as to what to think. So she herself began to fear, given that, in all humility, she claimed no absolute certainty about the source of her direct experience. She wanted to distinguish between the

workings of her own mind, wherein the “devil” might play tricks on her, and the work of God. In any case, her own critical self-reflection and detachment from her immediate experience came into play, and she never presumed she knew the answers to such questions. She thought it possible her prayer of quiet and of union might indeed be a “great illusion,” and so she played safe through consultation, to put her experience to the test of informed inquirers, spiritual men within her tradition. In the words of theologian Rowan Williams (1991: 149), “Teresa is not inclined to use her experience as evidence for what the universe is.” Her mystical states are not a “paradigm of certainty,” but rather have “authority only within a frame of reference which is believed on quite other grounds,” given consistency with her specific religious tradition. Such was her docility to her own tradition, Christological in frame of reference.

One of these men she so relied on, Francisco de Salcedo, arranged for her to consult a new authority, known especially for his holiness and learning as a theologian, Pedro Gaspar Daza. He and Salcedo agreed that her faults and imperfections, on the one hand, and her favors from God, on other hand, were incompatible. Daza was perplexed. So he asked her to tell him all she could about her prayer. She broke into tears, as she could not express such an interior experience in words. In the words of Walsh (1943:117), “She was suspected by the two most holy people she knew of being the dupe of the devil.” In this predicament, she asked with her characteristic docility if she should give up mental prayer altogether, in order to avoid these dangers.

These men indiscreetly conferred with others about her mystical states. Consequently, the whole town of Avila gossiped and joked about her. She tells us that it looked as if she herself had made her experiences public. In my view, such unjust judgment—resulting from her genuine docility in seeking counsel—must have provided a good training ground for Teresa’s deepening attitude of detachment from what the world thought of her, thereby later enabling her to found a monastery, with a certain inner sense of freedom, as we shall see, against the wishes of the town.

But at this point in our story, spiritual men, having read the book she had written out of obedience—her *Life*—reached a verdict: her experience was of the devil. So she next had to confer with a Jesuit, to remove herself from grave danger. As usual, she obeyed out of docility, as in this predicament she “saw danger everywhere” (1565: 206).

But talking with a Jesuit intimidated her, because of the special prestige of that new order. By chance, the nuns of her monastery found out about even this impressive consultation, which was supposed to be secret.

The Jesuit, whom Teresa doesn't name but whom Walsh identifies (1943: viii) as Diego de Cetina, was only twenty-three, but experienced with mental prayer. His break-through judgment wholly affirmed her own experience, and he became her spiritual director. But after four months he had to leave, and once again Teresa felt isolated and had to practice yet further detachment from dependence on humans.

Next a friend and man of much clout in Avila urged that Teresa be exorcised. At this point her reputation became mud. She tells us that she found this experience excruciatingly distressing—or is the fashionable word today “stressful”? She feared she would have no one who would agree to hear her confession. She says “I did nothing but weep” (1565: 244).

I myself find her emotional reaction reassuring. Here is a person who, in her duress, exemplified the humanity of Jesus, especially in his aloneness and suffering, as central to her spirituality. As Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D., puts it (1988: 70): “Only a human God, broken by human life, could have spoken into the life of this woman,” so Teresa increasingly identified with the “poor, suffering Jesus” for her inner source of affirmation and wisdom, in the face of such condemnation by learned men. Nor does FitzGerald let us forget that Teresa, “As a WOMAN in sixteenth century Spain . . . needed their reassurance and approval” (1988: 71). Nor can I overemphasize that, in her very docility, she was determined to follow the way of perfection from within her own tradition, in consonance with the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

Yet although Teresa learned increasing highly to value detachment from human judgment, as such, and to deepen her trust of her contemplative insights, does not mean she had no difficulties practicing detachment, and the same can be said of her docility itself. There were enough persecutions, she said, to drive her insane. So she resorted to raising her eyes to the Lord (1565: 245). She points out her predicament as a woman: “For the opposition of good men to a little woman, wretched, weak and fearful like myself, seems to be nothing when described in so few words; yet among the very severe trials I suffered in my life, this was one of the most severe” (1565: 246-47). On the one

hand, prayer itself consoled her with “new strength”; on the other hand, she knew that if she “contradicted” the learned men who were judging her spirit such contradiction would make matters worse for her, “Since my doing so would appear to them as a lack of humility” (1565: 248), given that they had already supposed she presumed to teach them as if she thought herself wise. Yet her intention was not to teach but to be teachable—that is, docile—in submitting, during this process of her development, to the counsel of learned men, determined as she was to follow their direction.

Because of the 1559 Index banning of books (sometimes in both the Latin and vernacular), Teresa found herself yet more isolated, without books in the vernacular she had relied on for spiritual sustenance. Among men and women, who any longer trusted such a suspect woman? All were convinced her raptures and visions were from devil, as her confessor himself thought. Therefore she should not go to communion regularly, and she should not be left to herself in solitude. If Christ should appear to her in a vision, she should send him away as if He were the Devil. Yet Teresa obeyed Church authorities all the way, given that she was determined to follow Christ from within her own tradition.

In this state of her soul, God, too, seemed to be absent from her. Instead of consolation, she experienced, in her aloneness, a frightful helplessness. Finally, she heard a divine voice within, which dissipated her fear of the “demons.”

We will return to this story, after an aside. We need to recall the linguistic problem that her own words, “God” and the “Devil,” present to us as used within the common language of that time. These words do not necessarily signify today what they signified even a century ago, and we have, as well, the problem of translation from one language to another, over time, in signifying her actual experience to which she herself refers. It does seem to me a good interpretation (in consonance with FitzGerald 1988) to say that Teresa, in her bout with “demons,” seems to be experiencing what I’d call a “dynamic tension” between her inner voice and the dictates of outer authority, wherein, with time, she increasingly *integrated* both her docility and her determination in a holistic way that affirmed her own inner voice. This integration itself seems to me to be an outgrowth of her underlying *attitude*, or disposition, which was rooted both in love of neighbor and detachment from created things, with humility at the base. All these virtues were to her so interrelated as to be an integral whole.

In relation to my own focus on Teresa's integration of docility and determination, I find the contemporary Carmelite scholars Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D. particularly helpful. Kavanaugh, in his "Introduction" to her *Life*, describes Teresa, in his apt expression, as "a sign of contradiction" (Kavanaugh 1976: 28), a sign he interprets in historical context, which is always an indication of a well-founded interpretation. FitzGerald, who likewise has a keen sense of the time dimension, has developed this specific theme of contradiction in relation to contemporary feminism. She recounts how Teresa "*began* to experience a sporadic, though often fearless, mastery not only over human condemnation, but even over her own inner contradictions" (FitzGerald 1988: 72). I have marveled at how agilely FitzGerald couches Teresa's sixteenth century Carmelite spirituality in contemporary language, and I have learned from some of her insights, including her concept of "impasse" in relation to "dark night" (FitzGerald 1986).

I think we indeed need duly to weigh and to consider, as have these Carmelites, how such a "sign" of contradiction, Teresa herself—in relation to her own era—is a dynamic sign, a person who develops over time. I see her as a living sign of contradiction, a person who neither submissively conformed to social convention nor rebelled against it, but rather went *beyond* it—on her *way*. Therein is the paradox that both got her in trouble and got her out of trouble, in the social milieu of her own time. Her docility and her determination worked in tandem, as complementary, in overcoming impasses.

In response to her dismay over the banning of books, Teresa would eventually come to trust her own inner experience, when she recalled Christ telling her: "Don't be sad, for I shall give you a living book" (1665: 226.) Teresa focused on her King at the center of her own being. Yet, docilely, she relied as well on spiritual and learned men to guide her along her way. Often enough confused about her state of soul and about what to do along her way of perfection, only in time did she learn not to be fearful whether a given experience was from God or the devil. This attitude of detachment from experience, as such, must have been inwardly freeing from undo concern about how to interpret her experience. Taking the low ground, she relied on her attitude of love,

detachment and humility, rather than on trying too hard to discern the source of a given experience.

Umberto Eco, who mystifies readers in his reveling in mediaeval signs, might write a brilliant treatise, or at least another best-selling novel, on Teresa's highly cultivated self-reflexivity in discernment about her own experience of visions. He has shown that mystical contemplation is particularly problematic in its use of symbols (Eco 1982: 165-74). But the catch is that Teresa herself ultimately became so detached from her own mystical experience—that is for its own sake—that she was not troubled further by questions about whether the source of an experience be “God” or the “devil” or her own “delusion.” Her point is rather that the purpose of the pure “gift” of contemplation, beyond human effort, was to bear good fruits of love of God and neighbor—period. All else was beside the point, grateful as she was for the gift of contemplation. I think that's her teaching on this point in a nutshell.

Meanwhile, however, in her isolation as a suspect woman experiencing visions, Teresa's old fears returned. What if she had imagined everything through desire, through self-deception? What if she had indeed deceived herself? She frets that she has thereby also deceived devout people. She got on her own case, so to speak, in self-deprecation and it was even worse yet for her to hold a conversation with anyone, because in such an excruciating state of anxiety she wanted to snap at that person. Here again, we can relate to her as a human being who was not always levitating, so to speak.

Her bottom line is her focus on the *humanity* of Jesus, both the passion and resurrection. She stays grounded in her acceptance of her own humanity with all its limitations. Her humility, detachment, and love are the virtues that get her through all her great trials.

Finally, in 1560, when she was forty-five, a highly reputed Dominican, Pedro Ibáñez, weighed in on her behalf, contending that her visions were from God.

Reform

At age forty-seven Teresa attempted to found her first monastery, St. Joseph's, in Avila. She ran into virulent opposition from good Catholics, who saw no reason to found

yet another monastery. Determined to fulfill her mission, she nonetheless gracefully—docilely again—let go of her attempt, obeying an order from her Carmelite provincial to go live in Toledo for a while, where she was out of sight and out of mind. So, with a certain detachment to outcome—an indexical sign of her underlying attitude—she set to work, again under obedience, to write her *Life*.

When the time came to resume founding her monastery, Teresa was under no illusions that she would not face hostile opposition. Indeed, the people of Avila, outraged with her plan, ridiculed her. A confessor to Teresa's lay companion in reform, Doña Guiomar (who had been helping Teresa with her plan to found the monastery), refused on Christmas of 1560 to give this lay woman absolution unless she first promised to call quits to the project. But she went with Teresa to the Dominicans for help. The Dominican prior of Santo Thomás, Pedro Ibáñez, who himself thought the plan should be abandoned, did say that he'd consider it, but would render his opinion only after some days of prayer about the matter, on the condition that the two women were *determined* to do what he said.

What would be the attitude of Teresa, given that these women had done all they could to stand their ground within the Roman Catholic Church? Would not Teresa's docility, rooted, as always, in her underlying attitude of love, detachment and humility in following Christ, come into play in her determination to follow the Dominican's counsel? The two women did indeed truly consent, in the darkness of knowing nothing about outcome.

After more than a week, the prior changed his mind and embraced the project himself, in spite of the opposition of Avila. But the persecution of gossip and derision wore so heavily on Teresa and her companion in this project that at times Teresa herself wondered what to do. It seemed to her that her opponents were "partly right." And so, wearied, she left the matter to God: "His Majesty began to console and encourage me. He told me that in this I would see what the saints who had founded religious orders had suffered, that I would have to suffer much more persecution than I could imagine, and that we shouldn't let it bother us." (1565: 282). Teresa "marveled" at their new-found courage to withstand such opposition: "Indeed, among people of prayer and, in fact,

throughout the whole city there was hardly a person who was not against us; the project seemed to almost everyone to be a lot of nonsense” (*ibid.*).

Then lo! The Carmelite provincial, who had heretofore supported the project, got cold feet in face of all the opposition and withdrew his permission. She tells us that this experience was the greatest trial she suffered during her foundations. Indeed, she says that her moving forward in her plan, given the support of the Bishop of Avila against the will of her superior, was like a death to her. Yet her determination saw her through this impasse. It seems to me that such deep determination gave her the go-ahead in her course of action, as she was thus encouraged, in interdependence with a learned counselor. Her determination likewise encouraged her to resist the temptation to what she herself sometimes calls a “false humility” that could have caused her to back off such action.

At the same time, as remarkable as her determination was, in this case, in *disobeying* her Carmelite superior, when she was under the fire of accusation from him, instead of *defending* her disobedience, she actually won him over with her genuine humility and docility. Wow! Thus, as I see it, her combined docility and determination acted together in a creative, dynamic tension, which so often in her life resulted—surprising even to Teresa herself in her own detachment from outcome—in overcoming roadblocks that at any given moment had seemed impassible. Let’s again use our imagination in remembering that Teresa had to live her life without our own historical vantage point. She could hardly say, “I am a canonized saint and a Doctor of the Church, so please listen to me and permit me to proceed on the way of perfection!”

In her own lifetime, who could not resist the provocative question: “Who does she think she is”? Indeed, to stop her reform effort, a Papal Nuncio, Philip Sega, once commanded her to confinement (some had suggested a prison cell in her monastery, as later happened to John of the Cross, her close associate in the reform). This Papal Nuncio wished to hear no more of Teresa. To cite his words (Sega 1577, as quoted in Sackville-West 1953: 85.): “She is a disobedient contumacious woman who promulgates pernicious doctrine under the pretense of devotion; leaves her cloister against the orders of her superiors . . . and teaches theology as though she were a *doctor of the church* [emphasis mine], in contempt of St. Paul who commanded women not to teach.”

In our own time, Valentine Macca, O.C.D., considers this accusation a “great eulogy for Teresa.” I interpret this comment as being praise in the double sense of both her determination to follow the way of perfection and of her docility in so doing, since he drives home the point that she “did not take a step except under obedience and with the counsel of the most famous learned persons of her time.” (Macca 1882: xv).

Teresa herself, in pondering whether her opponents were right that she should not found monasteries, once wrote that the Lord said to her: “Tell them they shouldn’t follow just one part of Scripture but that they should look at other parts, and ask them if they can by chance tie my hands.” (1571: 15:393.)

As for the numerous nuns in her monastery, the Incarnation, the same question arose. She tells us (1565: 285.): “I was very much detested in all my monastery for wishing to found a more enclosed monastery. They said I was insulting them, that I could serve God just as well there, for there were others better than I, that I did not love the house, that I might better seek income for it than for some other place.”

Worse yet, for her, that young Jesuit confessor who, we recall, had directed her soul so well, wrote her “as though I had done something against his will” (*ibid.*). She had expected a comforting letter in the midst of this “multitude of persecutions.” Instead, he judged the scandal to be her fault, her project all a fantasy, and ordered her to make amends by ceasing to speak of it. What would be her quite human reaction to this trial and what would be her ultimate response, in her increasing integration of her genuine docility and determination? From what source now would she draw support? How could she trust anyone, herself included, amid the default of almost all human allies? In her words (1565: 286):

What he said grieved me more than everything else put together, since it seemed to me that if I had been the occasion or had been at fault for some offense against God, and that if these visions had been an illusion, all the prayer I had experienced was self-deception, and that I was being misled and going astray. This made me so extremely distressed I was thrown into complete confusion and severely afflicted. But the Lord, who never failed me . . . told me not to be anxious; that I had served God a great deal and had not offended him in that project.

The question remains: How might she put into play both docility and determination this time, in this seemingly no-win situation? She relied no longer on learned men, nor on herself—all by herself—but on God telling her within: “I should do what my confessor ordered me to do by being silent for the present, until it would come time to return to the task.” With this resolution she was left, in her words, “so consoled and happy that the persecutions hanging over me seemed to be all nothing” (*ibid.*).

In her time of trouble Teresa did have the support of that Dominican prior, Father Ibáñez, who, we recall, had initially opposed her project. He now advised her to move forward with it *secretly*. Founding a monastery in secret, as a woman of that time and place, mostly alone and without the means, would seem to any “sane” person like “Mission Impossible.” Teresa was indeed sane in saying: “My Lord, how is it You command things that seem impossible? For if I were at least free, even though I am a woman! But bound on so many sides, without money or the means to raise it or to obtain the brief [Papal permission from Rome] or anything, what can I do, Lord?” (1565: 290).

Little did she know she would be founding throughout Spain many more monasteries—amid constant controversy and physical hardships, including her own precarious health—for the rest of her life. Nor did she know she would, between travels, be writing spiritual classics, out of obedience, into the early hours of the morning. Those tomes you can read yourself. Here we can only glimpse a little of one episode, during the founding of her first monastery.

At long last, moments after founding St. Joseph’s in deep secrecy, Teresa experienced another terrible bout of self-doubt. Had she been deluded, after all? All sorts of questions arose in her mind, “all mixed together” with the intensity of a “death agony” (1565: 313). She says further (1565: 312):

All that the lord had commanded me, and the great deal of advice, and the prayers that for more than two years had gone on almost without cease, all was erased from my memory, as though it had never been. I only remembered my own decisions. And all the virtues and my faith, were then suspended within me, leaving me without my having the strength to activate any of them or defend myself against so many blows.

But this time the agony was short-lived, given a “little light” from God. She saw this self-doubt as the “devil” trying to frighten her with lies, and her anxiety instantly fled. Exhausted, she was about to rest, but at this very moment the townspeople were at her front door, in a fury about the new foundation, and her prioress at the Incarnation sent her an order to return to her monastery immediately. She obeyed, believing they would throw her into the prison cell at once. At least, she thought, there she could rest. But instead, sleepless, she placated not only her prioress but even that protesting provincial. She spoke calmly, congruent within herself, without defensiveness, receptive to their points of view. Now that’s docility! When asked at last why she did what she did, she simply stated her case and got a good hearing.

The town of Avila was still in an uproar, but this is another story for another time, as our focus here is on her inner attitude in relation to her own actions. We expect the good people of Avila to suspect Teresa of being a fraud, given that she was a woman of vision in that particular place and time. No wonder she sometimes doubted what she was doing. What is a wonder is how her prayer and contemplation vivified her action in such a way as to harmonize both her docility and her determination, acting in concert. She could have bowed out of action, out of “humility;” but she teaches us that genuine humility recognizes both one’s own limitations and one’s gifts from God. Did any founder of a religious Order ever call it quits out of “humility”? Or did they, rather, follow the way of perfection, sometimes limping step by step, sometimes falling, sometimes flying more effortlessly than a bird, never knowing what lay ahead along the way?

Way of Writing

Let’s next duly weigh and consider how her way of writing itself demonstrates her characteristic attitude of love, detachment and humility as the sister virtues that ground her way. Could it be, as a distinguished feminist literary scholar holds (Weber 1990), that Teresa resorted to rhetorical deceit to win her way with the Inquisition? Or could it be, rather simply, that she wrote with the same kind of integrity that we see evidenced in her concern for her state of soul?

However we pose the question, further questions arise in historical context. I think we need to situate Teresa's writings at once in *relation to* her own tradition and to her *challenge within it*: she never deliberately stepped outside of it, but rather worked dynamically in interdependence with it. Could it be that Teresa was quite tactful, and most of the time, fearlessly so? Indeed, she tells us, laughingly, that she herself would be in a bad way if she needed to fear the Inquisition. Could it be she felt free to write sometimes even impishly about learned men, given her spontaneous sense of humor? Could it be, then, that she wrote without deception what she herself really thought? Could it be that her consciousness was at once simply pre-feminist and yet beyond feminism as an interpretative framework? I tend to read her more as "what you see is what you get" (even though I, too, revel in deciphering hidden codes in historical texts), and I'll tell you why. And you can see what you think when you read her. Now let's situate these interrelated questions in context.

During her five years at San Jose, she revised and rewrote her *Life*, in obedience to her Dominican confessor, Domingo Bañez, as well as wrote, as always out of obedience, *The Way of Perfection*. Teresa wrote cautiously, I think, not as a rhetorical ploy but in the sense of realizing she could herself be mistaken; or at least she seemed to have no attachment to proving herself right. So she wrote—openly—of her own experience, and she herself approved of letting her nuns read her *Life*. But her confessor forbade that as being too dangerous for women. It would be safer, he said, to throw the manuscript into the fire. At the same time he granted permission for her to write a book instructing her nuns, as they had requested, about prayer and contemplation, given due censorship. Fortunately for us, we have both the original and the revised (censored) manuscripts of the resultant book, *The Way of Perfection*.

Given the fact that women in her day were disallowed access to Latin learning, there is no way she could have written like a Latin-age scholar. Even so, she did challenge learned men, but on the grounds of her own *experience* rather than on grounds of the authority of the tradition of men—as *men*. At the same time, we know she had steeped herself in the vernacular spiritual writings, including the classic *Imitation of Christ*, and in this tradition the highest degree of knowledge was the wisdom of the saints, female and male alike, not a degree in theology. Since she herself embodied this

tradition, she knew how to fence with learned men in her defense. As Gillian Ahlgren puts it: “Teresa managed to overcome many disadvantages imposed on women by teaching herself through voracious reading and entering the male world of spiritual writing through her careful use of language and her skillful handling of opponents.” (1996: 8.)

As I see it, in assimilating this Christian *contemplative* tradition, Teresa, by virtue of her own experience as a woman, implicitly challenged some philosophical presuppositions of the Classical-Judeo-Christian cultural synthesis, wherein the dominant discourse of learned men defined woman as, to say the least, less perfect than man. Yet this devaluation of woman appears as anomalous within the contemplative tradition (see Deely 2001). While Teresa never deliberately stepped outside of her tradition, she did seem to one censor to step out of line as a woman, by challenging these presuppositions that devalued women (1566: 51):

Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us. . . so that we may not do anything worthwhile for you in public or dare speak some truths that we lament over in secret, without YOUR failing to hear so just a petition? I do not believe, Lord, that this could be true of Your goodness and justice, for you are a just judge and not like those of the world. Since the world’s judges are the sons of Adam and all of them men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect. . . . I see that these are times in which it would be wrong to undervalue virtuous and strong souls, even though they are women.

So, characteristically, in her revision of *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa out of docility complied with the Dominican censor in deleting this passage. There are indeed passages in Teresa’s writings that confront the rational mode of discourse of learned men as being inapt to fathom divine mysteries and that confirm this passage in the *Imitation of Christ* (Thomas à Kempis 1441: 10): “What will it avail thee to be engaged in profound reasonings concerning the Trinity, if thou be void of humility, and art thereby displeasing to the Trinity?” Even in ordinary matters, she says, in her Prologue to *The Way of Perfection* (1566: 40) that her “love” for her sisters and her “experience in some monasteries” may help her “in speaking of ordinary things to be more successful than learned men.”

Yet she also insists, in a later work, *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1575: Ch. 1: 220) that women ought not to teach and “think they are right” without submitting their work to learned men. Indeed, she makes this point in this very work that one Dominican, Diego de Yanguas, thought highly improper for a woman to write, given the injunction of St. Paul that women be silent in the Church. According to Kavanaugh, in his “Introduction” to this work (Kavanaugh 1980: 211-12), even though Teresa had written this manuscript with the permission of a former confessor, this “frightened” Dominican ordered Teresa and her nuns to burn their copies. As docile as ever, she immediately threw her copy into the fire, but others copies exist to this day, including the one her nuns put away in safe-keeping for the future.

Teresa was always careful in reminding her readers that she could be wrong about something. Indeed, in her humility she had a keen sense of her own fallibility and thereby provides a model for *men* as well. It seems to me incompatible with the character of her docility, rooted in humility, to interpret such reminders of hers as mere literary ploys to disarm learned men. For example, in *The Way of Perfection*, she spoke directly to her nuns in instructing them to use their own judgment—based on their own experience—about this work: “If you find it all wrong, burn it.” (1566: 90.) She was addressing not the Inquisitors but her own nuns, and she spoke as their founder. I think that such comments are indicative of her detachment, her own her inner freedom to write the way she sees things, without undo deference to the critics. Others, in her view, don’t have to see things her way. Nor does she have to be right. Such was her sense of humility that let the ink flow as fast as she could write.

She complained, too, that she had no time to write. That is evident from her unordered texts. So, in my view, what is going on with Teresa’s humble way of writing runs far deeper than any deceptive literary device. We have already seen how Teresa was so highly self-reflexive that she questioned whether she was deceiving herself. She did not claim that she herself always knew the truth, so she consulted foremost theologians. It seems most in character that the genuine humility of her attitude itself empowered her to write with a certain abandon, a certain detachment from outcome, even if her work were to be burned.

We have seen that she evidences no anxiety about the censors who had confiscated her *Life*. She herself tells us she had no fear of the outcome, whatever it might be. Surely there are plenty of times she is conscious of her critics in writing as a woman. But the question arises: how did Teresa handle this *situation*? We can cite those self-conscious and contradictory texts both wherein Virginia Woolf might say (1929: 74) that Teresa was admitting she was “only a woman” or texts wherein she was protesting that she was “as good as a man.”

Yet the crux of our question is whether Teresa “altered” her “clear vision in deference to external authority,” or whether she took the “jump” and delivered what she had to say with “integrity,” thereby giving us the “conviction” that “this is the truth”—that she had not “altered her values in deference to the opinion of others” (*ibid.*). Evidently Teresa was quite mindful of the need to take such a jump in writing about her own experience, as she often pens lines that ask for divine help—right before she takes that jump.

I think she does write in Woolf’s *poetic* sense of the contemplative (Woolf 1929: 106) as signifying that the “the power to contemplate” is “the power to think for oneself.” Woolf (1929: 104) describes this contemplative state of mind thus:

The whole mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. The curtains must be close drawn. The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness. He must not look or question what is being done.”

Let’s bear in mind that Teresa was not without a tradition: she did have the support, as I have pointed out, of the Christian contemplative tradition (as distinguished from the intellectual tradition), which did include women mystics. Perhaps this is why she so effortlessly, so often, took indeed that “jump” of thinking of “things in themselves” (Woolf 1929: 111). At the same time, grounded in genuine humility rather than reacting out of fear of censors, she just as freely acknowledged, so often, that, being unlearned, she might be wrong.

Therefore, far from saying Teresa was always unmindful of her censors, I am saying rather that, as actual witnesses testify and as she herself tells us, and as her text evidences, she wrote at high speed, without cross-outs, amid many interruptions, often without time for rereading or logical order. So she embodied both a genuine docility and a determined integrity that could take the heat of criticism. She could take both the heat and the cold. In the graphic description of Walsh (1943: 258):

Imagine a woman of nearly fifty, still suffering from pains and faintness in the heart and a ghastly daily vomiting, sitting clad in coarse sackcloth on the bare floor of her little cell after all the nuns had retired to rest, resting her parchment on the bed or on that little window or bench of stone near the unglazed window, while the winter winds howled outside the canvas pane and the cruel cold . . . smote her to the bone—imagine her, utterly forgetful of herself, writing on and on, at full speed, page after page, often until two or three in the morning.

She was fifty-two when she finished *The Way of Perfection*. Stepping for a moment a decade ahead of that time, let's imagine, too, how she composed on that same floor in the same mode her masterpiece, *Interior Castle*, in the midst of great trials, between travels, during her foundations. She herself tells us, in the Prologue to this masterpiece (1577: 281), how she approached this daunting task, with the combined docility and determination she so well exemplifies when she is most experiencing her own human incapacity:

Not many things that I have been ordered to do under obedience have been as difficult for me as this present task of writing about prayer. First, it doesn't seem the Lord is giving me either the spirit or the desire to undertake the work. Second, I have been experiencing now for three months such great noise and weakness in my head that I've found it a hardship even to write concerning necessary business matters. But knowing that the strength given by obedience usually lessens the difficulty of things that seem impossible, I resolve to carry out the task willingly, even though my human nature seems greatly distressed.

Because of her sickness and other duties, she felt “a strong aversion” to this task (*ibid*); so all the more did she depend on God's mercy to “do the work” for her. We should note that she determined at least to take the step of picking up her pen to write at least those opening lines. The rest is history.

We see in these lines how well she integrated docility and determination in her action that overflowed from her prayer and contemplation. She wrote this masterpiece not to seek “self-realization” in the sense of outward accomplishment or recognition. She was no modern feminist in this sense. But when she finished writing this work, she tells us it has merit and she is glad she has written it—so are we. Her humility here was not of the sort of “false humility” she speaks against, the sort of humility that would have gotten in the way of her writing altogether.

Stepping back again in the chronology of our story, could we foresee that in 1571, at age fifty five, a few years after writing *The Way of Perfection*, she would leave her newly founded monastery, St. Joseph’s, to return to her former monastery of the Incarnation—where she had scandalized the nuns in leaving them in the first place! She returned out of obedience to Church authorities, this time to become Prioress, against not only her own will but the will of the nuns. The reason for her return was that the monastery was in troubled times, and it needed both material support and some reform.

Outraged, the nuns were ready for open revolt. But, once again, her humility worked wonders in winning over her opposition. She dealt deftly with concrete temporal needs for fund-raising for food, and she put the monastery in order within a few months, winning the good will of the nuns. How did she accomplish this amazing feat? Suffice it to say here that she began—as always—with her attitude. When she faced the assemblage for her opening talk, the seat of Prioress awaited her. Yet instead of sitting in that seat of power, she put the image of Our Lady of Clemency in the seat of the Prioress and sat at her feet. She spoke leniently, since this monastery was not one of her own reform. Yes, hers was a masterful move in quieting the nuns and getting a receptive hearing. But without her virtues of love, detachment and humility, without her docility in obedience and determination in purpose, how could she have transformed this monastery, both in its temporal and spiritual needs, and in so short a time?

In 1572 she brought to the Incarnation as confessor the future canonized saint and Doctor of the Church, John of the Cross, then only in his mid-twenties. He was her companion in reform of the Carmelite Order. She never considered age to be a criterion for spirituality, and under his spiritual direction she flourished. It seems characteristic of

her humility—and her own vitality—that she had such confidence in the wisdom of a youth in guiding her own soul in the living present of her tradition.

Later, when she was sixty, she met Jerome Gracián, who was only twenty-eight. So docile was she that she took a vow of obedience to him, as symbolizing Christ. Under this young man's command she wrote *Interior Castle*. Three men in their twenties had directed her soul in a transforming way, thereby increasing her confidence in her own inner experience of God. Her *docility* and her *determination* to follow direction in the way of perfection, dovetailed.

Finally, let's glimpse, if we can, the landscape of Teresa's activities during her last years of life. In 1577, at age sixty-one, in obedience again to Gracián, she went for years through formidable trials with her foundations and her travel during all seasons, frequently using the poorest means of travel (covered wagons), without air conditioning or heat. The wagons rode jarringly over rough and uneven paths, and got stuck in the mud. And at her given destination, who knew, without cell phone and fax, what obstacles awaited her in the business world she so well finessed? Yet she tells us these were the least of her trials. And between these travels, she obeyed Gracián in writing, without cross-outs, the great classic, *Interior Castle*.

We can now pose this question in the context of modern feminism: Did Teresa take on this writing project simply to project her liberty in the world of action, through freely chosen projects, and thereby achieve “transcendence,” or “self-realization,” in the sense wherein Simone de Beauvoir speaks of Teresa as a “striking exception” among women mystics (Beauvoir 1949: 674)? Or did Teresa approach this project out of love, detachment and humility when, as she tells us at the outset, she would much rather *not* be writing?

I suggest this question raises a host of further questions in regard to her increasingly integrated docility and determination, in both her inner and outer life over time. Can her consciousness hence be reduced, on the one hand, to that simply of an obedient woman performing her cultural role in a patriarchal society? Or can her consciousness be reduced simply to a modern feminist quest for self-realization in the world of action? Or can Teresa's consciousness shed light on developing “feminist” and “post-feminist” discourse? For that matter how do we interpret the language of the

Imitation of Christ, written by a monk, that Teresa had in her cell and from which she borrowed the very expression “way of perfection,” as title for her own book written for her nuns? Can men learn just as much from her experience about being human as she learned from men? How do the virtues of love, detachment, and humility, work together in the determination of *both* women and men mystics to imitate Christ in a given time, including our own? Can it be that Teresa offers us an implicit new paradigm, one beyond the linguistic boundaries of *both* patriarchal *and* feminist ways of modeling the world?

In 1582, at the age of sixty-seven, Teresa dies as, in her words, “a daughter of the Church.” Who could have then imagined that she would be declared a Doctor of the Church?

PART TWO

BOOK *WAY OF PERFECTION*

We are now going to focus on Teresa’s book *The Way of Perfection*, wherein she teaches, in quite an ordinary way, the foundation of her own way of perfection—wherein she presents, that is, all that she considers really to matter about the proper attitude toward prayer and contemplation. We can begin to see, too, the integral relation, in her view, between prayer, contemplation, and her activities in the cloister and on the roads of the world.

We recall she wrote this work right after founding her first monastery, amid such formidable opposition, and amid controversy that did not subside during her writing of this book. We have already seen her in action; now we can see how she herself sees the interrelation between prayer and contemplation and this action. We are looking at a person who tells us she herself sometimes wondered what she was doing. So this work is a learning experience for us in that it clues us in on her own attitude about her life in action. We can glimpse the relation between her inward disposition toward prayer and contemplation and her decisive outward actions, wherein she dared to shape her own culture rather than shy away from this new direction, unlike those who opposed her direction as unsafe simply on the ground that it was *innovative*.

In applying the Gospel with her own vision in her own time, Teresa indeed challenged authorities of that time. But we have seen that she did so tactfully and effectively, as she was docile in consultation of authority and determined in following the way of perfection. She swam as a wise swimmer—diagonally *across* a strong current rather than *against* the current. She is a good model for both sexes. But it's still not "safe" to read Teresa—we might take the plunge into the dangerous currents of our own day.

Foundation of Prayer

Teresa focuses on three virtues as foundational for prayer and contemplation: the love of neighbor, detachment from all created things, and true humility. These three virtues act in interrelation with one another.

We need to get a clear picture of what she means by "humility" in her approach to prayer. She speaks of both what we can do by our own efforts and of what we can't do but can receive only from God as a gift—not as a reward of our efforts. We recall her profound detachment to outcome even in the realm of social action, no less than in her writing projects. In her own voice, she is always reminding us of her own limitations. In my view we can take her at her word when she tells us that she experiences her limitations as very real, very real indeed. When she says, for example, something like "Perhaps I don't know what I'm talking about" on a given point, my reading of her text is not that she is parading humility as a literary ploy, nor that she is *trying* to be humble, but that she *is* humble. Indeed. Then she proceeds to speak from her *own experience* with the voice of confidence, of abandon, of detachment. That is, in my reading of her, she takes the lowly ground first and never tries to over-reach herself.

In qualifying what she signifies by the word "humility," she cautions against what she calls a "false humility." Her distinction here is crucial. Precisely because she has a profound sense of her own gifts and limitations, she dares trust her inner voice enough to carry her mission across Spain and into the courts of Spain, as an equal to the King. Nor did she live in fear and trembling of the Inquisition that had confiscated the book of her *Life*. What gave her such audacity, even though she happened to be a woman in that most

patriarchal society, seems to me to be both her embracing of true humility and her rejection of a false humility that would keep her from her mission.

“Womanly” as she was in her “femininity,” we have seen how she rejected a culturally-defined “femininity” that would render women inwardly weak. Given her rejection of a false humility, she would rather have women resemble the “manly” warrior strength of men. While men were, in the dominant discourse of that tradition, the measure, or frame of reference, of human perfection, Teresa accepted that way of modeling reality *only up to a point*. She fully accepted her embodiment as a woman; but, inasmuch as she was *not* a man, she flouted male-defined “gender” expectations that would render her—in the way of perfection—*less* perfect than a man.

Although some feminists might object that Teresa modeled her spirituality after monks, I would go so far as to say that the Christian contemplative tradition itself offers a model of human experience that is simply irreducible to gender. For this reason, in Teresa of Avila we can see an implicit new paradigm that moves beyond the binary sign-systems of both patriarchy and feminisms (in the postmodern plural sense of “feminism” as a now over-coded word) toward an integration of human virtues for men and women as alike human beings (or, in postmodern coinage, “semiotic animals”).

In the interrelation between love, detachment, and humility, Teresa singles out detachment as embracing the other virtues as well: “Detachment, if it is practiced with perfection, includes everything” (1566: Ch. 8: 71). Her reference point here is the Creator rather than the whole of creation. She teaches, accordingly, that it is best to love one’s neighbor as an expression of God’s love. So to her “detachment” is an indexical sign of *love* rather than of indifference. Detachment in Teresa’s sense is as far removed from indifference as could be!

Given that her inner self is Christ-centered, in her detachment from creatures simply as creatures, she looks to the Lord as her nurturing source of wisdom, as her friend, relative, and spouse. That is, she doesn’t seek the source of her inner identity in relations with other creatures, as, for example, in the relations of wife or mother or prioress. We saw, for instance, how she conceded the Prioress seat of authority to a portrait of Mary, rather than lord it over the nuns of the Incarnation who protested her reform. She exercised her inner authority in a detached way—out of love—rather than

identify herself with the cultural definitions of exterior authority. Underlying such detachment and love, in interrelation, is her genuine humility.

According to Teresa, the virtue of “true humility” and the virtue of “detachment” are thus “two inseparable sisters” (1566: Ch. 10: 76). These are not the relatives she advises her nuns to “withdraw from” but are rather “sovereign virtues” as exemplified in Christ. Hence there is no ground for fear of outcome: “Such a person has no fear of anyone,” but fears only to displease God. As aids to escape “the land of Egypt” (however we might apply that journey to our own experience), these virtues, according to Teresa, will sustain us through the journey as the “manna.” She tells her nuns they will find the manna “sweet.” Yet she considers this practice of such virtues to be *work*: “This is the work that must be done” (1566: 77).

Now I come to some texts that sound particularly jarring within the context of contemporary culture: “. . . Let us try hard to go against our will in everything” (1566: Ch. 12: 82). What is she talking about? Suffice it to say here that, within in the context of *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa focuses on the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus, in his own experience, wanted to *live*, not to die, but nonetheless prayed “*thy* will be done.” Teresa’s way of perfection, it seems to me, is to practice the *virtues* that cultivate such detachment to outcome in this life. While she says being in a monastery helps, she points out that “the perfect soul can be detached and humble anywhere” We recall that she relied on the *Imitation of Christ* as a key work within her contemplative tradition. We know for sure that Teresa, in her practice of these virtues, followed the practice of the *Imitation* in her own emphasis on the vanity of any esteem for honor or wealth. She counsels the reader to forget that, or “You will never come to enjoy the true fruit of prayer.” The same holds true of insults to our honor—a big offense in the Golden Age of Spain that she belittles: “Pay no attention to false injuries—whether we have been offended” (1566: Ch. 12: 83).

In another text that is jarring to our contemporary ears, Teresa claims that the truly humble person “desires to be held in little esteem, persecuted and condemned without” (1566: Ch. 15: 91). Indeed, that person rejoices in “being blamed” (1566: Ch. 15: 93). Well, again, Teresa, even though she was, herself, a *woman*, is Christ-centered, in imitation of Christ, as were John of the Cross and Therese of Lisieux. These canonized saints are now all Doctors of the Church, and, in this respect, they all speak the same

language. They had their discontinuities, but on this point I can see only *continuities*, and I leave it to contemporary Carmelites to deepen our understanding of these texts.

While Teresa counsels the humility of keeping silent when accused (unless out of *charity* speaking is better in a given case), she did not hold herself up as a model, but rather insists that she still didn't have these virtues. Again, I take her at her word. I find it reassuring that she took in stride, out of humility, what she considered to be her own faults, no matter what language we use in interpreting her text.

Thus, since Teresa took as her own model the *humanity of Jesus*, she herself quite spectacularly models an *embodied* human being, indeed a woman in her particular case, who fully accepted her own *humanity*, without undue regard for "gender."

Meditation and Contemplation

Teresa denotes by the word "meditation" the use of one's own efforts to ponder one's own life and the life of Christ, and keeping one's look fixed on Christ inwardly, even if just a look, that's all. By the word "meditation" she refers not to any specific form of prayer. Her point is rather to distinguish "meditation," in any form, from "contemplation." In all her writings this is an essential distinction: Meditation is the "basis" for acquiring all the virtues; "But," she clarifies, "contemplation is something else" (1566 Ch. 16: 94).

So Teresa cautions her nuns that it is a "mistake" to confuse "meditation" with mystical "contemplation." On the one hand, one can practice meditation even though one does not possess the virtues, given that meditation is necessary for acquiring all the virtues along the way of perfection. Meditation is something one can do through one's *own efforts*. Contemplation, on the other hand, is a *gift*, pure and simple, that comes from God, the "King" at the center of the soul, without any effort of one's own. Since this distinction is to her the crux of the matter, she asks her nuns to pay close attention to what she says about the *way* that leads to contemplation (1556 Ch. 16: 95):

This king doesn't give himself except to those who give themselves entirely to him. Therefore, daughters, if you desire that I tell you about the way that leads to contemplation, you will have to bear with me if I enlarge a little on some other matters even though they may not seem to you so important; for in my opinion they are. And if you don't want to hear about them or put them into practice, stay with your mental prayer for your whole life. . . for I assure you and all persons who aim after true contemplation (though I could be mistaken since I am judging by myself for whom it took twenty years) that you will not thereby reach it.

Characteristically, at this point in her detachment and humility as being just one person who has experienced true contemplation, Teresa tells her nuns that they themselves will know whether she says something, unknowingly, that is untrue. She then makes her immediate point that she “wants to say” that God sometimes grants a favor to those who are in a “bad state,” so as “to draw them away by this means out of the hands of the devil” (*ibid.*; see also note 5: 465). Because she holds that, for good purpose, God can give favors to anyone God wishes, she doesn't get hung up on human merit when it comes to such divine favors, while at the same time she homes in on what one can do in making the effort to obtain the great virtues. That's all—that's her point about the proper attitude toward what we *can* do and what we *cannot* do, and she lets it go at that.

Given that Teresa focuses not on any one *form* of prayer but on the proper *attitude* toward prayer, her point is, thus, simply to let contemplation happen or not happen. She is, as always in attitude, detached to outcome, but receptive to the possibility of contemplation and welcoming of its effect. She stresses that contemplation is not to be sought for its own sake, but that prayer is to be sought for its own sake, as prayer is for the purpose of acquiring the virtues. The rest is up to God. Hence her conclusion is that one person can be more perfect in the practice of mental prayer, without experiencing contemplation, than another who does experience contemplation.

Teresa therefore focuses on what “mental prayer” is, as necessary in obtaining the virtues. While she was detached from mystical experience for its own sake, she did have what she herself calls a “determined determination” to practice *prayer* as the gateway to the Kingdom of Heaven within her. In her docility ultimately to God, she practiced self-surrender to God's will, as it resonated with her.

Now let's take a closer look at her “determined determination,” based not on a “false humility” but on a true humility. As she says: “What makes humility grow is to

have a holy daring” (1566: Ch. 16: 98). At the same time, one’s path can be a lowly one: “Perhaps the one who thinks she is walking along a very lowly path is in fact higher in the eyes of the Lord” (1566 Ch. 16: 99). She points out that although all her nuns practice prayer, not all can be contemplatives. Indeed, she claims that to be “impossible,” since to be a contemplative is a gift from God. Moreover, a person might gain much more merit because she has to work harder when “the Lord leads her as one who is strong.” Sometimes, too, the Lord comes very late and gives “all at once” what He gives to others only over much time (*ibid*).

Thus, although contemplation is not a matter of one’s own choosing, Teresa teaches that one should dispose oneself toward it in one’s *attitude* toward prayer.

The Way: “A Rough and Uneven Path”

We have already seen some examples of Teresa’s “holy daring.” She seemed to take in stride that tribulation is to be expected along the way of perfection, but that doesn’t mean that tribulation is ever a joy ride in itself. No kidding. I don’t see how we can get around this stumbling block, given her personal experience in life, by speaking of the journey as if it were only spiritual “joy.” She says that “the more God loves a person, the more God leads them along “a rough and uneven path,” and sometimes they think they are “lost and must return to begin again.” At the same time God gives them “wine” to endure the journey with courage, unafraid and, well, “determined to suffer” (1566: Ch. 18: 102).

I don’t often see this point made as explicitly in commentary on her as I do in her own writing, as well by the example of her own actions. It seems to me we cannot understand Teresa’s attitude in action without realizing that her experience of inner freedom was something other than the modern connotation of the word “freedom” as autonomous and willful, choosing always what one wants to do, willfully choosing even one’s own values. Her attitude, rather, *presupposed* a freedom of choice wherein she consented to the will of God, as she understood it, and went from there, no matter what, with determination, without worrying about the outcome, suffering included: “So I see

few contemplatives who are not courageous and determined to suffer, for the first thing the Lord does, if they are weak, is to give them courage and make them unafraid of trials.” Those in the active life, Teresa points out, painstakingly, sometimes think that all the contemplatives do is receive “favours.” “Well,” she replies (I imagine a bit peevishly), “I say that perhaps these active persons couldn’t endure one day of the kind the contemplative endures” (*ibid*).

The beginning of the journey, Teresa says, is the most important part. She reassures her nuns that even if they don’t have determination to go all the way, they can keep trying to take one step: “The step will contain in itself so much power” (1556: Ch. 20: 115). I’m reminded of her later namesake, St. Therese of Lisieux, who did have determination to go all the way up the spiritual ladder, but tells us all she could do was take a baby step, over and over, which couldn’t reach the first rung. But she tried and tried, until finally God carried her up, out of merciful love. But let’s not forget that she was “manly” (in that male-defined way of speaking) in her determination, all along that rough and uneven path, the way of perfection. Such requisite determination is surely Teresa of Avila’s point to her nuns (1566: Ch. 21: 117-18): “They must have a great and resolute determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don’t have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses.”

Let’s not forget, either, that even as she writes these words about determination in prayer, she dares to oppose common opinion. She dared to say to her nuns, under the nose of censors suspicious of women contemplatives: “You will hear ‘there are dangers,’ that ‘so and so went astray by such means; this other one was deceived’; ‘it’s harmful to virtue’; ‘it’s not for women, for they will be susceptible to illusions’” (1556: Ch. 21: 118)? She dared to argue that such fear of prayer among so many people in the world, to the extent of running away from the practice of prayer in order to avoid some supposed evil of prayer, is a faulty “reasoning,” “a wicked contrivance” that seems to her to come from the “devil.”

Worse yet, she dared to comment, however impishly, on the Inquisitors who banned books on prayer. I don’t see how any literary critic can call this crack a deceitful

rhetorical device: “Hold fast, daughters, for they cannot take away from you the Our Father and the Hail Mary” (1556: Ch.: 21: 120). A censor wrote in the margin: “It seems here that she is reprimanding the Inquisitors who prohibited books on prayer” (*ibid.*: note 8: 468). She got away with a lot of provocative lines, but in her revision she crossed out that line. Given her docility, why not? She had made her point. But the point I wish to make is that her docility and her detachment from the outcome of her writing coincided with her determination to say what she had to say, no more and no less.

Whereas learned men considered vocal prayer safer for women than mental prayer, Teresa, in her own reasoning, went between the horns of their dilemma by demonstrating such a distinction to be a false option. She demonstrated how vocal prayer itself, to be said properly, must include mental prayer. And if, furthermore, God should give the gift of contemplation to a woman—or to a learned man—well, what’s so wrong with that? That’s up to God.

While distinguishing among vocal prayer, mental prayer, and contemplation, Teresa thus blurs the boundaries of linguistic categories for vocal and mental prayer in telling us what can happen in actual experience, beyond words: “To keep you from thinking that little is gained through a perfect recitation of vocal prayer, I tell you that it is possible that, while you are reciting the Our Father or some other vocal prayer, the Lord may raise you to perfect contemplation.” Now I could cite here a long passage of her description of “perfect contemplation” (1566: Ch. 25: 131), but my task is rather to clarify her underlying *attitude* toward all forms of prayer.

Since contemplation, in her words, “cannot be merited or gained through all the trials one can suffer on earth,” and since it is not necessary for perfection, she focuses in *The Way of Perfection* on the proper disposition for prayer, wherein—unlike in contemplation—we can do something ourselves (1566: Ch. 25: 132): “To recite the Our Father or Hail Mary is vocal prayer. But behold what poor music you produce when you do this without mental prayer. Even the words will be poorly pronounced at times. In these two kinds of prayer, we can do something. In the contemplation I mentioned, we can do nothing.”

In speaking from her own direct experience of prayer, Teresa points out that she had experienced her own difficulties in praying. She suffered for many years in not being

able to quiet the mind in anything. But she counsels her nuns not to fret: “Let us not regret the time that is so well spent. Who’s making us hurry acquiring this habit?” (1566: Ch. 26: 133. The point is not to think conceptually, through the intellect, but simply just to look at Christ, because “in the measure you desire Him you will find him” (1566: Ch. 26: 134).

Whatever be one’s own difficulties, Teresa well accepted the human condition, in her common sense way, given the humanity of Jesus as her model. But she had no use for a certain mentality disguised as humility (1566: Ch. 28: 141):

Leave aside any of that faintheartedness some people have and think is humility. You see, humility doesn’t consist in refusing a favor the King offers you but in accepting such a favor and understanding how bountifully it comes to you and being delighted with it. What a nice kind of humility! While He is telling me to ask him for something I don’t do so and remain poor—have nothing to do with this kind of humility. But speak to him as a father or brother or lord or spouse, sometimes in one way at other times another. The intellect is recollected much more quickly with this kind of prayer.

In thus distinguishing a true humility from a false humility and in thereby founding her attitude toward prayer on love, detachment and humility in interrelation with one another, Teresa deepened understanding of her tradition amid much controversy in her day. She needed these virtues to endure the controversy. As a result she helped develop her own tradition.

CONCLUSION

Teresa herself summarizes the *whole point* of her book, *The Way of Perfection*, in these words: “The whole point is that we should give ourselves to Him with complete determination If God desires to raise you to higher things, he will discover in you the readiness” (1566: Ch. 29: 145).

We have taken a close look at her own attitude toward prayer, in any form, verbal included, an attitude she teaches in *The Way of Perfection*. She concludes thus: “Because everything I have advised you about in this book is directed toward the complete gift of

ourselves to the creator, the surrender of our wills to His, and detachment from creatures—and you understand how important this is—I’m not going to say any more about the matter” (1566: Ch. 32: 163).

We have also seen how freely she speaks not only to her own nuns but to the learned men who will read her book—including her censors. She stood her ground, however controversial, with the inner authority expressive of both her docility and her determination to speak from her own experience, as well as to teach.

Now we may ask what sort of model Teresa herself provides us today, in this way of love, detachment, and humility. What can we, both men and women, learn from her? Do we stand back in awe of how she had “her act together”? Do we dismiss her because of her medieval way with words? Do we dare take one step forward along the way? Do we fall flat on our face? Do we keep going forward, as best we can? Do we call quits? Do we begin again?

Teresa herself so well emulates, I think, what it is to be human. We can further ponder what we have here only glimpsed: We have glimpsed something of what all she had to go through in the public scrutiny of her soul, and in the founding of her first of so many controversial convents; we have glimpsed how she drew upon both her docility and her determination with increasing confidence in her own inner experience; we have glimpsed how her way of writing embodied her attitude; we have glimpsed how her prayer and contemplation overflowed into her action. The underlying question I have raised is simply this: What was the nature of her attitude that gave her the strength to endure all that duress we might be tempted today to call—in a reductionist way—simply “stress”?

I have asked myself these sorts of questions for this presentation and have left the grander questions about her extraordinary experiences to you as her reader to ponder. I’ve focused instead on her docility and her determination, as grounded in her attitude of what she calls “love, detachment and humility” (rightly understood). It seems to me that is, so to speak, “where the action is.”

And do you know what I like best about how she, in her humanity, exemplifies the way of perfection? She stumbled over a lot of rocks on that rough and uneven path. She didn’t levitate over them. But she also took so many of those steep ledges in stride,

with inner guidance. She tells us exactly how she herself walked that way, and I think her report card quite encouraging (1566: Ch. 38: 187):

Sometimes I think I am very detached; and as a matter of fact when put to the test, I am. At another time I will find myself so attached, and perhaps to things the day before I would have made fun of, that I almost don't know myself. At other times I think I have great courage and that I wouldn't turn from anything of service to God; and when put to the test, I do have this courage for some things. Another day will come in which I won't find the courage in me to kill even an ant for God if in doing so I'd meet with any opposition. In like manner it seems to me that I don't care at all about things or gossip said of me; and when I'm put to the test this is at times true—indeed I am pleased about what they say. Then there come days in which one word alone distresses me, and I would want to leave the world because it seems everything is a bother to me. And I am not alone in this. I have noticed it in many persons better than I, and know that it happens.

The heart of her teaching in *The Way of Perfection*, it seems to me, is the realization that only true “humility” can do something. Such humility is not something acquired “by the intellect,” but “by a clear perception that comprehends in a moment of truth . . . what a trifle we are and how very great God is.” So she leaves us with this “one counsel” regarding the way of perfection: “that you not think that through your own strength or efforts you can arrive, for reaching this stage is beyond our power” (1566: Ch. 33: 165).

Because her way of perfection is the Gospel model of the love, detachment and humility of Jesus, Teresa of Jesus offers an example of human experience that is simply irreducible to sex or gender. She is a model for both men and women in the docile as well as determined way she followed her tradition. In so doing, she deepened understanding of that tradition to the point of herself becoming a Doctor of the Church, given that learned men learned so much from her. Yet during her own time, such an outcome—especially given she was a woman—would have more than astonished many, including that Papal Nuncio who once ridiculed her as a rebellious nun who taught “as though” she were a Doctor of the Church.

In contemporary perspective, our culturally inherited concept of woman as “inferior” and “subordinate,” which Teresa had found debilitating, is, it seems, in its death throes. We see that Teresa was at once “womanly” as a *woman* and “manly” as a

human being. But enough of such a semiotic anomaly—so deeply rooted historically—in visiting upon a woman a male-defined reference for all human heroism!

We recall she was the patron saint of yet another Carmelite Doctor of the Church, Therese of Lisieux, whose own sisters laughed when a Pope called “manly” their little sister, whose long ringlets they used to comb so gently lest she cry. But Therese learned from Teresa of Avila and speaks for herself (Therese of Lisieux 1896: 1016-17): “Saint Teresa, who said to her daughters: ‘I want you to be women in nothing, but that in everything you may equal strong men,’ would not have wanted to acknowledge me as her child if the Lord had not clothed me in His divine strength, if He had not himself armed me for war.”

Thus, I have hoped to show how all men and women can learn from Teresa of Avila’s agile integration, over time, both of a genuine docility and a “determined” determination—grounded in her attitude that unifies love, detachment and humility—in following the way of perfection. In a modern feminist context—so confining a context that Teresa breaks the mold—Teresa was both a splendid failure and a splendid success. In our postmodern era, we stand a good chance of learning more from her, given especially her particular time, place, and “gender” (a troublesome word today—see, for example, Judith Butler 1999).

When, with our contemporary eyes, we put together the teachings of two companions in reform, who are now both Doctors of the Church—Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross—we get a three-dimensional perspective that points in our own time toward an implicit new paradigm beyond *both* patriarchy *and* feminism. As I suggest elsewhere (Deely 2001: 16; see also Williams 1981):

The contemplative dimension of human experience might contribute to developing a model of human experience beyond the presuppositions of both “patriarchy” and “feminism,” beyond the historic impasse. Contemplative experience is to theories of patriarchy and feminism what lived experience is to philosophy, that is, analogously, what the laboratory is to science. Historical evidence abounds that within patriarchal culture the semiosis of contemplation knows no boundaries of gender, for either sex.

Teresa of Avila's life and works opens up new possibilities in transforming culture, given a historical awareness of the rich resources rooted in Christian mysticism.

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A CHRONOLOGY

St. Teresa of Avila (of Jesus)

Her Way of Perfection

Presentation by Brooke Williams Deely

A chronology

I've adapted this chronology, as a handy reference for my presentation, from a longer chronology in *Teresa of Avila, The Way of Prayer: Selected Spiritual Writings*, introduced and edited by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D (New City Press, 2003) I have here added her *age*, sometimes approximate within a given year. [For reference to *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* (three volumes), see additional handout]

1515 Teresa is born in Avila.

1522 [Age 7] She attempts to run away with her brother Rodrigo to be martyred in the land of the Moors.

1526. [Age 13] Her mother dies.

1531. [Age 16] She goes to convent school of Augustinians.

1535 [Age 20] She enters Carmelite monastery of Incarnation.

1538 [Age 23] She becomes seriously ill—leaves monastery. Uncle. Reads *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* by Francisco de Osuna. Prayer of Recollection. Returns to Avila. Illness continues. Paralytic.

1542 [Age 27] She feels cured through intercession of St. Joseph. Her health always gave her problems, headaches included.

1543 [Age 28] Her father dies.

1544 [Age 29] She returns to practice of prayer with encouragement of a Dominican who was her father's spiritual director.

- 1554 [Age 39-40] She has a conversion during Lent before image of wounded Christ. Her mystical life begins. She turns to Jesuit fathers in Avila. She has visions of rapture and of herself in hell. As a result of vision of hell she desires to found small community of nuns to go back to primitive rule of Carmel, like early hermits of Mount Carmel.
- 1561 [Age 47] She receives orders from Provincial to go to Toledo to help a wealthy widow. [Dona Luisa de la Cerda]
- 1562 [Age 48] She receives permission, with support of St. Peter of Alcantara and the bishop of Avila, to found her new monastery, dedicated to St. Joseph.
- 1565 [Age 51] She concludes the final version of the book of her Life.
- 1566 [Age 52] She probably wrote her two versions of *The Way of Perfection*
- 1567 [Age 53] She is urged by General of the Carmelites to found more monasteries Such as St. Joseph's, including similar monasteries for friars. Same year she meets and encourages St. John of the Cross, age 25, to join her reform movement for friars. [Foundations start from now until she dies: 17 foundations for nuns and two for friars.]
- 1571 [Age 55] She becomes the prioress at the Incarnation (prioress for three years).
- 1572 [Age 56] She arranges for St. John of the Cross to become confessor and chaplain at the Incarnation. She receives the grace of spiritual marriage.
- 1575 [Age 60] She meets Father Gracián, when he is 28. He is discalced friar with authority over discalced friars and nuns.
- 1577 [Age 61] She begins, under orders from Gracián, writing the *Interior Castle*. The nuncio {Ormaneto} favorable to discalced dies . On Dec. 3 John of the Cross unjustly imprisoned. On Dec. 24 falls downstairs and breaks her arm.
- 1582 [Age 67] She dies (Oct. 4 became Oct. 15th because of Gregorian reform of Calendar).
- 1614 On 24 April she is beatified by Paul V.
- 1622 On 12 March she is canonized by Gregory XV.
- 1970 27 September she is declared a Doctor of the Church by Paul VI.

SELECTED IMAGES
AND CALLIGRAPHIC QUOTES



Monastery of
The Incarnation, Avila.

Calligraphy from Noteworthy:
Teresa of Avila, Carmel of
Saint Joseph, Terre Haute,
Indiana, 1981.

The Way of Perfection

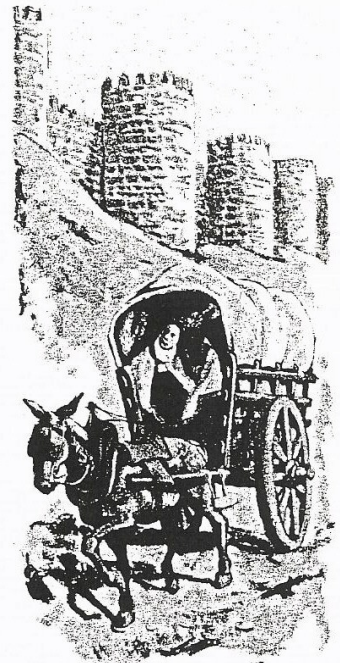
Do not think, my friends and daughters, that I shall burden you with many things; please God, we should do what our holy fathers established and observed... three things, which are from our own constitutions...

love for one another...
detachment from all
created things,
true humility,
which, even though I speak of
it last, is the main practice
and embraces all the others.

Illustrations on the Song of Songs

...many remain at the foot of the mount who could ascend to the top... I repeat and ask that you always have courageous thoughts. As a result of them the Lord will give you grace for courageous deeds.

Quotations from The Collected Works
of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol. 1, 1976,
Vol 2, 1980, tr. by Kieran Kavanaugh,
OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD.
ICS Publications



On the road to Medina
1567.

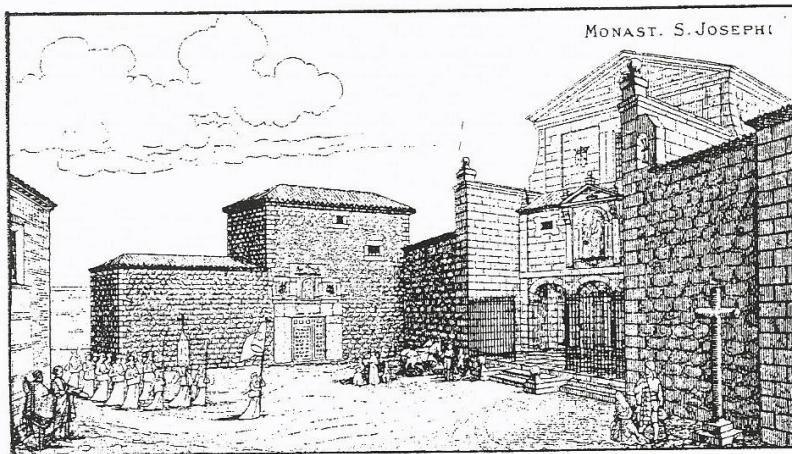
The Book of Her Life

...Some books on prayer
tell us where one must
seek God.

WITHIN
ONESELF,
VERY
CLEARLY,
IS
THE BEST
PLACE
TO LOOK...

The Interior Castle

THIS
IS THE REASON
FOR PRAYER,
MY DAUGHTERS,
THE PURPOSE
OF THIS
SPIRITUAL
MARRIAGE:
THE BIRTH ALWAYS
OF GOOD WORKS,
GOOD WORKS.



Teresa's first foundation
1562