

Pope Benedict on St. Teresa

On 2nd February 2011, during his general audience in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI began a series of catecheses on the Doctors of the Church, beginning with “one of the highest examples of Christian spirituality of all time”, the Carmelite Saint Teresa of Jesus (of Avila).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the course of the catecheses that I dedicated to the Fathers of the Church, to great theologians, and to women of the Middle Ages, I was also able to reflect on some men and women saints who have been proclaimed ‘Doctors of the Church’ for their eminent doctrine. Today I would like to initiate a brief series of meetings to complete this presentation of the Doctors of the Church, and I begin with a saint who represents one of the highest examples of Christian spirituality of all times: St. Teresa of Avila (of Jesus).

Born in Avila, Spain, in 1515 with the name Teresa de Ahumada, in her autobiography she herself mentions some particulars of her childhood. She was born from “virtuous and God-fearing parents” in a numerous family, with nine brothers and three sisters. While still a child, less than 9 years old, she read the lives of some martyrs that inspired her with the desire for martyrdom, so much so that she improvised a brief flight from home to die a martyr and go to heaven (cf. *Life* 1, 4): “I want to see God,” said the little girl to her parents. Some years later, Teresa would speak of her childhood readings and affirmed that she discovered the truth, which she summarized in two fundamental principles: on one hand, “the fact that all that belongs to this world passes,” on the other, that only God is “for ever, ever, ever”, a theme that returns in the very famous poem “Let nothing disturb you, nothing affright you; all things are passing. God is unchanging; patience obtains everything; the one who possesses God lacks nothing. God alone suffices!” Losing her mother at 12 years old, she asked the Virgin Most Holy to be her mother (cf. *Life* 1, 7).

If in her adolescence the reading of profane books led her to the distractions of a worldly life, her experience as a pupil of Augustinian nuns of St. Mary of Graces of Avila and the frequentation of spiritual books, especially classics of Franciscan spirituality, taught her recollection and prayer. At the age of 20, she entered the Carmelite convent of the Incarnation, still in Avila; in religious life she assumed the name Teresa of Jesus. Three years later, she became seriously ill, so much so that she was in a coma for four days, seemingly dead (cf. *Life* 5, 9). In the struggle against her illnesses the saint also saw the fight against weaknesses and resistance to God’s call: “I wanted to live,” she wrote, “because I understood well that I was not living, but I was fighting with a shadow of death, and I had no one to give me life, nor could I give it to myself, and he who could give it to me was right not to help me, given that so many times he had turned me toward him and I abandoned him” (*Life* 8, 2).

In 1543 she lost the closeness of relatives: her father died and all her brothers emigrated one after the other to America. In Lent of 1554, at 39 years of age, Teresa reached the culmination of her struggle against her weaknesses. The fortuitous discovery of the statue of “a very wounded Christ” marked her life profoundly (cf. *Life* 9). The saint, who in that period found profound consonance with the St. Augustine of the *Confessions*, describes in this way the decisive day of her mystical experience: “It happened ... that all of a sudden I had a sense of the presence of God, which in no way could I doubt was within me or that I was all absorbed in him” (*Life* 10, 1).

In a parallel manner to the maturation of her interiority, the saint began to develop concretely the ideal of the reform of the Carmelite Order. In 1562 she founded in Avila, with the support of the bishop of the city, Don Alvaro de Mendoza, the first reformed Carmel, and shortly after she also received the approval of the Prior General of the Order, Giovanni Battista Rossi. In subsequent years she continued the foundation of new Carmels, 17 in total. Her meeting with St. John of the Cross was essential; with him in 1568 she constituted the first convent of Discalced Carmelites in Duruelo, near Avila. In 1580 she obtained from Rome the establishment of an autonomous province for her reformed Carmelites, the starting point of the Religious Order of Discalced Carmelites.

Teresa finished her earthly life precisely while she was committed in the activity of foundation. In 1582, in fact, after having constituted the Carmel of Burgos and while she was on her way back to Avila, she died on the night of 15th October in Alba de Tormes, repeating humbly two expressions: “In the end, I die a daughter of the Church” and “It is time now, my Spouse, that we see you.” An existence consumed within Spain but often for the whole Church.

Beatified by Pope Paul V in 1614 and canonized in 1622 by Gregory XV, she was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by the Servant of God Paul VI in 1970.

Teresa of Jesus did not have an academic formation, but she always treasured the teachings of theologians, men of letters and spiritual teachers. As a writer, she always held to what she had personally lived or seen in the experience of others (cf. Prologue to *The Way of Perfection*), namely, from experience. Teresa was able to enjoy relationships of friendship with many saints, in particular with St. John of the Cross. At the same time, she was nourished by reading the Fathers of the Church, St. Jerome, St. Gregory the Great, St. Augustine.

Among her major works, the most notable is her autobiography, titled *Book of Life*, which she called *Book of the Mercies of the Lord*. Composed in the Carmel of Avila in 1565, it reviews her biographical and spiritual history, written, as Teresa herself affirms, to submit her soul to the discernment of St. John of Avila, “Teacher of the spiritual.” The purpose was to point out the presence and the action of the merciful God in her life. Because of this, the work often returns to the dialogue of prayer with the Lord. It is fascinating reading because the saint not only recounts, but shows that she relives the profound experience of her relationship with God. In 1566, Teresa wrote *The Way of Perfection*, which she called *Admonitions and Counsels that Teresa of Jesus Gives to her Nuns*. The recipients were the 12 novices of the Carmel of St. Joseph of Avila. Teresa proposed to them an intense program of contemplative life at the service of the Church, the basis of which were the evangelical virtues and prayer. Among the most precious passages is the commentary on the *Our Father*, model of prayer.

The most famous mystical work of St. Teresa is *The Interior Castle*, written in 1577, in her full maturity. It is a re-reading of her own spiritual journey and, at the same time, a codification of the possible development of Christian life toward its fullness, holiness, under the action of the Holy Spirit. Teresa refers to the structure of a castle with seven rooms, as an image of man’s interiority, introducing, at the same time, the symbol of the silkworm that is reborn as a butterfly, to express the passage from the natural to the supernatural. The saint is inspired by sacred Scriptures, in particular the *Canticle of Canticles*, for the final symbol of “two Spouses,” which allows us to describe, in the seventh room, the culmination of the Christian life in its four aspects: Trinitarian, Christological, anthropological and ecclesial.

Teresa dedicated the *Book of Foundations*, written between 1573 and 1582, to her activity as founder of reformed Carmels, in which she speaks of the life of the nascent religious group. As in the autobiography, the account is intended to point out above all God’s action in the work of the foundation of new convents.

It is not easy to summarize in a few words the profound and complex Teresian spirituality. I would like to mention some essential points.

In the first place, St. Teresa proposes the evangelical virtues as the basis of all Christian and human life, in particular, detachment from goods or evangelical poverty (and this concerns all of us); love for one another as the essential element of community and social life; humility as love of the truth; determination as fruit of Christian audacity; theological hope, which she describes as thirst for living water; without forgetting the human virtues: affability, veracity, modesty, courtesy, joy, culture.

In the second place, St. Teresa proposes a profound harmony with the great biblical personalities and intense listening to the Word of God. She felt in consonance above all with the bride of the *Canticle of Canticles* and with the Apostle Paul, as well as with the Christ of the passion and with the Eucharistic Jesus.

The saint stressed how essential prayer is; to pray, she said, “means to frequent with friendship, because we frequent face to face the One whom we know loves us” (cf. *Life* 8, 5). St. Teresa’s idea coincides with the definition that St. Thomas Aquinas gives of theological charity, as “amicitia quaedam hominis ad Deum,” a type of friendship of humanity with God, who first offered his friendship to humanity; the initiative comes from God (cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 23, 1). Prayer is life and it develops gradually at the same pace with the growth of the Christian life. It begins with vocal prayer, passes to interiorization through meditation and recollection, until it attains union of love with Christ and with the Most Holy Trinity. Obviously, it is not a development in which going up to the higher steps means leaving behind the preceding type of prayer, but is rather a gradual deepening of the relationship with God, which envelops our whole life. More than a pedagogy of prayer, St. Teresa’s is a true “mystagogy”. She teaches the reader of her works to pray while praying herself with him/her; frequently, in fact, she interrupts the account or exposition to burst out in a prayer.

Another topic dear to the saint is the centrality of the humanity of Christ. In fact, for Teresa, the Christian life is a personal relationship with Jesus, which culminates in union with him through grace, love and imitation. Hence the importance that she attributes to meditation on the passion and the Eucharist, as presence of Christ, in the Church, for the life of every believer and as heart of the liturgy. St. Teresa lived an unconditional love for the Church. She manifested an intense “sensus Ecclesiae” in face of incidents of division and conflict in the Church of her time. She reformed the Carmelite Order with the intention of serving and defending better the “Holy Roman Catholic Church,” and she was prepared to give her life for it (cf. *Life* 33, 5).

A final essential aspect of Teresian doctrine that I would like to underscore is perfection, as the aspiration of the whole Christian life and the final end of it. The saint had a very clear idea of “fullness” in Christ, relived by the Christian. At the end of the course of *The Interior Castle*, in the last “stanza” Teresa describes this fullness, realized in the indwelling of the Trinity, in union with Christ through the mystery of his humanity.

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