

A Portrait of Teresa of Avila from Her Letters

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Although Teresa repeatedly complained that letter writing was her “biggest burden”¹ the treasury of letters she left behind – some 468 survive – reveal facets of her personality that we could not otherwise know, even from the candid details of her life she gives in the *Life* and in *The Foundations*. Teresa’s letter writing is free from the concerns of censorship that overshadowed her books, though letters were nothing like as private in her day as they are now and at times she uses coded names in case a letter should fall into the wrong hands or asks the recipient to burn the letter after reading (a request obviously not always carried out!) Her surviving letters come predominately from the last two decades of her life when she was constantly moving around to make foundations and when she also wrote her major works of mystical theology. They reveal the hard realities of establishing new convents, of dealing with business matters, and most of all the relationships with the individuals to whom she writes.

Too often the images we have of canonized saints are detached from everyday existence and in being presented with role models for inspiration we are often disheartened by the apparent gap between their lives and ours. The vitality and honesty of Teresa’s correspondence is a refreshing antidote to this. While we are aware that she was indeed a very great saint and made an immensely important contribution to the development of understanding the journey to union with God, she also loved her friends and family, worried about her own terrible health and was concerned for the well-being of others. She became frustrated, was distressed when she was misunderstood, could deliver severe reprimands, be very annoyed with individuals and use scathing language about her adversaries. She offered considered advice, worked tirelessly for others (often completing her correspondence to them late into the night) and revealed a breadth of experience, she would also tease others, she could gently mock their failings and be delighted by small gifts (like the coconut from M. Maria de San Jose that she had apparently never seen before and for which she exclaimed “May he be blessed who created it, for it certainly is something to behold”² as she was with her generous benefactions. She could be diplomatic and knew how to court those whose help she required at the same time she admits that she could also be easily flattered – ‘I could be bribed with a sardine’³ she writes.

It was not inevitable that Teresa would be canonized. To be declared a saint, she had to fit to the highly politicized criteria of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church. She was in fact the only Spanish female saint to be canonized during the Catholic Reformation and Baroque period and this only after serious opposition was resolved. The final official *vita* differs significantly from the original testimonies collected for the canonization process. Her books were said to be composed while she was in a state of ecstasy and her ill-health was a result of extraordinary experiences in prayer where she was constantly transformed by God in such a way that it consumed her body and her life.⁴ Her virtues were to be seen as exceptional, not as an ordinary woman – as one Jesuit witness testified ‘she was

¹ Teresa of Avila: The Collected Letters, (2 vols.), trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, (Washington: ICS, 2001 & 2007), letter 39:1. The Letters of Saint Teresa of Jesus, (2 vols.), trans. Allison Peers, (London: Bums, Oates, & Washburne Ltd, 1951), letter 33, p. 97.

² Kavanaugh, 202:6; Peers 185, p. 470.

³ Kavanaugh, 264; Peers 248, p. 602.

⁴ Gillian Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, (London: Cornwell University Press), 1996, p. 162.

more manly than many a big man.⁵ Diego de Yepes, confessor to Philip II, witnessed to the high quality of her virtue ‘even though it appears under the weakness of a woman.’⁶ The letters offer us a healthy contrast to the ideal of a ‘constructed saint’⁷ and allow us to glimpse a warm spontaneous woman, truly holy and truly human.

Many – some estimate many thousands – of her letters have been lost. There are no letters from people we can be sure she must have written to, particularly earlier in her life.

Some, not realizing her full significance, may have made no attempt to save her letters. There is not a single extant letter to John of the Cross, for example, partially because for some time he was actually with her in Avila and also we know his papers were confiscated when he was arrested, but the loss of some, as Peers relates, ‘is attributable to an act of supreme abnegation on the part of the recipient,’⁸ who tore up a little bag of Teresa’s letters that he carried with him, fearing he was becoming too attached to them.

From the letters that remain we can identify several areas that particularly bring Teresa to life as a very real person with easily identifiable feelings these come in her judgments and personal comments, her concern for her health and health matters in general, her struggle to balance the essential poverty of the Reform with the paradoxical necessity of dealing with money matters as the foundations grew, her interest and involvement with her own family, her anxiety over the survival of her books and her affection for certain individuals which reveal her at her most understandably human.

Judgments and Personal Comments

Dealing with serious problems in the new foundations

Teresa rejoiced in a letter to her brother Lorenzo in 1570⁹ that the six houses of women and two of men she had founded were progressing so well in the way of perfection. However, as the foundations developed there were inevitable difficulties and areas of mismanagement. Teresa’s judgment, determination, strength and ability to act are shown clearly in 1577 when there were serious difficulties at Malagon. Teresa puts some of the responsibility for this on the nuns’ confessor. She admits that the nuns ‘lack of intelligence is clearly evident’ but also she ‘cannot fail to blame’ him.¹⁰ She deals very firmly and decisively with the situation and dismisses the incompetent chaplain, but with considerable delicacy – ‘although it will be distressing to me that you are leaving, I believe you are more obliged to preserve your own tranquility than to do me a favor.’¹¹ The situation continued to fester and Teresa lost patience with the nuns who, having complained about one prioress (now ill and recuperating in Toledo), were not satisfied with her substitute either. ‘I want them to stop complaining,’ she writes, ‘this woman is not killing them, nor is she neglecting the house, nor does she fail to provide for their needs, for she is very charitable.’ Teresa adds, ‘and how many things they found insufferable in the one they now adore! They practice the perfection of obedience mixed with a great deal of self love.’¹² Harsh words indeed. Later she says that the nuns at Malagon would complain ‘even if Saint Clare were there.’¹³ More than two years later she reconsidered some of her judgments in this case thinking it had been wrong to entrust so much to such a young prioress, ‘since they do not have experience,’ she says, ‘with good intentions they cause

⁵ Ahlgren, p. 158.

⁶ Ahlgren, p. 159.

⁷ This is Pierre Deloos’s phrase, quote in Ahlgren, p. 147.

⁸ Peers, “Introduction,” p. 18.

⁹ Kavanaugh 24:2; Peers 19, p.71.

¹⁰ Kavanaugh 201:1 & 2; Peers 186, p. 472.

¹¹ Kavanaugh102:5; Peers 186, p. 473.

¹² Kavanaugh 240:4 & 5; Peers 225, p. 552.

¹³ Kavanaugh 245:4; Peers 230, p. 563.

havoc.¹⁴ She also somewhat retracted her judgment of the chaplain who she says ‘seems to me to be a great servant of God, and I believe it is he who is less at fault.’¹⁵ When the slanderous events of Malagnon had completely died down, Teresa wrote to the whole community. She deals humorously and affectionately with Christmas messages from some of the nuns, ‘to Sister Jeronima, who signed her name as ‘dungheap,’ I say, ‘please God this humility will amount to more than words; and to Sister Gabriela, that I received the St. Paul, which was very beautiful in being so small resembled her and please me very much.’¹⁶ Then on a much more serious note she mentions the two major culprits by name saying ‘so my daughters, you are all daughters and sisters of the Blessed Virgin and should try to love one another and take care to behave as though nothing happened.’¹⁷ She ends with a touching reference to Sister Juana de la Cruz, the mother of the prime troublemaker: ‘I imagine she is continually gaining merit and since she has taken the title ‘of the Cross’ she has received a good share of it.’¹⁸

She showed similar concern when resolving difficulties at Seville where one of her closest friends, M. Maria de San Jose had actually been deposed as prioress, ordering that no enmity should be shown to the two sisters at the heart of the trouble, again she feels sorrow for the mother of one of these nuns who was also a nun there. She warns the community not to ‘say a word to her mother, for I feel very sorry for her.’ Then she chides them for not being sensitive to the mother’s situation. How is it that no one says anything to me about how she bore all these things and what she said – I’ve wanted to know this and whether she knew about her daughter’s schemes?’¹⁹ Teresa is able to be concerned for all aspects of the trouble and to feel for both the injured and the guilty.

The pain of being misunderstood

Writing to Gracian, then Provincial, and her great friend and confessor, Teresa is distressed by some of the misunderstandings that arose through the troubles at Malagon, particularly with P. Antonio de Jesus, an early member of the discalced friars, who had too easily believed the ‘unruly nuns and had complained about Teresa. She regrets his lack of good judgment – although I love him much – very much so – and he is a holy man, I cannot fail to observe that God has not given him a talent for discernment.’²⁰

There were many occasions when Teresa felt the pain of being misjudged like this. At one point she asks her friend, Don Teutonio de Braganza, later to be archbishop of Evoram, to speak favourably for her when he could about criticism of her travels. She says, ‘Certainly, travelling is one of the things that wearies me in life and one of life’s greatest trials, and above all when I am judged by others to be doing something bad.’²¹ This was one of the lists of faults that the Nuncio, Sega, had held against her in his caustic condemnation – that she was a gadabout ‘running around outside the cloister against the orders of the Council of Trent.’²² On occasion she suffered misunderstandings with the Jesuits as when their Provincial accused her of encouraging a Jesuit friend of hers to transfer to the discalced friars. She was outraged by the suggestion and denied all knowledge of it, but was deeply hurt by their implications about her involvement. She pours her heart out to Gracian asking for his help in the matter which could have serious consequences. In her frustration, she suggests that

¹⁴ Kavanaugh 316: 4; Peers 295, p. 691.

¹⁵ Kavanaugh 3 16:3; Peers 295, p. 691.

¹⁶ Kavanaugh 326:2; Peers 304, p. 712.

¹⁷ Kavanaugh 326:5; Peers 304,p. 713.

¹⁸ Kavanaugh 326:6; Peers 304, p.713.

¹⁹ Kavanaugh 294:10; Peers 274, p. 649.

²⁰ Kavanaugh 245:2; Peers 230, p. 562.

²¹ Kavanaugh 79:7; Peers70, p. 170.

²² Felipe Sega, a partisan of the friars of the Ancient Observance and no friend of Teresa’s Reform, described Teresa as ‘a troublesome, restless, disobedient and stubborn female who under the guise of devotion invented bad doctrines, running around outside the cloister against the orders of the Tridentine council and prelates.

she ‘might be the obstacle causing everyone to suffer’ and adds, ‘I have at times said that it would perhaps be best for them to throw me into the sea, as was done with Jonah, that the storm might pass.’²³

Relationships with Prioresses

We discover a great deal about Teresa’s nature from her writings to prioresses, especially M. Maria de San Jose, Prioress of Seville, and M. Maria Bautista, Prioress at Valladolid. She is disappointed when she cannot visit them on her travels, as she says in a letter to M. Maria Bautista. Explaining that she does not want to make a very short visit as this becomes very tiring, she writes, ‘One does nothing but visit and one even gives up sleep so as to continue talking – and idle words are never lacking – for great is the desire to be with you. But many things I would like to speak to you about cannot be discussed in a letter.’²⁴

At one time she shared the same confessor as M. Maria Bautista – the Dominican Domingo Banez. Teresa felt very much at ease with Banez and lightly teased him – for my love for Fray Domingo is such that whatever seems good to him seems good to me and what he wants I want as well. I don’t know where such enchantment will end.²⁵ She is however slightly jealous of M. Maria Bautista’s friendship with him ending a letter to her with ‘I don’t know how I bear the close friendship you have with my padre (Banez). See how you have fooled me. (Peers ends with ‘and all this time I had been thinking you were such a servant of God’).²⁶ In a letter to M. Maria Bautista some two years later, however, Teresa is very disgruntled with Banez indeed. She accuses him of ingratitude for not writing to her and warns Maria Bautista that she should know that ‘the care this friend (Banez) takes of you will last until he finds someone else (feminine in the Spanish) who pleases him. Be sure of this, no matter how much you take for granted’²⁷ – a very acrimonious comment.

In a letter to M. Maria de San Jose, Teresa expresses her deep affection for her. In thanking her for the design of a little stove she says ‘your love for me is obvious in the way you please me in everything. I really believe this, but I tell you that you owe me even more love (Peers translates this as ‘the love on my side is even greater’), for I am astonished at how much I love you. Don’t think that anyone surpasses you in this respect, for not everyone is to my liking as you are.’²⁸ Teresa relates openly to someone she loves and trusts and who understands her so well. Towards the end of her life Teresa confided to the same nun that she would be her choice as ‘foundress’ after her death. ‘You say everything so well that if my opinion were followed they would elect you foundress after my death. And even if I were living I would be eagerly in favour, for you know much more than I do – and are better – that is the truth. I have the advantage over you through having a little experience.’²⁹ This is a very tired, rather abandoned Teresa who is looking for a strong figure to continue her work. It is interesting that she mentions that M. Maria de San Jose knows more than she does because in a much earlier letter she picks her up for writing the date in words – ‘Please God you did so to avoid humbling yourself by putting down numbers’ – an odd, sarcastic comment. (Maria de San Jose often used Arabic numerals though Teresa always used Roman.) Perhaps Teresa senses some affection because she criticizes, in the following paragraph, Maria de San Jose’s use of Latin in a letter to a priest. She says ‘God deliver all of my daughters from presuming to be Latinists. May you never try doing so again or permit any other nuns to try. I desire more that you dare to appear simple, which is

²³ Kavanaugh 230:10; Peers 214, p. 529.

²⁴ Kavanaugh 73:1; Peers 64, p. 157.

²⁵ Kavanaugh 61:1 Peers 54, p. 138.

²⁶ Kavanaugh 63:6; Peers 53, p. 137.

²⁷ Kavanaugh 143:4; Peers 126, p. 326.

²⁸ Kavanaugh 248:3 Peers 233, p. 573.

²⁹ Kavanaugh 435; Peers 410, p. 923.

characteristic of saints, rather than so eloquent'³⁰ making it abundantly clear here that she does not see parading education and learning as a suitable activity for women pursuing a path to perfection. She herself did not know Latin and in her writing she often refers to her own lack of learning, but this was usually a form of rhetoric to avoid the dangers of any accusation of being a woman teaching. Perhaps in this letter she is just impatient with what she perceives to be pretentiousness.

Teresa had at times written severe letters to both these prioresses despite her great respect for them. Maria de San Jose had responded with gentle humility to Teresa's criticisms and Teresa is sorry. 'Pardon me,' she writes, 'for with those I truly love I am unbearable, for I wouldn't want them to err in anything. The same happened with Madre Brianda to whom I wrote terrible letters, but they did little good.'³¹ Towards the end of the letter Teresa gives her one of her backhanded compliments 'however wretched you are, I would like to have more like you.'³²

At another time Teresa complained to Gracian that M. Maria de San Jose 'had lost much credit' in her eyes because she wanted to move the nuns for health reasons to a different house from the one Teresa had chosen. 'The prioress is shrewder than her state requires,' she says, 'so I fear she is deceiving us; and, as I told her, she has never been open with me, she has a lot of the Andalusian in her.'³³ Here Teresa is very angry with motives she doubts, though in fact the move did eventually happen. Teresa's use of the term "Andalusian" in a derogatory sense occurs several times in her letters; in this letter the phrase had been tactfully crossed out by a later hand. Teresa makes a similar cryptic comment to M. Maria Bautista when she hoped that what she has heard about alms received was true. She says, 'But you are a fox, and I fear you are using some ruse as you do in regard to your health in order to please me.'³⁴

M. Maria Bautista, to whom she was also close and actually related, was often criticized for her excessive care with her own house without considering the general good. Following a dispute about a novice, Teresa tells her bluntly, 'that you think you know everything is disheartening, and that you say you are humble, all you care about is your own house and you do not consider what is essential for all of them. This would create a state of unrest in which everything could come tumbling down in ruins. No prioress has ever taken such a stance with me, nor anyone who is not a prioress. I tell you by acting in such a way you will lose my friendship.'³⁵ In the same letter she takes M. Maria Bautista to task for criticizing Gracian's actions which she will not tolerate. She finds fault with him only because she has not spoken with him much and does not know him. 'I tell you he is a saint and not at all impetuous.'³⁶ Maria Bautista has apparently also stepped into very dangerous ground by suggesting that since Teresa has Gracian as her confessor she has abandoned Domingo Banez. The text here is difficult to follow but in her reply Teresa tries to explain that the two men are just very different. There is obviously some deep rooted tension between the two women and Teresa will not let it pass without justifying herself.³⁷

Some of Teresa's attitudes to women and her loyalty to benefactors

Sometimes Teresa makes comment on her understanding of women for the benefit of her male correspondents. In the case of a school for girls to be set up beside the convent in Medina she has to point out to the Jesuits who are used only to teaching boys that 'there is much difference between teaching young women together and teaching young men as there is between black and white.'³⁸ A

³⁰ Kavanaugh 151:1 & 2; Peers 137, p. 347-8.

³¹ Kavanaugh 319:1 & 2; Peers 302, p. 704.

³² Kavanaugh 319:13 Peers 302, p. 707.

³³ Kavanaugh 3 12:6; Peers 290, p. 684.

³⁴ Kavanaugh 175:2; Peers 162, p. 404.

³⁵ Kavanaugh 88:7; Peers 78, p. 193.

³⁶ Kavanaugh 88:9; Peers 274, p. 194.

³⁷ Kavanaugh 88:9; Peers 274, p. 194.

³⁸ Kavanaugh 53:2 Peers 39, p. 109.

large number of girls, in her experience, will also make too much noise (as opposed to boys?). She feels nervous and insecure about making this decision but what is amazing is that she is considering the scheme at all, even though the prioress' involvement was to be minimal. The project was never actually achieved. Perhaps she felt some loyalty to benefactors' wishes as in other instances where she remained intensely – even irrationally – loyal to those who had been kind to her. Such had been the case of the priest Garcialvarez who had caused endless trouble by believing the idle chatter of nuns and allowing rumours to circulate. Despite his lack of sound judgment and unwise acts, Teresa would not hear of his dismissal when Maria de San Jose seemed to be proposing it (not unsurprisingly because as a result of his influence she had been both deposed and excommunicated.) Teresa, remembering his initial kindness, said 'I cannot bear our seeming to be ungrateful to someone who has helped us. For I remember that when others wanted to deceive us about a house they were selling, he alerted us to their deceit. I can never forget the good he did us in that instance and the trouble he saved us from, and he always seemed to me to be a servant of God and well-intentioned.'³⁹ This displayed Teresa's remarkable generosity to one who had, even if sometimes well-intentioned, caused a great deal of suffering. Discussing the possible transfer of nuns Teresa tells Gracian that she is never in favour of this except for making a new foundation and she looks forward to a time when everything can settle down. She advised Gracian to be careful 'and believe that I understand women's nature better than you do... and believe me when I tell you the truth – and if I die don't forget it – that for people who are enclosed, the devil doesn't want anything except to foster the opinion that something like a transfer is possible.'⁴⁰ She says that even when she has permission to transfer a nun for health reasons there have still been disadvantages. She is obviously convinced that stability is most important but quite why she feels women's nature cannot cope with transfer is hard to deduce.

Teresa points out the success of her nuns to Gracian at a time when false accusations were an increasing problem. She understands 'the value before God of a soul that for God's sake alone seeks to help others' – the vocation of the Reform's prayer life which she feels her monasteries are accomplishing – to pray to God to help those who struggle for his honour and service.' To this she adds 'since we women count for nothing' (Peers translates this as 'we women are of no use for anything else').⁴¹ This sounds rather damning, but it may of course be Teresa's irony in considering the status of women. She certainly doesn't believe they are worthless when she concludes, 'When I consider the perfection of these nuns, I am not surprised by what they obtain from God.' Towards the end of the same letter she appears to have a very different view of women in a discussion about using poorer, coarser materials for habits if the nuns do not accept the change, she suggests punishing a few of them to solve the problem because women on the whole are timid⁴² – certainly not referring to herself here!

(to be continued)

³⁹ Kavanaugh 264; Peers 248, p. 602.

⁴⁰ Kavanaugh 92:2; Peers 81, p.201.

⁴¹ Kavanaugh 162:5; Peers 147, p. 370.

⁴² Kavanaugh 162:9; Peers 147, p. 371.