

# TERESA OF AVILA

There must have been many days when Teresa of Avila, one of history's great authorities on contemplative prayer, sat—or knelt—without regard for time in the ecstatic silence of a convent cell overlooking a tranquil sixteenth-century Spanish garden.

But read her autobiography and other accounts of her life, and you begin to wonder where she ever found any time to pray or study, where she ever found the space in which to be wrapped in the silence of which she so often speaks, to be caught up in an overwhelming sense of God's love and presence.

So pressured was she that comparisons with the demands made on today's women come quickly and easily to mind.

In a period of about twenty years, beginning when she was in her mid-forties, she wrote five spiritual classics including her *Autobiography*, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*.

In that same period she carried out a difficult and travel-intensive reform of the long-established religious life of the Carmelite order. It required extraordinary spiritual courage and leadership. But it also required her to become immersed not only in the most basic physical details of daily Carmelite life, but also in the exasperating ecclesiastical and civil politics of over a dozen convents for women and two for men. More often than not she carried out this program in the face

of strenuous opposition—including lawsuits—from both local and upper-level religious authorities—and even from the “neighbors” who were often hostile to the establishment of new religious houses in their area. Add to all this the fact that she was never in good health. As an adult she continued to suffer ill-effects of youthful illnesses. In her early life she had spent days in a coma and years paralyzed.

Teresa attempted to establish a monastic life suitable to those who, like herself, sought to follow “a more perfect way” than was being demanded and practiced in the convent life of her time. We might wonder what sustained her through all the difficulties she faced.

Her own answer is prayer—prayer when it seems impossible, prayer when others do everything to dissuade you and shake your confidence in it, prayer when you are not sure whether you are being led by God or by a devil. For everyone who told Teresa that she was being blessed by God, there was someone with equal authority telling her that her experiences were the work of Satan. But she never stopped praying. Her spiritual teaching was in fact based on two wide-ranging and provocative metaphors for the life of prayer.

Her first metaphor draws upon the image of the various sources of water needed to irrigate a garden. Teresa compares the early stages of prayer—our first efforts to shake off sin and begin to meditate—with the great effort required to carry a bucket of water on our shoulders from a distant well. As our prayer-life matures, we

enter a phase which she calls the prayer of quiet, a gifted stage of prayer in which we experience God as the active one while we are more passive. We no longer struggle to carry the water; it is as if a pump were carrying it to us. In the next stage, a period of dryness, we discover that we need not draw water from afar, but that there has been a hidden river present all along from which we can water our garden. And in our final stage of growth, we experience God pouring grace upon us, uniting us with God's own divine life. It is as if bountiful rain is falling on us.

Teresa's second metaphor views our soul as an interior castle, in the very center of which dwells the Holy Trinity. Growth in prayer enables us to enter into an ever deeper intimacy with God—signified by a progressive journey through the apartments (or mansions) of the castle, from outermost sections to the luminous center. When we have attained union with God, to the fullest degree possible to us in this life, we have arrived at the center of ourselves. We enjoy integrity as human beings and as children of God. Each of the mansions represents a different stage in the evolution of our prayer life. As we enter each new mansion, we experience the effect of this new stage in every other phase of our life.

Both metaphors pick us up at the beginning of our search for union with God. Neither stops short of the most perfect union possible in this life, union with divinity.

But however sophisticated and rarefied her spiritual experience and writing, however lofty and apparently exotic her expectations, her spiritual life, example, and teaching were rooted in some very basic truths. These apply to us, however primitive and stumbling our spiritual efforts, however limited our vision.

No matter what happens, do not stop praying.

Never forget that no two of us ever travel exactly the same spiritual path.

And, as she was wont to remind us, do not expect an easy journey. Reflecting on the difficult path that Jesus walked, and on her own trials, she is reported to have said to God: "If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few!"

This small book is neither a theological or historical compendium, nor a guide to Teresa's spiritual theories. It is a series of meditations drawn from her various works written at difficult times in her life. Each one seeks to substantiate the spiritual wisdom of her advice to let nothing disturb us—especially in our attempts to pray and to find our own special paths. We will focus not so much on the great metaphors of her major works, but on the underlying truths that illumine the journey to the center of the soul—hers and ours.