

**The Compassionate Mother of Carmel:**  
Teresa of Avila and the Carmelite Model for  
Twenty-First-Century Seekers

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TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SEEKERS

RYAN SALAMONY

*The Compassionate Mother of Carmel*

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Christ has no body now but yours.  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which he  
looks compassion on this world.  
Yours are the feet with which  
he walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands through  
which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Teresa of Avila

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## **Introduction**

### **Teresa of Avila**

Saint Teresa of Avila is widely known for her mystical experiences of God and the reformation of the Order of Carmelites that resulted in the creation of the Order of the Discalced<sup>1</sup> Carmelites of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, but it is her other vocation as a writer and spiritual teacher that led Paul VI to recognize the importance of her writings on Christian prayer and name her the first woman Doctor of the Church. This title recognizes the profound effect that the saint has had on Christian doctrine and the deep holiness of their life. Teresa's teachings on prayer and Christian living, as well as her mystical experiences, readily earned her this crown. Her compassion for the Church, shone by her deep devotion to reform Carmel in building up new foundations and teaching the Church to pray more intentionally, her reverence of the Holy Family, and her devotion to ascetic living all flowed from her rich knowledge of her own personal faith that was so intimately linked with God. Teresa's legacy is seen not only in the books she wrote, which have retained their relevance throughout the intervening five centuries, but in the Christian witness of Carmelites and Carmelite-inspired people across the world, including John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, Alphonsus Liguori, and countless others.

Teresa's renown as a Christian mystic has continually increased her popularity since her death. Her profound visions of Christ were balanced by her visions of Hell and the many other raptures she experienced. At seemingly regular intervals, God gifted Teresa with these mystical ecstasies to assure her that she was meeting God's expectations, but

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<sup>1</sup> shoeless, wearing sandals as a sign of their poverty and humility



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also to express God's love and admiration for her. In one of Teresa's most vividly explained mystical favors, the transverberation of her heart, she explains the transformative value of being filled with God's love:

I saw close to me toward my left side an angel in bodily form...the angel was not large but small; he was very beautiful, and his face was so aflame that he seemed to be one of those very sublime angels that appear to be all afire...I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me that this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God...The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it...the loving exchange that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg [God] in [God's] goodness to give a taste of this love to anyone who thinks I am lying.<sup>2</sup>

In her usual humility, Teresa wishes that all those who doubt her would experience such an esoteric demonstration of God's love.

In the shadow of the Protestant Reformation and shifting understandings of Christian doctrine, Teresa's reform of Carmel helped to stabilize contemplative communities by introducing new interpretations of personal faith and relationships with God. She lived through the early surge of the Spanish Inquisition and, for a period of time, was under the scrutiny of the Grand Inquisitor, who challenged the veracity of her experiences and later censored her writings. Teresa was heavily shaped by the political and social climate of Avila, too, as well as the Christian monarchy of Ferdinand and Isabella. Just over two decades before her birth, the monarchs ordered the expulsion of Jews from their territories. Many Jews had already converted to Christianity to escape persecution, including Teresa's grandfather. Teresa's family purchased their way into Avilese nobility and secured social standing to remain in Spain, but Teresa always grappled with her Jewish lineage, despite her seemingly happy childhood. She entered the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila in 1535 at age twenty and remained a Carmelite nun until her death in 1582.

During her lifetime, she would experience many transitions. At Incarnation, she entered the Order as a wealthy noblewoman and slowly shed her ties to the luxury that

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<sup>2</sup> Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila: The Book of Her Life*. Eds. Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987) 252

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surrounded her, replacing it with an intimate, mystical relationship with Christ that produced an interior richness that surpassed the physical comforts of her apartment in the convent. Not very long after becoming a nun, Teresa endured a long-lasting illness, one that tormented her entire life; she would never know the comfort of a healthy life but was instead rewarded with a spiritual health that outweighed the bodily aches she suffered. In her mid-forties, Teresa was facing another transformation and answered God's call to found a new convent for nuns, where they could live simple vows and focus their lives on contemplative prayer and loving God. She would spend the remainder of her life writing and founding new convents for her reformed order.

Most of the information that is known about Teresa's life comes from her semi-autobiographical book, her *Life*, including first-hand accounts of her various mystical experiences. The Spanish Inquisition turned their focus to her writings, investigating *Life* to determine if her alleged experiences of God were divine or demonic. Teresa took heed and was diligently aware of her growing influence. However, her nuns were eager to learn more about her experiences and how they, too, could know God in such an intimate way through prayer and contemplation. She responded with *The Way of Perfection*, sensitively written as if she were having a conversation with her nuns about how to approach forging a relationship with Christ. Later, she would again approach the topic in *The Interior Castle*, formulating a third pattern to spiritual union with God. Teresa sought nothing more than to make God accessible for those who wanted to respond to the still small voice that called after them, yearning for a relationship.

In her writings, Teresa's true character becomes quite transparent. She is gentle, eloquent, and kind. She values camaraderie and friendship; one can imagine her sitting amongst her nuns during their recreation time, leading them in songs with her tambourine, drum, or castanets. She focuses on nurturing her nuns (and those who will read her books beyond her death) and their personal spiritual journeys. She offers a shoulder for them to lean on and treats them as equals. Her compassion radiates through every line as she shepherds the reader toward a closeness with God. But, more importantly, she was a renegade. She recognized the deficits of the spiritual formation she experienced, scrutinized the mitigated Rule of Life that the Monastery of the Incarnation followed, and eagerly provided pastoral care to priests and nuns alike. She was an empowered Renaissance woman who has heavily influenced the Church for

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centuries after her death. Francis Gross goes as far to say that she is Spain's most influential female historical figure<sup>3</sup>. So, just what is it about Teresa that elevates her to be "Spain's Most Beloved Saint"?<sup>4</sup>

Many scholars have previously explored Teresa's writings to understand the saint better. Numerous biographies have been written about Teresa, including those of Edgar Allison Peers (who is also responsible for a series of English-language translations of Teresa's manuscripts), Carole Slade, Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, and the 104<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Other scholars have explored Teresa's role in Catholic Christianity, her spiritual influence, and the contexts that shaped her mystical life. In *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, Allison Weber explores topics like misogyny, humility, and authority through a women's studies lens. Gillian Ahlgren takes a similar approach in *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, focusing on the power of Teresa's womanhood in the reform of Carmel. Another scholar, Jodi Bilinkoff, examines how the historical context of Avila and of Spain during the sixteenth century shaped the efficacy Teresa's religious reform. Joseph Glynn, a Carmelite, explores Teresa's role as the first woman Doctor of the Church in *The Eternal Mystic*, giving a biographical explanation of Teresa's treatises on prayer. Similarly, the recently-deceased Sister Mary Alphonsetta Haneman, CSSF, vigorously outlined Teresa's methods of prayer and their connections to forms of contemplative practice found in other religious traditions, including Yoga, Zen Buddhism, Hare Krishna, and Pentecostal Christianity; she explores the "contemporary hunger for mysticism"<sup>5</sup> that many individuals experience and outlines the foundation of this thesis project, the modern implications for Teresian spirituality. Scholars continue to explore Teresa's mysticism as mindfulness practices become mainstream in Western society, wanting to understand the relationship between contemplative practices and the busyness of twenty-first-century life.

The humble saint has shaped Christianity's understanding of contemplative prayer in profound and enduring ways. Her *Way of Perfection* and *Interior Castle* are

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<sup>3</sup> Gross, Francis L., Jr. "Teresa of Avila's Prophetic Voice." *The Journal of General Education* 38.2 (1986): 101-19.

<sup>4</sup> Mujica, Barbara. *Sister Teresa: A Novel of the Woman Who Became Spain's Most Beloved Saint*. London: Duckworth, 2007. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Haneman, Mary Alphonsetta. *The Spirituality of St. Teresa of Avila*. (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1983) 92

important spiritual guides across nearly all Christian traditions, as well as having influence beyond Christianity. Their detailed mapping out of the sacred transformation of self continues to be relevant for Christians today, Carmelite or not, despite the radical differences between the twenty-first century in the West and Teresa's sixteenth-century Spain. Teresian Carmelite spirituality continues to encourage the development of a silent interior space where one can retreat to spend time with God and to, as Teresa writes, "spend time with the one we know loves us."<sup>6</sup>

How does Teresa's spirituality maintain its relevance in a culture of distraction? How can an individual who seeks to know God find that interior space when one is perpetually checking e-mail and replying to text messages? Teresa's spirituality and her patterns of experiencing contemplative prayer, as is explained below, have shaped not only an entire legacy of Discalced Carmelite spirituality within Christianity, but have influenced non-Christians' attempts to know the transcendent. In Christian terms, the desire to engage the primitive connection with God is pervasive across time, cultures, and religious traditions. The contemplative approach to responding to the still small voice of God is alive in Teresa's unique theology and continues to apply to those Christians who desire to answer God's call to relationship.

As mindfulness and meditation have turned into new popular trends, perhaps it is worth revisiting Teresa of Avila and the contemplative way of living that her guides to prayer recommend. If humanity still desires to connect with something bigger than itself, Teresa's desire for all of humanity to participate in an interior relationship with God creates an opportunity for modern Christians to utilize mindfulness techniques to help foster that relationship. Christians who are drawn to these meditative practices may find that Teresa's paths to knowing God achieve the same goals: they produce an interior stillness where the participant can go to find God. These Christians would find Teresa's spirituality an intriguing way of participating in mindfulness techniques with an overtone that is definitively contemplative; melding together the two approaches to meditative experience unites modern experiences to historical Christian contemplation. Modern Christians can pay close attention to the ways that mindfulness techniques

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<sup>6</sup> *Life* 96

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overlap with Teresa's spirituality and draw connections between the two, only further emphasizing the timelessness of Teresa's teachings.

The purpose of this document is to, first, analyze the ways that historical contexts like the rise of imperialism and the Spanish Inquisition impacted Teresa of Avila's life, as well as the Christian monastic context out of which her spirituality emerges, and then introduce the reader to Teresa of Avila and Teresian Carmelite spirituality. Through an exploration of her personal history, one will begin to understand the particularities of Teresa's life that led her to such renown and that have made her one of the Church's most relatable saints, emphasized by an account of her writings and an explanation of the patterns of knowing God that she sets forth. Following that introduction, one will encounter several other Carmelite figures who, in the legacy of Teresian Carmelite spirituality, have affected Christianity in distinct ways across various contexts and eras. These overviews will be culminated in a discussion of Teresa's life, focusing on her roles as a mystic, a Renaissance woman, a foundress, and a Christian teacher. These perspectives will result in a discussion of the approachability of Teresian Carmelite spirituality for twenty-first-century Christians.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Tracing Historical Contexts**

To understand the impact that Teresa of Avila has had on Christianity, one must trace the histories that produced such an influential woman. Christian monasticism, already centuries old by Teresa's lifetime, is steeped in cultural traditions that have shaped the institution of the Church. Nearly a millennium following the earliest Christians that retreated from cities and towns to lead ascetic lives, the Carmelite tradition was codified under the Rule of Albert, and, for centuries, has continued to shape the contemplative experiences of Christians across many contexts. More particular to Teresa, the events of the Renaissance era have greatly framed the saint's life. The Doctrine of Discovery opened Europe to a world of traditions much different than Medieval Christendom understood, but also flooded the European empires' economies with resources that allowed Christianity to thrive. The Protestant Reformation, too, added a new dimension to European Christians' way of perceiving themselves and their relationship with God. In view of the changing political and religious climates in Spain preceding and during Teresa's lifetime, the Spanish Inquisition fervently monitored the health of the Church, ensuring that a religious revolution would not be led by a Spanish Martin Luther.

Teresa of Avila's own sense of deep calling to love God more intimately was a consequence of each of these momentous occasions in the Church's history, including her personal contexts as an Avilese noblewoman-turned-mystic. Exploring the ways that each of these topics has impacted Christianity—and, in turn, Teresa—is necessary to further extricate the relevance of contemplative practice for twenty-first-century

Christians and to understand how Teresa's particular approaches to knowing God reveal the timelessness of monastic culture.

## **Early Christian Monasticism**

The earliest records found that describe monks commonly refer to them as *monakhói*, meaning “solitaries” in Ancient Greek. The term evolved over centuries, being adapted as *monāchus* in Late and Medieval Latin and into *monk* in Middle English. Its early use to denote an individual who lives a solitary life did not immediately point toward desert asceticism but instead may have indicated a person holding religious office. Robert Louis Wilken explains that in a fourth-century legal petition, a farmer complained that his neighbor's cow repeatedly trampled his crops and eventually caught the cow to return it to its owner. When the farmer approached the owner with this cow, the owner and his friends seized the farmer and beat him with clubs. They would have succeeded in killing the farmer if it were not for a *diā́konos* and a *monakhós*<sup>1</sup> running to the farmer's aid.<sup>2</sup> Wilken analyzes this petition and finds that the text describes the *monakhós* in a way that does not identify him as an ascetic, living in the desert and eating locusts. He is an individual, it seems, who lives within the village and participates in the village's spiritual life. Christian monasticism, however, is widely regarded to have begun in the Egyptian deserts. Wilken asserts that the closeness of these solitaries to the small villages in lower Egypt and the way this monk is casually identified as participating in the petition's story point to how commonly one could find a *monakhós*.

Early Christians who followed a way of living dedicated toward ideals that would later shape the ascetic lifestyle found their inspiration in the asceticism of Jewish groups like the Essenes. They interpreted the words and actions of John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ through an ascetic lens and used them to shape a Christian understanding

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<sup>1</sup> *diā́konos* translates roughly to “deacon” or some other ecclesiastical minister while *monakhós* refers to one of these solitaries

<sup>2</sup> Wilken, Robert Louis. *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity*. (Yale UP, 2012) 99

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of disciplined living.<sup>3</sup> John, who lived in the desert, wore a tunic made of camel's hair with a belt around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey, is often exemplified as the first Christian ascetic, particularly by James Kelhoffer, who explains the close relationship between John's disciplined life and early monastics. Jesus, too, whose Temptation in the desert for forty days and nights shaped the penitential season of Lent, shared John's penchant for solitude and his dedication to prayer. It is unknown if either John the Baptist or Jesus were born into the Essenic tradition but, because of the pervasiveness of the sect throughout Judea during their lifetime, it can be assumed that the two men were acquainted with the spiritual practices of the Essenes.<sup>4</sup>

In the two centuries before the birth of Jesus, groups of Jewish people began to establish a way of life focused on communality: they shared possessions, responsibilities, and a faith life. Living humbly, these groups developed into a sect and rapidly gathered attention throughout Judea. The Essenes, as they came to be known, created a model of Jewish asceticism that would later influence the spiritualities of John the Baptist and Jesus. Their communal living was the most important aspect of their personal faith: they lived in extreme poverty with all possessions in common, sharing money from one purse, and distanced themselves from a money-centric society. They elected a leader to oversee the community and designated attendants to perform certain tasks to alleviate their interactions with the secular world around them. They refused to pledge oaths, even to Herod, who is said to have honored this. They did not own slaves or servants and, instead, served one another. Many led celibate lives, choosing to dedicate themselves more closely to serving God.<sup>5</sup> These markers of the Essenes' lifestyle greatly influenced the Christians of the first three centuries who separated themselves from society, much like John the Baptist and Jesus, to live more closely with God. The Therapeutae, a group of Essenes who had settled near Alexandria decades before Jesus' birth, are the first monastic community recorded, living solitarily in a collection of cells, abandoning their worldly possessions, participating in daily individual contemplative worship, and maintaining a diet of bread, water, and salt in a single evening meal. Their colony was established on a hill near the shores of Lake

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<sup>3</sup> Wilken 99-100

<sup>4</sup> Nesbit, Edward Planta. *Christ, Christians, and Christianity: Jesus an Essene*. (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1895) 14, 49



Mareotis and their way of life incorporated their Jewish traditions as well as facets of the mysticism of the Egyptians around them.<sup>6</sup> Their presence in this area would later influence groups of Christians who settled in the Egyptian desert to find a closeness with God.

Early Christianity's focus on the outcast and downtrodden in society provided many opportunities for the construction of alternative social structures. By the second century, as small pockets of Christianity developed throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, groups of Christian men and women were living in community, not cohabiting and remaining celibate for the promise of the forthcoming Kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup> These groups that formed during this era, devoting themselves to prayer, laid the foundations for monasticism, one of the most resilient Christian institutions. With the rapid growth of Christianity throughout this region of the world in the first three centuries, these collections of people living in intentional ascetic communities sprung up almost simultaneously across the Christian world. People in cities and remote areas alike were attracted to the radical interpretations of Jesus' teachings and molded their lives to reflect a shared, holy life like the Essenes. These early Christians were drawn to the teachings of Jesus, which posed a preferential option for the poor, and they looked forward to meeting Christ at his Second Coming. Their dedication to a life completely centered on God allowed them to focus on living fully into Jesus' teachings. Their poverty, their fasting, and their seclusion from society enabled them to care only about Scripture and looking Godward.

Anthony the Great is credited as the pioneer of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the group of Christian ascetics who settled in the Egyptian deserts, after hearing a sermon preached on giving up one's possessions and following Christ inspired by Matthew 19:21.<sup>8</sup> Anthony retreated to the desert to experience a radical solitude which would enable him to dedicate his life to Christ. Many followed Anthony's path, creating the

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<sup>5</sup> Nesbit 117, 158

<sup>6</sup> Rappoport, S. *History of Egypt: From 330 B.C. to the Present Time*. Vol. XI. (London: Grolier Society, 1904) 28 - 30

<sup>7</sup> For a more complete historical overview of these early groups, see Rappoport's *History of Egypt*, Hannah's *Christian Monasticism*, Wilken's *the First Thousand Years*, Nesbit's *Christ, Christians, and Christianity*, and Ayer's *Ancient Church History*. Information include below this footnote should be assumed to be referenced compositely from these sources.

<sup>8</sup> Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

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Desert Fathers and Mothers movement, wishing to sacrifice their lives in a revolutionary way.<sup>9</sup> As Christians put down their plows and pruning hooks to lead simple lives, the numbers of those who moved to this hermitic lifestyle began to rival the numbers of those living in nearby towns and villages. The establishment of monastic communities in the northwestern Nile Delta evolved out of informal collections of hermits, ascetics, and monks who gradually shifted from dispersed living to a more communal arrangement. The most notable of these ascetic communities that formed during the third century is in the Scetis Desert in Egypt—the region south of Lake Mareotis, where the Therapeutae settled—a monastic community that is still active today, though similar communities were founded in the surrounding area, including at Nitria and at Kellia. The group that settled in the Scetis Desert would, within a century, set in place the cornerstone for the foundation of monasticism in the Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup>

It seems very appropriate that Egypt—the land from which Moses led the Jewish slaves as God’s chosen people and to which Mary and Joseph fled with the infant Jesus fearing Herod’s imminent infanticide—would birth a new movement in early Christian history which would have lasting significance for the growth and stability of the faith tradition in every generation and pocket of Christendom for over a thousand years. The Desert Fathers and Mothers are commonly considered to be the parents of Christian monasticism for their desire to find a different way of being Christian in the world.<sup>11</sup> As local Christians and inquirers went to the newly formed group of ascetics to seek advice about how to adapt their lives to reflect Christ more richly, they were forced to organize into a community and establish a way of life that would enable them to fill two roles: fostering a contemplative relationship with God and providing spiritual care to those who wish to know God more intimately. Each community that developed in this region during this first century of monastic living reflected a different approach to their way of life. The ascetics in lower Egypt, including Anthony the Great, led an exclusively anchoritic or hermitic lives, living solitarily and deeply withdrawn from society. A group in upper Egypt, organized by Pachomius, shared a common life and established what

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<sup>9</sup> Chryssavgis, John. *In the Heart of the Desert : The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, Inc.) 15-16

<sup>10</sup> Chryssavgis 15-17

<sup>11</sup> Chryssavgis 12

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would become the cenobitic<sup>12</sup> model for monastic life; these ascetics evolved directly out of the Essenic tradition mentioned above and were dedicated to a communal life which was self-contained within the monastery's walls, working and socializing as one large familial unit. Finally, the communities in Nitria, Kellia, and Scetis were semi-hermitical, establishing a settlement comprised mostly of individual hermit's cells<sup>13</sup>, chapels, and communal buildings, eventually developing into a self-contained society with nuns and monks filling roles as bakers and farmers within the monastery's walls.<sup>14</sup> It is out of this group of monastics we receive the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (*Sayings of the Fathers*), a collection of sayings and stories associated with the Desert Fathers and Mothers, which has inspired theologians throughout the last two millennia.

There are many notable figures in the early centuries of Christian monasticism who have forged and shaped the culture of contemplative life. Among these were Anthony the Great and Pachomius, who are mentioned above. Anthony, a Coptic-speaking Egyptian, inspired by Jesus' call to abandon worldly possessions, modeled his life after a solitary who lived near the village where Anthony grew up. Anthony spent the early years of his 105-year life weaving baskets to pay for his diet of bread, salt, and water and reciting Scriptural passages that he memorized. Inspired by Jesus' Temptation, Anthony withdrew to the desert to face his own temptations from Satan, equipped with only the weapons of the Spirit: his fortitude, detachment, and wisdom. He remained solitary in the desert for twenty years. With a strong yet undernourished body, he emerged back into society ready to teach others what he had learned.<sup>15</sup> The anchoritic lifestyle that Anthony and the Desert Fathers and Mothers practiced enabled the solitary self to be united, in many ways, to God. Anthony's repute as the first of the Desert Fathers is an inspiring testimony of the hardship that the human spirit can face and still, through those purifying trials, provide spiritual care for others to enable them to achieve a Christ-centered life.

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<sup>12</sup> From Greek, "koinos" + "bios" - "common life"

<sup>13</sup> The modern word "cell" comes from "Kellia," one of these early monastic communities.

<sup>14</sup> Bagnall, Roger S., and Dominic W. Rathbone. *Egypt from Alexander to the Early Christians: An Archaeological and Historical Guide*. (Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005) 108, 111-13

<sup>15</sup> Wilken 100-2

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Scholars often also memorialize Pachomius as the father of cenobitic monasticism for his organization of the early collections of monks into communities.<sup>16</sup> Initially, he began by uniting solitaries who lived in close proximity to one another, creating small loosely-connected communities, just as the communities in the Scetis Desert had formed. His communities were under the authority of a leader (an *abba* or an *amma*)<sup>17</sup> and each monk participated in a daily schedule marked by prayer, work and meals. The monasteries that grew out of these small communities became vast properties containing kitchens, bakeries, dining halls, and houses made up of forty individual cells for monks. Pachomius' followers were also the first of these congregations to distinguish themselves by wearing a religious habit and the first to organize their day into periods of rest, prayer, and work. Under Pachomius' direction, Christians who sought to live within the monastery's walls were first tested to ensure they could fully participate in the rhythm of the cenobitic life: they engaged fully in the monastery's life for a three-year probationary period, where they immersed themselves in studying Scripture and adapted to the daily schedule. Pachomius' nuns and monks participated in a life of simplicity and communality: they wore simple peasant's tunics and ate together in silence at every meal. The formation of a unified way of life was extremely necessary for these budding communities as these early Christians retreated from cities and transformed their lives.<sup>18</sup>

The intentional Christ-centered living that each of these groups shared shaped what would become the institution of Christian monasticism in unique ways. The emphasis on a radical transformation of heart and lifestyle revolutionized Christian spirituality from its very beginnings. Some early Christians sought to imitate Christ's retreat into the desert for forty days,<sup>19</sup> when he was drawn by the Spirit to solitude in the wilderness where he fasted and was tempted by the Devil, fortifying his will against temptations of power and food. Retreating to the desert, living mostly in caves on mountainsides, these Christians would live in solitude, but not always in complete isolation, dedicate themselves to eremitical living and extreme asceticism, and practice a rule of life with a focus on prayer and complete dedication to God.

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<sup>16</sup> Wilken 102-3

<sup>17</sup>'father' and 'mother'

<sup>18</sup> Bagnall 113-14

## **Origins of Carmelite Monasticism**

Though many of these communities existed, the community that would become the Order of the Carmelites traces their origins to a community of hermits living the range of hills along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean known as Mount Carmel, the Biblical home of the prophet Elijah, who lived nearly a millennium before the time of Christ. The earliest-documented collection of hermits living around Mount Carmel dates to the twelfth century, when a group of European pilgrims and early Crusaders gathered in the wadi surrounding Mount Carmel, dedicating their encampment to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This same group of hermits are responsible for requesting the creation for the primitive Carmelite Rule, the Rule of Albert<sup>20</sup>, given to the hermits by Albert Avogadro<sup>21</sup>, who served as the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem between 1206 and 1214. The Rule briefly outlines instructions for the monks, ranging from prohibition of owning property other than animals to maintain the land, guides for construction of a communal spaces for worship and meals, and a suggestion to maintain a strict vegetarian diet. Many that had settled in this wadi eventually returned to Europe in the early half of the thirteenth century following a Muslim threat of expulsion and, influenced by their eremitical lifestyle in Jerusalem, began founding Carmelite houses across the continent. In 1238, the community that was founded at Mount Carmel was abandoned and, by 1250, the Carmelites had settled houses in Cyprus, Sicily, England, France, Germany, Belgium, and Italy with the Order founding a new monastery nearly every eighteen months.<sup>22</sup>

The Order of Carmelites<sup>23</sup>, like many other religious orders that had evolved from the Benedictine tradition, grew dramatically across Europe, responding to the needs of the changing political system following the decline of the feudal system. Those that were drawn to Carmel were more interested in personal piety and allegiance to Christ than the apostolic missions of mendicant groups, such as the Franciscans or Dominicans. However, as Carmel grew throughout Europe, they began to assimilate

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<sup>19</sup> Known as the Temptation of Christ; see: Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix I

<sup>21</sup> Also called Albert the Lawgiver and Albert of Jerusalem

<sup>22</sup> Jotischky, Andrew. *The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and Their Pasts in the Middle Ages*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 9-14

themselves to the mendicant orders' ministries. By the Late Medieval Period, the Church recognized the Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Augustinians as the principal mendicant orders. Not all Carmelites were pleased with the shift from an eremitical monastic community to the practice of founding houses in urban centers and sending members to universities to train for professional careers. By 1432, the Rule of Albert was modified, relaxing the restrictions on diet and enclosure. The new mitigated rule also formally accepted laity into the Order as well as creating communities for women. The first order of Carmelite nuns that was founded, the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila, would be responsible for the Order's most influential renewal movement with the creation of the Order of the Discalced Carmelites of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, led by Teresa of Avila. Teresa focused on reverting the mitigated rule to its original form to accommodate a life dedicated to unceasing prayer and spending "frequent time with the one we know loves us."<sup>24</sup>

### **The Reorienting Christianity of 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Europe**

Sixteenth-century Europe was a time of great upheaval for the Christian Church. At the height of the Renaissance, Europeans' understandings of life were changing greatly. The discovery of the New World and rapid flow of wealth from the Americas into Europe meant increased commercialism in urban and rural areas; the invention of and the spread of the printing press in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries increased literacy and the accessibility of Christian scripture. The Protestant Reformation marked a distinctive change in Christian theology, introducing much of Europe to new ways of interpreting scripture but also providing new approaches to theologically-Christian living. Additionally, the Roman Catholic Church experienced a severe political upheaval across Europe in response to these events. Among many of the changes that the Church faced during this period, the dynamic growth of religious orders reflected the changing religious culture outside of the monastery walls. Communities were vibrantly growing; new convents and monasteries were opening across Europe and the Americas, and

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<sup>23</sup> Also referred to as Carmelites of the Ancient Observance

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existing communities began to question their relevance to the shifting tides. The changing image of monasticism in this period left members of several groups attempting to understand their role in reorganizing, securing, and stabilizing their ministries.

Several new orders formed during the Renaissance. Under the guidance of Saint Angela Merici, the Order of Ursulines, founded in 1535, focused on increased Christian Education, particularly in the New World. The Order of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, founded in 1501 by Saint Joan of Valois, was established as an independent order of the Order of Saint Clare, living a contemplative life of enclosure. And, in 1520, Matteo de Bascio, an Observant Franciscan, founded the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, which was dedicated to living the primitive Rule of Life established by Saint Francis of Assisi over three hundred years earlier. While these newly formed congregations were reflective of the changing religious climates around them, the 1593 establishment of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, which traced its origins to the eremitical traditions of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and to the prophet Elijah, sought to reform the Carmelite Order of Ancient Observance, reverting to the simplistic charism (or Rule of Life) that the earliest-recorded Carmelites followed. The reformed Order would be a life dedicated to prayer, contemplation, and community living and would focus on maintaining a simplistic lifestyle focused toward Christ. Through working together, communally praying the Divine Office, and designating two hours a day to silent, contemplative prayer, they could exercise their ministry through complete dedication to honoring Christ and his salvation through their prayer. This facet of the Discalced Carmelites' charism draws directly from the Order's foundress, Saint Teresa of Avila, who demanded of her sisters a life that was focused completely on loving Christ not only as the Savior but as a brother. Like Teresa, the Order also recognized that, though the Church continually prays for the world, the Church is also in desperate need of prayer.

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<sup>24</sup> *Life* 96

## **Spanish and Avilese Influences on Teresa's Life**

Teresa's life was greatly impacted by the sociohistorical contexts of sixteenth-century Avila. Her father's family, who had converted to Christianity from Judaism, provided their lineage with a level of prosperity that molded Teresa's initial experiences as a Carmelite nun, affording her luxuries that other nuns did not enjoy. Several of Teresa's own siblings were impacted by the eruptive growth of the Spanish Empire which furnished Avila with a steady flow of New World resources that, ultimately, helped to fortify the wealth of the Church in Spain. In Avila, the shifting religious landscape became a critically-contentious arena for the Spanish Inquisition's thorough examination of heterodoxy, fearing threats of converts, Protestants, and witchcraft. While navigating the primary contexts out of which Teresa of Avila emerges, it is necessary to reflect on how the following factors influenced the development of her unique theology in consideration of the historical contexts of monasticism, Carmelite spirituality, and the Reformation-era theologies of Europe.

During the sixteenth century, despite the religious turbulence erupting across the rest of the European continent, Spain was arguably the greatest power in the world. Following the Age of Expansion, Spanish monarchs found themselves surrounded by wealth flowing in from Spanish-held territories across the globe that they acquired through marriage, dynasty inheritance, or war: in the Americas, the large Viceroyalties of New Spain (including the Louisiana Territory), New Granada, Peru, and Rio de la Plata as well as Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico; in Asia, the Spanish East Indies were comprised of the Caroline Islands, the Mariana Islands, and the Philippine Islands, and Spain also attained Guam in the second half of that century; in Africa, the Canary Islands, the cities of Ceuta, Peñon de Vélez, Melilla, Oran, and Tunis; and in Europe, particularly following Philip II's Habsburgian inheritance, the Low Countries, England and Ireland, Burgundy, the Italian provinces Lombardy, Naples, and Sicily, and the Western Mediterranean islands of Sardinia, Mallorca, Minorca, and Ibiza. The sun never set on the Spanish Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and its rapid global expansion ensured that the crown and its territories would have a steady flow of goods from every corner of the earth: gold, silver, corn, sugar, chocolate, wine, cheese, potatoes, spices, weapons, and, most of all, slaves. As merchants in every city



and town became wealthy purveyors of exotic specialties, the Spanish nobility and monarchy reaped their benefits, as did the Church.<sup>25</sup> Tracing this history, which more closely concerns Teresa of Avila's life, helps elucidate the environment that produced both Teresa's mystical experiences and the reform of Carmel.

The generation preceding the turn of the sixteenth century was a tenuous time for the kingdoms of Spain. Catalonia engaged in a civil war between 1462-72, nobles controlled the rural territories as warlords, and the monarchy was seen to be ineffectual. Isabella of Castile rose to power in 1474 and her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon, succeeded the throne in 1479. Together, this powerful couple sought to stabilize the Spanish kingdoms. The monarchs developed institutions and forged alliances across the Iberian Peninsula to foster collaboration between the nobility, the cities, and the Church. The creation of these institutions and alliances slowly provided strength to the Spanish kingdoms, even in the face of military threat from neighboring France and Portugal and from the Moorish Emirate of al-Andalus on the southern coast. In the urban cities of Castile, the monarchs supported the creation of vigilantes, the *hermandades*<sup>26</sup>, who aimed to organize violence instead of eliminating it. The *hermandades* would travel through towns, enforcing justice on delinquents, gradually covering the south of Spain, encouraging citizens to participate in local militia groups to keep peace but to be prepared for attacks from the Moors. They were considered to be effective leaders and greatly strengthened the power of the monarchs in the small, remote towns on the plains.<sup>27</sup>

Having eliminated civil dissension and achieved political stability in the Iberian kingdoms, Ferdinand and Isabella turned toward a new goal: overseas expansion. Already boasting strong military power, the monarchs' thirst for power was centered on an imperialism that could help create a centralized Spanish government, with money and goods flowing richly into the Iberian kingdoms. Their first target would be to secure the territory of al-Andalus. On 2 January 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella's military triumph against the Moors was glorified as they overpowered and entered the city of

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<sup>25</sup> Historical information from this period is composited and sourced from Henry Kamen's books, Robert Wilken's *the First Thousand Years*, Michael Thomsett's *the Inquisition*, Vivian Green's *Renaissance and Reformation*, as well as John Elliot's *Spain and its World*.

<sup>26</sup> trans. "brotherhood"

Granada. As Spaniards were celebrating a wave of messianic optimism, the monarchs issued a decree on 30 March for all Jews to be expelled from the Spanish kingdoms. Soon after, they issued a commission to Christopher Columbus to explore the ocean that lay west of the horizon and find a new route to Asia. By Ferdinand's death in 1515, the Atlantic Ocean was mostly unexplored, but by the 1520s, Mexico was conquered, followed by Peru in the 1530s. The establishment of these territories under the Spanish crown rivaled the Portuguese territories in Africa and Brazil, yet opened Spain to a massive influx of goods.<sup>28</sup>

The King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V sought to not only expand Spain beyond the Iberian Peninsula into the New World, but to expand Christianity as well. His unification of rule across Europe and the Americas proved him to be an effective leader of Spain who would bolster Spanish imperialism as the successor of Roman imperialism. It became the Spanish conquistadors' divine mission to follow in the steps of the Romans, to conquer and colonize and then organize, govern, and exploit their conquests and to send back goods and resources to their mother country.<sup>29</sup> The return of wealth to Spain allowed for a bureaucratic structure to be created in Madrid, which soon became the capital of the new global empire, where councils could advise Charles on the health of his colonies abroad and on the Church in Spain. The flow of dye-stuffs, emeralds, gold, silver, and mercury from the Americas would quickly meet the King's military and security expenses. Nobility promoted of the flow of goods back into Spain's economy, enabling them to pay off debts, acquire property, and construct chapels in local churches and cathedrals. The trade transactions were reciprocal, as well; artisans from Castile and farmers from Andalusia could produce more wine, wheat, and oil to ship to émigrés in the Americas.

Avila was one of the many cities in Spain to benefit from the European imperialism in the New World. The city itself boasted a socially diverse population, with its residents organizing themselves into *barrios* according to their occupation, class, and ethnicity. Avila's economy, strengthened by income from the colonies, still maintained its heritage of sheep husbandry and developed a cloth-making industry which sent woolen cloth to

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<sup>27</sup> Kamen, Henry. *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) 6-7

<sup>28</sup> Kamen, *Empire* 14

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the Spanish provinces and to Flanders. The wool trade in Avila was booming by the turn of the sixteenth century; almost a quarter of Avila's population was employed in wool, as carders, combers, spinners, dyers, and weavers. Neighborhoods outside the city's walls retained their rural histories and thrived on the growing wool industry.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, religion penetrated the city and its surroundings in the Late Medieval Period and the Renaissance: Avila's Romanesque cathedral is built into the city walls, a dozen monasteries and convents speckle the city, and eighteen churches and shrines serve the population's spiritual needs. Avila's history as a religiously diverse hub shifted drastically as Ferdinand and Isabella dedicated themselves to stabilizing the Church in Spain with the forced conversion or the expulsion of Jews and Moors. The *Conversos* and *Moriscos*<sup>31</sup> sculpted their own place in the social hierarchy as craftsmen, farmers, and shopkeepers, though some families were unable to achieve these positions.

Jews faced pogroms throughout the kingdoms for centuries but after they were forced to convert to Christianity or faced expulsion, scrutiny of their religious practices intensified. Avila's large and dynamic *Conversos* population wrestled courageously to secure their standing; wealthier Jewish families could afford buying their way into gentility, but the specter of Judaism besieged Spanish culture. Juan Sánchez, grandfather of Teresa of Avila, adopted his mother's Christian surname, Cepeda, when he purchased his title and homestead. Avilese *Conversos* greatly aided the transformation of the city from a sleepy hamlet to a bustling mercantile city. As the wealth of Avila grew, so did the wealth of the monasteries, convents, churches, and the cathedral. The growth of Avilese aristocracy mirrored the restoration of Catholic dominance in other cities across the Spanish Empire.

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<sup>29</sup> Elliott, John H. *Spain and Its World: 1500 - 1700*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997) 8-10, 12, 18

<sup>30</sup> Bilinkoff, Jodi. *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-century City*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 4-6

<sup>31</sup> *Conversos*, trans. "convert;" *Moriscos*, trans. "Moorish"—refers to Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity during this period.

## **The Spanish Inquisition and its Control of Spain**

The kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula were the first in Western Europe to recognize the legal (albeit uneasy) coexistence of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, creating a culture of tolerance, *La Convivencia*<sup>32</sup>, between these three groups. *Convivencia* enabled Spaniards from the different faiths to collaborate and the different traditions were not divided: Christians, Jewish, and Muslim traders worked collaboratively and for one another. Following the Moorish occupation, many Islamic communities remained in Spain and Portugal, with the strongest, most populated communities along Spain's southern edge, including al-Andalus, across the Alboran Sea from the Maghreb. Their occupied territory on the Iberian Peninsula was greatly contested by the native Christian populations that were overpowered by the military forces led by Umayyad Caliph Al-Walid I when they landed at Gibraltar in April 711. For nearly 800 years following the Moors' landing on the peninsula, the boundary lines between Moorish territories and Spanish Christian territories changed regularly through wars and battles for domination. By the mid-thirteenth century, Muslims retained only al-Andalus, following a defeat by Christian armies across the rest of the peninsula or having abandoned their settlements. By the late fifteenth century, the idea of a new 'crusade' against the Moorish occupiers was strongly felt by the Spanish; they bore crusader crosses on their uniforms and followed a large silver cross into battle against the remaining Moors in al-Andalus. Because enslavement of defeated persons became a tactic of war between Muslims and Christians across the Mediterranean region following the battles that regained Granada and the rest of the kingdom from the Moors, many of the defeated Moors were enslaved and converted to Christianity, becoming the *Moriscos*.<sup>33</sup>

Jews, who, throughout the Muslim caliphate, aided the Moors in military and financial endeavors, became the next targets of Ferdinand and Isabella. Sephardic Jews inhabited the Iberian Peninsula since at least the third century and, by the Middle Ages, they were comprised the single largest Jewish community in the world, though their

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<sup>32</sup> trans. "the Coexistence"

<sup>33</sup> Kamen, *Empire* 16-17; Kamen, Henry. *The Spanish Inquisition: An Historical Revision*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997) 1, 4, 8

numbers were small compared to the populations of Christians and Moors, just under two percent of the Spanish population, living mostly in small farming villages but with some living in towns and working as shopkeepers, weavers, or tailors. However, across western Europe, tensions between Christians and Jews worsened: in 1235, a papal bull made Jews in France wear a yellow patch to indicate their faith and in 1250, another papal decree banned Jews from building new synagogues. By 1405, Jews in Spain were forced to live in *aljamas*, quarters of town specifically for Jews. Jews faced persecution in nearly every city across Europe by the thirteenth century. Slowly, the tolerance of Jews in Spain decreased; many Jews were forced to convert to Christianity—becoming the *Conversos*—to remain included in society, though this did not keep mobs from attacking Jews and burning the *aljamas*. Jewish conversion to Christianity became, for many Jews, a safer option than continuing to practice Judaism. The Jews who retained their faith were forced to fill certain roles in society and commerce, becoming merchants, physicians, bailiffs, and peddlers. In 1478, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella established the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition to purify the orthodoxy of the Spanish people. The Inquisition forced the Church and Spanish Christians to recognize the biggest threats to securing Catholicism in Spain (and, of course, in the rest of Europe) were the Jews and the Moors. The Jews' and Moors' integral role in society could no longer guarantee their safety as Spanish citizens. As the Inquisition intensified across the peninsula, the monarchs were swayed to alleviate Spain of the threats against Christian orthodoxy. Following their victory in Granada in 1492, the monarchs passed a decree forcing Jews to evacuate the Spanish kingdoms.<sup>34</sup>

Many of the legislations made against Jews' ability to freely exercise their faith were a direct byproduct of the Inquisition, which began in the twelfth century to combat religious fanaticism and increasing heretical interpretations of religious doctrine that spread throughout the Catholic Church. Aided by the Dominican Order (the Order of Preachers, O.P.) in many provinces across Europe, the Inquisition fervently sought to eradicate any religious viewpoints that did not align with the Catholic Church's strict interpretations of scripture. They tried individuals or groups whose experience of religion and spirituality lay outside of the common exercise expected by the Church and

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<sup>34</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition* 8-19

penalized individuals were perceived to violate the expected Christian *modus vivendi*, even though the jurisdiction of assigning and enforcing these penalties fell to the provincial government. The penalties for small transgressions would range from paying a fine to wearing a large cross (either physical or sewn into one's garments) as an exercise of penance, but if the Inquisition deemed that an individual's expression was heretical, they were subject to life-long imprisonment, banishment, or death by combustion.<sup>35</sup>

The first Inquisition issued by papal bull in 1184, Lucius III's *Ad abolendum*, authorized local bishops to turn heretics over to civil authorities to undertake prosecution of heterodoxy. This early eradication of dissenting theology focused on the Waldensians, followers of Peter Waldo (or Peter de Vaux, ca 1140 – ca 1218), who preached, without Church-authorized training, a Gospel of radical poverty and exclusion from society: they owned no property, made no oaths, refused to serve in wars, and rejected the doctrine of purgatory.<sup>36</sup> Later religious groups like Anabaptists and Mennonites would be influenced by Waldensian ideas. This first decree greatly influenced monarchs across Europe to exercise their own authority in their respective provinces and, by the thirteenth century, the Church saw this as a threat equal to heresy. In response to this continued threat, the Vatican began to issue excommunications more vigorously. Under the papacy of Gregory IX (1227-41), the Church's Inquisition tightened its strong hold on Europe. Under Gregory, the Dominicans were instructed to supervise and manage the Inquisition, which they did very harshly. Over its life of 700 years, the Inquisition became the greatest weapon of the Church, defending her against perceived threats like witchcraft, the theologies of John Wycliffe and Martin Luther, and the revolutionary science of Galileo.

By the fifteenth century, the Inquisition had reached the Iberian Peninsula and worked vigorously to extinguish any heterodoxy it could find, including *Conversos* suspected of continuing to practice Judaism. The anti-Semitic behaviors listed above were only a portion of the division that was created between Christian and Jew, particularly across Iberia. The large numbers of Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity were under particular scrutiny and pogroms intensified across Europe

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<sup>35</sup> Thomsett, Michael C. *The Inquisition : A History*. (Jefferson, N.C., McFarland, 2010) 34

throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Laws of Catalina, passed in 1412, ensured that Jews would be forced into poverty, made to abandon their lands, and compelled toward socioeconomic and political extinction. Wealthier Jews, who could pay their way into Spanish nobility, felt a certain security in their new Christian identity, but many farmer-class Jews were not afforded the same privilege. When Ferdinand and Isabella rose to power in the middle of the century, a stronger and more determined Inquisition swept Spain: Moorish power was stripped from al-Andalus and Jews were expelled from Spain entirely. *Conversos* and *Moriscos* were brought continually to tribunal and felt the brunt of the Inquisition along with Lutherans, suspected witches, fornicators and sexual deviants, heretics, and bigamists. The inquisitors, backed by the Spanish monarchy as well as the Papal States, developed intense tactics to force confessions from individuals and usurped the secular courts' jurisdiction to justify the harsh punishments they could levy. They elicited confessions from common people, promising to extend grace to them in exchange for their public penance. Unrepentant heretics were strangled and burned at the stake. Interrogations were intense and violent and included the *garrucha*; the *toca*; and the *potro*.<sup>37</sup>

In the sixteenth century, the Church sought to move away from a culture of punishment of heresy into an environment where education about Christian values would prevent heresy by strengthening Christianity against these perceived threats.<sup>38</sup> During this era, too, the Church also needed to incentivize her people to avoid the distraction of Protestantism and to fortify herself during the Counter-Reformation. Local bishops were no longer paying their way to power and, instead, were given authority over the religious life. Following Luther's reform, the religious life exploded across Europe with the formation of new orders and the evolution of existing orders.

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<sup>36</sup> Thomsett 14-16

<sup>37</sup> In the *garrucha*, the victim is tied, hoisted in the air, and then dropped, dislocating and breaking many bones. In the *toca*, the head is covered in a cloth and water would be poured into the victim's mouth so that they would think they are drowning, similar to water-boarding. In the *potro*, the victim is placed on a rack and their legs and arms would be slowly stretched away from their torso and trunk (Thomsett 156).

<sup>38</sup> The Inquisition still exists, by idea only, within the Roman Catholic Church. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its primary focus was on censorship of music, art, and literature. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, it focused on accusations made against clergy. In 1965, Pius VI renamed the institution of the Inquisition the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Currently, the CDF exists to protect Catholic doctrine. The CDF has responded in the past decade to issues surrounding

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The Jesuits, Capuchins, Ursulines, and Discalced Carmelites all were founded in the shadow of the Protestant Reformation, aiming to return the Church to the elementary values that early Christianity espoused through education and example.

Each of these contexts that impacted Teresa's life, her instructional writings, and her spirituality contribute to the relevance of Teresa for modern Christians. For a woman—regardless of her socioeconomic stature—to be leading a transformative movement within Christianity during this era of the Inquisition's glaring eye, the perceived threat of Protestantism, and the discouragement of her superiors demonstrates the effective way God calls for humanity to engage in authentic relationships with Godself. Teresa battled, despite her own infirmities and lifelong dolor, against the status quo expectations of ways of approaching monastic living to cultivate an environment where Christians could experience God in that silent interior place, formulating patterns (discussed below) for achieving a spiritually intimate relationship with Christ. Knowing Teresa's own circumstances, one will, hopefully, be able to identify the relevance of the saint's methods for twenty-first-century Christians while recognizing the relatability of Teresa and her spirituality.

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human sexuality (including same-sex marriage and abortion), the legacy of liberation theology, and eschatology.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Santa Teresa de Jesus**

#### *The Compassionate Reformer of Carmel*

With the preceding explanation of the circumstances that shaped her experiences, this account of Teresa of Avila's life presents an overview of her greatest accomplishments and most hindering trials, with special attention paid to her interior struggles of doubt and distress. This chapter systematically explores her visions and locutions, her call to reform Carmel, and the transformation of her vocation, her body, her personality, and her soul.<sup>1</sup> It is meant to portray a snapshot of Saint Teresa's resilient character and to inventory the momentous events of her life that accentuate her relatability. Throughout this chapter, one encounters Teresa's life in a way that communicates the ways she related to others and the world around her. Her humanity shines through effortlessly in her *Life*, though much of that may be absent from this account. However, her penitence, her charisma, and her persistent nature will be apparent. Teresa's remarkable life, which produced a monumental legacy in the Teresian Carmelite tradition, showcases the timelessness of humanity's primitive desire to connect deeply with God, the One we know loves us.

Born on 28 March 1515 near Avila, Spain to Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda and Beatriz de Ahumada y Cuevas, Doña Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada's life of piety would greatly influence the Catholic Church for centuries: her reform of the Order of

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<sup>1</sup> All the information outlined below is sourced from Teresa's semi-autobiographical *Life*, with few analyses composited from the autobiographies written by Rowan Williams, Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, and William Thomas Walsh and from the commentaries of her life Kieran Kavanaugh in the *Collected Works* series. As this chapter aims to be an overview of the saint's life and not an exhaustive memoir, the evaluations made here are gleaned from the various sources and express, almost exclusively, the author's personal understanding of Teresa's life.

Carmelites, her spiritual teachings and writings, as well as her own humility and pious disposition posed Teresa of Avila to become not only a widely-studied saint but also the first female Doctor of the Church. Her legacy as a controversial mystic, a compassionate woman, and a determined reformer have lead many individuals—Christians and non-Christians alike—to explore her spiritual writings and to garner a deeper understanding of contemplative practices. The monastic tradition that was created by her reform of the Order of Carmelites, the Order of the Discalced Carmelites of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, has transformed the Christian approach to contemplative practice and it traces its beginnings to the writings and teachings of this mystic saint. Teresa’s life has greatly impacted how this unique spirituality has been formulated, understood, and revitalized through the past five centuries.

In a modern understanding of Teresian Carmelite spirituality, it is uncomplicated to recognize how contemplative practice can foster a relationship with Christ. But it is more ambitious to recognize the transformations that have redefined Christianity and Christians’ experiences of God’s revelation, even by beginning with Teresa of Avila. Teresa’s life exemplified the Discalced Carmelite pattern of transformation: she recognized the deficits in her life that prevented her from loving God more completely, she continually sought God’s aid in developing a closer bond with God, and she used her experiences to enable others to encounter God in that quiet interior place. However unapproachable or incomprehensible Teresa’s mystical experiences of God may be, modern Christians continually look to Teresa’s processes to reply to the calling of the still small voice.

### **Teresa’s Childhood**

In her *Life*, Teresa describes her childhood as one filled with piety and affection, though she was also imaginative, curious, and adventurous. Her sensitive nature was balanced by her courageous play with her brother Roderigo; enchanted by stories of the saints and of the heroic expression of martyrs’ deaths, the two siblings vowed to escape their home outside Avila and cross the sea to find Moors in Africa that would behead them and they could achieve martyrdom. After their uncle foiled their exploit and returned the young wanderers to their parents, the children decided maybe they’d like to

be hermits instead, building up stones in their orchard to resemble makeshift hermits' cells. Young Teresa's inquisitive nature and her fascination with religion and the extreme devotion that Christians were making to God—in both occasions, by dedicating their lives to God—clearly seems to have aligned Teresa's growing mind with a sense of Christian vocation. Her childhood experiences provided her with a strong foundation to dedicate her life to a complete dedication to Christ and his suffering, but also fortified the direction of forwardness her later life would provide.

Teresa's family, too, may have provided her with an understanding of living among others. Her father, Alonso, whom Teresa described as devout, well-read, and charitable, was, along with his father, a *converso*, but his faith in the Church was rich. He did not lack sympathy for his twelve children and provided them with many luxuries, including the education that young Doña Teresa enjoyed; she describes him as “a man of great truthfulness,” going on to say that he seldom spoke poorly of another and that his life, which Teresa centers on his charity, was most pure.<sup>2</sup> Teresa's mother, Beatriz, too, was “a woman of great goodness” whose life reflected the same humility that Teresa would espouse in her own life.<sup>3</sup> Teresa saw her parents as wholly good, concerned only with their children's welfare.

Near age twelve, after the death of her mother, Teresa began to be interested in worldly desires, under the influence of older siblings and cousins. Like any teenager, in seemingly any century, a preoccupation with beauty—her hair and clothing, perfume—and then books about chivalry (which her father felt was greatly distracting her from more serious learning) replaced her inclination toward Godly things. Her focus turned from the naive piety she exercised in her youth toward a dream of romance, hearing her older cousin's stories about her boyfriends and her own vanity. Teresa remarks in her *Life*, “Until she became friendly with me...I do not believe that I turned away from God in mortal sin.” Even in her admitted distractedness, Teresa's fear of displeasing God (as well as her father) is visible.

Soon after Doña Teresa began cavorting with her persuasive cousin, near age sixteen, her father decided that it was in Teresa's best interest to be enrolled at a boarding school run by Augustinian nuns. This was not unusual; many young women from wealthier

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<sup>2</sup> *Life* 54

families were sent to boarding schools to further their domestic education. Her father felt that this would preserve her honor, surrounded by pious women, and would give her a richer education than he could continue to provide at home. At the convent school, Doña Teresa quickly adapted to living in a monastery and all of the nuns were impressed by her character and her grace. She, too, was taken with the nuns. They were obedient to the Augustinian rule and exercised their contemplative life in an authentic way, though she confesses that she still had little desire to join their ranks. The young student grew close with one of the nuns who served as mistress to the secular students at the convent, enabling her exposure to a deep, rich style of prayer. Doña Teresa's knowledge of what it means to be "saintly" abundantly grew in the year and a half that she remained close with this nun; she understood many vocal prayers and envied those who received the gift of tears when they prayed.

By the end of her schooling, she had pleaded for many months for God to show her the path she should follow to live a devout and truly Christian life, though she included in her prayer a request that God not compel her to become a nun. Doña Teresa wrestled with this question for quite a while after leaving the convent boarding school. She spent time with her family and with experienced monastics to better understand what sort of life is required to say 'yes' to God's call of monastic vocation. Fearing saying 'no' to God for the sake of vanity, she reflected, would exclude her from ever experiencing God's Kingdom. Slowly, she saw that the religious life was "the best and safest state" and resigned herself to saying yes. Knowing that she was not destined for marriage, Teresa was drawn to the simplistic living of the nuns and monks that she knew, how their entire lives were structured around their commitment to Christ and showing forth his salvation in their lives, and was undeceived by the vanity that surrounded her in her circle of friends and in Avila, more broadly.

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<sup>3</sup> *Life* 54

## **Entering Carmel**

Doña Teresa's decision to leave her family was not easy. She loved her father deeply and was very saddened to have to distance herself from him, but she knew that her love for God and for Christ was a more important relationship to devote her time. She wrote, "For it seemed that every bone in my body was being sundered" as she departed her father to continue her life as a nun.<sup>4</sup> In 1535, Doña Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada entered the Convent of the Incarnation, one of the eleven Carmelite monasteries in Spain, in Avila and became, officially, Sister Teresa of Jesus, though for more than twenty years, she would be referred to by her title of nobility as Doña Teresa. Her apprehension about entering religious life was greatly relieved when she was clothed with the habit: "the Lord gave me an understanding of how He favors those who use force with themselves to serve Him."<sup>5</sup> As Doña Teresa settled into her new life, she found that God worked through her to change the mundanity of religious life into a delightful experience, yet she did not understand how her life was suddenly filled with a sensation of joy that she had never experienced. Teresa did not find complete ease in her adjustment: she struggled with prayer and, though she understood that Carmelites' primary vocation is to pray, she was not confident in knowing *how* to pray. She spent much of her time, instead, reading (particularly, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*) to enrich her apperception of spirituality.

When Teresa did pray, she would often ask God to assure her that she was satisfying God's will for her life. In return, God granted her with many spiritual favors of religious ecstasy: the gift of tears, visions and revelations, raptures, trance-like states, and levitation. Teresa viewed the interior locutions—which would base the fame she would earn after her death—to be a distinctive part of the phenomena that may accompany contemplative prayer. Teresa's humility shone forth in her declaration that she, a miserable sinner, was not worthy, nor did she deserve, to experience these revelations from God. Her mystical experiences greatly affected Teresa and her faith life. Her attitude of unworthiness never changed, but she gradually became more comfortable in her spiritual formation, despite the attention that her favors drew. Soon, failing health

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<sup>4</sup> *Life* 64

would complicate Doña Teresa's transition to conventual life; after her first year as a nun, her physical health broke down completely.

### **Bodily and Spiritual Sickness**

As Doña Teresa sunk into a comfortable rhythm at the Convent of the Incarnation, her new lifestyle negatively affected her body. The difference in food—from bountiful meals with meats, vegetables, and cheeses, enjoying recreation with her family to the meager board of broth and bread shared among the many nuns in silent meals—left her body quite feeble. Her new schedule, too, limited the time required to properly care for herself. Between the rigorous horarium, time spent working in the kitchen, and the training she received as part of her spiritual formation, the semi-luxurious lifestyle that she was accustomed to was no longer a reality. Her body and mind both felt the adjustment very strongly. Her initial uneasiness about entering the religious life transformed into a bodily suffering.<sup>6</sup>

Following the death of an older nun at Incarnation, Teresa prayed to God to bestow her with ailments so that, through her own misery, she could love God more fully. God answered her supplication, and within two years, she gradually became completely infirm with pains of the heart and was unable to do much more than remain in her bed to pray. While her illness was not as severe as the departed sister, the three-year period that she endured her suffering would bring her to what she later describes as her marriage to Christ. To ease the burden on the convent of caring for another sick nun, Doña Teresa went to stay with her half-sister Maria near Becedas, roughly 50 miles away from Avila. Her father and a nun who she had befriended at Incarnation accompanied her on her long voyage to the rural village. In the first month, her afflictions became too much for her to endure.

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<sup>5</sup> *Life* 64

<sup>6</sup> Glynn, Joseph. *The Eternal Mystic: Teresa of Avila, the First Woman Doctor of the Church*. (New York: Vantage, 1982) 45

## *The Compassionate Mother of Carmel*

In the village, there was a *curendera*<sup>7</sup> that many suggested might be able to heal Teresa of her infirmities. The treatments that the *curendera* used were very potent and Teresa's suffering heightened: she experienced more intense heart pains, a constant feeling of being bitten, chronic fevers, fatigue and lack of appetite, nerve pain, and a deep sadness. Her complete restlessness and inability to ingest anything exhausted her. The nerve pain she suffered radiated across her entire body and made anyone's touch unbearable. Unimpressed with the *curendera*'s treatment, her father took Teresa to stay with her learned uncle in Hortigosa, where Teresa was introduced to Francis d'Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. She spent nearly five months in severe discomfort. In August 1539, she sought confession before the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but her father denied her request, fearing that she was too weak to make confession. That evening, she suffered a paroxysm, leaving her in a catatonic state for four days. Her family and the local physician were sure that the twenty-four-year-old nun had died and summoned a priest to give her communion and perform the Anointing of the Sick. Receiving communion filled her, even in her comatose state, with a sensation of being completely filled with God's love. On the fourth morning, when she awoke from her catatonia, her father's and friends' sorrow was turned to joy, for they all doubted and regretted Alonso's decision to not permit Teresa to make confession. Doña Teresa was not fully recovered from her paroxysm and remained partially paralyzed for three years, unable to stand or walk on her own. She would continue to endure the physical pains until the following Easter, when the physician felt assured that she could return to the convent.

Despite her suffering, she found solace in the words of Job: "Since we receive good things from the hand of the Lord, why do we not suffer the evil things?" Yet, she felt that she was unable to resume her vocation of prayer.<sup>8</sup> She felt dejected by the corpse of a body that returned to Incarnation. Her inability to walk was met with a hurried determination to not become another nun's responsibility; her atrophied muscles in her arms soon regained the strength they formerly had which brightened her disposition. She did not, at any point, lose her willingness to conform to the will of God; she was happy to remain in that incapacitation for as long as God desired. She felt that these

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<sup>7</sup> a folk-healer, medicine woman

ailments made up for the wickedness of the sins that she had committed throughout her entire life. Soon after Doña Teresa regained a sense of self-sufficiency in crawling around the convent's infirmary, she returned to her regular solitude and prayer. In her deep, contemplative prayer, she met with God and spoke to God about her desire to be cured. She felt that the deepness of prayer that she achieved during this time was the greatest gift that God could give her and she worked toward a transformation, not only of spirit, but of devotion. She turned her complete attention to God and trusted that, in her conversation with God, she would find the most happiness. Her tears did not cease as she considered the distances that she created between herself and God, but yearned only to love God more completely, returning to God's grace. She no longer feared being punished by God for the sins that she perceived that she had committed. The fears of God she experienced, instead, were "enveloped in love."<sup>9</sup>

Once she regained a serious commitment to her prayer life, she adopted Saint Joseph, the spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as her advocate and guide. Her regular petitions to Jesus' earthly father and tutor were met with the granting of all her prayers and requests. She had an appreciation for Joseph that paralleled her devotion to Mary: "for I don't know how one can think about the Queen of Angels and about when she went through so much with the Infant Jesus without giving thanks to Saint Joseph for the good assistance he then provided them both with."<sup>10</sup> Teresa endeavored to mirror the sacrifices that Joseph made for the infant Messiah in her own life and, with Joseph as her advocate, she filled her life with contemplative prayer to know Jesus more deeply which, in turn, cured her of these ailments that she suffered for so long.

### **Becoming Sister Teresa of Jesus**

Doña Teresa, unlike many of the nuns at the Convent of the Incarnation, enjoyed a certain level of luxury afforded her by her family's socioeconomic standing in Avila. Compared to the dozens of economically-limited nuns who slept in dormitory-style

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<sup>8</sup> Job 2:10, *Life* 74

<sup>9</sup> *Life* 78

<sup>10</sup> *Life* 80-1



residences in the convent, Doña Teresa lived in a spacious apartment which had a guest room, her private cell, a small kitchen, a private oratory, and, likely, even a servant. Many of the wealthier nuns had similar (or even more grandiose) arrangements within the monastery's walls. Though they followed an exacting horarium, the nuns at Incarnation maintained a relatively relaxed adaptation of the Carmelite Rule of Saint Albert: the wealthier nuns (including the personable Doña Teresa) entertained family, friends, and other Avilese locals in the privacy of their apartments; all of the nuns participated in a relaxed interpretation of enclosure, with nuns often coming and going from the monastery to visit with friends and family inside Avila's city walls; and wealthier sisters were often ranked by and referred to by their social titles. The modified Rule allowed for nuns to retain their possessions and to receive incomes from outside the convent while the communal funds of the convent perpetually teetered on the edge of destitution. The population of nuns living at Incarnation during Doña Teresa's illness totaled near 150 and as many as fifty nuns were forced to return to their families to secure decent board because of the convent's severe economic insecurity.<sup>11</sup> As Teresa assimilated into the regular rhythm of the convent, she slowly began to understand that the way that Albert's Rule was practiced at Incarnation did not allow for her to adequately pursue the personal, quiet prayer that she savored during her stay in the infirmary.

Teresa, against her doubts, engaged in these social practices as often as her well-off peers. She felt that this was the custom of the monastery and that, should someone be visiting the monastery, it became her duty to entertain them, not fearing that these activities would cause her any harm. She was blind to the distractions that pulled her away from the prayer life she so desired. Teresa had found adequate time to spend reading spiritual guidebooks and socializing with other nuns and guests in the comfortable parlors (which were both discouraged in the Carmelite Rule), yet she understood that her vocation of prayer was not being exercised in the same way she felt God was calling her to live, nor was she living into the life that the Carmelite Rule suggested. Incarnation, she felt, was led astray from the Rule because of its loose understanding of enclosure and its approach to living in community. The Rule's request

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<sup>11</sup> Payne 27; Bilinkoff 113-5

for the Carmelites to dine communally, in silence and listening to Scripture was often overlooked, though many of the less wealthy nuns partook in this task. The constant socialization of the nuns violated Albert's tenth point, "each one of you is to stay in [her] own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at [her] prayers unless attending to some other duty"<sup>12</sup>—though many of the affluent sisters considered that their conviviality with guests was a responsibility, as those kin and kith were the reason they lived in such agreeable conditions—and his twenty-first: "The Apostle would have us keep silence, for in silence he tells us to work...Silence is the way to foster holiness."

Gradually, Teresa began to receive spiritual gifts from God in her prayers, though she spent many months attempting to resist them. With her usual apprehension, she felt that she was in no position to receive any revelations of God or God's movement in her life. Again and again, she writes that she, the miserable sinner, is not worthy enough to stand so close to God and to be loved by Christ. Eventually, she realized how little her effort mattered: if God wanted to move through her life, she had no options: "The more I strove to distract myself, the more the Lord enveloped me in that sweetness and glory, which seemed to surround me so completely that there was no place to escape—and that was true."<sup>13</sup> Teresa followed with a surrender to the will of God, despite her constant worry that she was not deserving enough to do so. She often struggled with forging new friendships, feeling that socializing with anyone but God would be too much of an interruption from her expectations of her own piety: "I did not consider that they were much better and that what was a danger for me was not so much so for others, for I doubted that there was always some kind of danger."<sup>14</sup>

Teresa's doubt about a particular acquaintance was rewarded with her first vision from God: "With great severity, Christ appeared before me, making me understand what he regretted about the friendship. I saw him with the eyes of my soul more clearly than I could have with the eyes of my body."<sup>15</sup> She grew to understand that spiritual friendship is more important for the soul than for the person and sought to love those that she encountered as if they were Christ and to help them turn their lives in a more Godward

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix I

<sup>13</sup> *Life* 209

<sup>14</sup> *Life* 86

direction, to build a deep relationship with God built on communication (through prayer) and spending time just being *with* God. She wrote, “It seems to me this must be why some saints used to go to the deserts,” though it seems that she still struggled to break out of the social habits that the other sisters at Incarnation continued to encourage.<sup>16</sup> To help with this, a priest recommended that, to please God, she must leave nothing undone: she should abandon some of her more frivolous friendships so that she could be more dedicated and intentional in her prayers. She heeded his advice.

One day, while reciting the *Veni Creator*, Teresa experienced a rapture, the first of the many she would experience. While chanting the prayer, the rapture came upon her so quickly she could not even doubt it was happening. A voice spoke to her, “No longer do I want you to converse with men, but with angels,” and she felt the words in her soul.<sup>17</sup> For God to have both moved through the priest to encourage this behavior but to also reveal God’s self to her in prayer, Teresa saw that this action was essential for her to achieve the closeness to God that she desired. She courageously sought to abandon things that did not bring her closer to God or enable her to love God more completely; she felt that God had recognized her need and gifted her with the determination to give up social attachments that she lacked previously.

In an effort to understand these visions, Teresa sought guidance from Peter of Alcántara, a Franciscan friar who had written several books on prayer and meditation on scripture. Peter was a deeply holy, penitential (yet affable) man who understood Teresa to have a very sincere calling to serve God as a nun and understood that her locutions were an exercise of God working through her life. He encouraged Teresa to create a deep trust for these experiences that she was having, to know that they were from God and not the work of the devil, and to continue allowing for God to grant her these favors, for that is the surest way for Teresa to know that she is following the path that God has laid for her. As Teresa continued speaking with and writing to Friar Peter, the Holy Spirit began to work through the pair of mystics and pushed Teresa in a new direction. In her *Life*, Teresa reflects on her second attempt at transforming her heart to face God and Christ: “I was thinking about what I could do for God, and I thought that

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<sup>15</sup> *Life* 86

<sup>16</sup> *Life* 93

<sup>17</sup> *Life* 211

the first thing was to follow the call to the religious life which [God] had given me, by keeping my rule as perfectly as I could.”<sup>18</sup> Under Friar Peter’s guidance, Teresa’s openness to God and receiving God’s love through visions and guidance grew rapidly, even though she maintained that she was contemptible in God’s eyes.

## **Reforming Carmel**

Peter of Alcántara saw something in Teresa that she tried to hide from for many years. A woman who often felt that she was not living into her full vocation, Teresa’s dependence on her claims of being the “miserable sinner” would last until her death. However, it was quite clear to Friar Peter that this woman, with her visions of God and her peculiar understandings of how to pray, knew something profound about authentic Christian living. Even before Teresa wrote *The Interior Castle*, Friar Peter could see that her understandings of a progression toward knowing God were an important thing for her to teach to others who want to know God in a similar way. Teresa, however, was very conscious of the world around her. With ongoing religious turmoil happening across the European continent because of Martin Luther’s Reformation and the changing role of women in society, as well as in the church, Teresa’s next encounter with God would make the wretched sinner into a courageous and resilient saint.

In 1560, amid a small group that gathered in her parlor, one of the nuns at Incarnation—who liked Teresa’s company and agreed that they could be doing a better job to live out their vocation of prayer—suggested that, if they couldn’t be like the Discalced Franciscan nuns who had recently established a convent nearby in Avila, perhaps they could found their own monastery where they could exercise a fuller devotion to prayer. Teresa, having already felt the desire to lead a quieter, more contemplative life, invited the opinion of a wealthy woman whom she was fond of. The woman, Doña Guiomar de Ulloa, thought that Teresa would benefit greatly from this new endeavor (both personally and spiritually) and offered to draw up plans and

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<sup>18</sup> *Life* 279

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provide an income for the new monastery. The offer of Teresa's friend was very important to the establishment of this new convent that would live under an ascetic vow of poverty in a city that was already strained by religious communities begging for alms. Teresa felt very inspired to found this new community, where the nuns could develop a true commitment to unceasing prayer. She envisioned a small convent with a maximum of thirteen nuns who lived together as equals and as friends and supported one another in their dedication to contemplative prayer for the sake of the Church and for the world. She, too, understood that this would be a challenge in the deeply patriarchal culture of her time; she would have to fight against the structures of social status and honor and would have to defend herself, her reform, and her nuns against the glaring eye of the Inquisition. Nevertheless, she persisted.

Teresa and her companions prayed fervently for some time over their new enterprise, agreeing to let God move them how God willed. Later, after receiving Communion, God appeared to Teresa and commanded that she "strive for this new monastery with all her powers" and promised her that it would be founded and that it would thrive.<sup>19</sup> God instructed Teresa that the convent should be named after Saint Joseph, to whom she had prayed for many years, and that both Joseph and the Virgin Mary would protect the house so that Christ could dwell within. Naturally, Teresa was apprehensive. She understood the challenge that sat before her, but she was also content living at Incarnation. She followed God's instruction and discussed her vision with her confessor, a Jesuit named Baltasar Alvarez. In some ways, Teresa may have hoped that he would have told her it was a vision from the devil or that she could never accomplish the task, but instead he advised her to consider if her financier could actually afford to provide for the new foundation and suggested that Teresa discuss the matter with the provincial superior, Angel de Salazar, and do as the superior advised. Instead, Doña Guiomar de Ulloa spoke with the superior, who joyously agreed to support the new house under his jurisdiction.

The public response to the decision to build a new convent was immediate. The city of Avila's reaction to Teresa and her companions' plan was not positive: many felt that Teresa should be comfortable in her own monastery (with her own private suite, maybe

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<sup>19</sup> *Life* 280

they were indeed correct) or that Doña Guiomar de Ulloa's support of the new house was nonsensical. Priests and preachers denounced their enterprise from their pulpits. But amid all the turmoil, Teresa received another vision in which God consoled and encouraged Teresa and told her that, like the many saints before her, she would have to suffer persecution more than she could imagine. This was soothing to Teresa and gave her the strength to continue with their dream with a fervent personal conviction and responsibility to succeed. Unfortunately, de Salazar soon retracted his agreement to support the new convent. He felt that it would be imprudent; it seemed to lack sufficient income, it was too small, and there was significant opposition to its foundation. Teresa was amused by the scandal and, with confidence, laughed at the threat of an Inquisition trial. Doña Guiomar, feeling slighted by Avila's reaction, went to a Dominican priest, Pedro Ibáñez, to seek his support. Impressed with their determination and their zeal to live under the Primitive Rule, he told the women that he would pray over their issue for eight days, asking the group to promise to follow his decision, whatever it would be. After this period, Ibáñez suggested to Teresa and her companions that they should hurry to bring the project to a conclusion; it was a small project and it could be easily accomplished without causing any more chagrin.

Teresa faced much maltreatment following Ibáñez's support. De Salazar would not change his mind to agree with Ibáñez that it would be a success and refused to receive the new house under his jurisdiction. Disappointed, Teresa felt forced to abandon the project. At Incarnation, many of the nuns derided Teresa for her critique of the way that they practiced the Mitigated Rule, particularly enclosure. The flow of guests that would come to visit Teresa dwindled sharply compared to the numbers that would vie for her attention in the convent parlor. Still under the threat of the Inquisition, she wondered if maybe their judgment was correct and that she was indeed deluded by the devil into thinking that she could start a new house. She devoted herself instead to continuing to reflect on the scriptures and to obscuring herself from the busy life of the convent for the next six months while remaining discreetly hopeful in God's promise that the foundation would be started. Soon after this period of devoting her time to maintaining silence, de Salazar was removed from his position and Teresa was invited to meet with the new superior of the Society of Jesus in Avila, Dionisio Vázquez, to explain her dream to the very spiritual priest. He was quite impressed with her devotion to God, felt that

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she was truly called to assume this project, and quickly gave her permission to resume her dedication to the new foundation. The two agreed to complete secrecy.

In 1561, Teresa recruited her sister Juana and her husband to fund the purchase of the new house in Avila and begin the necessary repairs to make the dwelling habitable, living in it as if it were their own until the time was ready for the convent to be founded. Doña Guiomar aided Teresa and Juana as best she could, though her efforts did not amount to much considering all the work that was needed to establish the new monastery. Teresa soon learned the burden of hiring and paying workmen, not knowing how or when she would be able to pay them for fixing up the house. Saint Joseph appeared to her and encouraged her to not worry about the payment, as he was certain that she would have more than enough. As knowledge of her need spread, her friends and family quickly ran to her aid and furnished the money required for the fees.

Once Teresa finally saw the small house that her sister had found, she felt disappointed. She did not think that it would be a suitable place to begin her reform of Carmel but, again, God appeared to Teresa: “I’ve already told you to enter as best you can. Oh, covetousness of the human race, that you think you will be lacking even ground! How many times did I sleep in the open because I had no place else!”<sup>20</sup> Once she planned out the house, she found that it worked perfectly as a small monastery. She paid for the bare minimum of work to be put into cleaning it up, leaving everything rough and unpolished. As Teresa began to doubt if this was too much poverty for her nuns, Saint Clare appeared to her and assured her that her needs would be met. Soon after, a nearby convent of Franciscan nuns would help to sustain Teresa’s financial need. This persuaded Teresa to commit to the sincere poverty that she astutely noticed Incarnation lacked.

At Mass on the Feast of the Assumption, 15 August 1561, Teresa reflected on the many sins that she had confessed about her “wretched life.”<sup>21</sup> Immediately, she was overcome with a rapture: on either side of her was the Virgin Mary and Joseph, her spouse, clothing Teresa in a fine white robe, showing that she was cleansed of her sins. Mary took Teresa by the hands and rejoiced at Teresa’s service to her spouse and encouraged Teresa to remain optimistic about the reform. To promise this security,

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<sup>20</sup> *Life* 290

Mary provided her with a fine golden necklace with a heavy, valuable cross hanging from it over her bosom.

With this promise in mind, Teresa sent a petition to the bishops in Rome to grant her a right to commit obedience to the new foundation, which was promptly approved by the prelate. Her agreement of secrecy with Vázquez was no longer valid. With the help of a new financier, Doña Luisa de la Cerda (whose husband, Arias Pardo de Saavedra, was one of the wealthiest men in Castile), Teresa felt more secure about her mission. For nearly six months, Teresa went to stay with Doña Luisa in Toledo and grew to love the city with its Moorish influences and bustling commercial center. Doña Luisa provided abundantly for the nun during this time, though Teresa felt that all of the gifts were undeserved for the humble servant of God that she was. Teresa describes Doña Luisa as a prayerful and penitent woman, very eager for God to grant her favors. A Carmelite *beata* from Toledo, María de Jesus, visited Teresa during her stay with Doña Luisa and she, too, received instruction from God to found a reformed Carmelite order and the woman quickly heeded God's call, sold all her possessions, and walked barefoot to Rome to acquire a patent from Pius IV for permission.

## **New Foundations**

Initially, Doña Teresa feared living in poverty. This is not surprising, given that she had lived very comfortably for over forty-five years. In her father's house, no one ever knew want and her time spent at Incarnation, in her private suite, is demonstrative of the level of wealth she enjoyed. However, Doña Luisa's commitment to establishing a new order that lived humbly in intentional poverty impressed Doña Teresa. Discussing the Rule of Carmel, Teresa first found out that the unmitigated Rule of Carmel ordered that the monasteries own no possessions and earn no income. Teresa was perplexed by this, as she felt that the impoverished communities that she had visited were not very prayerful, but later understood that their lack of prayer was not a reflection of the distractions they faced in their poverty: "For distraction won't make monasteries richer;

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<sup>21</sup> *Life* 291



nor does God ever fail anyone who serves [God].”<sup>22</sup> These monks and nuns were not poor because they lived a vow of poverty but because they did not practice their devotion to God as fervently as she thought they should. Doñas Teresa and Luisa agreed that their new monasteries should observe a poverty of wealth but emphasize a prosperity of virtue. The two, they felt, could balance each other richly.

Working toward the first reform monastery, Teresa found it difficult to live into her desire to live a true vocation of poverty. God and Christ appeared to her numerous times to reaffirm their desires for her to succeed in this endeavor. In the months leading up to August of 1562, Teresa wrestled with her will to complete this reform. She was greatly assured by Doña Luisa, Friar Peter, and de Salazar that she was working toward what would please God best, but she still doubted. When she returned to Avila in July 1562, after the six-month stay in Toledo with Doña Luisa, a patent from Rome arrived on the very same day, permitting her new convent to be opened. Friar Peter and a gentleman, Don Juan Blázquez, persuaded the new bishop of Avila to accept the monastery under his jurisdiction, suggesting that the new convent would be founded as a community of evangelical poverty, just as Jesus and his twelve apostles had done a millennium and a half earlier. The bishop was delighted—whether by their persuasion or by the idea, it is uncertain—and approved their request. Now that the opening of the new convent was a reality for Teresa, she felt that there were many impediments standing ahead of her that she would need to see to before dedicating the house: her brother-in-law, Juana’s husband, had fallen sick and could not vacate the house in Avila they were occupying; the workmen still needed to convert the house into a monastery, and she felt that she could not proceed without Doña Guiomar or Doña Luisa at her side. Teresa worked tirelessly to make up for their lack of time: she wielded bucket and mop, scrubbed, sewed, washed, and polished, preparing a house that would become God’s delight.

Despite her ample fears, on Saint Bartholomew’s Day, 24 August 1562, four nuns<sup>23</sup> joined Teresa and received the habit, the Blessed Sacrament was placed in the house’s small chapel, and the Convent of Saint Joseph in Avila was quietly founded. Eighteen

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<sup>22</sup> *Life* 303

days later, the convent that María de Jesus sought to found was opened in Alcalá de Henares. Teresa longed to “withdraw more from everything and live [her] profession and vocation with greater perfection and enclosure” and, jubilant at the sight of new convents for her reform, sought to obtain all permissions that she could to live in the new Convent of Saint Joseph with the poor orphans that dwelled there.<sup>24</sup> Before entering the convent church, Teresa was greeted by Christ, who received her with great love and placed a crown on her head, thanking her for her service to his Mother. Teresa’s visions of the Holy Family continued during her first few months, assuring the reformer of the goodness of the works she had done.

As the new community settled into its rhythm, Teresa, aided by several visions, understood how the convent should operate. Following a vision of Our Lady, she and the other nuns changed from their comfortable and refined black habits to brown habits made of coarse serge, with a cream-white mantle and woven sandals (making them *discalced*, “shoeless”), dressed as Mary appeared to Teresa. They adopted the Primitive Rule of Saint Albert and followed it perfectly, maintaining their vow of poverty, living a strict rule of enclosure, and maintaining complete silence except when in chapel. The new order rapidly grew to its maximum of thirteen. Teresa felt that allowing any more would corrupt the discipline that she and her nuns needed to maintain to experience true contemplation. The nuns were each called by their religious name and dedication, shedding social honors and lineages and living as true equals. Doña Teresa was now, more seriously than ever, simply Sister Teresa of Jesus. Teresa would remain in this house for five years, teaching the nuns how to pray in the ways that suited them best, teaching them about religious observance, and enjoying, only for a short time, some silence.

For several months, the nuns grew comfortable in their prayer lives, until a Franciscan friar, Alonso Maldonado, returned from the West Indies and told the community at Saint Joseph’s about his experiences there, including about the murder of millions of natives and slaves. The nuns’ vocations of prayer were finally realized: they must devote their every hour to pray—and pray deeply—for the world and for the

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<sup>23</sup> Antonia of the Holy Spirit, a friend of Peter of Alcántara; Ursula of the Saints, at the recommendation of one of Teresa’s confessors; Maria of the Cross, a servant of Doña Guiomar; and Maria of Saint Joseph, the sister of Juan of Avila

terrible destruction that was happening beyond their convent's walls. Teresa was still not content with this life, and longed to keep her reform going. She hoped that, soon, she would encounter an opportunity to extend her movement and found a men's community that would, with the nuns, live according to the Primitive Rule of Carmel.

During this same time, she was asked by a priest that she had met in Toledo, García, to write her autobiography, her *Life*. Teresa's hesitation is seen throughout. She was well-aware that her self-disclosure about the visions and locutions that she had experienced so far would only bring her greater scrutiny: the Inquisition, still unsure about mental prayer, would readily see Teresa's work as a written confession of seemingly heretical spirituality. Teresa, living under the shadow of Magdalena de la Cruz,<sup>25</sup> was terrified of the deception of the devil and knew that the mystical visions that she had experienced could lead her to a similar outcome as Magdalena de la Cruz. Teresa began her *Life* with the conciliation necessary to persuade the Inquisitors and her confessors, but then wrote with "apostolic zeal," first for the nuns of her reformed order, and then for a wider audience of disciples and admirers.<sup>26</sup> Though she was joyous for finally completing the task that God assigned her, her *Life* is full of compunction, very much like her own prayers and lamentations to God throughout her life. She continued to feel that she was a 'wretched sinner,' completely unworthy of God's love, for the duration of her life.

Her greatest achievements were still to come. Her cozy convent in Avila attracted the attention of the Carmelite Superior General, Friar Rubeo, and he begged her to open a second convent and, eventually, a friary. He encouraged her to continue working to please God and issued her more patents to found several more houses. In August 1567, one of her close friends, Julian of Avila, traveled to Medina del Campo to find a suitable house and obtain permission for a new foundation in that place. Permission was quickly given by Baltasar Álvarez, the rector of the nearby Jesuit college, and Friar Antonio Heredia, the prior of the calced Carmelite monastery. Both were close friends of Teresa. With the house purchased on borrowed money, Teresa and six other nuns (four had come from Incarnation) packed a wagon and headed the seventy-five miles to Medina

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<sup>24</sup> *Life* 311

<sup>25</sup> A Franciscan nun whose visions, stigmata, and miracles were investigated by the Inquisition and found to be works of the devil and condemned in 1546 to perpetual silence and public repentance

## *The Compassionate Mother of Carmel*

del Campo, leaving the Bishop of Avila and the townspeople thinking she had gone mad. When Teresa, this “restless, disobedient gadabout,” landed in Medina, the Augustinians there refused the nuns entrance to the house that had been arranged for them.<sup>27</sup> With the help of Friar Antonio, Teresa purchased a quite unsuitable house from a noble lady in that town so that their mission could continue. On the feast of the Assumption, 15 August 1567, Teresa founded the Monastery of Saint Joseph in Medina del Campo with four nuns from Incarnation and two young women who desired to live as Discalced Carmelites. In conversation with Antonio Heredia about her reform, the prior promised Teresa that, when she was ready to establish a community of friars, he would eagerly join.

At Medina del Campo, she also met Juan de Yepes, a very small (John was barely five-feet tall) and sickly Carmelite friar from the monastery of Saint Ann. John, at age twenty-five, had studied at the Jesuit college and worked in a hospital. Teresa was quite taken with the young friar’s diligence and his piety. When John disclosed to Teresa that he aspired to leave the Carmelites and join the Carthusians, seeking a quiet life of prayer, Teresa encouraged him to join her movement, to help her to found the friary she had longed for. When Teresa returned to her monastery, she burst into the common room, exclaiming, “Blessed be God, for I have a friar and a half for the foundation of a monastery!” Her humor shone through her excitement at the prospect of finally having her friary.

Teresa’s reform kept growing, though the humble woman was already growing weary. At age 53, Teresa’s life was already full of many changes and transformations, but she persevered. In Malagón, nearly 140 miles away, Teresa’s friend Doña Luisa de la Cerda promised to endow a new foundation. On 18 March 1568, Palm Sunday, a festive procession through the streets of Malagón celebrated the establishment of the new Convent of Saint Joseph. During that same time, Teresa was making the journey from Medina del Campo to Valladolid where she was bequeathed a house from the brother of the bishop of Avila, Don Bernardino de Mendoza. Teresa received a vision from Christ that Don Bernardino, whose life was not particularly righteous, would be granted

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<sup>26</sup> Weber, Alison. *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990) 158

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, Katharina M. *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*. (Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1996) 410

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compassion for his bountiful sins if Teresa were to found a monastery in his house. Teresa made haste to arrive in Valladolid to make the new foundation. She arrived and found that the large house, situated near a river, needed much repair and quickly donned her work gloves despite her ongoing illnesses. Though the first Mass was celebrated on 10 August 1568, the nuns did not take possession of the Convent of Our Lady of Carmel until the feast of the Assumption, five days later, a full year following the foundation of the convent in Medina del Campo.

Nearly thirty miles from Avila, Duruelo, a small farming community, would be one of Teresa's greatest foundations. A relative of Teresa's, Rafael Mejia Velázquez, offered her a farmhouse for her next monastery. In June 1568, Teresa, Julian, and Sister Antonia (one of the first nuns professed at Saint Joseph's in Avila) visited the farmhouse and found it to be almost completely unsuitable. It would require far more work than the poor Discalced Carmelites could afford. Yet, Teresa was determined to found her friary and wrote to Friar Antonio about the situation. Because the previous foundations had faced so much opposition against the local townspeople, Teresa wondered if the small Duruelo would be a hospitable place for the new monastery. Friar Antonio quickly agreed to Teresa's plan, only if John would join him. The nuns at Medina prepared a habit for the two Friars as Teresa and John travelled to Duruelo to prepare the house while Teresa instructed him about the Rule and their way of life. In November of that year, Friar John of the Cross celebrated, unshod, the first Mass at the Discalced Carmelite friary in Duruelo. Antonio and John would wander the towns nearby to preach and hear confessions and, in exchange, the local populations kept them well-fed. Not two years later, the pair were offered a church and a house in Mancera, only four miles away, and the Carmelite friars continued growing from this new location.

The Order of Discalced Carmelites would continue blossoming with such intensity for many years. Immediately following these initial foundations, new monasteries were founded across Spain in the next five years: in 1569, the monastery in Toledo was fully established by the end of May and the monastery in Pastrana by the end of June; in 1575, the monastery in Alba de Tormes was established in January; and in 1573, the monastery in Salamanca was founded in September. However, Teresa's traveling around the Spanish countryside ended abruptly in October 1571 when Teresa was elected as prioress of the Convent of the Incarnation in Avila. Her friend Pedro

Fernández specifically requested Teresa for the position, hoping that her presence at her former monastery would restore order to Incarnation and rapidly installed her as prioress, without a vote, against the wishes of many of Teresa's former compeers who knew that Teresa's installation would end the laxity of the Rule and the social life of the convent.

At Teresa's induction, the nuns were restless, jeering and throwing punches, yet Teresa maintained her poise and thought about how best to handle the situation she was now in. She left the disordered chapel for several minutes and returned carrying a statue of Our Lady, placing it in the prioress's seat and sitting below Mary's feet on the floor. She placed a statue of Saint Joseph in the subprior's choir stall and spoke gently to the nuns, advising them not to fear her for she was sent to Incarnation to love them and to serve them. For the remaining three years of her appointment, Teresa gradually and cautiously reformed the Convent of the Incarnation over the next six years to mirror the way of life that was lived in the smaller convents she had founded over the previous ten years. During Teresa's stay at Incarnation, she was finally able to live into her role of the compassionate mother that so many knew her to be. Her strength and determination not only empowered her as prioress of Incarnation, but in the subsequent foundations in Segovia (1574), Beas and Seville (1575), Caravaca (1576), Villanueva de la Jara (1580), Palencia and Soria (1581), and Burgos (1582).

## **The Last Chapter**

By 1578, Teresa's health was declining sharply. Following a fall down a set of stairs that dislocated her shoulder, she wore a heavy cast from her clavicle to wrist and required continuous assistance to do even the simplest of tasks. Already feeling old and tired, the sixty-three-year-old Mother Teresa now also felt helpless. She would always be accompanied by a younger nun, Anne of Bartholomew, who would serve as her personal nurse; she was never again able to dress herself, feed herself, or take care of other personal needs. Anne, an indefatigable worker, was always glad to sit at Teresa's side and learned much from Teresa. On top of this injury and the other ailments plaguing her body, Teresa was also developing uterine cancer. Neither this, nor her

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other infirmities, prevented her from desiring to visit her convents and to continue founding new ones.

The compassionate Mother Teresa was no longer interested in enforcing her Rule, but showing her nuns the depth of her love for them. In each of the monasteries she visited, she was greeted with joy and affection. In Malagón, Teresa got right to work to help the community elect a new superior. Her days of slinging a mop around were long past, but she was still determined to do her share. The roving Mother Teresa was relentless and Anne, ever faithful, helped nurse Teresa's hemorrhages and washed her linens. She was present at the last foundation she made in Burgos, having roamed the city to find an appropriate house, but was no longer the vigorous heroine of Carmelite life. When the first Mass was celebrated at the convent in Burgos, Teresa's face shone with happiness. She felt the pang of disappointment when her attempts to found a monastery in Madrid did not bear fruit, but knew that her indelible mark on the Church would not end with her death.

Leaving Burgos with Anne and her niece Teresita (whose father sent her back from the New World to be looked after by Teresa's family), they headed toward Avila where Teresita was scheduled to be clothed as a nun. Their route, traveling through Palencia, Valladolid, and Medina del Campo, was long and arduous and Teresa's health was waning with every mile. The trio left Valladolid after a tenuous visit with Teresa's cousin, Maria Bautista (who, upon their departure, told Anne that Teresa would not be welcomed back to that place), and headed toward Medina where they would, for a second time, not be received with hospitality. As they turned toward Avila, to Saint Joseph's, the Mother's 'home', Teresa and Anne were summoned to Alba de Tormes to pray for the birth of the duchess's grandchild. Teresa was not well enough to make the journey safely and Anne worried tremendously as they travelled. Teresa continually comforted and consoled the young Anne, reminding her of the great work that Teresa had done in the previous twenty years. The pair arrived safely at the Monastery of the Annunciation in Alba and Teresa was received with a bevy of kisses and endearments. A tired Teresa was taken to a warm bed, undressed, nursed, and comforted. Before she

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fell asleep, she remarked, “How tired I feel. It is more than twenty years since I went to bed so early! Blessed be God that I have fallen ill among you.”<sup>28</sup>

For eight days, Teresa joined the life of the community as their compassionate Mother, joining the sisters for prayer and reconciliation. By 29 September, Teresa’s health left her confined to the straw mattress in the small cell she shared with Anne. Friar Antonio rushed to Alba to hear her confession and the duchess assisted Anne with the nursing tasks. The duchess later remarked that she did not mind the task, as Teresa’s body emanated a fragrant aroma that seemed to fill the entire convent. On 3 October, Teresa received the last Sacraments, hoisting herself upright without assistance from Anne, surrounded by the Annunciation community, and, as the ‘wretched sinner,’ offered an apology to the nuns for the terrible example that she had set, imploring them to do a better job of keeping the Rule and Constitutions better than she ever had. On her deathbed, she repeated “Lord, I am a daughter of the Church,” and, still loving to entertain, sang to the nuns:

O, my Lord and my Spouse, now the desired hour is come. Now the time is for us to go. Now is the time set forth, may it be very soon, and may your most holy will be accomplished. Now the hour has come for me to leave this exile, and my soul rejoices at one with you for what I have so desired.<sup>29</sup>

By the morning of 4 October 1582, the feast of Saint Francis, whose simple poverty and single-mindedness Teresa had adored her entire life, Teresa asked to be anointed and joined in the prayers. For the duration of the day, Teresa was silent and motionless. In the evening, Anne stood in the corner of the room as Teresa’s head turned on her pillow, a wide smile held over her teeth, hands reached out to grasp Anne’s. Anne cradled the dying nun until she drew her last breath at nine o’clock that evening. After her spirit departed the body, the room (and indeed the entire convent) was filled with a heavenly fragrance and her body radiantly glowed. Anne, seated on the edge of Teresa’s bed, saw God and many angels escorting Teresa to the heaven that she so longed for. The duchess brought in a burial dressing of gold brocade and wept at her friend’s side.

The Convent of the Annunciation, fearing that Teresa’s body would be stolen or claimed by Avila, buried her the next day in a deep grave covered with lime and many

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<sup>28</sup> Obbard, Elizabeth Ruth. *La Madre: The Life and Spirituality of Teresa of Avila*. (Slough: St Pauls, 1994) 148

<sup>29</sup> Walsh, William Thomas. *Saint Teresa of Avila: A Biography*. (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1987) 579



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stones and bricks. Months after her burial, the celestial fragrance<sup>30</sup> continued to exude from the tomb. When Teresa's friend Gracian visited Annunciation the next summer, they exhumed the body to find that it was completely incorrupt. They dressed her body in a new habit and placed it in a coffin, but before closing it, Gracian removed Teresa's left hand to carry it with him as a relic. Three years after her death, Avila conspired to steal the body from Alba. Gracian and his companion Gregory, along with Julian of Avila and Don Juan Carrillo (the chancellor of the Cathedral of Avila), worked to exhume the body from the grave again. Still, the body released its fragrance and was perfectly incorrupt. Teresa's left arm was removed from the body to be kept as a relic in Alba de Tormes, alongside her transverberated heart, and the rest of her body was taken to Avila, to the Monastery of Saint Joseph, to be venerated. But, yet again, a secret plot was orchestrated by the Duke of Alba de Tormes, who wielded all his political power, to have Teresa's body returned to Alba de Tormes, where it has remained since. The remainder of the body, however, was desecrated and parts of Teresa's corpse can be found around the world, where they are venerated as relics: her right foot is in Rome, the left hand is in Lisbon, and the right hand and parts of the flesh are scattered across the world.<sup>31</sup> Even in death, Teresa's tired, frail body is of service to the whole church.

The work of Teresa and John's reform of the Order of Carmelites of Ancient Observance (the Carmelite order where Teresa and John both received their spiritual formation) would be officially recognized by the Catholic Church in 1593 with the creation of the Order of the Discalced Carmelites of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. In 1591, Teresa's beatification process began in Salamanca. On 24 April 1614, Teresa was beatified by Paul V. In 1622, forty years after her death, Teresa of Jesus was elevated to sainthood alongside Isidore of Seville, Ignatius of Loyola, and Francis Xavier. Her honor continued to grow and she was subsequently declared as the patroness of Castile and Naples. In 1922, the University of Salamanca awarded her a *Doctor ecclesiae*. On 27 September 1970, Paul VI declared Teresa a Doctor of the Church, the first woman to be granted this distinction. In his papal bull, *Multiformis Sapientia Dei*, he commemorated Teresa to be "revered [as] a very safe guide and teacher

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<sup>30</sup> In Catholic theology, this is identified as the odor of sanctity, which indicates that the deceased individual has acquired a state of grace.

<sup>31</sup> Glynn 140-41

of the doctors of sacred sciences” for her “knowledge of divine things” and for “promoting the love of the soul towards contemplation and attainment of heavenly things.”<sup>32</sup>

This recognition of Teresa’s contributions to Christian theology stresses the lasting impact that her approach to contemplative spirituality has had. Teresa, who longed for all persons to be transformed by God’s love and grace, understood—perhaps in a way that her contemporaries didn’t—the hospitable nature of God and God’s enduring affection for humanity. This love isn’t a gift granted to the spiritual elite, those who have made it through Teresa’s contemplative progression, but one that is open to all individuals, across generations, who seek to know and love God in that more intimate and more steadfast way. Teresa’s compassion for the Church and the world are evident in the way she explains knowing God. She is careful to make sure that her audience understands that God is not avoiding humanity, but God is indeed calling out to each individual, asking them to be receptive of that divine love.

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<sup>32</sup> *Multiformis Sapientia Dei*. Saint Teresa of Jesus, the Virgin of Avila, is Proclaimed Doctor of the Church. Promulgated by Paul VI. Vatican City: 1970.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Spirituality of the Compassionate Mother**

Having already explored the sociohistorical contexts that affected Saint Teresa's worldview and shared the narrative of her exemplary Christian life, it is accordingly necessary to explain the spirituality that her Discalced Carmelite movement produced, as well as the consequences for generations of Carmelites who lived after Teresa. This biographical information is meant to introduce Teresa in a way that demonstrates her relevance to modern Christians, showcasing the great accomplishments of her spiritual revolution, but also emphasizing the sympathetic humanity of the greatly-adored Catholic saint. Teresa penned three manuscripts relating directly to the Godward transformation that she experienced throughout her life; *Life*, *The Way of Perfection*, and *Interior Castle* each enable the reader to chart the progression of that transformation, helping them to identify the patterns of their behaviors that interrupt or distract that spiritual growth. In *Life*, Teresa uses a metaphor of watering a garden to describe the stages of contemplative prayer, while *Way of Perfection* is more direct in identifying these different stages. *Interior Castle*, Teresa's most famous spiritual treatise, portrays the journey toward spiritual betrothal to Christ as a progression through a castle, where the participant methodically travels through a series of mansions to reach the innermost mansion, which is the interior dwelling place of Christ within every person.

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Not long after Teresa's death, despite the threat of censorship, popularity of her writings grew. Many of her communities used (with permission)<sup>1</sup> *Life* and *Way of Perfection* as part of nun's formation processes, but *Interior Castle* quickly garnered secular attention for Teresa's sincere and unambiguous desire for others to love Christ as intently as she had done through her life. Though the growth of her renown was slow at first, her books would become highly suggested for those interested in practicing contemplative prayer as a vehicle to achieve this spiritual intimacy with God. While it is true that there is a distinct timelessness to Teresa's method, the magnetism and transparency of the humble saint herself continually draws people to experience a relationship with God.

### ***The Book of Her Life***

The first of Teresa's books, her *Life*, was written during her priorate at the Convent of Saint Joseph in Avila at the request of her confessor, Friar García de Toledo, and Doña Luisa de la Cerda, during a surge of the Inquisition. They thought it best for her to write a semi-autobiographical account of the visions and locutions she was experiencing so that, should the Inquisition ever point its finger at Teresa, they could defend her. In *Life*, Teresa begins with the story of her childhood, outlining the devotion that the young saint exercised as her parents instructed. She chronicles the path of her life in great detail until the foundation of Saint Joseph. When she began writing, she was in her late forties but had already experienced many visions. It is her *Life* that gives us the clearest understanding of what Teresa thought about herself; she continually addresses her various infirmities—including her catatonia, paralysis, headaches, and body pains—and says that she deserves all the strife she endured, as she is nothing more than a wretched sinner. This is the most visible theme throughout her autobiography and gives the reader a strong impression of Teresa's determination to show her love to God; if she were indeed such a horrid woman and were truly repentant for her transgressions, her deeply penitential demeanor and her sacrificing humility would be, from her

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<sup>1</sup> In some jurisdictions, Teresa's writings were still seen as suspect, despite the Vatican praising her

perspective, the best that she could give to God. But as Teresa develops her theology throughout the book, she is explaining what one could best do in order to love God: to sacrifice one's life to God's service and to, like Teresa does, fully resign oneself to God's will.

This is an important distinction to make because, particularly as Western culture shifts toward secularity, there are many individuals who may recognize their own interior struggles in Teresa's words. One may see how one's *desire* to love God isn't reflected in how they treat others or how they spend their time. Or, perhaps, one might acknowledge that one is struggling, as Jesus would phrase it, to serve both God and money.<sup>2</sup> Teresa speaks to an unlimited audience throughout each of her treatises on prayer and spirituality. In various religious traditions, it is necessary to live one's life in a way that reflects the peace and compassion of that worldview. This is paramount to Jesus' teachings and one can sense Teresa's vigilance to this and her desire for others to be aware of how intensely Jesus' life reflected God's love for God's creation. She is speaking not only to the sisters of her communities, but to every person in every time. She is using her voice to teach others to allow God to turn one's life Godward and to intentionally express love to one another as God does.

Some of Teresa's most profound theology comes from the second revision of her autobiography, chapters eleven to twenty-two, where Teresa allegorically uses four ways of watering a garden to explain the degrees of prayer. Teresa uses the symbol of water, which symbolizes Christian baptism but also emphasizes humanity's thirst for God. In the first way to pray, one takes water from a well, bucket-by-bucket, to water the garden. This will certainly take a physical toll on the body but will also be time-consuming. This is active prayer. In the second stage, one can obtain the water from an aqueduct. The water, flowing from a distant height, comes in a steady current. In this stage, one is nourished with God's joy, as a gift, and one knows how easily one can spend time with God, despite the chance that the aqueduct may run dry. In the third stage, one situates the garden near a running stream, benefiting from its flow with little effort. God is truly at one's side on this plane of prayer, and it is God's grace that pours into one's life, enabling the individual to love God through loving one's neighbor. The final stage, the

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doctrine and celebrating the innovative spirituality she proposed.

gentle rain, describes the blessing of a permanent union with God. For Teresa, this was shown in the gift of ecstasy, when one's complete consciousness is filled with God's presence and one's silent interior place is expanded to welcome God's presence, detached from one's surroundings.

However, it is essential to remember that Teresa did not write *Life* as an autobiography, but instead as a chronicle of the supernatural realities of the mystic experiences she sensed throughout her life. These gifts that she received from God took form in both interior (visions) and exterior (levitations) ways. This separation of interior and exterior is mirrored in the significance of the history that Teresa tells. The exterior story in *Life* outlines Teresa's movements through the world, the establishments of foundations, and the people she knew. The interior story narrates God's movement through Teresa and her life, explaining the mystical transformation of her life that propelled her to becoming the foundress of nearly twenty convents. Teresa wanted for all of humanity to experience a Godward transformation so that they could share in the grace-giving love and joy that she savored her entire life, describing interior prayer as spending time with the one we know loves us. In order to make this goal a reality, Teresa knew that she needed to instruct her sisters first, and wrote *The Way of Perfection*.

### ***The Way of Perfection***

Teresa began writing this book of teachings before she had made the second revision of *Life* at the request of several of her nuns and of her confessor, Domingo Báñez. She wanted it to be a tool for her nuns during their religious formation, enabling them to understand how to pray, to know the elements of prayer, and to learn the path toward contemplative prayer. The *Way of Perfection* also outlines how her communities should be established and organized, providing many of the details that would later become part of the Constitutions. Of the many guidelines<sup>3</sup> that she formulates in this book, she

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<sup>2</sup> Mt. 6:24

<sup>3</sup> These are not rigid rules, but instead guidelines for approaching interior prayer, as everyone's experience of prayer and of God will be different.

places the importance on unceasing prayer—maintaining a prayerful state throughout one’s day, regardless of the barriers that one encounters. She explores the topic of prayer thoroughly and teaches that there are three essential practices to inwardly and outwardly possess the peace required for a life of prayer: love of neighbor, detachment, and humility. These three virtues construct Teresa’s three-legged stool, with the life of prayer as the seat, and with each virtue as a supporting leg.

Beginning with love, Teresa divides the virtue into spiritual love and sensual love. Love, like prayer, takes on three roles: love for neighbor, love of God, and God’s love of humanity. The three modes of love reflect spiritual love and sensual love differently throughout an individual’s progression through one’s transformation—love for neighbor may be experienced both sensually and spiritually, but as one develops a closer relationship to God, the sensual experience of the neighbor becomes, more completely, a spiritual love. Teresa explores love as it is core to a vocation of prayer, particularly if that prayer is directed at the Church and the world. For Teresa, love must begin with friendships. As she is speaking to her communities, she implores her nuns to be friendly toward one another and to make friends with one’s sisters. Humans are social creatures and Teresa does not want to deny that right to her communities; if the nuns are to live in silence and pray without ceasing, their two hours of recreation must be spent forging friendships with the women they live with. It is through the expression of friendship with one another that they can work toward experiencing contemplative prayer. Only with compassion can they build a prayerful relationship with God that will enable them to pray for all of God’s creation.

Addressing detachment, she discusses poverty, mortification, and complete surrender to God’s will. Teresa argues, “a great aid to going against your will is to bear in mind continually how all is vanity and how quickly everything comes to an end.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout the chapters on humility, her instructions to her nuns are easily transmuted for a non-monastic audience: she encourages the reader to experience an authenticity of permitting God to take the reins and to self-enforce a discipline that will enable people living in the world to avoid things that restrain one’s ability to resign oneself and one’s will to God. The goal of detachment is an interior freedom from worry of any kind. It is

a separation of the self from the external machinations of society and allows an individual to separate their life from things like honor, wealth, or creature comforts in order to more satisfactorily and more intentionally serve God and God's will for oneself.

Humility always follows, in the shadow of detachment. To be truly humble, one must detach oneself from those things that detract from one's commitment to living a God-centered life. Of the many steps that Teresa explains in her chapters on humility, one that is most important to her reasoning is a refusal of honor, which is reflective of her experiences at Incarnation. She encourages her nuns to "diligently put a stop to [preoccupations with self-interest], what today seems to be nothing will tomorrow perhaps be a venial sin...all, perhaps, are more affected by a bad custom we have started than by many virtue. For the devil does not allow the bad custom to cease, but natural weakness causes the virtues to be lost."<sup>5</sup> Her reassurance offers a greater detachment from all things that would inflate the ego, allowing one to deepen one's relationship with God through prayer.

The remainder of *Way of Perfection* is dedicated to outlining a productive way to pray. Teresa begins by inviting the pray-er to find a way to concentrate within oneself, to find a space of calm within one's busy mind and life. Here, she isn't writing to an audience who already is able to 'find one's center' but to one, like Teresa, whose mind is "so scattered [it is] like wild horses no one can stop. Now they're running here, now there, always restless"<sup>6</sup> She acknowledges that not every individual is perfectly equipped to practice something like *lectio divina* and that, for some, there may need to be a precursor to discursive meditation and offers her prayer of recollection as that first step: when "the soul can collect its faculties and enters within itself to be with its God"<sup>7</sup> It is, not unlike centering prayer, devoting one's attention to clearing that interior space where one can feel close to God, who is always wanting to spend time with us. It is being fully present to God, as God is always fully present to us.

Teresa does not discourage vocal prayer, but instead recognizes that for certain individuals, it may be a helpful tool for them to find that interior space. For her method,

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<sup>4</sup> Teresa of Avila. *The Way of Perfection*. Ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000) 121

<sup>5</sup> *Way of Perfection* 146-7

<sup>6</sup> *Way of Perfection* 204

<sup>7</sup> *Way of Perfection* 300



there is no singular way or formula to adhere to in order to achieve this recollection. Gradually, as one perfects this prayer of recollection, the soul is introduced to the prayer of quiet. In this place, the soul reaches a place of contemplation where it is gently quieted by God's presence and that interior space becomes a silent space where the petitioner can listen for, and hear, God. This is not a style of prayer that comes directly from human effort, but is one of the many spiritual gifts that is given, by God, to those who earnestly desire God's love.

In the following stage, the prayer of union, the silent interior space is widened and envelops all of one's faculties, enabling the individual to experience God's self-disclosure. Teresa's entire focus is placed on one's determination to pray:

[One] must have a great...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 all the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses.<sup>8</sup>

It is the individual's fortitude that will enable them to succeed on this road of prayer and only through the help of God will one reach one's destination.

### ***The Interior Castle***

Similar to the journey that Teresa details in *Way of Perfection*, *The Interior Castle* outlines the soul's progression toward God. This, her seminal work, portrays spiritual, mystical life as a progression of mansions within a castle, where the individual passes through the mansions to reach God at the seventh, inner-most mansion. It is a true treatise on prayer. While it is still written as if to her nuns, the message is easily understood in a non-monastic context and is perhaps the first indication that Teresa makes that her treatises on prayer could be useful beyond the convent walls. She begins, "I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of a very clear crystal, in which there are many dwellings, just as in Heaven there are many mansions."<sup>9</sup> Beyond the walls of the castle are treacherous creatures (sin), but between the first and seventh mansions are the soul's transformation from sinful creatures to the

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<sup>8</sup> Teresa of Avila. *Interior Castle*. Trans. E. Allison Peers. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008) XXI.2

bride of the spiritual marriage. This progression mirrors the ones found in *Life* and *Way of Perfection*, but is explained in a different manner, using different imagery but still reflecting the same progression of transformation.

In the first mansion, the soul is waiting in a courtyard where the individual still yearns for the creatures outside the castle yet desires God. The first mansion is cold and is distant from God. Teresa likens this to people who only seldom pray to God or spend time thinking about God. In this mansion, one must create humility within oneself and recognize that such humility is how the soul can connect with God. Within this mansion, the soul must pass through a great number of rooms to reach the second, overcoming temptations that would regress one's soul along the way. Many may always remain in this mansion, grappling with the sinful creatures that remains in the courtyard beyond the gate, but those who wish to move toward the second mansion must "put aside all unnecessary affairs and business."<sup>10</sup> Those who remain in this house, Teresa alludes, do not know God. The second mansion, the mansion of the practice of prayer, though still within the reach of the creatures in the courtyard, is a place for the soul to enjoy the first stage of transformation. The soul will slowly come to know God in this place and will understand the basics of prayer and theology. It is perhaps, compared to the symbol of watering a garden in *Life*, only possessing the bucket that one could carry to the well. The third mansion, the mansion of exemplary life, introduces the soul to discipline and one begins to understand the necessary self-surrender (detachment) that one requires devoting oneself to active prayer, not merely saying 'hello' to God, but expressing the humility one learns in the second mansion. The soul has not yet experienced the fullness of God's love, but has had a taste and can slowly understand the interior desire to know God more devoutly. This mansion parallels watering the garden using the aqueduct and the prayer of recollection.

The fourth mansion is where the soul begins to recognize its own transformation through spiritual consolations. It is equal to the prayer of quiet or watering the garden directly from a spring. In the fourth mansion, one begins to experience mystical gifts from God and the soul is much less active in the process of prayer. The soul is detached, no longer hindered by the memory of the creatures before the first mansion, and it can

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<sup>9</sup> *Interior Castle* 15

respond to trials from God while not being burdened and distracted by worldly concerns. The fifth mansion produces within the soul the prayer of union and introduces the soul to a new experience of contemplation: spiritual betrothal. The fifth mansion initiates the psychological connection with God, where the mind and the soul unite in God's presence and the physical faculties are 'asleep.' The sixth mansion becomes the place where the betrothed spend much time together, where Teresa describes that God rests here, "as if in a gold reliquary."<sup>11</sup> One spends time with God in this place to know God, and to experience God in a new way, one that is not easily described. In the sixth mansion, the soul receives any number of locutions and the spiritual and mystical experience is heightened by a lack of awareness of one's surroundings. The seventh and final mansion is where the soul meets its spiritual marriage to God. The soul is completely resigned to the will of God as the gentle rain falls. The seventh mansion culminates the complete transformation of the soul, creating a mystical experience of perfect peace.

Teresa understands that not all her nuns (nor any individual who seeks contemplation as a religious discipline) will reach the seventh mansion. However, she does adequately communicate that the action of spending time with the one who we know loves us is satisfying enough for God. When spirituality is exercised with humility, charity, and detachment at the core of one's prayer life, one can still accomplish a transformation of soul and life. Teresa's realistic way of portraying that transmuting journey through her three methods makes the contemplative prayer experience accessible to any individual that seeks to know God in this way. Because Teresa's proposes different methods to know God, her pattern extends to anyone who reads her instructions through their desire to develop that relationship with Christ.

Teresa's unique theology is applicable in many contexts because of the accessibility that she includes in her writings. She offers an acute awareness of the different experiences that her readers may have of God and of prayer and is certain to acknowledge the varied struggles that one may encounter while exploring that interior silent space. Teresa's true character shows through her writing in this way. Her own mystical experiences allow for her to speak genuinely about the journey she

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<sup>10</sup> *Interior Castle* 25

recommends others to take. Her sensitivity to the reader's needs accentuate her feministic attitude and her role in Carmel as the compassionate foundress and mother. Teresa's interpretation of her own misgivings in God's eyes makes her relatable to the reader, too; one could perhaps see themselves in Teresa's doubts, wondering if one is living up to God's calling for one's life. Teresa's personality impacts the reader in various ways, but most importantly is the adaptability of contexts dependent on the reader's interpersonal and spiritual needs.

### **Teresian Carmelite Spirituality**

Carmelites throughout history have ministered to the Church through prayer, but also through an outward ministry of teaching others to pray. Teresa's writings, as well as those of the Discalced Carmelites that came after her, emphasize utilizing contemplative prayer as an avenue to closeness with Christ and with God. Following the structure laid out by Teresa in her writings, Carmelite life is characteristic of Teresa's three-legged stool of simple living, devoted to God, emphasizing a life of prayer dedicated to humility, detachment, and charity. It is from these three legs of her stool that true contemplative prayer can exist. The primary aim of contemplative prayer is to exercise these virtues in a way that produces the deep, inward transformation that contemplative practices invite. It goes deeper than a prayer of supplication. Many Christians often seek God's help or intervention in times of need, or in crises, but never just for the sake of saying hello to God. The Right Reverend Edward Salmon often told a story about a person he met on an airplane who, when noticing a clergyman sitting in the next seat, shared about his own relationship with God: he believes in God but never goes to church and never prays. Bishop Salmon responded, "Well, would you send your mother a Christmas card and write, 'Hello, mother, I believe you exist but I'm not coming to visit you nor will I call you this year?'" The individual, of course, did not know how to respond. This is the distinction of contemplative life. It is not dedicated to the frivolity of social media or the demands of capitalism. It is rooted in an honest,

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<sup>11</sup> *Interior Castle* 132

deep, and mystical relationship with God, who created humanity for love and continues to call out to creation throughout time to enrich that relationship, by inviting God's creation to know God in a way that can (and will) transform an individual's life.

Carmelite spirituality emphasizes the building up of that relationship as the most important exercise of faith. For Teresa, mental prayer is a good place to begin. In such an exercise, the individual draws themselves into their own being, finding the place where God dwells within them and resting with God in that place. Teresian mental prayer centers on building up a relationship with Christ: "Mental prayer...is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him we know loves us."<sup>12</sup> God has initiated a friendship with us through Christ's humanity and, through prayer, one can experience God's perfect, divine love. Mental prayer is, however, only the first step. Spending time with Christ in that interior space, it is as if one is merely sitting and chatting with a friend in a cafe. Teresa suggests that the next step to prayer, meditation, begins the conversation with this friend. In contemplative spirituality, meditation deepens that relationship. It allows an individual to reflect on the things that this friend says and teaches them to listen, instead of just hearing, to what the friend means. She also explains that there are stages of meditation (prayer of recollection, prayer of quiet, and prayer of union) and identifies these in different ways in her writings, but, overall, the pattern to cultivate a personal relationship with God follows a sequence of intensifying levels of contemplative and mystical prayer. It is important to remember that when one prays as Teresa teaches, one is dedicating their time to knowing Christ. She is habitually focused on Christ's life, teachings, death, and resurrection and views Christ as both a friend and a brother. It is through knowing Christ and loving him in that intimate way that one reaches a spiritual transformation. The mystical favors received through Teresian prayer are gifts from Christ in return for the devotion of prayer. Only through Christ can true humility, detachment, and charity be attained.

There are several methods within Teresian contemplative prayer. Vocal prayer helps the individual to practice meditation or mental prayer. Taking a mindful approach to vocal prayer is preferred: attention must be paid to the words that one prays, to the

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<sup>12</sup> *Life* 96

weight of those words, and how one uses the words to interiorly seek God. A second, reading scripture, allows one to prayerfully consider the Bible and the Gospels and to use the texts to navigate a relationship with Christ. Teresa also encourages the use of imagery or icons to aid an awareness to the presence of God in one's midst, allowing the individual to focus completely on the scenes or the persons depicted and to look inward to one's own emotions. Self-knowledge is important to any form of asceticism—as with any relationship, knowing Christ more completely is dependent on knowing one's own self. Self-knowledge, humility, and detachment are tightly interconnected. Recollection, the most important to Teresa's method, occurs when the soul “collects the body's faculties together and enters within itself to be with God.”<sup>13</sup> The pattern that Teresa lays out culminates in the inward transformation of the soul.

### **Method: *Lectio Divina***

Of the many tools of prayer used by Teresian Carmelite spirituality, *lectio divina* is a meditative reading of Scripture utilized often in both monastic and secular life and is found within many other contemplative traditions. As with any format of prayer, there is a learning curve; a strict dedication to exercising prayer in this way is essential to its success. In *Lectio Divina and the Practice of Teresian Prayer*, Sam Anthony Morello, a Carmelite priest, outlines the four steps to *lectio divina* in a Teresian context:

1. *Lectio*: reading; the careful, repetitious recitation of a short text of Scripture
2. *Meditatio*: meditation; the effort to understand the meaning of the text and its personal relevance
3. *Oratio*: prayer; a personal response to the text, asking for grace to show through the text
4. *Contemplatio*: contemplation; gazing at length on something, where one experiences an interpersonal relationship with God.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Way of Perfection* 300

<sup>14</sup> Morello, Sam Anthony. *Lectio Divina and the Practice of Teresian Prayer*. (Washington, D.C., ICS Publications, 1994) 20

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For Teresa, these four basic steps to *lectio divina* reflect the journey toward relationship with God. Teresa describes the close, personal intimacy with God as a marriage, a complete unity of human spirit to the Divine. In reading, one experiences God in the scriptures and one can connect with God through the text in a sincere way. But first, one must ask oneself, to whom is one praying? What is it that one seeks in prayer? An attentiveness to the distinction of the human–God relationship is essential to fully engage this step in a positive way, both to honor the divinity and majesty of God and to acknowledge one’s smallness compared to God, creating an understanding that supplication requires humility to be genuine. While meditating on the text, one may find that the Holy Spirit is directly guiding oneself to a particular phrase or a person and their role in the passage. Then, it is up to the individual to meditate on where the Spirit is directing them and to find comfort in the Spirit sitting with them while one explores where one has been guided. The nurturing presence of the Spirit greatly enriches the meditation stage when one invites the Spirit into that prayer space. In the third stage, one taps into the deepest desires of one’s heart, analyzing how God is speaking through the text, inviting one to participate in a conversation and allowing one’s heart to become directly focused on Christ. In contemplation, one’s mind, one’s heart, and one’s soul is spiritually fed through this closeness with God. One’s love and dedication toward Christ, with the assistance of the Spirit, fills that individual with a new understanding of inner harmony.

Throughout time, *lectio* has been a popular way for many Christians to pray because it allows them to meet Christ wherever they are. One can sit and read scripture in their prayer space, regardless of the baggage one brings to that space. It does not demand a full separation from the busyness of life and enables a deep understanding of scriptural passages. It allows the individual to see themselves in stories about Christ’s life and introduces them to interacting with Christ in a new way. In the four steps of *lectio*, the individual reflects on where one ends up in the story and how God is using that to speak to them to address their needs and desires and to provide a sacred space for reflection. For example: in Luke 10, when Jesus visits the home of the sisters Mary and Martha, Martha is busy buzzing around the house preparing a hospitable place for her guest while Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and listens to him. She chastises her sister’s unwillingness to help her, but Jesus defends Mary: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted

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by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” In this story, the individual will likely relate to either Martha or Mary (or even perhaps neither and will just be an onlooker). If one relates to Martha, perhaps God is telling that person that they need to slow down or let go of some control. Instead, if one relates to Mary, perhaps Christ is showing appreciation for how diligent they are about cultivating that divine friendship.

There are many other contemplative practices that an individual can use to strengthen their relationship with God. *Lectio* takes an adaptable approach to prayer. Similarly, things like journaling and other creative forms like art or music can provide this same venue for the participant. Someone who requires a deepening of an interior stillness may utilize meditation, sustained silence, or centering prayer in the same way. For a more active contemplative, prayer might be best manifested through meditative walking (perhaps using a labyrinth), yoga, and dance. For the extroverted contemplative, things like storytelling may be useful. Contemplative practice outside of a Christian context tends to fall into these same categories in unique ways, but perseverance is the essential component of success in contemplative prayer. As the Carmelites have emphasized in their various teachings on prayer, the discipline of devotion is fundamental.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Teresa's Legacy**

To understand Teresian Carmelite in its modern contexts, one must first recognize the many shapes that the spirituality has taken in the past five hundred years, the struggles that it has endured, and the other Carmelite figures that have shaped the spirituality in shadow of Teresa of Avila. Indeed, Teresa produced a theology that is profound and proves to be enduring five centuries later, but other notable Carmelites continue to attract inquirers to Carmel. The diversity of Discalced Carmelites who followed Teresa exemplify the adaptability of the transformation of spirit that Teresa yearned for people to foster. From John of the Cross, Teresa's contemporary and founder of the men's branch of the Discalced Carmelites, to Edith Stein and Titus Brandsma<sup>1</sup>, who died in the Holocaust, the particular theologies of other Carmelites have reflected different contexts where Teresa's patterns of knowing God can be applied and understood. The figures introduced below represent a small number of the Carmelites around the world, but they each adequately represent how a transformation of spirit can be actualized regardless of circumstances.

#### **John of the Cross**

*Spain, 1542 - 1591*

John of the Cross was born Juan de Yepes in 1542 in Fontiveros, Spain to Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez, who worked as weavers.<sup>2</sup> His father and next oldest brother

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<sup>1</sup> Titus Brandsma, excluded below, belonged to the Order of Carmelites (not Discalced) and was imprisoned and died at Dachau for his opposition to Nazi ideology.

<sup>2</sup> Biographical information sourced from Payne's *The Carmelite Tradition*

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died several years after his birth, leaving John's mother to move the family to Medina del Campo, where he would later meet Teresa. In his teenage years, John worked in Medina del Campo's plague hospital caring for the sick as a nurse-orderly, a concern he would carry with him throughout his life. Despite this, his early Christian education prepared well him for his second vocation as a Carmelite. In 1563, John entered a Carmelite house as John of Saint Matthias, turning down an offer from the hospital administrator to enter a seminary and then return to the hospital to serve as a permanent chaplain. The Order provided him with an education in the arts at the University of Salamanca and he was ordained a priest in 1567, returning to Medina del Campo to celebrate his first Mass. Soon after, he met Teresa of Avila as she was founding the second house of her reform and John was deeply moved by Teresa's life and yearned to lead a life with a strict focus on contemplative prayer. Teresa was eager for the young friar to learn, and was equally as eager to teach him. She invited John to accompany her to make the new foundation in Valladolid, to introduce him to the way of living that was offered in the Carmelite's Primitive Rule. John agreed with Teresa's reform, wanting to shake away the indulgences of Pope Eugene IV's mitigated Carmelite Rule, and, in 1568, he established the first foundation for the Discalced Carmelite friars in Duruelo, becoming John of the Cross, the subprior of the new men's community.<sup>3</sup>

Teresa's affection for John would continue through the duration of her life. When Teresa was called to return to the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila as the prioress in 1571, she negotiated for John to join her as vicar and confessor for the monastery. Several years later, in 1577, a group of calced Carmelites believed that John was ignoring his superiors' instructions by continuing his service to Teresa at Incarnation and conspired to have him removed and taken to the Carmelite monastery in Toledo, where he was held captive in their jail for nine months. It was during this time that John experienced an interior darkness, feeling abandoned and betrayed, not only by his friends but by God. But this captivity also allowed for John to discover the *Todo*, the All, and he began composing "the Spiritual Canticle." After escaping in August of 1578, his mystical poetry allowed him to become a competent teacher like his mentor Teresa and to help the Discalced Carmelite movement continue to grow. Toward the end of his life,

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<sup>3</sup> Payne, Steven. *The Carmelite Tradition: Spirituality in History*. (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press,

John was again the subject of persecution, this time by his Discalced brethren, for asserting that the newer leadership of the movement were too rigorous. John spent the last three months of his life at the monastery in Ubeda, where on 14 December 1591, John of the Cross pierced through the “thin veil” that separates humanity from the Divine.<sup>4</sup> John was canonized on 27 December 1726 by Benedict XIII.

In 1926, Pius XI named John of the Cross a Doctor of the Church for his notable contributions to Christian spirituality, including the *Spiritual Canticle*, *The Living Flame of Love*, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and *The Dark Night of the Soul*, saying that these works serve as a guide to all those seeking a more perfect Godward life. In *Ascent*, he writes about the appetites of mankind and instructs the reader to develop habits that use the human faculties to honor and glorify God, to purify the spirit to reach God. In *Dark Night*, he continues to discuss the purification of the spirit and the soul, paying close attention to the difficulties of beginners and the initial transformation that contemplation has on one’s life. The two poems, *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame* both describe John’s mystical experiences of love from and union with God. John and Teresa’s respective theologies and mystical experiences overlap considerably: both teach of a complete transformation of spirit and soul culminating in a union or marriage with God. Independently, John’s mystic experiences provide a framework for approaching spirituality that is similar to Teresa’s and both Carmelite saints have had profound impacts on contemplative life across the world and in every generation.

### **Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection**

*France, 1614 - 1691*

Not much is known about the life of Nicolas Herman. He was born in Hériménil, Lorraine in 1614.<sup>5</sup> Despite being born into a poor family and receiving little education, he was literate and possessed an understanding of God’s presence in the world. After troublesome time spent in the military and as a prisoner of war during the Thirty Years’ War, Nicolas felt a call to live an eremitical style of life. He attempted his vocation as a

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<sup>4</sup> Payne 43-44, *The Living Flame of Love* (qtd Payne) 1.29-35

<sup>5</sup> Biographical information sourced from Payne’s *The Carmelite Tradition* 86-98

hermit but did not have the emotional stability for solitary life. In 1640, Nicolas was accepted as a lay brother in the Order of Discalced Carmelites at a monastery in Paris, becoming Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. Lawrence found comfort in the religious life, though he experienced his own dark night, expecting harshness from God for his perceived shortcomings. Gradually, Lawrence's fears of damnation subsided and his soul was filled with a deep inner peace.<sup>6</sup> With this peace, Lawrence could fully commit himself to his Carmelite vocation, finally achieving the emotional stability he had formerly lacked. As a lay brother, Lawrence was responsible for the general upkeep of the monastery—in addition to his assignment working in the kitchen—including greeting visitors and helping the poor who sought comfort from the monastery. As he grew older and was no longer able to stand to perform these physical tasks, he was reassigned to work as the monastery's sandal-maker. In 1691, Brother Lawrence's simple yet active life ended peacefully on 12 February, supported and loved by the community that he had served for fifty years.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the contemplative lives of the other brothers, his busy life still allowed for him to achieve the eremitical inner peace he'd longed for in his youth. Like Teresa, Brother Lawrence's interior relationship was found in the simplicity of washing pots and pans and in the bustle of everyday life. He is best known for his book, *Practicing the Presence of God*, which is a collection of teachings and letters he had written, where he teaches that one can find delight in the company of the Divine, speaking humbly and lovingly with God at all times, in every moment, but particularly so in times of temptation and suffering. In his post as the gatekeeper of the community he served, he could share these practical teachings with the streams of visitors he encountered. His writings attracted a Protestant audience, too, as the Catholic Church's interest in his spiritual exercise waned. In *Practicing the Presence of God*, the influences of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are quite evident and Brother Lawrence's unique approach to Carmelite spirituality and the hospitality he showed to those that he encountered is very important to understanding Carmel. His treatises on prayer, combined with Teresa's teachings, can be helpful for modern Christians who seek to closely know God through the busyness of life and the distractions that contemporary society offers.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter 2, Payne 90-93

**Teresa of Saint Augustine and her Companions**

(The Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne)

*France, 1794*

Like the Spanish Inquisition, the French Revolution, too, impacted Carmelite history. As Robespierre's Reign of Terror haunted France, the Carmel of Compiègne was one of many religious orders that was targeted for execution, as religious vows were seen to conflict with Enlightenment ideals of personal liberty and rationality (especially contemplative communities who were seen to not contribute anything positive to French society's welfare). In 1790, privileges given to clergy and religious communities were removed, including a permanent suspension of religious vows and a prohibition of wearing of religious habits in public.<sup>8</sup> On 14 September 1792, the Feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross, the nuns of the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Compiègne were forcibly removed from their convent and forced to find lodging nearby, where they would continue under the leadership of Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine (Madame Lidoine), attempting to live as closely to Teresa of Avila's Primitive Rule as they could. Reacting to the continued persecution facing religious communities across France, Mother Teresa encouraged her sisters to make an act of consecration for the community, dedicating their lives daily to Jesus as a sacrifice, as a holocaust, to restore peace to France and the Church. In June 1794, sixteen nuns from the community were discovered, arrested, and imprisoned. Three weeks later, while washing their secular clothes, the order was given for the nuns to be delivered to Paris for their trial, forced to wear their prohibited, but dry, religious habits.

On 16 July, the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the nuns were found to be traitors, conspiring against the authority of the Republic, and were sentenced to be executed by guillotine. The next day, they were loaded into tumbrils and delivered to the Place du Trône; the streets fell silent as onlookers, normally frenzied with bloodthirstiness, watched the brown-clad nuns roll through the streets. As they prepared for their execution, each renewed her vows to their Mother Teresa, with the community chanting the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, as they would do at renewal under any other circumstances. The nuns were executed in order of their profession, beginning

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<sup>7</sup> Payne 86-87

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with Marie-Geneviève Meunier, Sister Constance, who made her initial life profession to Mother Teresa in the shadow of the guillotine scaffolding. Chanting the *Salve Regina*, a monument of Carmelite tradition, pleading for protection from the Virgin Mary, each nun was summarily executed, ending with Mme Lidoine, the prioress. The nuns were beatified by Pope Pius X in May 1906. Their sacrifice shines through the oppression that they endured. Even in the face of death, the commitment to the transformation of heart and spirit that many of these nuns had made (or still desired to make) shone through. They did not abandon their vows to secure their lives, but understood their execution as a necessary further transformation of self, one which would bring them to the ultimate closeness with God.

### **Thérèse of Lisieux, The Little Flower**

*France, 1873 - 1897*

Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin, born in Alençon, Normandy on 2 January 1873 had, by all accounts, a turbulent childhood. During her first year of infancy, she was cared for by a wet nurse and, at age four, her mother died of breast cancer. She fell into the care of her oldest sister, Pauline, but several years later, Pauline left the family home and joined a Carmelite convent.<sup>9</sup> The young Thérèse did not fare well through this transition but eventually found herself a new maternal figure in Mary, the mother of Jesus and devoted herself to Mary's service. At Midnight Mass on Christmas in 1886, Thérèse experienced a conversion of soul where she felt charity enter her soul and understood her vocation to be to save souls of great sinners. She prayed fervently for murderers and criminals that seemed to be beyond repentance. She heeded her vocational calling and entered the Carmel at Lisieux, where her sisters Pauline and Marie had previously entered, as Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face in April 1888 and quickly adapted to the convent's lifestyle. In her various duties, she was eventually tasked to help with the formation of novices, among whom later was her

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<sup>8</sup> For a more complete history, reference Payne's *The Carmelite Tradition* 104-114

<sup>9</sup> Biographical information sourced from Payne's *The Carmelite Tradition* 115-26.

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sister Céline. Thérèse was best known for her joyful, generous spirit and overflowing patience with more difficult members of the community.

Thérèse was curious about how to best serve God in her vocation and sought to entrust herself entirely to God's mercy. Exploring her own spiritual relationship with God and recognizing her own smallness compared to God's greatness, she would formulate her "little way" approach to asking for God's help: "God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself as much as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new."<sup>10</sup> She continues to comment on the 'age of invention' in which she lived: that there are now elevators in people's houses to replace the burden of climbing stairs and she, instead, would like to find an elevator to raise her to Jesus. In her other writings (particularly her letters), her understandings of vocation are explicit. She felt that her vocation was one of love, not just a love of Christ but love for the Church and the world. She could easily find God anywhere in the world and always sought to stand beside Christ, her spouse.

By 1896, Thérèse had contracted tuberculosis. The young nun's health steadily declined over the next year and a half until her agonizing struggle reached its end on 30 September 1897. Similar to Teresa's death, Thérèse's corpse emitted the odor of sanctity. Unknown to most of the world, Thérèse, at age 24, endured her sickness as if it were a trial of faith. She sought to find that elevator to Jesus and promised her sisters that she would return to them from heaven to be with them in a shower of roses. Thérèse was canonized on 17 May 1925 by Pius XI. Her writings would posthumously catapult her into fame, with millions of Christians around the world praying her "little way," leaving her to become one of Carmel's best-known figures and one of the most popular saints of all time. Thérèse is popularly represented bearing a crucifix and a bouquet of roses, both strong themes of her life and symbols of her destiny to live anew in other soil.

**Edith Stein**

(Teresa Benedicta of the Cross)

*Germany, 1891 - 1942*

Edith Stein was born on Yom Kippur, 12 October 1891 into a wealthy and devout Jewish family in Breslau, Prussia. As a child, Edith was independent and intellectual, despite leaving school at age thirteen.<sup>11</sup> At this same time, Edith decided to abandon Judaism, much to her mother's disappointment. Several years later, she reentered academia and pursued studies in philosophy, studying empathy for her dissertation. By 1916, she was awarded a doctorate (*summa cum laude*) but was unable to obtain a university teaching position because of her gender and Jewish heritage. In 1921, Stein had a conversion experience upon reading Teresa of Avila's *Life* and was baptized on 1 January 1922. From 1923 to 1931, she worked as a teacher at a Dominican girls' school in Speyer and dedicated time to lecturing on women's issues. In the face of rising anti-Semitism in Germany, Stein wrote an eloquent letter to Pius XI, urging the church to speak more forcibly about the persecution of her fellow Jews. As National Socialist policies surged across Germany, Stein found herself able to pursue a religious vocation at the Carmel of Cologne. She entered in 1933 as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and was highly encouraged to continue studying phenomenology and scholastic philosophy.

By the end of 1938, she was transferred to the Carmel of Echt in Holland with her sister Rosa (who, by then, had converted to Christianity and became an extern sister) for their own protection, where she would write *The Science of the Cross*, a study of the theology of John of the Cross. The illusion of safety was shattered just barely a year and a half later when Germany invaded the Netherlands. In July 1942, the Catholic bishops of the Netherlands denounced the Nazi persecution of Jews and Nazi authorities quickly retaliated, ordering the deportation of all Catholics of Jewish descent. On 2 August, Edith and Rosa Stein were arrested and sent to Auschwitz, where they were sent to the gas chamber shortly after their arrival. John Paul II canonized Teresa Benedicta of the

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<sup>10</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*. Trans. John Clarke, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1996) 207-8

<sup>11</sup> Biographical information sourced from Payne's *The Carmelite Tradition* 147-57.



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Cross on 11 October 1998 and declared her copatroness of Europe, alongside Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena.

To understand the contexts that each of these saints lived in is necessary to further recognize the adaptability of Carmelite spirituality in different cultures and eras. Edith Stein enjoyed the privilege of a modern education, something that her predecessors Teresa or Thérèse were not afforded, and converted to Christianity, seeking to understand the mystery of God's love. The martyrdom of Teresa of Saint Augustine and her Companions might parallel the widespread anti-Christian ideologies and Christian persecution in the Middle East, but carrying a relationship with Christ in that interior silent space is easily accomplished; it only requires a willingness to believe in the love that the Trinity has for Creation. Brother Lawrence's busy life as a lay brother can easily mirror the hectic lives of single parents or of independent college students who work three jobs to afford the costly tuition of private liberal arts colleges, and his determination to love God and his resolve of humble living prove to be healthy examples for modern Christians across the world.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Understanding Teresa of Avila**

*Exploring the identities of Teresa*

Remembering the importance of the different contexts that speak to the reader's experience of Teresa's methods of contemplative prayer, Teresa's own personality impacts how the texts can be read. Her mystic nature is very evident in all that she wrote and it is easy for the reader to detect the profound connection between Teresa and God. The way that she explains her relationship with Christ, the spiritual marriage, amplifies the meaning of that exchange, allowing the reader to understand the intensity of the mystical experiences that she received from God. Repeatedly, Teresa refers to herself as a wretched sinner, undoubtedly projecting her own fears about disappointing God. But this allows for a more substantive knowledge of Teresa, even within the context of her identity as a woman during the Renaissance. Her womanhood, too, successfully shapes how she connects with the reader and timelessly connects Teresa to other women who yearn to know God more deeply despite societal structures that limit not only their accessibility to God but also their access to power and autonomy.

Teresa's renown as a mystic is among the many qualities that one can contribute to the saint. Of the many, varied revelations that she received, her visions of Christ are the most profound and most grounded mystical experiences in the annals of the Church. She struggled for a complete rebirth and a fundamental conversion of soul and her locutions enabled her to see God working in her life to help her develop the intimate companionship with Christ that she yearned for. Seeing the suffering in Christ's eyes, she knew that she, too, needed to suffer to be transfigured. She worked diligently to create an inner peace where Christ could dwell, knowing that she needed Christ as her

shelter, the mighty castle that surrounded her heart. Christ repeatedly appeared to her and reassured her that he would not desert her, despite her many anxieties.

Teresa lived through the surge of the Inquisition throughout Spain, when the Carmelites' mental prayer was very suspicious to the patriarchy of the Church and the Inquisition. For Christians in Spain, the idea of the Devil was very real and mystics like Magdalena de la Cruz were persecuted for their alleged experiences of the Divine, yet Teresa never lost hope that God was moving through her to accomplish something necessary. With her boundless charm, she allayed the doubts of those who questioned the veracity of her experiences, mortified at the thought that they could be the work of the Devil. Teresa's continual revelations of God—particularly her levitations, recurring visions, and ecstasies—were often disruptive to the communities where she lived and visited. As a true teacher, Teresa shared with other nuns how they could attain such a spiritual marriage with Christ. Her sisters, too, could be servants to the Church through their prayer and their fellowship with God. Through *Interior Castle*, *Way of Perfection*, and her *Life*, she teaches methodical theology to her nuns in a way that's both accessible and practical, allowing them to understand her desires for them and to experience meditative prayer as a way of spending time with God. While her vocation was indeed one of prayer, writing her books transformed her inward contemplative vocation into an outward active ministry, allowing her nuns (and, later, Christians around the world) to experience God in these mystical and transformative ways.

Teresa's own misgivings about her vocation are seen regularly throughout her writings: she often refers to herself as a wretched sinner, criticizes her own attempts at living a spiritual life directed toward Christ, and lamented when she felt she was not meeting God's expectations for her. In her time at Incarnation, she wrestled with the desire to entertain her friends and to talk with visitors in the convent parlor and was tormented by her frivolity and distraction from God. Her illusion of her sinful life is matched by her doubts of her ability to follow where God led her. For many years, she felt inadequate because she didn't think she was praying correctly. She consistently felt that she was disappointing God and not loving Christ as strongly as she wanted to. She did not resist Christ in her locutions, but when she felt called and was encouraged to establish a new convent where the Primitive Rule of Carmel could be followed, she

insisted that she was not fit for the task. How could she, the miserable sinner, lead a group of women in a direction that she felt so incapable of going?

Teresa certainly did not understand why she, the wealthy noblewoman from Avila, should be fit to accomplish such a task that was set before her. She was rife with misgivings, reluctant to lead, and, in many ways, desired simply to be unknown. As a wealthy nun, she could choose to live comfortably and not protrude from the fray of the other nuns at Incarnation. She could wake at dawn, say her prayers, socialize with guests, meditate in the afternoons, and spend her recreation time doing things she enjoyed. Indeed, these were all options for her! Instead, her anxiety overcame her and she recognized her deficits in loving God. One can picture her, kneeling in her oratory. “Why me?” she asks again and again. It would seem that, just like the mystics that preceded her, God desires to speak through those who question their worthiness of accomplishing the task they are called to do. Perhaps it was this doubt that gave her the ability to accomplish all that she would. God worked fervently through many of the female Christian mystics, even when they hesitated. Teresa said “yes” to God and, in turn, God sustained her through the uncertainty.

The empowerment of women was not an unfamiliar concept for Avila. During the Reconquista in the Medieval Period, Avila was saved by the legendary heroine Jimena Blázquez and all the women in the town. The men were away at battle and the Moors thought that Avila would be easy to conquer. Blázquez, the wife of the governor, organized all the women and dressed them in their husbands’ hats and armor. They climbed to the parapets and violently banged together pots and pans. The Moors feared that the ruckus meant that Avila was defended by twice as many soldiers as usual and fled.<sup>1</sup> As the leader of this ferocious gang of women, Blázquez empowered herself for the safety of the women around her without the need of her husband’s permission. Teresa would, years later, fill the same role for the Carmelite sisters that sought to reform their way of life.

It may seem that Teresa’s life experiences are very relatable. She was a woman who experienced many things that modern women still endure: a culture of heteropatriarchal condescension, criticism of her womanhood, and continuous impediments to reaching

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<sup>1</sup> Bilinkoff 2-3

her goals. Teresa was very aware of the patriarchal Church that surrounded her. She recognized that her own position as a woman—albeit a spiritually wealthy noblewoman—who sought to create effective change in the church would be met with repeated challenges. And she was. Interiorly, she struggled to find assurance that her relationship with God was strong enough to empower her to accomplish the task that God had ordained for her, but she was persistent in allowing her experiences of God to shape her own vocation of prayer. It seems obvious that the Inquisition targeted women accused of witchcraft or being overcome by the Devil because Christianity, as a patriarchal structure and institution, had majorly depended on the works and spiritualities of men for its advancement. Long lists of influential characters in the history of Christianity showcase thousands of men's names with the occasional woman; Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Jerome, Origen, Ambrose, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, and Martin Luther often make it onto lineups of Christianity's most influential theologians while the opinions and interpretations of women seem to not bear weight until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, or Teresa of Avila begin to expand the gendered boundaries of the Church. Their unique mystical theologies overlap in many ways but consistently challenge the abiding assumption that Christianity is a religion for men.

Arguably, even Jesus would promote the full inclusion of women into the Church. Jesus seems to have always extended his ministry to women and invited them to stand at his side: Mary, his mother; Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles; Mary Salome; Mary and Martha of Bethany; Joanna; Mary, mother of James; Mary of Clopas; Susannah; the wives of his apostles; the Samaritan woman at the well; the Syrophenician woman and her daughter; and many others were uplifted by Jesus and his teachings. Jesus must have understood the patriarchal oppression of women in Jewish and Gentile culture and he actively associated with them, perhaps as a way of enabling their liberation from the oppression and exclusion they may have suffered. Even in Teresa's lifetime, Jesus chose to speak to a woman who struggled with her spirituality. Teresa was an intuitive person who knew how to make Christ accessible to others. Her pioneering nature fully prepared her for the transformation of self and society that would epitomize her life. In an era where women would have limited access to education, understanding their own piety could be an unwieldy task and Teresa

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recognized the need to uplift these women as Jesus would and help facilitate their spiritual exploration. These nuns could use prayer to know the Christ that seemed to only be available to the male-dominated institutional authorities that monitored and dictated their lives. Gradually, Teresa's charm softened the rigid responses she received in response to her dedication to teaching her nuns about prayer and piety and she found many influential supporters to back her reform.

Teresa's extroverted nature aided her in all her endeavors and she was an indefatigable advocate for the needs of her nuns. She could readily convince or persuade wary confessors that her methods would invite a closeness with God and could solicit approval for her nuns to utilize mental prayer in their spiritual practices because they would personally benefit from her sensitive instructions. Teresa was tenacious and emotionally expressive and she related to people as authentically as she could. She spoke to her nuns as equals and to confessors and priests with a complete recognition of their needs for her pastoral care (which were, perhaps, unknown to them). She broke the restraints of women's roles in the Church and society with her own theologies, emphasizing that women, too, could have sincere experiences of God.

Her experiences of Christ and of God connect Teresa to the great network of Christian mystics who have channeled the accessibility of God and the importance of virtue into the modern era. In the shadows of other mystic women—such as Hildegard of Bingen, Clare of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, and Joan of Arc—Teresa's own revelatory experiences of God have shaped and molded an enduring movement within Christianity which has, in turn, shaped modern Christians' understandings of God. Her patterns for attaining a spiritual marriage to Christ are seen in how monastic communities continue to teach, preach, live, and pray with Christ at the center of their particular theologies. Her urgency for unceasing prayer for the Church and the world is exercised in Christian monasteries in many parts of the world. Teresian Carmelite spirituality is a vocation of prayer that remains important in a changing political and religious sphere.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Teresian Carmelite Spirituality for the Twenty-first Century**

For a twenty-first-century Christian, understanding God as Teresa of Avila did, at the deep, interior level, can be a lofty goal, and it is certainly something that is not approachable for every person. Producing an interior silence in a world filled with noise is a goal that seems far too unattainable for many Christians in many parts of the world. When one is surrounded by distractions like social media, a busy work life, and/or children who need to be shuttled off to Little League games, finding the time to sit and reflect on one's personal relationship with Jesus doesn't easily become the first priority. It's difficult to sit in a comfortable chair and do nothing for an hour when one's diary is filled with appointments and meetings. One is always evading the still small voice in the tiny back corner of the brain that is calling one's name—the voice of God that is trying to gather up the individual's faculties to allow that quiet space to grow. Teresa did not seek the silver and gold from the Andes like many of her siblings; instead, she yearned only for an interior peace where she could grow to know God and love Christ more completely. She responded to that awakening voice with her full heart and let God transform her life.

But how would Teresa respond to Facebook? What would her tweets look like? Would she prefer Mac or PC? What would she have to say about Donald Trump's haphazard first hundred days as president? These are real questions that many contemplative communities around the world have had to wrestle over the past half-century. How does a community of Discalced Carmelites continue to thrive in bustling areas like Los Angeles or New York City? Do they purchase a computer to stay relevant

or does it just become a distraction in their contemplative life? How does their communal life change with the invention of social networking like Facebook? How do contemplative communities maintain an environment of silence with the phone ringing every fifteen minutes? How does a cloistered community stay relevant when their Rule demands strict enclosure? Does their enclosure mean they can't run down to the shop to pick up a quart of milk? More importantly, for Christians who don't live within communities—such as those from secular or dispersed orders, those who are oblates of a contemplative order, or just ordinary Christians with the luxury of contemplation—how should contemplative prayer be incorporated into one's day in a way that keeps God at the very center of one's rhythm? Similar to Teresa's own apprehensions about accomplishing what she felt God planned for her to do, modern Christians (especially those living in the busyness of Western culture) have to grapple with and, ultimately, recognize the shortcomings which prevent them from accomplishing an intimate closeness with God and adapt to be able to hear the still small voice as God tries to direct their lives toward transformation.

Indeed, Carmelite communities must adapt to their changing environments just as any other collective of people must do. Particularly in the West, they tend to reflect the society that surrounds them: monasteries own cars to run errands, such as doctor's appointments or visiting local parishes; most communities allow their members to have a cell phone, particularly for emergencies but also to keep in contact with family and friends they knew before entering Carmel; and some communities have an online presence, offering a space for visitors to their webpage to make prayer requests, access worship service times, or to explore one's own sense of vocational calling to be a Carmelite. Having an online presence becomes an essential for many of these communities as they experience membership decline due to death or decreased interest; it allows the community to connect with a broader audience than they could through conventional means and, with that, increases the network of support needed to effectively run a monastery, particularly so if the community is small and extra hands are needed to assist in the daily maintenance of the house. But what is remarkable is that Discalced Carmelites across the world still look to our noble Saint Teresa, learning from her teachings and experiencing God in the same way that she desired for them.



Additionally, a question that will require further exploration outside of this document: how does someone who does not carry the multiple layers of privilege that enable an individual to sit and contemplate God relate to spiritual teachers like Teresa? How does someone focus themselves interiorly if they are unable to feed themselves? How does one pray without ceasing if they are working tirelessly to provide for their children? How can one look to Teresa's model for guidance when one is unable to imagine living in their own tastefully-furnished apartment, as Teresa did? These are certainly valid counterarguments to the applicability of Teresian Carmelite spirituality, but, unfortunately, only further complicate the argument of this document. This area requires more research and analysis than the length of this document can accommodate.

Remembering that Teresa was a pioneer of contemplative teaching and that she lived centuries ahead of the women's suffrage movement and feminist movements in the West, her influential teachings carry an importance of honoring that interior space as God's dwelling space transcends generational and centurial shifts of culture and society. She writes to Christians of any age, emphasizing their ability to connect with God in any setting, despite the stressors that they face outside of that interior space. When Teresa was young and went on a bold adventure to find the Moors so that she could die a martyr, she was embracing the sense of adventure and wonder that Carmelite spirituality represents: inviting an individual to enter an unknown world that focuses on silence, solitude, and introspection. It requires the inquirer to reflect heavily on one's own life, how God has moved and continues to move through it, and how one is called to meet God in that interior place. It also stresses a life that is a perfect blend of friendship and solitude—one's primary goal is to foster a relationship with Christ (and, if living in a community, with those one lives with) while living a solitary and independent life in an environment of silence. This should seem like a severe challenge for twenty-first-century Christians.

A dense theme through Teresa's writings is an emphasis on one's need to be patient while listening for God in that interior space and to be mindful of God's presence. Alongside this patience and mindfulness is a complete self-emptying which transforms the individual, both interiorly and exteriorly. By spending an hour or two every day with God in that interior space, one is opening one's life to this transformation. If one were to track the amount of time one spends scrolling through Facebook or sitting in traffic, it

seems probable that it would total more than an hour a day. Redirecting a portion of that time to facing Godward would foster the creation of that interior space. One could easily incorporate a mindfulness or contemplative practice into one's routine, starting with five minute periods of silent, meditative prayer in the morning and adding time to that window every few weeks so that, eventually, one can spend an hour a day sitting with God.

Silence, while an important part of Teresian Carmelite spirituality, is a necessary resource for contemplation. It has countless restorative properties: silence calms the body, amplifies introspection, and resets how one connects with one's surroundings. Humanity values the silence that it can find. A great sacrifice comes from seeking out a sacred space where one can just sit and *not* think, *not* be bombarded by ads and Facebook likes, and *not* be interrupted by the sound of buses changing gear. Studies of human physiology have shown that individuals who live in consistently loud environments release continuously high levels of stress hormones.<sup>1</sup> Chronic noise from airports or other transportation networks can have negative impacts on a child's development, while persistent beeping in hospitals can slow patient health and can have negative impacts on nurses' productivity, as well.<sup>2</sup> The body's cells are transformed by noise, but also by silence. Similar studies have shown how silence therapy could impact conditions like dementia or depression.<sup>3</sup> If enduring clatter adversely affects the body while silence can be reparative, perhaps contemplative life's transformation is not merely spiritual but also a physical renewal. Modern Christians who feel plagued by the tapping of keyboards and the ding-ding of text message alerts could indeed benefit from stepping back away from their devices to re-center themselves both spiritually and bodily. Conceivably, that still small voice can still be heard over the purr of interstate highway traffic or the droning sound of electricity, of which most of humanity has become desensitized. The voice of God is still there, lingering, waiting for the individual to recognize, hear, and listen to that transcendental cry.

However, as we have explored, prayer is essential within this silence. A prayer that eagerly and mindfully responds to God's apparent fascination with God's creation is, for

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<sup>1</sup> Gross, Daniel A. "This is Your Brain on Silence." *Nautilus*. 21 August 2014. Web.

<sup>2</sup> Novotney, Amy. "Silence, Please." *Monitor on Psychology*. Vol 11, No 7. July/Aug 2011. pp. 46-49.

<sup>3</sup> Gross, "This is Your Brain on Silence."

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Teresa, the best way to approach reconnecting with God in an authentic way. She teaches that humanity must thirst for God. Through this longing, the individual can be born anew and live and act in a more Christ-like way. In her spiritual marriage to Christ, one can interpret that her complete transformation—spiritual, corporal, emotional, and mental—redressed the behaviors, vices, and characteristics that distanced her from God. This culminates her teachings on detachment and humility. Through these processes, fatalistic self-worth can be wholly redefined and reframed in a new, positive way. Christians living today can aim to accomplish these transformations within their own personal contexts; it is possible to become detached from the worldly distractions that plague Western society and to exemplify a humility of spirit that recognizes God’s will for one’s life.

If God calls for humans to sit next to God and develop a relationship with God that is centered in being more Christ-like, sometimes the distractions exist only to propel the individual closer to God. Distraction forces a person to reconcile their true desires against their actions. If an individual longs to respond to Christ’s companionship and engage with Christ on an intimate level, one should be willing to recognize the distractions that prevent an authentic discourse with “the one we know loves us.” One has to step away from an inbox full of unread e-mails and focus one’s energies on allowing God to Temptation seems to grow more pervasive as one inches away from an openness to experiencing God’s love through relationship with Christ. Just as Christ retreated into the desert to battle Satan’s temptations and the early Christian monastics did the same, modern Christians should find a silent place where they can depart the busyness of daily life and experience a similar retreat if they want to experience God and God’s love just as Teresa did. Carmelite spirituality can only teach the way to begin that journey if the traveler has prepared an interior space to escape distraction.

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**Appendix**

*I. The Carmelite Rule of Albert<sup>1</sup>*

1. Albert, called by God's favor to be Patriarch of the Church of Jerusalem, bids health in the Lord and the blessing of the Holy Spirit to his beloved sons in Christ, B. and the other hermits under obedience to him, who live near the spring [of Elijah] on Mount Carmel.
2. Many and varied are the ways in which our saintly forefathers laid down how everyone, whatever his station or the kind of religious observance he has chosen, should live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ—how, pure in heart and stout in conscience, he must be unswerving in the service of his Master.
3. It is to me, however, that you have come for a rule of life in keeping with your avowed purpose, a rule you may hold fast to henceforward; and therefore:
4. The first thing I require is for you to have a prior, one of yourselves, who is to be chosen for the office by common consent, or that of the greater and maturer part of you; each of the others must promise him obedience -- of which, once promised, he must try to make his deeds the true reflection—*and also chastity and the renunciation of ownership.*<sup>2</sup>
5. *If the prior and brothers see fit, you may have foundations in solitary places, or where you are given a site that is suitable and convenient for the observance proper to your Order.*
6. Next, each one of you is to have a separate cell, situated as the lie of the land you propose to occupy may dictate, and allotted by disposition of the Prior with the agreement of the other brothers, or the more mature among them.
7. *However, you are to eat whatever may have been given you in a common refectory, listening together meanwhile to a reading from Holy Scripture where that can be done without difficulty.*
8. None of the brothers is to occupy a cell other than that allotted to him or to exchange cells with another, without leave or whoever is prior at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Bede Edwards, originally published in *The Rule of Saint Albert*, eds. Hugh Clarke and Bede Edwards (Aylesford and Kensington: n.p., 1973) 79-93.

<sup>2</sup> Italicized portions of text are additions and modifications made by Innocent IV in 1247.

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9. The Prior's cell should stand near the entrance to your property, so that he may be the first to meet those who approach, and whatever has to be done in consequence may all be carried out as he may decide and order.
10. Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty.
11. *Those who know how to say the canonical hours with those in orders should do so, in the way those holy forefathers of ours laid down, and according to the Church's approved custom. Those who do not know the hours must say twenty-five Our Fathers for the night office, except on Sundays and solemnities when that number is to be doubled so that the Our Father is said fifty times; the same prayer must be said seven times in the morning in place of Lauds, and seven times too for each of the other hours, except for Vespers when it must be said fifteen times.*
12. *None of the brothers must lay claim to anything as his own, but you are to possess everything in common; and each is to receive from the prior -- that is from the brother he appoints for the purpose -- whatever befits his age and needs.*
13. *You may have as many asses and mules as you need, however, and may keep a certain amount of livestock or poultry.*
14. An oratory should be built as conveniently as possible among the cells, where, if it can be done without difficulty, you are to gather each morning to hear Mass.
15. On Sundays too, or other days if necessary, you should discuss matters of discipline and your spiritual welfare; and on this occasion the indiscretions and failings of the brothers, if any be found at fault, should be lovingly corrected.
16. You are to fast every day, except Sundays, from the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross until Easter Day, unless bodily sickness or feebleness, or some other good reason, demand a dispensation from the fast; for necessity overrides every law.
17. *You are to abstain from meat, except as a remedy for sickness or feebleness. But as, when you are on a journey, you more often than not have to beg your way; outside your own houses you may eat foodstuffs that have been cooked with*

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*meat, so as to avoid giving trouble to your hosts. At sea, however, meat may be eaten.*

18. Since man's life on earth is a time of trial, and all who would live devotedly in Christ must undergo persecution, and the devil your foe is on the prowl like a roaring lion looking for prey to devour, you must use every care to clothe yourselves in God's armor so that you may be ready to withstand the enemy's ambush.
19. Your loins are to be girt with chastity, your breast fortified by holy meditations, for, as Scripture has it, holy meditation will save you. Put on holiness as your breastplate, and it will enable you to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Faith must be your shield on all occasions, and with it you will be able to quench all the flaming missiles of the wicked one: there can be no pleasing God without faith; [and the victory lies in this -- your faith]. On your head set the helmet of salvation, and so be sure of deliverance by our only Savior, who sets his own free from their sins. The sword of the spirit, the word of God, must abound in your mouths and hearts. Let all you do have the Lord's word for accompaniment.
20. You must give yourselves to work of some kind, so that the devil may always find you busy; no idleness on your part must give him a chance to pierce the defenses of your souls. In this respect you have both the teaching and the example of Saint Paul the Apostle, into whose mouth Christ put his own words. God made him preacher and teacher of faith and truth to the nations: with him as your leader you cannot go astray. We lived among you, he said, laboring and wary, toiling night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you; not because we had no power to do otherwise but so as to give you, in your own selves, an example you might imitate. For the charge we gave you when we were with you was this: that whoever is not willing to work should not be allowed to eat either. For we have heard that there are certain restless idlers among you. We charge people of this kind, and implore them in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that they earn their own bread by silent toil. This is the way of holiness and goodness: see that you follow it.

21. The Apostle would have us keep silence, for in silence he tells us to work. As the Prophet also makes known to us: Silence is the way to foster holiness. Elsewhere he says: Your strength will lie in silence and hope. *For this reason I lay down that you are to keep silence from after Compline until after Prime the next day.* At other times, although you need not keep silence so strictly, be careful not to indulge in a great deal of talk, for, as Scripture has it -- and experience teaches us no less -- sin will not be wanting where there is much talk, and he who is careless in speech will come to harm; and elsewhere: The use of many words brings harm to the speaker's soul. And our Lord says in the Gospel: Every rash word uttered will have to be accounted for on judgement day. Make a balance then, each of you, to weigh his words in; keep a tight rein on your mouths, lest you should stumble and fall in speech, and your fall be irreparable and prove mortal. Like the Prophet, watch your step lest your tongue give offence, and employ every care in keeping silent, which is the way to foster holiness.
22. You, brother B., and whoever may succeed you as prior, must always keep in mind and put into practice what our Lord said in the Gospel: Whoever has a mind to become a leader among you must make himself servant to the rest, and whichever of you would be first must become your bondsman.
23. You, other brothers too, hold your prior in humble reverence, your minds not on him but on Christ who has placed him over you, and who, to those who rule the Churches, addressed the words: Whoever pays you heed pays heed to me, and whoever treats you with dishonor dishonors me; if you remain so minded you will not be found guilty of contempt, but will merit life eternal as fit reward for your obedience.
24. Here then are the few points I have written down to provide you with a standard of conduct to live up to; but our Lord, at his second coming will reward anyone who does more than he is obliged to do. See that the bounds of common sense are not exceeded, however, for common sense is the guide of the virtues.



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