



## St. Teresa of Avila:

# MEEK TEACHER OF MYSTIC LOVE

St. Teresa of Avila's autobiography, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, completed in 1565, in addition to chronicling her own spiritual awakening, is a call to the reader to pursue a more virtuous life. The Carmelite nun's memoir, much like St. Augustine's *Confessions*, succeeds in not only sharing divine truth but inspiring rightful obedience to it. St. Teresa is a spiritual shepherdess who desires the conversion and rectification of as many souls as possible. Her autobiography reflects this—striving towards accessibility both theologically and linguistically. *The Life's* focus on mystical experience, remarkably, does not detract from this accessibility, for Teresa shares her mystical encounters without excessive interpretation—in part because she feels unable to do so given their mysteriousness, but primarily because it complicates the simple purpose of *The Life*, which is to inspire fidelity to God. As Professor of Theology Peter Tyler states: "Teresa is a *practical theologian* who is not so concerned with debating obscure points of faith but in *changing people's lives*."<sup>1</sup> Peter Tyler's designation of St. Teresa as a "practical theologian" is apt. Her use of the autobiographical genre gives *The Life* an evangelistic potency not found in many systematic theological works. St. Teresa's humility and honesty bridge the gap between her and her reader—inspiring the reader to reflect and echo truthfulness before God. *The Life* thus emerges as an exceptionally dynamic literary holy work in which St. Teresa triples as evangelist, confessor, and advisor.

Indispensable to *The Life's* evangelistic effectiveness is its unostentatious language and self-effacing or meek approach to storytelling and theological inquiry. This authorial approach by Teresa aids the reader in both understanding her arguments as

well as sympathizing with them. In speaking of Teresa's language, Tyler states that she deliberately appears "to avoid the hifalutin terms of a spiritual elite (the *letrados*) for more simple homely words which her audience will respond to."<sup>2</sup> In addition to avoiding ostentation in her writing, Teresa almost invariably abstains from elaborating upon complex theological concepts and



phenomena—especially her mystical experiences. In Chapter XVIII, for example, Teresa refrains from dissecting the features or conditions of what is commonly called "Divine union" in mystical theology: "The way in which this that we call union comes, and the nature of it, I do not know how to explain. It is described in mystical theology, but I am unable to use the proper terms."<sup>3</sup> Teresa's professed incapacity in understanding helps to elevate her as a humble

narrator while also preserving the enchanting incomprehensibility of mystical experience. Her inability to adequately explicate certain theological ideas or the mysteries of her visions results too in frequent asides that she utters in meek acknowledgment of her limitations, such as: "I do not know if the things I am saying are nonsense,"<sup>4</sup> and "my own stupidity prevents me from describing and explaining in a few words a matter which it is so important to expound thoroughly."<sup>5</sup> In the spirit of humility, Teresa also regularly invokes God for help in articulating various concepts and sentiments: "May the Lord explain this, as He has explained everything else, for I should certainly know nothing of it."<sup>6</sup> Teresa's invocations to God are a feature of her very language, as are her numerous asides. As Peter Tyler observes, all of these elements contribute to "the surprising, homely and often frankly down-to-earth pull of Teresa's language."<sup>7</sup> Teresa's appeals to God, her simple language and homely tone, and her calling attention to intellectual deficiencies are markers of humility that imbue *The Life*, and its angelic narrator, with a meek grace that heartens and inspires the reader towards virtuous living. As Tyler affirms, the "humility of ordinary language" that Teresa employs is "central to the effect she wants to produce in her readers."<sup>8</sup> In narrating her autobiography without pretension and with constant deference to God, Teresa gives a holy simplicity to the gift of her life's story—a gift for the souls who receive it because of the goodness it inspires and teaches.

Though Teresa's language and literary style itself inspire meekness, the Carmelite saint also inspires goodness through direct instruction which she ardently pursues in *The Life* as a kind of spiritual advisor.

Teresa's counsel is made intimate by virtue of her tender concern for struggling souls and her incorporation of the reader into her meditations and teachings: "if we truly repent and determine not to offend Him, He will resume His former friendship with us and grant us the favours which He granted aforetime, and sometimes many more, if our repentance merits it."<sup>9</sup> Alongside this sense of fellowship, Teresa builds credibility with her audience by grounding her claims in experience. These claims are sustained across the whole of *The Life* with remarks such as: "For I know now, by experience of many kinds",<sup>10</sup> "I say this because I know it by experience",<sup>11</sup> and "I have a great deal of experience of this and I know that what I say is true, for I have observed it carefully and have discussed it afterwards with spiritual persons."<sup>12</sup> Such comments bear the character of Teresa's direct writing style and fall in line with the aforementioned asides and digressions she frequently makes. It should also be mentioned that Teresa renders even her claims from experience in a humble light—in acknowledgment that her perception is unreliable and that she might have bungled something in her account: "I am not sure if I understand what I am saying, because, as I have said, I am judging from my own experience."<sup>13</sup> Whilst the realm of ordinary experiences is surer, ultimately Teresa's attitude towards it is the same as it is towards mystical experience. Just so, she does not advocate faithful Christians to aspire or attempt to ascend to higher levels of meditation or sense-suspending mystical states without God's intervention: "people should not try to rise unless they are raised by God. . . . What I say we must not do is to presume or think that we can suspend it ourselves".<sup>14</sup> According to Teresa, mystic transports and higher levels of prayer are devotional gifts that God alone sets in motion and grants. Teresa is dedicated foremost in *The Life* to helping the reader to deepen his or her devotion to God—whether or not a mystical vision arises under such due obedience and service is a matter she leaves to heaven. For Teresa, she simply wishes desirous souls to take refuge in God, as that will bring about true fulfillment and the manifestation of all things good: "I hope in the mercy of God, Whom no one has ever taken for a Friend without being rewarded."<sup>15</sup>

Teresa's caution against pursuing high spiritual states and experiences does not extend, needless to say, to non-ecstatic or non-mystical modes of worship and vener-

ation. Indeed, with respect to intercessory prayer, Teresa urges confident and passionate pursuit. An exceptionally memorable instance of authorial entreatment occurs in Chapter VI concerning St. Joseph's intercession. Here, Teresa asserts the unfailing intercessory help of St. Joseph and implores devotion to him:

I only beg, for the love of God, that anyone who does not believe me will put what I say to the test, and he will see by experience what great advantages come from his commending himself to this glorious patriarch and having devotion to him.<sup>16</sup>

Chapter VI is replete with praise for St. Joseph, for Teresa shares a special bond with him, having taken him as an advocate: "I took for my advocate and lord the glorious Saint Joseph and commended myself earnestly to him."<sup>17</sup> In accordance with Catholic venerative tradition, Teresa elevates St. Joseph as the most powerful intercessory saint: "To other saints the Lord seems to have given grace to succor us in some of our necessities but of this glorious saint my experience is that he succors us in them all."<sup>18</sup> Teresa wishes all Christian souls to have recourse to St. Joseph and implores her readers to pursue her claims of St. Joseph's power for themselves. In doing so, Teresa gives the reader practical guidance for devotion. Just so, she urges the faithful to thrust themselves into prayer and good action without fear: "I would never recommend anyone, when a good inspiration comes to him again and again, to hesitate to put it into practice because of fear."<sup>19</sup> Teresa's admonitions against fear across *The Life* foster hope while encouraging her readers to embrace holiness. The intimate details of her own faith journey likewise reinforce and magnify this encouragement, as do her numerous self-effacing remarks which teach humility: "Now if the Lord bore for so long with such a wicked creature as I . . . what other person, however wicked he may be, can have any reason for fear?"<sup>20</sup> Teresa's counsel regarding worship and intercession, which stresses trust and humility in and before God, concurs with her general outlook on the spiritual life. St. Teresa's simple thesis, which she taught and embodied so well, advocates complete surrender to God. As God is good—the "Supreme Good!" in Teresa's exclamation—none can fail in

Him, Whose mercies are endless.<sup>21</sup> As Teresa states, "the Lord never allows anyone to be harmed who strives to approach Him with humility".<sup>22</sup>

As of today, St. Teresa is one of only four women to be declared a "Doctor of the Universal Church"; she was the first of the four to be designated as such by Pope Paul VI in 1970. *The Life* stands alongside *The Way of Perfection* and the *Interior Castle* as one of Teresa's greatest holy works of mystic theology, and it deserves special regard and admiration for what it accomplishes evangelistically. Teresa's unostentatious style, straightforward spiritual instruction, and saintly candor all contribute to the exceptional noetic assimilability of *The Life*. The subtitle of Peter Tyler's Teresian work, *Doctor of the Soul*, emphasizes Teresa's enduring legacy as a spiritual advisor and confidant for the Christian faithful.

Teresa's simple objective in writing *The Life*—which was proposed and urged by her spiritual director and confessor, Father Garcia de Toledo—was to share and instill love of God for the profit of souls. She expresses this desire to convert and assist souls in the final pages of *The Life*: "I care more about the smallest degree of progress achieved by one single soul than for all the things that people may say about me . . . it has been the Lord's will that this should become the aim of all my desires."<sup>23</sup> Even when not directly petitioning the reader, Teresa's account naturally delights and ennobles because it speaks of the mysteries of God with complete candor and without embarrassment. The hard work that *The Life* ultimately summons its readers to pursue is that of self-denial and humility before God—the most difficult of virtues to cultivate. As Teresa states, "We must always keep humility before us, so that we may realize that this strength cannot proceed from any strength of our own."<sup>24</sup> The Luciferian sin and impulse of vanity that the world extols and celebrates is rebuked with unremitting zeal in *The Life*: "we must reflect that, with the help of God, we can strive to have a great contempt for the world, no regard for honour, and no attachment to possessions".<sup>25</sup> Teresa's zeal supplies firmness in equal measure to tenderness, for in speaking the truth, both are needed. Her fundamental instruction, which is stressed in *The Life* repeatedly (both firmly and tenderly), is that we are in need of a meek and God-loving soul in order to know true peace and to become that which we are meant to be.

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#### References

1. Peter Tyler, *Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Soul* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 27.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
3. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 1562–1565, published posthumously, trans. E. Allison Peers, (Image Books, 1960), p. 130.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
5. *Ibid.*, 94.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
7. Tyler, *Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Soul*, p. 84.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
9. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, p. 54.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 90.