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Mary Eileen McNamara, OCD

Saint Teresa of Avila: Prayer-Centered Reformer

TERESA OF AVILA BECAME a prayer-centered reformer as she followed the enlightenment and guidance of Jesus' Spirit on a lifelong path of self-discovery. Over four-hundred years ago, the very human Teresa Ahumada became aware within herself of a Divine Presence, who invited her into the intimacy of friendship. In her remarkable writings, Teresa has contributed invaluable guidelines to contemporary searchers into our own identity as friends of Jesus Christ. The metaphors that she uses to describe her experiences may not, however, be ones which you find helpful. You may experience, as I do, that I understand what she is explaining though I would not use her images to explain my awareness of union and communion with the God in whom I live, move, and have my being.

Scriptural Models

In the Book of 1 Samuel, chapter 3, there is recorded an incident that is an important scriptural image of what we shall be considering in our reflection on Teresa's attainment of the stature of a

Mary Eileen McNamara

reformer through her prayer-centered life. The young child Samuel was sleeping in the temple, where the ark of God was. Three times he heard himself called by name. Only after the third time—when the youth had run to Eli, his spiritual father, saying, “Here I am”—did Eli realize that God was calling Samuel. The old man instructed the boy: “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say: ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

Another scriptural model of a person led into a profound experience of how Jesus uses prayer as a way to self-discovery is the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:5–20). She has been immortalized by John’s description of Jesus’ conversation with her when she came to draw water from the Sychar Well where he was resting. Saint Teresa invites us to meditate on Our Lord’s words to this woman who asked him to give her “the living water” of which he spoke when he said:

The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

So profound were our Savior’s words upon her that she announced to the villagers, “He told me everything I have ever done.”

Teresa’s Experience

Saint Teresa had a profound spiritual experience of her own identity in relation to Jesus in which he assured her that just as she was “Teresa of Jesus” so was he “Jesus of Teresa.” With Teresa we are able to find grounds for our identification with Jesus in St. Paul’s assertion, “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). In Revelation 3:20—where Jesus says to each of us, “Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me”—one who prays is assured of the nourishment and drink one needs in one’s prayer life. As we hear within ourselves these words, the Spirit of Jesus is enlightening us to follow the pathway into the interior of ourselves to our deepest center where God dwells—Father, Son, and Spirit.

We shall be reflecting on the role of prayer in our self-discovery in the light of the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila. Therefore, we must

St. Teresa of Avila: Prayer-Centered Reformer

consider: Who was this sixteenth-century Carmelite nun whose writings speak to us today of a search into our identity and meaning in our lives? Why do her reflections on her journey into the center of herself invite us to accompany her as she learned through experience to enter into conversation with Jesus Christ, who invited her into a personal intimacy with him in prayer as her Friend?

Teresa’s Background

Teresa was born in the city of Avila on March 28, 1515, one of ten children of Beatrice de Ahumada, the second wife of our future Saint’s father, Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda. Alonso was a highly respected and respectable man who refused to own slaves and had special care for the servants in his household. He was generous in giving alms to the poor, of which there were many in Avila even in this “golden age.” Don Alonso also had a good library containing books in Spanish, which his children were encouraged to read. Teresa’s mother was a devout and devoted wife and mother, who trained her children in virtue. She had a special devotion to our Blessed Mother and to the rosary, which deeply influenced Teresa.

Teresa’s mother had borne ten children by the time she died at the age of thirty-three. Since she was often not well, she found recreation—much to her husband’s displeasure—in reading chivalrous novels, which she shared with Teresa. These tales provided her young daughter with a literary format and content that would prove beneficial as she developed her own style of writing. She and one of her brothers wrote their tale of chivalry a little later.

At the time of her mother’s death, Teresa was thirteen years old. She knelt before our Blessed Mother’s statue and begged Mary to become her mother. For the next three years, Teresa gradually lost her youthful piety. She became very interested in learning from a youthful cousin—whom her father could not prevent from visiting their home—the vanities and amusements an adolescent girl of her class would want to cultivate. When Teresa’s oldest sister left home to marry, her father, concerned about his favorite daughter’s coming under the influence of a young male cousin, took this opportunity

to place her in the care of the Augustinian nuns in a convent of Our Lady of Grace in Avila.

Convent Life and Sickness

At first, Teresa did not care for this new type of living. However, she was attracted to a deeply prayerful nun, Dona Maria Briceno, and gradually adapted to this semimonastic lifestyle. She was even experiencing a struggle within herself concerning a possible vocation. She knew that she did not want to become a married woman who would have to bear many children and give up her independence to a husband who could even become abusive. The stress she was under caused her to become so sick that her father brought her home.

After her recovery, she went to stay with her married sister for a time. On her way she stopped at her uncle Don Pedro's home. He was

Our saint's honesty shines through the pages on which she transcribes her successes and failures

able to suggest to her books, one of which was the *Letters* of Saint Jerome, where she found help with her struggles about a religious vocation. When she finally decided to enter the religious life, her father would not give his consent to his much-loved Teresa. However, she

asked to be admitted to the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation and left home secretly on November 2, 1535, at age twenty. Her father decided to resign himself to the decision of his strong-willed daughter and provided a substantial dowry and what Teresa would need to have an apartment of her own. Life was austere at the Incarnation. The recitation of the Divine Office, the observance of silence needed to provide a prayerful atmosphere, along with fasting gave a penitential character to her life. However, there was no time set aside for mental prayer. Evidently there were no instructions given to novices on how to pray or to become recollected. Strangely, the books Teresa read were not by Carmelites but by Franciscans.

St. Teresa of Avila: Prayer-Centered Reformer

Two years after her entrance Teresa made her profession of vows. Following her profession, she became ill with a sickness the doctors could not diagnose. At Becedas there was a quack who had a reputation for healing. Teresa's father decided to take her there for treatment. Her precarious health only worsened, close to death she asked to be taken back to her father's home. Shortly thereafter, Teresa was pronounced dead and the nuns at the Monastery of the Incarnation had a grave opened for her burial. However, her father refused to believe that she was dead. She came out of the coma but insisted that she be taken back to her community.

For the next two years she was paralyzed. Her patience contributed to her reputation as a very holy nun, which attracted many visitors. Finally, our Saint decided that she wanted to recover and placed her request in the care of Saint Joseph. Her powerful patron obtained for her a gradual recovery from her paralysis.

Struggles With Prayer

In *The Book of Her Life*, written at the command of her confessor, Teresa admitted that for eighteen years she led a life that she considered mediocre and only intermittently faithful to the graces she was being given. She believed that her own cultivation of friendships with those who were allowed to come to visit her at the parlor of the monastery prevented her from living the life to which she was vowed. Finally, she knelt in front of a picture of Jesus being scourged before his crucifixion and begged for the grace to become faithful in the practice of prayer.

In her autobiography, Teresa gives a remarkable description of her struggles in practicing mental prayer and the very special graces she received. Our saint's honesty shines through the pages on which she transcribes her successes and failures in responding to the initiatives of Jesus' Spirit within her. During the years when she experienced being strongly attracted to prayer, she and some of her youthful friends discussed the possibility of establishing a new monastery where the number of nuns would be limited to thirteen. Teresa had learned the great disadvantages of having a community

Mary Eileen McNamara

which numbered over two hundred. At the Convent of the Incarnation, not only nuns lived there but the servants of those who were wealthy were permitted to live and serve these women from the privileged class. In her *Life* and in her *Foundations*, Teresa explains the trials that multiplied as she sought to carry out what she believed was God's will for her and a small group of other women.

Spiritual Advisors

It is important to realize the dependence of monasteries of Sisters at that time in Spain on the patronage of the wealthy. Because of Teresa's reputation for being prayerful and her very real charm, Dona Guiomar de Ulloa, a wealthy widow, obtained permission for Teresa to assist her at her home in her time of grieving. Our saint was experiencing a great deal of suspicion from others because of the sensational graces she was receiving in prayer. She not only comforted Dona Guiomar, but this noble woman was able to discern the genuineness of Teresa's prayer life. Through Dona Guiomar, Teresa was given an opportunity to talk with Saint Peter of Alcantara. This holy and austere Franciscan recognized as authentic the spiritual favors of this middle-aged Carmelite nun. Because of his own reputation for holiness, he was able to reassure some male advisers, who had decided that Teresa was under the influence of the devil, that the Spirit of God was granting her very special graces. They were told to stop disturbing her.

During this period Teresa needed expert advice on the mystical graces she was receiving, as well as guidance for the many practical problems with which she was confronted in establishing her first monastery of Discalced Nuns. Our saint was blessed to have highly respected Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans assist her. Among these confessors were Saint Francis Borgia and Saint Peter of Alcantara. Teresa was a remarkably gifted woman, whose intelligence and spiritual writings, coupled with her love for God and all others—as well as her courage in fulfilling what she believed to be God's will—have earned her the Church's official canonization as well as the titles of Doctor of the Church and Mother of Spirituality.

St. Teresa of Avila: Prayer-Centered Reformer

Teresa was well aware of the spiritual climate in the Spain of her times. She recognized the justifiable concern of Church authorities for the potential harm to genuine spirituality that enthusiasm for extraordinary spiritual phenomena could cause. However, she only laughed when she was told that she was in danger of being handed over to the Inquisition. She said if she knew anything in her writings were heretical, she would be the first to submit to any decision of the Church. A couple of times she was asked to give the book about her life to the Inquisition for inspection. Each time she was acquitted of having written anything contrary to Church teaching.

Saint Teresa had not deliberately sought permission to found monasteries because she had perceived herself as a helpless woman who could never accomplish such a task. However, when God inspires a person with urgent longings to do great things, the Spirit empowers a person to accomplish them.

In addition to the foundation of the Monastery of Saint Joseph in Avila, this valiant woman was the foundress of fourteen monasteries for Discalced Carmelites, from 1567–1582, the year of her death. Teresa *directed* the foundation of two other monasteries though she was unable to be present. With Saint John of the Cross, our saint supervised the foundation of the first monastery for the Discalced Fathers at Durelo.

Her Writings

At the suggestion of a Jesuit, Father Jeronimo Ripaldo, Saint Teresa began the composition of her book, *The Foundations*. This book by the Holy Foundress has contributed to our knowledge of the Saint as well as many interesting facts about life in Spain at that time. Saint Teresa used this literary task as another opportunity to give analyses of persons, events, and a deeper sharing of the spiritual development to her Sisters. As she broadened her understanding of human nature through interaction with Sisters in these communities, she was able to give advice to the Prioresses about how to handle spiritual as well as physical and psychological disorders.

Mary Eileen McNamara

I want to quote from Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh's Introduction to his edition of the Volume 1 of Saint Teresa's *Letters* to show the importance of her correspondence to our understanding of Spanish life at that time:

A keen observer of the reality around her as well as within, Teresa focuses light on many of the struggles in both the Carmelite order and the church of sixteenth-century Spain. She introduces us to major personalities who have left their mark on history.

Fr. Kavanaugh writes that scholars claim that Teresa's letters are a treasure trove, which contain a wealth that is unparalleled in Spanish literature. According to Rodriguez-Egido, the number of letters written by our Saint could have been twenty-five thousand. Four hundred and sixty-eight of these have been located. Many of the recipients of these letters did not realize their value. Others destroyed them for fear of how those hostile to the Carmelite Reform would misinterpret them. Many of the letters never reached the persons to whom they were addressed.

Her Foundations

Saint Teresa founded her monasteries throughout Spain under conditions we can scarcely imagine today. She and her companions traveled the rugged terrain in Spain on horseback, rarely in the carriage of a wealthy patron, or in carts drawn by mules. On one occasion, when the cart she was in got stuck in the mud and overturned, Teresa complained to Our Lord that he was not taking better care of her sisters and herself when they were doing all they could for his glory. Jesus replied, "Teresa, this is how I treat My friends." And Teresa retorted, "That is why You have so few!"

The heat and cold that the Sisters experienced in the uncomfortable carts were often unbearable, and they were frequently forced to lodge in wretched inns. Teresa had the responsibility of founding these houses of prayer with inadequate financial support, not knowing from where the funds she needed would come. However, she was heard to say, "Teresa and two ducats can do nothing. But God, Teresa, and two ducats can do all things." Because of the poor health

St. Teresa of Avila: Prayer-Centered Reformer

from which our saint had suffered all of her life, she often had to travel when she was seriously sick.

The last journey Saint Teresa made was in obedience to Father Antonio of Jesus. The Provincial ordered her to be present at the birth of a baby whose mother was a member of an important family. Teresa was in a dying condition when she reached the monastery of Alba de Tormes. Surrounded by her Sisters and supported by the Last Rites of the Church, our Holy Foundress died, consoled by the realization that she was "A Daughter of the Church" to which she had tried to be faithful. Her date of death in the revised calendar was October 15, 1582.

Teresa's Major Written Works

The Major works of Saint Teresa are *The Life*, *The Way of Perfection*, and *The Interior Castle*. In these writings and in many of her letters, Teresa shares with us a key to understanding how the success of her work as a reformer in Carmel was completely dependent upon her prayer-centered life.

The Book of Her Life

The account of her life was written in obedience to a confessor who recognized the gift Saint Teresa had of being in contact with her own experience and of being able to write about it in an understandable manner. With remarkable clarity, our Saint compared the four stages in the development of a life of prayer to four ways in which a garden can be watered.

First Stage: Initially, the gardener must bring bucket upon bucket of water by hand from a deep well to the seeds and plants. Just so, the person who desires to learn how to pray must begin with the first phase. Place yourself in the presence of Jesus, the Divine Teacher. Select a text from Scripture that is meaningful for you. Enter into a conversation with Jesus, present within you, about what he was teaching his listeners. Apply Our Lord's teaching to yourself. Make a resolution of how you can use your insights to help you to become more Christlike. Ask Jesus to give you the enlightenment, strength,

Mary Eileen McNamara

and courage to be faithful in your daily life to the graces you have been given.

Second Stage: At the next level, the image of a waterwheel suggested itself to Teresa. At each new phase, place oneself in the presence of Jesus, the Divine Teacher. The person who is praying now enjoys a certain facility in meditating. Rather than having to haul bucket after bucket by hand to one's garden, she/he has developed a pattern for her or his prayer that gives her/him a support. She/he now experiences special lights and consolations that make prayer easier than it was at first. The metaphor of a waterwheel supplying her/him with a much more abundant supply of water seems most appropriate.

Third Stage: Next the system of providing water by an irrigation system was a suitable image of what Teresa had experienced in her prayer life. At this third stage, Jesus increases the consciousness of the one who prays that he is within and is assisting one with graces to both know oneself better and to be able to love others as oneself. At this stage Saint Teresa would continue to emphasize the three signs of the Spirit's action in the life of one who prays: the person practices humility, detachment, and love of others.

Fourth Stage: The fourth metaphor Teresa uses is abundant rain. At last there is nothing that is an obstacle to a person being open to receive the graces which Jesus' Spirit now grants to the person in abundance. At last the pray-er's will is one with God's will. The person has reached the innermost regions of oneself where God alone dwells. Here God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are truly present as they have always been.

Interior Castle

Following the imagery Saint Teresa develops in her book *Interior Castle*, we are introduced to a new metaphor of the spiritual journey, a journey which each pray-er must make through the seven mansions of the human person to the center one where God alone dwells. Each of these seven mansions, with its lights and shadows, represents a stage in the growth to human maturity. Our growth in holiness is ordinarily very much in tune with our growth in human wholeness.

St. Teresa of Avila: Prayer-Centered Reformer

I realize that the metaphor of the four waters and that of the Interior Castle are ways Saint Teresa used to explain her personal interior journey. You might find other metaphors to understand your own.

Teresa has made a contribution to our understanding of vocal and contemplative prayer in the context of the present interest in spirituality. The important lesson for all of us to learn is that we need to be in touch with our own experience of the presence of Jesus, his Father, and the Spirit within us, as well as how Jesus Gospel message has influenced our lives. Our reflection on Jesus' words and deeds under the guidance of his Spirit will bring about a growth to a human wholeness that transforms us into the likeness of Christ.

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With the help of an experienced spiritual companion or director, we will find our own metaphor to understand our life of prayer.

The Way of Perfection

After Saint Teresa had founded the Monastery of Saint Joseph in 1562, her sisters learned that she had written in her book on her life something about prayer. Her confessor did not believe that the Sisters should read the *Life*. However, he advised her to write something for her sisters about the life of prayer that should characterize their life at Saint Joseph's. *The Way of Perfection* is the treatise on prayer and the manner in which her newly founded community should practice virtue. Saint Teresa took the *Our Father* as her model. In this remarkable book, she gives primarily to her nuns but also to every Christian advice on how to live one's life in openness to the inspiration and guidance of Jesus' Spirit.

Saint Teresa's experience of her virtues and frailties in the religious and secular environments of her times has qualified her to give to the laity, as well as to her own religious, remarkably good counsel on the spiritual journey. A prayerful, reflective reading of Teresa's writings will unlock for you her rich spiritual legacy. You will find

Mary Eileen McNamara

in her courage and determination to keep her attention on Jesus, who never took his eyes off of her, encouragement to be faithful in your own identification with Our Lord in the joyful, sorrowful, glorious, and luminous, mysteries of his Life.

Saint Teresa valued highly the spiritual direction that she received from holy and learned confessors and guides. From persons who were well qualified to advise her, this Mother of Spirituality gratefully and humbly received the enlightenment she needed to dis-

The fruits of a genuine prayer life more than compensate for the self-discipline we must practice to be faithful to a prayer regime

cern the initiatives of Jesus' Spirit in her life. By her openness to others as friends and companions on this life's pilgrimage, Teresa has taught us that we are walking with Jesus in the company of those who love and support us into the House of his Father.

In prayer we learn that we are this Dwelling Place in which Our Lord with his Father and Spirit have taken up their abode. Saint Teresa's final word to those who desire to reach the innermost dwelling place where God abides is to persevere with complete trust in our Divine Friend, who will not allow us to die of thirst but will reward us with the Living Waters about which he spoke to the Samaritan Woman.

The fruits of a genuine prayer life more than compensate for the self-discipline we must practice to be faithful to a prayer regime. We acquire a deeper understanding of one's self and a greater understanding and tolerance of others. The dimensions of our consciousness are expanded to see the larger picture where we experience how much each of us has been gifted to share with one another the privilege of being Christ bearers in our society. The practice of Mental Prayer in our secular world sensitizes us to the need for a renewal of ethical values and to the importance of possessing the special skills for dialogue that openness to the enlightenment

St. Teresa of Avila: Prayer-Centered Reformer

and guidance of the Spirit of Jesus bring. The union of one's will with the Divine Will in a "prayer centered" life will empower us in our lives as it empowered Teresa in hers.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to treat the often quoted sentence from Saint Teresa, "Let nothing disturb you," in the context of the whole poem:

Saint Teresa's *Bookmark*:

Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you;
All things are passing,
God alone never changes;
Patient endurance attains all things,
Who possesses God,
In nothing is lacking,
God alone suffices.

Lest we experience the words, "Let nothing disturb you," as a mockery today in the face of the sufferings—spiritual and physical—of untold millions of innocent victims of illness, disrupted familial relations, ethnic and religious conflicts, and finally the wars in so many parts of our world, we must enter into Saint Teresa's own transformative experience of her personal sharing in the life, sufferings, death, and glorious risen life of Jesus, God's Son. Teresa certainly knew sorrow, anxiety, disappointment, frustration, disillusionment, and so many of the emotions we would describe as "disturbing."

However, she was graced with a profound awareness of the Divine Presence within her—Father, Son, and Spirit. Her faith in this Divine Presence and in her personal union with Jesus in the whole Christ, the Church, convinced her that "Patient endurance attains all things / Who possesses God / in nothing is lacking, / God alone suffices." This faith did not remove for Teresa, as it will not for us, the mysteries enshrouded in life's shadows. However, this faith is the source of the hope that empowers us to repeat with Saint Teresa, "Who possesses God / possesses all things / God alone suffices."

Mary Eileen McNamara

In closing, I would like to share this prayer with you:

O God, in Teresa you have given us a model—a woman who was faithful to prayer, to her sisters and friends, and to the work she was called to do. Help us to be so committed to you that our daily work fosters our life of prayer and our life of prayer enables us to live fully in the world around us, aware of its needs and concerns. Bless all who follow the charism of Teresa and grant that they may be true to her spirit and faithful to a life of prayer. We ask this through Jesus who was ever her friend. Amen.

Mary Eileen McNamara, OCD, has been a member of the Carmelite Monastery in Baltimore, Maryland, since 1941. In the context of the radical changes that have spanned her sixty-nine years as a Carmelite, she has lived a prayer-centered life, nourished by the charism of prayer that is the legacy of Saint Teresa of Avila. She has shared her insights on the importance of prayer with many of the laity.

Spirituality Resources

Carmelite 25th Anniversary Conference will be held June 16–20, 2010, at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Ind. The theme will be "Carmel's Quest for the Living God." Keynote speakers are Camilo Macisse, OCD; Fernando Millan, OCarm; Ms. Delores Leckey. Workshops by Carmelite Forum members: Mary Frohlich, Kieran Kavanaugh, Daniel Chowning, Kevin Culligan, John Welch, Patrick McMahon, and Keith Egan. For information and brochures, contact Mrs. Kathy Guthrie at the Center for Spirituality, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN 46556. Tel: (574) 284-4636. E-mail: kguthrie@saintmarys.edu.

Carmel Clarion Communications CDs: Discover over 75 lectures concerning Carmelite themes and teachings on Carmelite subjects. CDs are \$8.95 each, with a discount on a purchase of 4 or more. For a complete listing of available CDs, go to www.carmelclarion.com. CDs can be ordered by telephone at (877) 845-4560 or by e-mail from the above web site.

Summer Institute in Spirituality and Health: This Institute, addressing the integration of spirituality and healthcare and sponsored by GWish—The George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health—will be held July 12–16, 2010, on the campus of The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. This Institute is designed for healthcare clinicians and practitioners of all disciplines, as well as others working with patients and families. CMEs and other education credits are available. For more information and applications, please visit, www.gwish.org.

Joan Roccasalvo, CSJ

Beethoven and Suffering

FROM ANCIENT TIMES, people from every race and color have held that music, more than any other art form, is the most intimate expression of human feeling. To the Greeks, music possessed an almost mysterious and magical power. It had the power to elevate or degrade the mind. It had the power to touch and move the person at the deepest part of his or her spirit. It had the power to influence a person's behavior and to form moral character. Music can play an important role in the spiritual healing of a person.¹ The music of Beethoven is a case in point. This article invites the reader inside Beethoven's mind and heart through excerpts from his letters and his last compositions, written as a completely deaf person. There he teaches us an invaluable lesson about creative suffering.

Human Suffering

Suffering is a painful and universal mystery. Whether physical, mental, or spiritual, suffering does violence to our person. It rearranges us. Suffering may be unmerited or it can be self-inflicted. Some people choose suffering for a higher goal. An expectant mother, for example, chooses to endure suffering for newborn life. Beethoven shines as an example of one man's decision to bring fruitfulness out of suffering not chosen.