

**A TIMELESS WOMAN:  
TERESA OF ÁVILA AS A MODEL FOR THE MODERN WOMAN**

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I'm delighted to be here with you today, and to be here in Ávila celebrating this city's remarkable hometown saint.

I had the privilege of visiting Ávila once before. I came nine years ago with my husband, John. We were battling infertility at the time, visiting shrines from Portugal to France to ask our favorite saints for help. We went on to have four children in a little over four years, all of whom are here with us this week. So obviously, Teresa was listening.

It wasn't the first time she's helped me. As I chronicle in my latest book, *My Sisters the Saints*<sup>1</sup>, Teresa has been guiding and interceding for me ever since I first discovered her during my college days.

I was a distracted and casual Catholic back then, too busy living the work-hard, play-hard lifestyle to focus on the things of God. Then one crisp October morning I found myself dangling my legs out the fourth-floor window of my apartment. I was battling an especially vicious hangover. I remember surveying the detritus of the campus party scene on the street below me and wondering why all of the pleasures and honors I'd chased with such abandon no longer thrilled me. I was doing everything the world told me to do to be happy and free. Yet I felt lonelier and less liberated than ever.

Over the course of the next year, this somewhat hazy realization prompted me to make some superficial tweaks to my life. I enrolled in a feminist philosophy course. I switched roommates and threw myself into an application for a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford. I even started dating an older, more serious graduate student.

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<sup>1</sup> CAMPBELL, Colleen Carroll, *My Sisters the Saints: A Spiritual Memoir* (New York: Image/Random House, 2012).

But nothing assuaged that ache in the pit of my stomach. I did my best to ignore it. And I succeeded, some of the time.

In quiet moments, though, I felt as if I were treading water in the center of the ocean, all of my happy projects and plans merely distracting me from the meaninglessness that surrounded on all sides.

When I went home for Christmas that December, my father gave me Marcelle Auclair’s 1950 biography of Teresa. Had I not been stranded with my parents in a new city where they had recently moved and I knew no one, that book probably would have wound up on some dust-collecting shelf where I put all of the others my parents had given me since I left for college.

But Christmas-break boredom can make a college student do desperate things. And that Christmas, it made me crack open Teresa’s life story.

### **ONCE I DID, I WAS HOOKED**

I immediately warmed to Teresa’s earthy, honest and often comic descriptions of her winding road to conversion. I identified with her decades-long tug-of-war between her longing for worldly status and her longing to draw closer to Jesus. And I was inspired by the way her surrender to God had transformed her: from being just another social butterfly to one of the greatest mystics and reformers in Church history, all without stripping away her natural boldness and wit.

In Teresa, I saw for the first time how the quest for intimacy with God could be a rollicking, rewarding adventure, one that could lead to genuine –and indeed, eternal– liberation.

Meeting Teresa jump-started my sputtering spiritual quest. Her vivid, messy, meandering journey cast my own troubles in a new light. Maybe the discontent that had dogged me for the past year wasn’t a spiritual dead end or a signal that I needed to work harder at tidying up the margins of my life. Maybe it was the opening chapter in a love story. A story like the one Teresa had lived, in which a divine Protagonist pursues His beloved with reckless ardor and ultimately wins her heart. Reading about Teresa’s ecstatic prayer experiences –in which she said she felt Jesus consuming her with a love so sweet and piercing she thought she might die on the spot– I felt a desire for divine intimacy kindled within me.

I soon began to read everything about Teresa I could get my hands on: her autobiography, letters and books on prayer. The more I read, the more Teresa began to seem like a true friend –a wise and holy woman who could help me not only through her writings and example but through her prayers on my behalf. Her friendship inspired me to begin reconsidering my relationships, reordering my priorities, and rediscovering the riches of the Catholic faith I had put on the backburner for the better part of four years.

My life didn't change overnight. My initial efforts at cultivating a more disciplined prayer life and more virtuous social life met with mixed success. I felt a shaky sense of peace taking root in my heart. Whatever was happening wasn't strong enough to curb my vanity and vices, though. It just made me enjoy them less.

Still, getting to know Teresa inspired me to take my first tentative steps toward an adult relationship with Christ. That relationship would eventually lead me out of my emptiness and through trials I never expected to face when I was a 20-year-old coed on that windowsill. Through it all, Teresa was a beacon and a friend to me. And she remains so to this day.

### **TERESA'S APPEAL**

I'm not alone in calling Teresa a friend. Judging by the ink and pixels spilled on her over the past 500 years, Teresa has attracted quite a few friends and unlikely followers since she walked the streets here in Ávila. She has inspired poets from the devout Richard Crashaw to the dissenting Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Saints Therese of Lisieux and Edith Stein sang her praises in print; so did skeptics Simone de Beauvoir, George Eliot and Vita Sackville-West. Even today, when faithful daughters of the Church are often regarded with pity or contempt, Teresa is celebrated by people from all walks of life.

There's much to celebrate. Teresa is the first woman Doctor of the Church; a leader in the Catholic Counter-Reformation; reformer of the Carmelite Order; founder of 17 new convents; mystic, author and spiritual beacon to millions.

Teresa's appeal goes beyond her résumé, though. Beguiling, vivacious, funny – Teresa is that rare saint with whom nearly everyone can identify. She is a contemplative who craved solitude yet traveled so broadly that the papal nuncio dubbed her «a restless

gadabout»<sup>2</sup>. She is a levitating mystic who advised melancholic would-be visionaries to stop swooning and get back to sweeping. Teresa's books tackle the loftiest topics of the interior life –from spiritual warfare to mystical marriage– yet they read like kitchen-table chats between old friends. And the same saint who slept on a wooden pillow, wore a hair shirt and endured decades of debilitating illness also danced on tables and famously deplored silly devotions and sour-faced saints.

From her teen years devoted to preening, lowbrow fiction and a forbidden fling, to her distracted first decades in the convent, during which Teresa says she «indulge[d] in one vanity... [and] occasion of sin after another»<sup>3</sup>, to her decisive conversion at age 39, when she threw herself down before a statue of Christ and begged for the grace to stop backsliding, Teresa is an eminently relatable saint. Her flaws are familiar, even if her holiness and accomplishments are not. Somehow even the more dazzling parts of Teresa's biography console us. They prove that God can make great saints out of the vain and distractible likes of Teresa –or us. «God does not deny Himself to anyone who perseveres»<sup>4</sup>, she tells us. Coming from Teresa, we believe.

It's a shrewd method of evangelization that Teresa uses. She lures us with her self-deprecating humor. She invites us to identify with her frailties and moments of conversion. Then she turns the focus back to us and challenges us to rethink our most cherished self-deceptions. We wind up looking at the same old problems in a new light, shocked by the power and relevance of her wisdom.

That wisdom applies to men as well as women. But given that my topic is Teresa as a model for the modern woman, I'd like to concentrate on three countercultural lessons she can teach women today. These lessons have helped me personally, and they have the potential to be powerful tools in the New Evangelization. They center on the primacy of prayer, a right relationship with the body and the value of obedience.

## THE FIRST LESSON

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila* Vol. 2, Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980) 265.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Life*, Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2008) 30.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Life*, 60.

Let's start with the first lesson. Although the world knows Teresa as a woman of action, the Church celebrates her as, in the words of Pope Francis, «above all a teacher of prayer»<sup>5</sup>. It was the richness of Teresa's interior life –and her gift for sharing her riches with others– that made her a Doctor of the Universal Church. As Blessed Pope Paul VI said when he bestowed that title in 1970, «Teresa has penetrated into the mystery of Christ and knowledge of the human soul with such perception and wisdom [...] that her doctrine clearly indicates the presence of [...] the Spirit». Praising what he called the «efficacy and perennial authority of her doctrine», Paul cited the many saints and other Doctors of the Church who learned from her. Teresa, the pope said, is not only a masterful “teacher of contemplation”. She is “a teacher of spiritual masters”<sup>6</sup>.

That's a feat in itself. It's all the more so when you consider Teresa's limited education, her jam-packed schedule and the tumultuous times in which she lived. Hers was the age of the Inquisition, the Protestant Reformation and the Illuminati. The Church's teaching authority was under attack, and non-clerics teaching on prayer were automatically under suspicion. That suspicion went double for women, who were told – as Teresa reports in *The Way of Perfection*– «to stick to their spinning»<sup>7</sup>.

Thankfully, Teresa ignored that advice. She was driven not by vainglory but a desire to save souls and defend the Church she loved. As she writes in *The Way of Perfection*,

I determined to do the little that was in me –namely, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could, and to see that these few nuns who are here should do the same [...] busying ourselves in prayer for those who are defenders of the Church [...]

Teresa didn't see prayer as a sidelight to her more visible work of reforming the Carmelite order or writing spiritual treatises. She saw prayer as essential: the foundation of her fruitfulness in the world and her greatest contribution to the Church.

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, “*Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Superior General of the Order of Discalced Carmelites on the 500th Anniversary of the Birth of Saint Teresa of Jesus*”, The Holy See, 28 March 2015, 3 July 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150328\\_lettera-500-teresa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150328_lettera-500-teresa.html)

<sup>6</sup> Pope Paul VI, “*Multiformis Sapientia Dei*”, The Holy See, 27 Sept. 1970, 3 July 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_apl\\_19700927\\_multiformis-sapientia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19700927_multiformis-sapientia.html)

<sup>7</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, Trans. and Ed. E. Allison Peers (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012; an unabridged republication of *The Way of Perfection* from *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, Vol. 2, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946) 151.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 36-37.

In her books, Teresa probes the most sublime mysteries of prayer. Yet her advice is concrete and clear enough for beginners. Seek out solitary prayer time each day, she says. Pray continuously, even during your work. Focus less on what you are doing in prayer than on what God is doing in you. «The soul's progress», Teresa writes, «does not lie in thinking much but in loving much»<sup>9</sup>. For prayer, as she puts it, «is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us»<sup>10</sup>.

Taking that time isn't easy, of course. It isn't for us, with our smartphones, social media and omnipresent screens. And it wasn't for Teresa, even in the convent. The road to her famed raptures was long and paved with difficulty. In the early years of her prayer life, Teresa writes, «I was more anxious that the hour I had determined to spend in prayer be over than I was to remain there, and more anxious to listen for the striking of the clock than to attend to other good things»<sup>11</sup>.

Teresa found that the times she persevered despite distractions were the ones that yielded the most joy and peace. Perhaps that's why she writes so passionately about making time for prayer. As she tells her nuns in *The Way of Perfection*,

I am not asking you now to think of [Christ], or to form numerous conceptions of Him, or to make long and subtle meditations with your understanding. I am asking you only to look at Him. [...] Your Spouse never takes His eyes off you, daughters. He has borne with thousands of foul and abominable sins [...] Is it such a great matter, then, for you to avert the eyes of your soul from outward things and sometimes to look at Him?<sup>12</sup>

Teresa prioritized prayer because she knew she would be lost without it. It's no coincidence that some of her most lucid writings on prayer, and loftiest experiences of it, came as she was battling critics inside and outside the Church, braving treacherous conditions to establish convents across Spain and caring for hundreds of women while suffering near-constant sickness herself. Teresa couldn't have done what she did without tapping into supernatural strength. Left to her own devices, Teresa says, «I

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<sup>9</sup> Saint Teresa and Marc Foley, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2012; text from *The Book of Her Foundations* taken from the *Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Ávila*, Vol. 3, Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodríguez, O.C.D., Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications) 64.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Life*, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Life*, 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 174.

should not have the courage to kill an ant»<sup>13</sup>. Prayer emboldened her. As she explains in *The Way of Perfection*, people of prayer «are like soldiers: the more wars there are, the better they are pleased, because they hope to emerge [...] with the greater riches. [...] Believe me, sisters, the soldiers of Christ [...] are always ready for the hour of conflict»<sup>14</sup>.

Prayer not only connected Teresa with the lifeline of grace. It also gave her a hunger for heaven. That hunger kept her earthly problems in perspective. «Be brave», Teresa writes in one of her letters. «[...] Life is short, a mere moment of trial remains for us»<sup>15</sup>.

Teresa's emphasis on prayer is among her most valuable contributions to the modern woman. In a world that measures us by what we do, what we own and what we know, Teresa reminds us that God values us for who we are. We have worth simply because we bear His image. So we don't need to spend our lives frantically producing and consuming, competing and striving. We don't need to manufacture our own courage or confidence. We can let go and let God, Teresa tells us, trusting that if we take time to connect with Him through prayer, God will give us all we need to do all He needs us to do.

## THE SECOND LESSON

The second lesson that Teresa teaches the modern woman centers on our bodies – namely, how to think about them and how to treat them.

This subject is fraught for many women in the West. Although most women in America and Europe don't face the bodily dangers that confront our sisters in the developing world, we nevertheless remain preoccupied by our bodies. We live in an age of computer-enhanced supermodels, a \$20-billion-a-year cosmetic surgery industry and a \$265-billion-a-year beauty products industry. We can find a product or procedure to fix nearly every aesthetic flaw in our bodies, including those we once considered normal signs of aging. Like the pursuit of the perfect résumé, the pursuit of physical perfection has become all-consuming in the lives of many women, crowding out room for God.

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<sup>13</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 252.

<sup>14</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Ávila* Vol. 1, Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2001), Letter 19, to María de Mendoza, 72-73.

So how can Teresa speak to modern women caught in this trap? What could a Renaissance-era virgin who spent two-thirds of her life cloistered in convents and clad in a spare brown habit possibly have to say on the matter?

Well, quite a bit, as it turns out. Because Teresa fell into the same trap. And her escape –both from the vanity she battled in her youth and the body-hating Gnosticism she rejected later on– can help us recognize our own culture’s lies about the body.

Teresa’s day, after all, wasn’t so different from our own. Women had far fewer educational and professional opportunities; it’s true. Yet then, as now, women were judged largely by their sexual allure and fecundity. The pressure then was for women to prove their value through high-status marriages and the bearing of many children. Now, women are often pressured to repress our fertility to compete in a sexual and economic marketplace that devalues marriage and motherhood. In both cases, our relationship with our bodies becomes distorted and obsessive, marked alternately by self-loathing and self-indulgence.

Teresa knew those temptations, and in her early years, she succumbed. Her troubles began shortly after she lost her mother at age 13. She started reading romance novels, spending time with worldly cousins and focusing on fashion rather than prayer. The fervor she once directed to God was diverted to beautifying herself, attracting throngs of male admirers and keeping a forbidden romance secret from her father.

Teresa eventually joined the convent, more out of fear for her soul than zeal. Her trivial pursuits followed her in. So she slogged through her religious routine, caught in a tug-of-war between her hunger for God and her addiction to turning heads and enjoying the creature comforts of her not-yet-reformed convent.

When she was nearly 40, Teresa walked into the chapel and came face-to-face with a statue of the suffering Christ. Something about His image, bloodied and bound as He awaited crucifixion, moved her. She was pierced with regret for the decades she had spent serving herself instead of God. Teresa threw herself down and begged Jesus for the grace not to offend Him anymore.

From that day on, her prayer life began to deepen. Things of the spirit began to interest her more than things of the flesh. And she gradually grew into the saint we celebrate today.



At the heart of Teresa's conversion was her discovery that, as she puts it in *The Way of Perfection*, «we actually have something within us incomparably more precious than anything we see outside»<sup>16</sup>. That discovery didn't come easily to an attractive extrovert like Teresa. She writes,

I knew perfectly well that I had a soul, but I did not understand what that soul merited, or Who dwelt within it, until I closed my eyes to the vanities of this world in order to see it. I think, if I had understood then, as I do now, how this great King really dwells within this little palace of my soul, I should not have left Him alone so often [...] <sup>17</sup>.

In Teresa's struggle against vanity and self-indulgence, she relied on penance as well as prayer. Teresa found that denying her body in small ways weaned her from more than just physical luxuries. It also helped her stop people-pleasing and playing to the crowd.

Teresa came to believe that our attachments to honor, money and creature comforts are all connected. When we free ourselves of one, we more easily disentangle from the others. So one way to grow in humility and poverty of spirit is to give up little indulgences for our bodies – including the indulgence of bemoaning their imperfections, aches and pains. As Teresa explains in *The Way of Perfection*, these bodily flaws

...come and go; and unless you get rid of the habit of talking about them and complaining of everything (except to God) you will never come to the end of them. [...] For this body of ours has one fault: the more you indulge it, the more things it discovers to be essential to it <sup>18</sup>.

Case in point, Teresa argues, is our tendency to use physical discomfort – or the risk of it – as an excuse to avoid prayer. She writes,

Hardly have we begun to imagine that our heads are aching than we stay away from choir, though that would not kill us either. One day we are absent because we had a headache some time ago; another day, because our head has just been aching again; and on the next three days in case it should ache once more <sup>19</sup>.

Teresa saw penance as the solution. She believed so firmly in the connection between physical asceticism and spiritual progress that she made it a cornerstone of her Carmelite reform. The asceticism she promotes isn't born of narcissism or the mania for

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<sup>16</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 188.

<sup>17</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 188.

<sup>18</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 92.

self-improvement that drives today's fitness fads. The goal is not to drop a dress size, impress Facebook friends or even live longer. The goal is to get to heaven.

Christian asceticism, as Teresa practiced it, stems from a hunger for God, and a willingness to abide some physical discomfort to remain aware of that hunger. Skipping dessert, getting out of bed a few minutes early for extra prayer time, passing up the chance to complain about those last five pounds we can't lose –or forgoing a second peek in the mirror when we finally do lose them– such little acts of mortification seem insignificant. Teresa believed they add up, though, to significant spiritual growth. They purify and strengthen us, allowing us to follow God in greater freedom.

She saw similar opportunities in illness and age-related decline. Both can draw us closer to God if we join them to the redemptive suffering of Christ. Our pain then becomes a prayer –a more powerful one, Teresa argues, than the prayer of, as she put it, «one who is breaking his head in solitude, thinking that if he has squeezed out some tears he is thereby praying»<sup>20</sup>.

Teresa's praise for penance and suffering flies in the face of the health-and-wealth gospel so popular today. And the austerity she and her reformed Carmelites embraced can be intimidating for those of us who struggle just to forego meat on Fridays and keep our Lenten fasts from coffee or chocolate. With her hair shirt, wooden pillow and intense fasts, Teresa's mortification is a tough act to follow. Even her language about the body can be off-putting. It can sound harsh, Manichean, at odds with the celebration of embodiedness we find in John Paul the Second's Theology of the Body.

Severe as Teresa may sound, though, she was no body-hating Gnostic. Unlike many in our culture today, she believed that our bodies were created to glorify God, and that what we do with them has eternal consequences.

Teresa had a thoroughly incarnational faith, nursing great devotion to Jesus in His humanity and in His real presence in the Eucharist. She rejected the iconoclasm of Protestant Reformers who wanted to scrap Catholic art and statuary. And she celebrated the created world, from good food and good housing for her nuns to the joys of the flamenco she liked to dance on the tables at recreation. A sacramental worldview

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<sup>20</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Ávila* Vol. 1, Letter 136, to Padre Jerónimo Gracián, 369.

permeates the pages of Teresa's books, which are filled with comparisons between spiritual realities and the gifts of nature: silkworms and butterflies, caterpillars and cobwebs, hedgehogs and mulberry leaves.

Even Teresa's advice on penance was shaped by her earthy, pragmatic streak. Nuns who suffered from sadness and absorptions masquerading as rapture were told to pray less, eat more and do more manual labor. Some outsiders deemed the level of penance in her convents insufficient. But Teresa shrugged off the criticism. She saw extreme penances as dangerous, a trick the devil uses to ruin our health and lead us to despair. As she writes to her brother, Lorenzo, «God desires your health more than your penance [...] Take great care not to give up sleep and to eat enough [...] for with your desire to do something for God you will not notice anything until the harm is done»<sup>21</sup>. Or as she clarifies in *The Way of Perfection*, a few chapters after chiding nuns who needlessly skipped choir, «we must shorten our time of prayer, however much joy it gives us, if we see our bodily strength waning or find that our head aches: discretion is most necessary in everything»<sup>22</sup>.

For Teresa, physical self-denial is not an end in itself. It's a tool for building spiritual stamina. If we embrace the balanced, joyful asceticism Teresa advocates, we can find that the very bodies that once distracted us from heaven become means of preparing us for it.

### **THE THIRD LESSON**

If Teresa's attention to penance and prayer is countercultural, her praise for obedience is downright radical.

Obedience might seem an unlikely lesson to learn from trailblazing woman leader like Teresa, who repeatedly found herself in the crosshairs of civil and ecclesial authorities. In the eyes of many, Teresa's dogged pursuit of reform despite resistance makes her a better patron saint of rebellion than obedience. And the very idea of obedience is controversial among women today, given how often through history we have seen female obedience used to justify male domination.

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<sup>21</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Ávila* Vol. 1, Letter 185, to Don Lorenzo de Cepeda, 506.

<sup>22</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 144.

Yet here we have Teresa –bold, outspoken, intrepid Teresa– cheering what she calls “happy obedience”<sup>23</sup>. «Obedience», she writes, «is the quickest or best means for reaching this most happy state (of spiritual perfection)»<sup>24</sup>.

To understand Teresa’s words, it helps to look at her life. She was both savvy and resolute in dealing with religious officials who opposed her reform. She harbored no illusions about the sinlessness of the Church’s human members. Still, Teresa was steadfastly obedient to the legitimate authorities in her life –her religious superiors, her confessors and the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. For Teresa, there was no separating Christ from His Church. And there was no other way to follow Christ than to live as He did: «Obedient unto death» (Phil 2:8)<sup>25</sup>. «[God’s] glory and the good of His Church», she writes, «[... ] are my only wishes»<sup>26</sup>. Or as she said on her deathbed, «I die as a daughter of the Church»<sup>27</sup>.

Teresa’s reform was born in obedience and a desire to recover rather than uproot Catholic tradition. As she writes in her autobiography, when describing the founding of her first reform convent, St. Joseph’s,

I was there [...] with the permission of my superiors. I did nothing without the advice of learned men, in order that I might not break, in a single point, my vow of obedience. [...] If they had told me that there was the slightest imperfection in the whole matter, I would have given up the founding of a thousand monasteries [...] <sup>28</sup>.

Some dismiss such words as a literary ploy to appease Inquisition censors. That explanation lets us applaud Teresa’s strength while ignoring her docility. But Teresa’s support for obedience is too thoroughly interwoven in her writings, and too tangibly documented in her life story, to be discounted.

Consider the example of St. Joseph’s. Teresa’s obedience was tested repeatedly in her founding of that convent. In her autobiography, she relates how her provincial abruptly withdrew his approval for the project after the deeds were drawn up. Teresa had already worked and suffered a great deal to bring it to completion. Her confessor ordered her to drop it, though, and Teresa agreed.

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<sup>23</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 64.

<sup>26</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “*General Audience*,” The Holy See, 2 February 2011, 3 July 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20110202.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110202.html)

<sup>28</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Life*, 259.

The reversal exposed her to ridicule. Critics mocked her as foolish. Her fellow nuns wanted her locked in a prison cell. Still, Teresa persevered in obedience, and discovered the surpassing peace it can bring. Here are her words: «God granted me the very great favor that none of all this disturbed me; rather, I gave up the plan with as much ease and contentment as I would have if it hadn't cost me anything. No one could believe this [...] even my own confessor couldn't believe it»<sup>29</sup>.

Obedience was not always so easy for Teresa. She writes candidly about what she calls the “painful exercise” of obedience when, as she puts it, «the judgment made in our case seems to us absurd»<sup>30</sup>. Teresa believed that God's grace assists us in these acts of self-denial. Our self-surrender then leads to self-mastery, which in turn leads us to want only what God wants. And that, Teresa says, is the essence of holiness and real freedom. Here's how she explains it:

The highest perfection obviously does not consist in interior delights or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy but in having our will so much in conformity with God's will that there is nothing we know He wills that we do not want with all our desire, and in accepting the bitter as happily as we do the delightful when we know that His Majesty desires it. This seems most difficult [...] and indeed it truly is difficult. But love has this strength if it is perfect, for we forget about pleasing ourselves in order to please the one we love<sup>31</sup>.

It's worth noting that the obedience Teresa extolls is about surrender to God rather than submission to man. Still, that surrender is made manifest through our assent to the legitimate authority of someone or something outside ourselves –whether it be the authority of a religious superior or confessor, the teaching authority of the Church or the authoritative demands of our vocation.

For women in the Catholic Church today, the question of obedience arises most commonly in the context of the Church's moral teachings. Obedience can indeed be difficult when it means following the Church's calls to live chastely in a society that trivializes sex. Or to welcome children as blessings rather than burdens. Or to forge a lifelong marriage based on the biblical ethic of “mutual subjection” of spouses (Eph.

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<sup>29</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Life*, 233.

<sup>30</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 69.

<sup>31</sup> Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 68.

5:21), which John Paul the Second described as Christianity’s “new way” of viewing relations between husbands and wives<sup>32</sup>.

Hidden within these larger calls to obedience are countless others: the call to overlook a critical comment from a harried spouse; to listen attentively as a forgetful parent tells stories we’ve heard before; to look away from the computer screen and into the eyes of the child who needs our love.

Such situations test our obedience to the demands of the present moment and the demands of our vocation. Teresa faced those tests herself, in the context of community life. And she taught her nuns to rank the duties of obedience and charity above even their desire for more prayer or penance, because doing God’s will in each moment is always better than doing our own. She writes, «my daughters, don’t be sad when obedience draws you to involvement in exterior matters. Know that if it is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans [...]»<sup>33</sup>.

That’s a consoling thought for today’s busy mothers or women caring for frail parents and needy neighbors. Teresa reminds us that the God who gives us the desire to spend solitary time with Him also sanctifies us through our service to others, provided we make time for prayer when we can. Obedience rooted in prayer becomes a fast track to holiness. And the very frustrations of family or community life that test our obedience become priceless opportunities for spiritual growth. As Teresa writes in her *Book of Foundations*,

Here, my daughters, is where love will be seen: not hidden in corners but in the midst of the occasions of falling. [...] For people who are always recollected in solitude, however holy in their own opinion they may be, don’t know whether they are patient or humble, nor do they have the means of knowing this. How could it be known whether a man were valiant if he were not seen in battle? St. Peter thought he was very courageous; see how he acted when the occasion presented itself. But he came through that experience not trusting at all in himself, and as a result he trusted in God and subsequently suffered the martyrdom about which we know. [...] I consider one day of humble self-knowledge a greater favor from the Lord [...] than many days of prayer<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Pope John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*”, The Holy See, 15 August 1988, 3 July 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html)

<sup>33</sup> SAINT TERESA, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 67.

<sup>34</sup> SAINT TERESA, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 71.

Humble self-knowledge isn't something to which we naturally aspire, of course. Neither is obedience. Yet Teresa gives us good reason to reconsider this neglected virtue, and to see obedience through her eyes: as a path to joy and true liberation.

## CONCLUSION

At the heart of Teresa's lessons about prayer, penance and obedience, there lies a simple message for the modern woman: We find our freedom in God alone.

We don't find it in achievements, or appearances, or the absence of constraints. We find it in moment-by-moment fidelity to God's will –the very fidelity against which our world and our flesh so fiercely rebel.

In a society obsessed with freedom and seduced by its counterfeits, the interior liberation that Teresa champions can be a tough sell. It doesn't come easy or cheap. But it's worth the effort, Teresa tells us, because it's the only freedom that lasts. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, «When the Son frees you, you will be free indeed» (John 8:36).

Teresa achieved that freedom. And she is a timeless woman – not because she was brilliant, or beautiful, or even a master of the mystical life. Teresa is timeless because she surrendered herself to God's fathomless, liberating love, then took the risk of teaching others to make that same surrender.

In the first chapter of her *Book of Foundations*, Teresa tells the story of a longing she felt years earlier to do something big for God. At the time, her desire seemed futile, cloistered as she was in her convent. Then one night, she heard the Lord tell her: «Wait a little, daughter, and you will see great things». Teresa was comforted but also puzzled. She says, «No matter how much I thought about this promise I couldn't figure out how it would be possible [...] Nevertheless, I remained [...] certain that these words would prove true»<sup>35</sup>.

We now know that they did come true, in a spectacular way. Five centuries after she was born here in Ávila, Teresa is still changing lives, still doing great things for God.

Today I believe God is calling us to do the same. To take up the task of the new evangelization with Teresa's boldness, confident that with His grace, we –like Teresa– can renew our Church, influence our culture and even become saints.

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<sup>35</sup> SAINT TERESA, *The Book of Her Foundations: A Study Guide*, 23.

It's an audacious hope. But as Teresa writes in *The Way of Perfection*, God wants us «to desire great and sublime things [...] It would be insulting a great emperor to ask him for a farthing»<sup>36</sup>.

May God grant us the grace to desire those great things –then to pray, work and watch for their unfolding.

Teresa of Jesus, daughter of Ávila and Doctor of the Church, pray for us.

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<sup>36</sup> SAINT TERESA, *The Way of Perfection*, 277.