

***MESA DE EXPERTOS: UNIDAD DE VIDA: MUNDO EXTERIOR***

**SAINT TERESA OF AVILA AND THE VIRTUE OF FLEXIBILITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Though Teresa is noted for her “determined determination” in pursuit of fundamental goals, she was remarkably adaptable and creative in the means she used. Her flexibility can serve as a model today.

**KEY WORDS:** Teresa, flexibility, flexibilidad

I want to express my deepest thanks to the organizers for the invitation to participate in this international congress marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of St. Teresa of Jesus, founder of the Discalced Carmelites and Doctor of the Universal Church. Allow me to begin in an unusual and roundabout way, not with St. Teresa herself but with one of her spiritual daughters.

Miriam Baouardy, better known Mary of Jesus Crucified, OCD (1846-1878) or “the Little Arab,” was recently in the news as one of the first two Palestinians ever to be canonized, in a ceremony that took place at St. Peter’s on 17 May 2015. Though she lived in the skeptical 19<sup>th</sup> century, her biography is full of details we more often associate with medieval hagiography: a miraculous healing through the intervention of Our Lady, the stigmata, ecstasies, levitations and so on. She died at 32 in the Carmel of Bethlehem, which she had helped to found.

What is striking for our purposes, however, is that her visions and voices sometimes involved “conversations” with notable saints, including St. Teresa of Avila. In fact, her sisters in the Carmelite convent, aware of her ecstasies, tried to consult St.

Teresa through Sr. Miriam on issues of concern. According to Fr. Brunot's biography, for example, the nuns wanted to know whether those who had to leave choir 15 minutes before everyone else for some assigned task were obliged to start 15 minutes early to make up for the time lost. According to Sr. Miriam, La Madre said «no», because those sisters were performing a service of charity, and Jesus would make up for it.

May chocolate or coffee be served for breakfast?

«[Madre] Teresa said that when the superiors had forbidden chocolate or coffee they were at that time very rare and costly; it was only the well-to-do who could afford them. But it is different now, they are not more expensive than other things. She especially permits these for the sick».

Is it necessary to keep the habit of [Madre] Teresa? «For that matter, habits are not that important. Mother says that (they are) not exactly like hers but (she is) satisfied as you are».

Must we go barefoot or wear shoes: «She says that it is not wrong to wear a little more because times have changed»<sup>1</sup>.

Now I doubt St. Teresa herself would have encouraged such supernatural consultations or reliance on private revelations! Teresa tells us that her own practice, when she felt she received some divine command in prayer, was to present it to her directors and superiors without mentioning the supernatural source but simply giving all of the natural and prudential reasons for the desired course of action; if they agreed, she felt more confident that she was on the right track<sup>2</sup>.

But I mention Sr. Miriam's revelations only because of their connection with my theme. I don't claim to know definitely whether our newest Carmelite saint was actually communicating with *the spirit of St. Teresa*, or even what exactly that would mean. But it seems to me that Sr. Miriam's responses on behalf of St. Teresa, whatever their

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<sup>1</sup> A. Brunot, *Miriam, The Little Arab: Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified (1846-1878)*, trans. by Jeanne Dumais and Miriam of Jesus, Eugene, OR: Carmel of Maria Regina, 1984, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> See *Foundations* 17.4, regarding a command she received in prayer to go to Pastrana for a proposed foundation: «...I didn't dare but do what I usually do in similar instances, which was to follow the counsel of my confessor. And so I sent for him. I did not tell him what I had heard in prayer. In this way I am always left more satisfied, for I beg the Lord to give my confessors light in conformity with what they can know naturally. And when His Majesty wants something to be done, He puts it in their heart. This happened to me many times. So it happened this time [...]». Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are from *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976-1986, 3 vols., and from *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2001-2007, 2 vols.

source, were certainly in line with the *Teresian spirit*. The replies she shared certainly reflect the “good balance, the sense of an intelligent adaptation, and the primacy of the spirit over the letter”<sup>3</sup> that we naturally associate with La Madre. It is about that balance and flexibility that I wish to speak.

Teresa is widely regarded as a woman of great «determined determination» (*mu* *determinada determinación* [Way 21.2])<sup>4</sup>, and rightly so. Few men and women of any era have accomplished as much in the face of so many obstacles. But this does not mean that she was rigid and uncompromising in pursuit of her particular vision of Christian and religious life. Unlike many of her followers and admirers, Teresa herself clearly understood the difference between means and ends, and showed surprising freedom in revising particular strategies and practices in order to achieve her ultimate goal.

Perhaps the most obvious example concerns her desire to establish communities of her nuns without endowments or a regular income. Readers of *The Book of Her Life* recall that, according to her own account, once she learned of the requirement of poverty in the early Carmelite legislation<sup>5</sup>, she insisted that her first reformed community of San José be founded in poverty, even though fierce opposition on this point from the civic leaders of Avila nearly derailed the project (*Life* 34-35). Teresa’s reasons, though she does not say so explicitly in the *Life*, were as much practical as devotional. A community founded in poverty could be free from the interference of wealthy donors and from the obligation of reciting lengthy vocal prayers for their intentions as repayment. Still, from the way she writes about the issue in the *Life*, one might easily assume that she considered founding in poverty as an indispensable element of her Reform.

Yet already by the time of her third foundation in 1568, under pressure from “learned men” and her great benefactor, Doña Luisa de la Cerda, she reconsidered. Because the village of Malagón was too small to provide adequate donations, she allowed the community there to be founded with a “sufficient income”. And she was reassured in prayer by the Lord that «He would be served in that house» (*Foundations*

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<sup>3</sup> Brunot, *The Little Arab*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> This famous expression is translated as «very resolute determination» in the ICS edition.

<sup>5</sup> See *Life* 35.2 and its accompanying note. As the English translator explains in the ICS edition, the original Carmelite Rule itself did not prescribe absolute poverty, but this was added later by Gregory IX in 1229.

9.3-5). Nor was Malagón unique in this respect. Similar arrangements were allowed in Pastrana, Alba de Tormes and elsewhere. In fact, to prepare for the 1581 Chapter of Alcalá establishing the “discalced” as a separate province, Teresa wrote to Gracián:

Our constitutions say that our monasteries should be founded in poverty and not have an income. Since I now see that they are all on the way to having an income, consider if it would not be better to remove this and anything else in the constitutions that might refer to it so that no one on seeing them will think our monasteries have grown lax so quickly (*Letters* 376.7 [To Gracián, 21 February 1581])<sup>6</sup>.

More generally, unlike many leaders and founders, Teresa was not inclined to impose rigid conformity or to over-regulate the details of the way of life she inaugurated. In the same letter to Gracián, for example, she advises against certain restrictive legislation on diet and clothing, “so that the nuns won’t be having scruples” (*Ibid.*, 5). She writes elsewhere concerning an overzealous visitor: «I felt worn out just from reading [his] decrees. What would happen if I were obliged to observe them? Believe me, our rule doesn’t bear up under rigorous people, for it is rigorous enough» (*Letters* 150.2 [To Gracián, 19 November 1576]). In general, one can say that Teresa was not an advocate of many regulations, preferring instead to leave her followers free to adjust to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

Indeed, at times such “Teresian flexibility” could almost be mistaken for inconsistency. In the *Way of Perfection*, for instance, Teresa instructs her nuns that their houses «must be poor and small in every way» (*Way* 2.9), and warns against constructing sumptuous monasteries: «May such a building fall to the ground and kill you all the day you desire one» (*Ibid.*)! Yet she does not hesitate to spend significantly more to obtain healthy surroundings and a good view (see *Letters* 103.2 [to Don

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<sup>6</sup> See T. Egado, «Ambiente Histórico», in *Introducción a la Lectura de Santa Teresa*, ed. de Alberto Barrientos, Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1978, pp. 43-103. This article has been translated into English by M. Dodd and S. Payne in two parts as “The Historical Setting of St. Teresa’s Life”, in *Carmelite Studies* 1, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980, pp. 122-182 and “The Economic Concerns of Madre Teresa,” in *Carmelite Studies* 4, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987, pp. 151-172. My observations and examples here are heavily indebted to Egado’s insights in this article and other publications. See also J. Bilinkoff, *The Avila of St. Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth Century City*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1989.

Rodrigo de Moya, 19 February 1576)]<sup>7</sup>. She speaks admiringly of the physical penances of Peter of Alcantara (*Life* 27.16-20) and Catalina de Cardona (*Foundations* 28.21-36),<sup>8</sup> yet discourages her friars from going barefoot and worries that their excessive austerities might cause her reform among the men to collapse (*Foundations* 14.12)<sup>9</sup>. She writes that she would willingly «die a thousand deaths» for the «slightest ceremony» of the church (*Life* 33.5), but feels no qualms about reducing the chanting of the Divine Office in her communities to *recto tono*, to leave more time for mental prayer. She repeatedly professes complete submission to the judgment of the church authorities (cf. the prologues to her major works), but openly disagrees with certain prelates and ecclesiastical policies when she believes they are mistaken (cf. her disappointment with the decision to ban spiritual books in the vernacular [*Life* 26.5]). Teresa befriends and consults with those from every category and rank of society – *letrados* and *espirituales*, peasants and nobility, New Christians and Old Christians, legitimate and illegitimate<sup>10</sup> – even when these groups regard one another with mutual suspicion.

Any apparent inconsistency, however, becomes more understandable when viewed in the larger context of her particular vocation. Teresa clearly recognizes that she has been personally called to establish small communities of friends who will support one another in a life of “unceasing prayer” for the sake of the church and world. For her, all of the other details are secondary, to be accepted or rejected insofar as they help or hinder realization of this primary goal.

«Our primitive rule states that we must pray without ceasing. If we do this with all the care possible – for unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of the rule – the fasts, the

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<sup>7</sup> She writes: «It is so important to have a monastery well located that it would be a mistake to look at the price. Considering the water and the view, I would elsewhere have very gladly paid much more than what the house cost».

<sup>8</sup> Despite the high praise given to Catalina de Cardona in the *Foundations*, however, Teresa’s ambivalence about her harsh physical penances is revealed, for example, in her *Spiritual Testimonies* 19, where she recalls the Lord telling her in prayer: «I value your obedience more».

<sup>9</sup> See also the very interesting letter of 12 December 1576 to Ambrosio Mariano in which she observes humorously: «I am fond of strictness in the practice of virtue but not of austerity, as you see in our houses of nuns. This is perhaps so because I am not very penitential» (*Letter* 161.8).

<sup>10</sup> In a letter of 15 December 1581 to her nephew Lorenzo (son of her brother Lorenzo) she admonishes him for having sired an illegitimate daughter but praises the girl herself and reminds her nephew of his responsibilities towards her: «...even though what you did was very distressing to me because of its being an offense against God, when I see how much this little girl resembles you, I can’t help but welcome and love her.... May God make her his servant, for she is not at fault, and so don’t be negligent in taking care to see that she is brought up well» (*Letter* 427.4-5).

disciplines, and the silence the order commands will not be wanting. For you already know that if prayer is to be genuine, it must be helped by these other things» (*Way* 4.2).

Thus, for Teresa, since «prayer and comfortable living are incompatible» (*Ibid.*), physical asceticism has value to the extent that it helps prepare our bodies for the demands of a prayerful life; but excessive penances should be avoided to the extent that they harm the bodily health needed for «unceasing prayer». Similarly, simple clothing is sufficient for women and men dedicated to contemplative prayer, but what is appropriate will vary according to the temperature, the materials easily available, and so on. Modest houses keep us from becoming distracted by luxurious decorations, but a healthy climate and beautiful view lift the spirit to God and so are worth the extra cost. Church rituals and ceremonies are to be cherished but not unduly multiplied to the point where they leave no time for quiet meditation. And anyone who supports her project of a praying community, regardless of his or her social status, is to be welcomed as a friend and ally.

In short, Teresa embodies the discretion or “common sense” praised in the Carmelite Rule as the guide to the virtues<sup>11</sup>. Like ourselves, she lived in a deeply polarized church and society, where any sort of compromise may be viewed as a betrayal. Yet she gives us an example of how to avoid all fanaticism and rigidity. She is firm on basic principles, but understands that they need to be applied differently in different situations, and in dialogue with people having other points of view. Of course, Teresa is well aware of the risk of rationalization and self-deception, which is one reason we need the guidance of directors, superiors, church authorities, the teachings of Scripture and so on. But in the end, her spirituality and charism cannot be reduced to a strict set of rules and observances to be followed. We remain faithful to Teresa’s spirit not primarily by reduplicating the externals of her sixteenth century lifestyle, but by discerning how to live a life of “unceasing prayer” in our own contemporary context, and adapting the externals accordingly. In the end, as we know, for Teresa prayer is

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<sup>11</sup> The Rule of St. Albert ends with the words: «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 [*discretio*] are not exceeded, however, for common sense is the guide of the virtues».

both friendship and a way of life, and therefore her advice for prayer and for living is much the same:

«Do that which best stirs you to love. Perhaps we don't know what love is. I wouldn't be very surprised, because it doesn't consist in great delight but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything, in striving, insofar as possible, not to offend Him, and in asking Him for the advancement of the honor and glory of His Son and the increase of the Catholic Church» (*Interior Castle*, IV.1.7).

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