

# ST TERESA OF JESUS, MENTAL PRAYER AND THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

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ONE OF THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS of the spirituality of St Teresa of Jesus (St Teresa of Ávila) was her attitude towards mental prayer. St Teresa advocated mental prayer at a time when a group of women dedicating themselves to prayer was regarded with distrust and suspicion, and when people were advised to follow the safe paths of the ascetical life and vocal prayer, shunning the extraordinary ways of mysticism. For her, mental prayer was not only a silent prayer of the heart, but also a response to God's call and invitation, and the way to a personal and intimate relationship with God.

Things were obviously not easy for St Teresa. The value and role of mental prayer were a matter of controversy. Furthermore, women mystics were even more likely than their male counterparts to be suspected of false mystical illuminations or demonic possession. This was partly because scholastic theologians were influenced by Aristotle's assertion that women were guided by their passions rather than by stable judgment. As a woman, St Teresa did indeed feel incapable of much. She wrote in *The Way of Perfection*: 'I realized I was a woman and wretched and incapable of doing any of the useful things I desired to do in the service of the Lord'.<sup>1</sup> The result of these reflections, however, was not a surrender to apathy but the resolve to do the little that she felt was in her power.

It was in this sceptical environment that St Teresa founded the first monastery of Discalced Carmelites within the Carmelite reform, with a much stricter rule than the Carmelite monasteries of the time. The nuns were to dedicate themselves to a life of prayer, of intimate friendship with God, of faith and love, and they were to observe enclosure. St Teresa

<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 1.2, in *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila*, volume 2, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS, 1980).

believed that their prayer would be well received by God although they were women, and she showed an ardent faith that this was the case:

Since you, my Creator, are not ungrateful, I think you will not fail to do what they beg of you. Nor did you Lord, when you walked in the world, despise women; rather you always, with great compassion, helped them. [And you found as much love and more faith in them than you did in men .... since the world's judges are sons of Adam and all of them men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect. Yes, indeed, the day will come, my King, when all will be known for what they are. I do not speak for myself, because the world already knows my wickedness ... but because I see that these are times in which it would be wrong to undervalue virtuous and strong souls, even though they are women].<sup>2</sup>

St Teresa firmly believed that mental prayer is not a kind of spiritual optional extra, but an affirmation of awareness of the extraordinary reality that God is accessible to human beings in a personal, one-to-one relationship. Together with centring one's attention on the human qualities and attributes of Jesus, she earnestly insisted on the nearness of God to each person, emphasizing the importance of being fully present to God in prayer—just as God is fully present to us. She said in *The Way of Perfection*:

What I am trying to point out is that we should see and be present to the One with whom we speak without turning our back on Him, for I don't think speaking with God while thinking of a thousand other vanities would amount to anything else but turning our backs on Him. All the harm comes from not truly understanding that He is near, but in imagining Him as far away.<sup>3</sup>

You should not be thinking of other things while speaking with God, for doing so amounts to not knowing what mental prayer is.<sup>4</sup>

For St Teresa it was unthinkable that anyone could possibly want to think of something else while in the presence of God, rather than treasuring the moment of intimacy with God. She was firmly convinced of God's presence during mental prayer, faithfully exhorting her sisters, 'I'm not asking you to do anything more than look at Him'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection*, 3. 7. The bracketed paragraph was deleted from the first redaction (Escorial Autograph) by García de Toledo, St Teresa's confessor, who thought it was too daring for the attitude toward women that was characteristic of the times. Teresa complied and omitted the passage in the second redaction (Valladolid Autograph).

<sup>3</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection*, 29. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection*, 22. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection*, 26. 3.

She argued that even vocal prayer can and must be accompanied by mental prayer. Mental prayer may be silent prayer, or interior prayer—or prayer unbound by any formulas. St Teresa suggested three essential steps for fruitful mental prayer: first, we must be searching for God; second we must be willing to be alone with God; and third, we must look upon God as present within us. In *The Way of Perfection* we read:

However softly we speak, He is near enough to hear us. Neither is there any need for wings to go to find Him. All one need do is go into solitude and look at Him within oneself and not turn away from so good a Guest but with great humility speak to Him as to a Father.<sup>6</sup>

### **Martha and Mary**

Unlike some proponents of the spirituality of her time, St Teresa never saw mental prayer as a means simply to personal fulfilment, and she resolutely put aside any methods of provoking mystical states or supernatural experiences for their own sake. Furthermore, she never neglected temporal



Martha and Mary, by Bernardino Luini, c. 1520

<sup>6</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection*, 28. 2.

duties for the spiritual, as this would only result in what she saw as a form of spiritual confinement.

Although a contemplative, St Teresa believed in a balance between the contemplative and the active life. She encouraged her sisters to desire and be occupied in prayer, not for the sake of their own enjoyment but to replenish their enthusiasm and vigour to serve God. The work of both Martha and Mary was necessary:

Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always present and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat. How would Mary, always seated at His feet, provide Him with food if her sister did not help her? His food is that in every way possible we draw souls that they may be saved and praise Him always.<sup>7</sup>

For St Teresa, however, Mary had already done the work of Martha:

He said that Mary had chosen the better part. The answer is that she had already performed the task of Martha, pleasing the Lord by washing His feet and drying them with her hair .... I tell you, Sisters, the better part came after many trials and much mortification .... the many trials that afterward she suffered at the death of the Lord and in the years that she subsequently lived in His absence must have been a terrible torment. You see she wasn't always in the delight of contemplation at the feet of the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Mental Prayer and the Love of God***

Not surprisingly, St Teresa rigorously recommended dedicating a larger place in prayer to the work of the heart relative to that of the understanding and the intellect; she believed it to be much more important simply to rejoice in the Lord's presence than to tire ourselves out by occupying our minds with deductive reasoning. In the autobiography, *The Book of Her Life*, she says:

But returning to those who practice discursive reflection, I say they should not pass the whole time thinking ... they should put themselves in the presence of Christ and without tiring the intellect, speak with and delight in Him and not wear themselves out in composing syllogisms.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 7.4.12, in *Collected Works*, volume 2, alluding to Luke 10:38–42.

<sup>8</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 7.4.13.

<sup>9</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life*, 13.11, in *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila*, volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez, 2nd rev. edn (Washington DC: ICS, 1987).

St Teresa insisted with her sisters that the essential element in mental prayer 'not to think much but to love much'.<sup>10</sup> In the *Life* she gives another definition of mental prayer, which has become a classic: 'For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends [*tratar de amistad*]: it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us'.<sup>11</sup> The Spanish suggests a communion or exchange suffused with intimacy and love.

It was in order that this communion might be more perfect that God took on our human nature to participate fully in our human life. St Teresa's first thought was not that we *must* pray; what was so remarkable for her is that we *can* pray because God, through Jesus, has made it possible for us to enter into intimacy with God. She advised her sisters in *The Way of Perfection*:

Represent the Lord Himself as close to you and behold how lovingly and humbly He is teaching you. Believe me, you should remain with so good a friend as long as you can. If you grow accustomed to having Him present at your side, and He sees that you do so with love and that you go about striving to please Him, you will not be able, as they say, to get away from Him; He will never fail you; He will help you in all your trials; you will find Him everywhere. Do you think it's some small matter to have a Friend like this at your side?<sup>12</sup>

Mental prayer as understood and advocated by St Teresa makes no sense to the loveless soul. It is possible, perhaps, to recite other prayers with little or no conscious love of God, but it is not possible to do this with Teresian mental prayer. For her, mental prayer was an expression of love, a sincere love which involves giving rather than seeking for oneself, a love that strives to please rather than be pleased. At certain moments St Teresa even doubted that human beings could truly love God:

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 ....<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 4. 1. 7; and see Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Foundations*, 5. 2, in *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila*, volume 3, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS, 1985): 'The soul's progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much'.

<sup>11</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Book of Her Life*, 8. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection*, 26. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 4. 1. 7.

***The desire to  
be alone with  
God and talk  
with God***

This kind of love moves us to spend time alone with God, not for what we get out of it, but for what we can put into it. For St Teresa it was the desire to be alone with God and talk with God that characterized true prayer. It is not important whether we are delighted by consolation or tortured by dryness and desolation during prayer. What is important is this desire, which really shows our love for God. St Teresa taught her sisters that love for God cannot but develop into the habit of prayer. Furthermore, it makes us choose God rather than ourselves outside prayer as well, a choice that will be evident in our acts of fraternal charity, generosity and humility. This attachment to God and detachment from ourselves, is the measure of the perfection of our prayer.

***The Humanity of Jesus***

Because of her vision of spiritual intimacy with God, St Teresa's devotion to the humanity of Jesus resulted from attachment to him as a person with whom she could communicate on an equal and intimate level. This was considered by her to be an immense privilege; at the same time it was extremely helpful to her to recall that Jesus himself also experienced human emotions. St Teresa had instruction in the Jesuit methods of prayer and meditation, which made use of symbols and images and developed them by means of visualisation. It is without doubt that these teachings played a part in developing her ideas here.

St Teresa was once again swimming against the current here, as not all mystical writers of the time agreed with her on this teaching. The belief of the time was that to remain in consideration of Christ's humanity could be an obstacle to the soul's progress in contemplation. For this reason, contemplation of the humanity of Jesus was relegated by scholastic theologians to the level of 'discursive meditation'. This was roughly equivalent to the early stage of prayer that St Teresa calls 'meditation'.

Yet, once again, St Teresa took a stand of her own on this issue. She asserted that the path which keeps the image of Jesus' human form always before us is the safest and the most appropriate for human beings. Her opponents cited John 16:7 in support of their theory that the human image of Christ had been superseded: 'if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you'. But St Teresa did not accept the validity of this example and vigorously refuted the argument. She did not condemn every move to moderate the use of

the imagination, but she simply could not accept that the soul should banish the remembrance of Jesus Christ purposely and forcibly.

She believed that meditation on the person of Jesus could continue also at the higher stage of mystical prayer given by the grace of God. In this way, the mysteries represented by the Person of Jesus could be apprehended not only discursively but ‘in a more perfect manner’.<sup>14</sup> With reference to certain books on prayer she argued:

They give strong advice to rid oneself of all corporeal images and to approach contemplation of the divinity. They say that in the case of those who are advancing, these corporeal images, even when referring to the Humanity of Christ, are an obstacle or impediment to the most perfect contemplation. In support of this theory they quote what the Lord said to the apostles about the coming of the Holy Spirit—I mean at the time of His ascension. They think that since this work is entirely spiritual, any corporeal thing can hinder or impede it, that one should try to think of God in a general way, that He is everywhere and that we are immersed in Him. This is good, it seems to me sometimes; but to withdraw completely from Christ or that this Divine Body be counted in a balance with our own miseries or with all creation, I cannot endure.<sup>15</sup>

And in *The Interior Castle*, again, she wrote:

I believe I’ve explained that it is fitting for souls, however spiritual, to take care not to flee from corporal things to the extent of thinking that even the most Sacred Humanity causes harm. Some quote what the Lord said to His disciples that it was fitting that He go. I can’t bear this.<sup>16</sup>

St Teresa gave two reasons why she considered that neglecting Christ’s humanity was wrong. First, she believed that it showed a lack of humility on our part to wish to rise above meditation on the humanity of Christ before God granted us that gift. This lack, she admitted, as very small and hidden, and that was the reason why it went unnoticed. Wanting to raise the soul up to the level of contemplation before the Lord raises it, or not being content to meditate on something as valuable as the humanity of Christ, was in her opinion, ‘wanting to be Mary before having worked with Martha’.<sup>17</sup> She said in the *Life*:

<sup>14</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 6.7.11.

<sup>15</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Book of Her Life*, 22.1.

<sup>16</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 6.7.14.

<sup>17</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Book of Her Life*, 22.9.

This practice of turning aside from corporeal things must be good, certainly, since such spiritual persons advise it. But in my opinion, the soul should be very advanced because until then it is clear that the Creator must be sought through creatures .... What I wanted to explain was that the most Sacred Humanity of Christ must not be counted in a balance with other corporeal things.<sup>18</sup>

The second reason she gave was that we are not angels and we have bodies ourselves. In the *Life* she writes, 'It is an important thing that while we are living and are human we have human support', and again, 'Christ is a very good friend because we behold Him as Man and see Him with weaknesses and trials and He is company for us'.<sup>19</sup>

We can read about this teaching twice in St Teresa's writings, both in her autobiography and *The Interior Castle*. It is worth noting that the teaching of *The Interior Castle* remained faithful to that given in the *Life*, although fifteen years passed between the writing of one and the other.

### **Praying with Christ**

For St Teresa, meditation on the humanity of Christ meant coming to know ourselves through Christ. Christ as companion both affirms and challenges our emotions. In him we find our humanity fully present so that we do not have to remove our human particularity in order to pray. If we begin our prayer by recognising our emotional state and accepting the contingent facts of our changeable mental and affective life, and then locate this awareness in relation to Jesus' human experiences, our unstable and changeable condition is not suppressed but reordered. St Teresa encourages us to see ourselves in relation to the story of Jesus. In this way we can accept our emotions in a mature way, and not deny them. By relating our human emotions to the humanity of Jesus, we associate them with the fundamental action of a loving gift. We have to open up our affective life to the possibility that through it, as through Christ, God can communicate love.

In the manner of the love of God for human beings, St Teresa stressed that friendship is not a relationship in which one partner makes unilateral claims on the other from a position of superiority. On the contrary, it means wanting the fulfilment of another human being's potential, because

<sup>18</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Book of her Life*, 22.8.

<sup>19</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Book of her Life*, 22.9; 22.10.



friendship is more than just a generalised benevolence. Her concern was always that we should develop the habit of conscious companionship with Christ. It is erroneous to think that we have to leave ourselves and journey somewhere distant in order to find God. God is already accessible to us and it is up to us to continue to speak to God. However, just as much as St Teresa believed that it is possible for everyone to experience the love of God, likewise she held that God does not impinge on our will and our freedom, and we are free to accept or refuse God's offer of friendship. She wrote in *The Way of Perfection*: '... since He doesn't force our will, He takes what we give Him; but He doesn't give Himself completely until we give ourselves completely'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection*, 28. 12.

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