

## SAINT TERESA OF JESUS: *The Book of her Life*

### Introduction

In taking up *The Book of her Life* (*Life, L*) by Saint Teresa, our attitude should not resemble that of someone who is picking up a book to read through mere curiosity or simple obligation. We should be aware that we have in our hands a good book, a book that involves us, that recounts things we feel are somehow ours. What the *Life* recounts, lies within us, is happening to us, in some way or other.

*The Life* can be read in a participative manner for, in it, Holy Mother Teresa has proposed her personal history as a path for others to gain experience. The way she conducted herself, or better, was guided, is an adequate guide for the interior adventure which brings us to full encounter with God. She herself says this explicitly when she states that her intention in writing was "to attract souls to so high a blessing"(Life 18:8)

This spontaneous confession of Teresa gives us the key for reading, which ought to guide our search for deeper understanding of the *Life* and this can be stated of all her writings: Saint Teresa is the mediator of an active Presence, the presence of God, it contains the efficacy to favour personal encounter, not only with her, but also with her divine conversational partner. For, whenever Teresa speaks about God, she does so before him, *coram Deo*, concerning the form in which he appears and manifests himself.

Therefore, it should be a reading that is receptive and vibrant like that which was the norm of her first editor, fray Luis de Leon: "And thus, always when I read them [the writings of Teresa], my admiration is renewed, and it seems to me that for the most part there is no human ingenuity in what I hear; and I do not doubt that the Holy Spirit speaks through her in many places, and that he governs her pen and her hand, so that he manifests the light that he sheds on obscure matters and the fire that is lit by her words in the heart that reads them"<sup>1</sup>.

This feeling, this conviction, is multiplied for her sons and daughters: as Carmelites we are called in a particular manner to encounter our truth, the Truth, in the pages of this *living Book*.

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<sup>1</sup> FRAY Luis DE LeON, Letter-prologue to *Los libros de la Madre Teresa de Jesus*, Guillermo Foquel, Salamanca 1588 (the text appears in the edition of *Libra de la Vida* published by BAG, Madrid 2001, 332, edited by S. Ros GARCIA, OCD).

Many of our brothers and sisters testify explicitly to this experience, in telling us about their vocation or their conversion as the fruit of meeting with Teresa and with Jesus, the way the truth and the life, by reading her works, particularly the *Life*, (from Francisco de Santa Maria Pulgar and Thomas of Jesus in the XVI century to Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in the XX century).

Thus what comes to mind are the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite friars: "The origin of our family in Carmel and the very nature of its vocation are closely bound up with the life and charism of St Teresa, especially with the mystical graces which led her to undertake the renewal of Carmel and make prayer and contemplation its total commitment" (n. 5; — cf. n.4 of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns' Constitutions).

And, if we truly want to get the most out of our reading, we should not forget what Fr General said in the preface to the Chapter document "*I was born for you*": "As soon as we open the volume of the works of Saint Teresa, we come upon the extraordinary prologue of *The book of her Life*, in which she advises the reader not to forget the dark side of her person about which she is not permitted to say a word, as she has permission only to write about her way of praying and the graces she has received. This declaration places us immediately outside the conventional hagiographical style and takes us back to the authenticity of a Christian life in a continual state of conversion. If Teresa writes this, it is precisely because she wants nobody to feel excluded from the possibility of following her way and receiving graces similar to those she experienced. But if between ourselves and Teresa of Jesus is erected a barrier of stereotypes, conforming more to the canons of a certain type of hagiography or a certain spiritual theology rather than the real history of Teresa, then listening to her words cannot become for us a source of salutary renewal, and there is the danger that it will turn into a pious exercise, from which can be derived, at the most, considerations of a moralistic or spiritualistic tenor."

## **1. A Living book**

This *living book* is the first work of the Saint and lacks an authentic title. It was the librarians of the Escorial who wrote on the first page what has come down to us.

Of all her works, the *Life* is the most extensive and in it Saint Teresa describes herself as the author. As well, we are dealing with writing that is profound, shocking, an authentic revelation of her soul, to the point that she herself was to describe it: "my soul" (*Letter* to Dona

Luisa de la Cerda, June 23, 1568, 3; cf. L 16: 6; L epilogue: 4).

In this book Saint Teresa has made a systematic effort — the first in the history of thought and literature - to pour out into its pages the whole of her person, in such a way that literary critics consider the book the most personal in the whole of Spanish literature.

This is so, since Saint Teresa does not try simply to write an autobiography, but rather to recount to the reader her life as a *history of salvation*, as an area of encounter with God. The Saint relates to us the manner in which God became the protagonist in her life, *waiting for her* (cf. L, prologue) and patiently transforming her. So then, the book recounts the intervention of God in the life of the woman who is Teresa of Jesus, with the intention to involve, which is to say, by stimulating readers to put themselves into the situation where God becomes the protagonist in their own life.

Despite being written at various time (1562-1565), this is a deeply considered work with a well-defined structure, alternating the narration of biographical events with presentation of a doctrinal nature. This rhythm between narrative and instruction is a particular characteristic of the writer, and recurs throughout her writings. Being an exceptional narrator, she does not limit herself to transmitting a chronicle. Rather, possessing an unstoppable eagerness to communicate, she prefers to exercise the office of spiritual guide, turning her biographical narration into a platform for doctrine, searching more to have her words accepted than to have a reply to them.

## 2. Structure of the book

The book unfolds in 40 chapters, divided into five sections containing distinct topics:

Section I. The first part of the book spans chapters one to nine. St Teresa gives an autobiographical account of forty years of her life, from infancy to the basic events leading to her mystical experience. Throughout the narration, Teresa seems to divide herself in two: narrator and the person written about. The narrator sets out the perspective that she has to write about, while she, the person, sets it in motion and describes it according to the viewpoint that Teresa herself had when the narrated events happened. The section has an increasing dramatic quality, in which the readers can see themselves clearly involved, right to the episode about her conversion, which saint Teresa reveals as the key event in her life, the turning point from what came before to what happened after.

Section II. After chapter 10, which makes the transition, the writer gives, in chapters 11 to 22, a detailed exposition of the four grades of prayer, using an allegorical image: the four ways of watering the garden, which describe meditative prayer (chapters 11-13), the prayer of infused recollection and quiet (chapters 14-15), the prayer of the sleep of the senses (chapters 16-17) and the prayer of union (chapters 18-21). Chapter twenty-two summarizes and crowns the whole of her spiritual journey with the irreplaceable meditation on Jesus Christ, "through whom all blessings come to us" (L 22:7). This section prepares us to understand better the new life that she is experiencing after entering into mystical experience.

Section III. From chapters 23 to 31, the author returns to autobiographical narration, but no longer as in the first section. Now the distance we spoke about between the narrator and the person spoken about is reduced to a minimum, both melting into a change of identity, which from the beginning is announced through expressions and experiences similar to those of saint Paul: "This is another, new book from here on - I mean another, new life. The life dealt with up to this point was mine; the one I loved from the point where I began to explain these things about prayer is the one God lived in me" (L 23: 1).

Section IV. The fourth part runs from chapter 32 to 36, where she apparently deviates from her discourse on her life, to speak about external happenings: the foundation of St Joseph's monastery in Avila. But, according to the author herself, the event and its report, are a fruit of what was previously narrated, a fruit and effect of her mystical experience, converted into a source of life for others. Her *personal history of salvation* becomes caught up into the *History of Salvation* and St Teresa, together with the group of her first followers, set out in St Joseph's to serve Christ and his Church. Her graces received are thus revealed not as a special privilege for her own personal advantage, but as an ecclesial gift for the benefit of all.

Section V. This is made up of the final chapter of the *Life*, from 37 to 40. Here, St Teresa, encouraged by Fr Garcia de Toledo, resumes an autobiographical style in order to complete the sequence of the third part with what she was presently living. In contrast with previous fears and perplexities, she reveals here a feeling of serenity and interior security, which allows her to recount new experiences with absolute conviction.

### 3. Guidelines for reflective reading of these sections

Section I. Teresa speaks honestly to us about herself: her family, her life as an infant, an adolescent and a young woman, her first vocation, her encounter with Carmelite life etc. But, above all, St Teresa speaks to us about God, how God worked in her, a God who is dynamic and active, leaving nothing undone in his desire to come close to mankind, to lower himself in order to share his life and to transform the person, through some crisis or other. From her own personal experience, Teresa teaches us that God is a positive presence, who improves the person, by encouraging good desires and pardoning faults. In order to show even more clearly God's greatness and his never ending desire to transform the person, Teresa presents herself as an ungrateful person, resisting the divine workings. However, we are not dealing with a pessimistic or negative vision of the human person. St Teresa is only trying to highlight how the divine initiative is matchless, how God's action does not depend on our merits, nor the value of our good intentions, rather, solely and exclusively on his mercy.

Section II. Prayer is the sphere for the privileged encounter between God and the human person, where there is realised the *miracle* of transformation. God seats himself at table with men and women, loves to walk with them, for the purpose of communicating his own nature to them. On the part of the person, this demands in prayer, an attitude that is loving and non-grasping. Prayer is not a practice for looking for things for oneself, for finding spiritual consolations. Rather, it is opening the door for the action of God who, at his own pace and not ours, continues to reveal to us his friendship and love, taking the reins of our life. Jesus Christ and his most sacred humanity play an irreplaceable role in this process: in him we have been saved, and through him God has for us all the favors necessary for our transformation to his image. To abandon him is to block the way to any spiritual progress.

Section III. This section shows God taking, even more, the leading role in Teresa's life, which has become a *new life*. So much so that the person, as happened to St Teresa, can be surprised to discover God so close, so loving, giving constant favors to the soul he loves. To the extent such love asserts itself, doubts cease and the person can move in harmony with God, who becomes the center, the source and sole objective of the person. *The favors* Teresa received (visions, locutions, etc.), while having importance, do not constitute the essential of mystical

experience. What is essential is the teaching received by means of these, the deepening of the experience of communion with God perceived as lover and close to the person. Teresa describes a constancy of fruits from her mystical experiences: personal richness, a moral change, growth in love for God and others, humility, rejection of evil, etc. Joined with such a rich panorama of graces and rewards, appear trials, temptation and rejection, incomprehension and harshness. Perfection is not reached in a short time, nor is the road leading to it a way exempt from difficulties, internal and external. Above all the Saint seeks to draw attention to discouragement which can cause real debility: there is no way out except to trust in the Lord and to have patience with yourself; don't overtire yourself, hope in the Lord, persevere in prayer and do what each one can do by themselves, until ones desires are realized.

Section IV. Nothing from God for oneself. We are part of the entire human community and we are part of the Church placed in the midst of this community as a light which shines, like a city set high on a mountain. Yeast and ferment are we for a society that runs the risk of turning away from God. The experience of St Teresa, which she invites us to make our own, is that all mystical graces received are for others, for humanity and for the Church. We see God's hand in history as a *saving touch* by means of Teresa, encouraging her to the foundation of St Joseph's monastery. In the same way, God touches each one of us to invite us to put to one side whatever personal plan we may have and to embrace in his name even that which seems to us completely incomprehensible.

Section V. As community, we contemplate with St Teresa the marvels worked by God, who continues to give birth to places of prayer, poverty and fraternity. Let us examine our community and try to build it in the image of Teresa's dream, which we see realized in St Joseph's. We are called by the Holy Mother to *hasten to serve his Majesty*, so that there are realized in us and for us *miracles* resembling those that happened to St Teresa, who gives witness to these in this *Book of her Life*: "This is the way in which I now live, my Lord and Father [Fr Garcia de Toledo]. May your Reverence beg God that He either take me to Himself or show me how to serve Him" (L 40:23).