

# TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

## St Teresa of Avila and Spiritual Direction

THE CENTRAL THEME of the writings of St Teresa is the attachment to the person of Christ through prayer and the central theme of her whole life is the love of God. She viewed prayer as the privileged means of communication with God.<sup>1</sup> She considered spiritual direction as a means of primary importance for making progress in the ways of the Spirit and a significant help in avoiding the dangers and overcoming the difficulties inherent in striving for the goal of the spiritual life—union with God. Teresa's experience of being on the receiving end of spiritual direction made her value a good director when she found one because she had suffered much from incompetent directors. She was convinced that if she had had a good director from the beginning of her journey to God, she would have given herself to God's service much earlier and she would have reached her goal of union with God much sooner.

The ministry of spiritual direction has received new life in recent years because of the experience of the need for sure guides in the search for a more authentic faith and in the search for a deeper experience of God in prayer. Teresa's experience of direction from both sides—receiving and giving—can teach us much about the spiritual life, about how we can advance in the love and knowledge of God and how we can help others on their journey towards God.

Teresa stressed the importance and the need for spiritual direction. For herself, she feared that her own experiences in prayer might not be from God. As the Inquisition was only too eager to root out false visionaries, she had good reason to fear. However, she had great difficulties in finding anyone who understood her. When she was writing her *Life*, her fears had largely disappeared. Gradually she became the spiritual director of some of her own directors and of many other people too.

### *The qualities of the spiritual director*

What did Teresa look for in a spiritual director? She stressed the need for a director to be experienced in the spiritual life<sup>2</sup> especially for those who were beginning to give themselves to prayer. Teresa had the opportunity of consulting some of the most famous theologians of her day and several saints. She greatly valued learning in directors<sup>3</sup> but she also came across people who were learned in a rather superficial way. If learning remains only in the head and does not penetrate to the heart, it is rather arid. Academic knowledge of theology and scripture is important

because it provides a sure foundation for faith but it is far more important to have a knowledge of God's ways, that is, the ability to translate academic knowledge into real life.

A director who is careless about his or her own life can be very dangerous because he or she can encourage carelessness in others. A director will often be a model for those who come to him or her for help. Therefore, according to Teresa, it is necessary for a director to seek holiness because,

it is a great encouragement to see that things which were thought impossible are possible to others and how easily these others do them. It makes us feel that we may emulate their flights and venture to fly ourselves, as the young birds do when their parents teach them; they are not yet ready for great flights but they gradually learn to imitate their parents.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Teresa as spiritual director*

Through the experiences which she had, Teresa came to grasp certain principles about prayer and the spiritual life. She wrote her major works either for her spiritual directors at their request to help them understand her better or for her own nuns. Amongst her nuns, there were several with very high spiritual gifts and who were advanced on the path of holiness. However the majority were ordinary women with normal problems. Therefore Teresa took pains to point out that prayer was only part of the christian life; the normal christian virtues must accompany prayer and growth in the virtues authenticates growth in prayer. She very strenuously advises that we must not always be looking in on ourselves to check our spiritual pulse as it were. Instead we must look outwards towards God and to the needs of other people. As she wrote in her *Interior Castle*:

When I see people very diligently trying to discover what kind of prayer they are experiencing and so completely wrapped up in their prayers that they seem afraid to stir, or to indulge in a moment's thought, lest they should lose the slightest degree of the tenderness and devotion which they had been feeling, I realise how little they understand of the road to the attainment of union. They think that the whole thing consists in this. But no, sisters, no; what the Lord desires is works.<sup>5</sup>

We are called to love which has very practical consequences. However I cannot exercise love outside God. Prayer is an opening to God whereby I consciously allow him into my life. St Paul urges us to pray always.<sup>6</sup> If

we take this seriously, we must see that our prayer goes beyond the times we set aside for formal prayer. My prayer expresses my relationship with God. My practical care and concern for other people authenticates my love for God. If my relationship to other people is not going well, then I should not be surprised when my relationship with God does not seem to go well either. Prayer and daily life are inextricably connected.

Teresa was always very practical. She deals with the first steps towards God as well as the most sublime states of union with him. When the decision is taken to give oneself to the Lord, the first steps of the journey is the struggle against sin. Teresa says that one should be prepared to die rather than commit a grave sin.<sup>7</sup> Also one must avoid with the greatest diligence any venial sin. The best way of defending ourselves is prayer which helps us get up after a fall and not to fall again.

Along with the struggle against sin, there must be the practice of the ordinary christian virtues. Teresa wrote *The Way of Perfection* for the nuns of St Joseph's, the first convent she had founded. They had asked her to write about prayer but she prefaced it by a short explanation of the practice of the virtues. There are two versions of her book, *The Way of Perfection*. The second version was probably written when Teresa realised that many of her nuns in other convents wanted to read it too. She tells her sisters that prayer cannot be accompanied by self-indulgence. Prayer is a going out of oneself to God while self-indulgence is a concentration on self. Teresa lays down three attitudes which are vital in a life of prayer: love of neighbour; detachment from earthly things; and humility. The way to test whether we are advancing on our journey towards God is to look at our lives. Are we growing in love for those around us? Are we becoming less possessive and grasping of material goods? Are we growing in true humility, that is a true knowledge of ourselves, that we are sinners in need of God? Teresa stresses often that we cannot merit anything from God. It is his will that he fills us with his love but before he can do so, he must break down the barriers which we have set up against him. This can be a very slow process.

Teresa tells her nuns that they must not only be detached from exterior things but also from themselves. This latter detachment is much more difficult than the former because it is more difficult to see one's attachment to self. We can seek ourselves in many things and even in seemingly holy pursuits like prayer. Why do we pray? Is it to advance in the spiritual life or is it simply to give time to the One whom we love and whom we know loves us? Do we seek consolations in prayer and abandon it when prayer becomes more difficult? We need a great deal of honesty and so this detachment from self must go hand in hand with true humility. Teresa is careful to point out that this detachment must be practised in little things because by being faithful in little things, we tend to become faithful in bigger things.

The best way, according to Teresa, to obtain the virtues of love, humility and detachment is through prayer. She does not waste much time trying to explain the nature of love but she takes great pains to determine what it means in practice.<sup>8</sup> Perfection consists in the conformity of our wills with the divine will and this is attained by loving God and our neighbour.

The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy, but in the bringing of our wills so closely into conformity with the will of God that as soon as we realise he wills anything, we desire it ourselves with all our might, and take the bitter with the sweet, knowing that to be His Majesty's will.<sup>9</sup>

God does not look only at external works but he looks at the love which lies behind them.<sup>10</sup> He alone can see to the heart. The Lord wants to give himself to us in love but he will not force this. God wants all to reach perfection but it is necessary that the individual actively disposes himself or herself by freeing his or her heart in order to receive God. Therefore the person must free his or her heart from all other things. Detachment is the preparation of the soil for the seed which is the love of God and given the right conditions, this seed will grow and flower into full union of the human and divine. Humility prepares the way for detachment. It prepares the soul to be empty so that it can receive the love of God. Humility is the foundation of the spiritual edifice and the Lord will never raise a person up much if that virtue is not very secure.<sup>11</sup>

Teresa puts prayer at the beginning of the spiritual life and it accompanies the whole development of the person producing ever more perfect fruit up to the fulness of holiness. To begin on the way of perfection means to begin on the way of prayer. Prayer is an intimate relationship of friendship with One whom we know loves us. The person who decides to give himself or herself to prayer must have a firm resolution not to stop at any obstacle. To this point Teresa often returns. This means that one must never give up prayer for any motive—false humility, sin, illness, criticism etc. The person must not think of consolations but only to conform his or her will with the will of God. Authentic prayer is recognised by its fruits and a continual life of prayer attracts the gifts of God. If we are content with mediocrity, then we will never progress very far. It is so easy to think that we are very good people when we have hardly begun to walk the road which leads to God. We must never be complacent or even content. God has created us for much, much more and he wants to give us much more if only we are willing to receive it.

### *The Interior Castle*

Teresa's masterpiece is *The Interior Castle* because there we have her

most profound thoughts on the spiritual life worked out in a systematic fashion. Fr Gracian, Teresa's great friend, asked her to write a book on prayer as the manuscript of her *Life* was in the hands of the Inquisition.

#### *First mansions*

The interior castle is the symbol of the human being.<sup>12</sup> The door of the castle is prayer and it is through prayer that one enters into oneself. Within this castle there are many rooms and the Lord himself lives in the innermost room at the very heart of the castle. God calls us to himself and we respond by entering into an intimate dialogue with him. Those who are deaf to his call, live outside the castle among the reptiles and insects. The first rooms of the castle are the rooms of self-knowledge. Humility is a natural consequence of a growth in self-knowledge.

#### *Second mansions*

In the second set of rooms or mansions are those who have made an earnest start in giving themselves to God, that is in Teresa's terms those who have begun to pray seriously. These people have a resolution to do God's will although it is still weak. The important thing at this time is to persevere because God is very patient with us even though we fall often. The danger at this stage is to return to the things which we have been called to leave behind. The second mansions are a vital stage of growth because here begins the parting of the ways between those who will live for God and those who will settle for mediocrity.

#### *Third mansions*

In the third mansions are those people who seem to be on the straight road to God. They desire very much not to sin, even in small ways and they generally live very good lives. There seems to be no good reason why these people should not progress much further in the spiritual life. However sometimes God sends these people little tests and immediately they begin to believe that they are martyrs. Yet God only withdraws his help a little to let them understand how imperfect they are. God wants to fill people with his love but first of all they must be made capable of receiving him. The capacity of the person for God in the third mansions is still very fragile.

The third mansions are a springboard for further progress but this stage can be rather dangerous. It is precisely because this state is so good that it can provide a stumbling block to further goodness. People at this stage can feel a secret satisfaction with themselves and they can think that they are spiritual people. Generally people do not commit gross sins at this point in their spiritual lives but their state is similar to that of a garden which has been recently weeded. The garden looks lovely, but just below the surface the roots of the weeds are busily preparing a new

assault on the surface. People in the third mansions order their lives very well; their generosity is kept under control by good sense.

Often we expect God to reward us for our goodness. This is seldom a conscious idea because in our heads we know that we can merit nothing from God since all is gift. However in prayer, we can expect some consolations and when they do not come, we can easily become disgruntled. Why do I feel empty at prayer? Why does God not do his part, after all I am hardly a beginner? At this stage we have not grasped with the heart that all is grace and that we can only receive humbly and gratefully. We still lack the ardent love for God which would make us willing to put up with boredom in prayer and inconvenience etc. in life in general. So this is a dangerous state because it is so easy to become complacent. We can get used to the way we are and we can fail to see that there is still a long way ahead.

#### *Fourth mansions*

The fourth mansions are of great beauty and Teresa finds it very difficult to explain what there is to see here. She says that really to understand this state, one must experience it. Normally before entering these mansions, one will have spent a considerable time in the other mansions. Teresa points out that the way to make much progress is not to think much but to love much. Since that is the case, one must feel free in prayer—'do, then, whatever most arouses you to love.'<sup>13</sup> Teresa stresses that love is not an emotion but a decision—'for love consists not in the extent of our happiness but in the firmness of our determination to try to please God in everything, and to endeavour in all possible ways not to offend Him . . .'<sup>14</sup>

It is in the fourth mansions that Teresa says 'we begin to touch the supernatural'.<sup>15</sup> This is where we enter the strange world of mysticism. God has made the person who enters these mansions capable of receiving him to a certain extent and now he begins to touch that person at the very core of his or her being. God is now preparing the person to be united with him in a way which surpasses all human understanding. This way is not for a privileged few but is offered to all. One modern writer stresses that the mystical way ' . . . means being wholly possessed by God and that is holiness. One cannot be holy unless one is a mystic and if we do not become mystics in this life we become such hereafter.'<sup>16</sup> Many of the experiences which Teresa talks about are by no means normal. They are the effects of mystical graces in very few people. The more usual experience of mystical prayer is one of darkness in which the person is aware that God is powerfully at work but in no way 'sees' what God is doing.

The genuineness of any experience in prayer must be measured by its fruits. There must be a growth in humility and in the love of God and

others. The important thing is to strive to love God simply because he is God and not because of anything he can give us. This is to love the God of all consolations and not the consolations of God.

What we find in the fourth mansions is not a deepening of what has gone before but is something completely new. This 'something new' is the beginning of a process which continues in the fifth and sixth mansions and is completed in the seventh. God continually offers us divine intimacy and by this time the person has accepted this offer and has done and continues to do all in his or her power to be open to receive this gift of God. Teresa says that it is in the fourth mansions that God begins to give us his Kingdom, not that he did not want to do so before this point but simply that before this, we were incapable of receiving it.

#### *Fifth mansions*

From now on, human language fails. There are simply no words adequately to explain what is going on in the depth of the soul. Teresa uses the analogy of the silk worm for the person who has travelled thus far.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of its life, the worm grows by means of the natural helps which God offers. It is in the fifth mansions that the soul begins to spin its cocoon around itself. Within the cocoon great changes take place so that a beautiful butterfly may emerge. There is still suffering to be endured here. The little butterfly has left its old home, the cocoon, but it has not yet reached its true resting place in God. It flies around not knowing quite where to settle.

The person can still be led astray at this stage in very subtle ways. Self-love is always ready to eat away at us. We can think that we are loving God and others when in fact we are really self-seeking. Therefore this stage is one of growth in love. If there is no growth, there is something seriously wrong.

#### *Sixth mansions*

In these mansions, the person wants nothing else than to be eternally united with God. Suffering can be caused at this time by all sorts of things. Some people will praise such a one and this causes suffering because he or she knows that no merit attaches to him or her since all is grace. Furthermore the person realizes how little he or she has responded to the immensity of God's love. There can also be periods of great aridity when the feeling is that God has forgotten him or her. It is only the Lord who can relieve this distress. He does so by visiting the soul and wounding it by love. The person realises that God is present but is unable to look upon him and this causes a sweet distress. The person feels at the same time deep distress and joyful tranquillity.

Looking back from this stage, the soul sees all its sins as dreadful. The person loves God so much that the slightest infidelity of the past seems

gross and utter madness. He or she knows that if God were to allow him or her to fall from his hands, all would be lost since all the virtues which are possessed come as a free gift from God. There is generally great growth in the love of God at this time until the moment of total surrender into his hands.

### *Seventh mansions*

This is the moment of the spiritual marriage between God and the soul. The two are united, never to be separated. The soul is brought into the intimate life of the Trinity and it experiences the mystery of faith that the One God is a trinity of persons. This is the stage of wholeness, of holiness, when the person becomes what he or she was created to be. Whatever the person does at this stage is done in, with and for God. The person's whole attention is on the Lord's will. Everything that happens is seen as coming directly from the hands of God. The love of such a one is truly great and he or she becomes a slave of God and of other people. There is less and less outward rest but normally there is great tranquillity within, no matter what is happening outside.

### *Conclusion*

The spiritual direction which can be gleaned from the writings of St Teresa is always of a very practical nature. The acid test of any supposed experience or progress in the spiritual life is whether the person is becoming a better human being. The foundation of all progress is humility which makes us trust only in God and not in anything of our own. The basic christian virtues are vital for a life of prayer and they authenticate it. Teresa gives her readers an ambition. Why should we settle for mediocrity when God is calling us to an intimate friendship with himself? 'Anyone who fails to go forward, begins to go back, and love, I believe, can never be content to stay for long where it is.'<sup>18</sup>

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf *Life*, 8, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Life*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Interior Castle*, 3, 2, 12. All quotations from the works of St Teresa in this article are taken from the translation of E. Allison Peers.

<sup>5</sup> *Interior Castle*, 5, 3, 12.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thess 5, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Way of Perfection*, 41, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Cf *Foundations*, 5, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Foundations*, 5, 10; Cf *Interior Castle*, 5, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Interior Castle*, 7, 4, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 4, 8.

<sup>12</sup> For an interesting modern interpretation of this and other symbols in the writings of St Teresa, see John Welch, *Spiritual pilgrims: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila*, (New York, 1982).

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

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 1, 1. See also *Spiritual Relations*, 5 for Teresa's explanation of what she meant by 'supernatural prayer'.

<sup>16</sup> Burrows, Ruth: *Guidelines for mystical prayer*, (London, 1976), p 10. See also her *Interior Castle explored*, (London, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> *Interior Castle*, 5, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 4, 10.