

SPIRITUALITY OF ST. TERESA OF AVILA

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To begin to articulate the specific aspects of the spirituality of Saint Teresa of Avila, it is essential to first examine four main elements of her mystical prayer life. First is Spontaneity, second is Simplicity, third is Determined Fidelity, and the fourth element is Humility. These four expressions of Saint Teresa's spirituality will be the deliberated in this research paper.



When we speak of spontaneity in Saint Teresa's life, we are referring to one of the most precious qualities which she possessed. Honesty with the Lord during her daily encounters with Him was of extreme importance to Saint Teresa.

"Saint Teresa does not hesitate to bring her needs before the Lord with loving trust and she complains of the things that weigh heavily on and trouble her heart. But above else, she is aware of how privileged she is that the Lord comes to take His supper with her. Hence, her primary emphasis is on adoration and gratitude, praise and rejoicing."¹

Her tendency and inspiration are one of complete surrender to the Lord. It is amazing to see how much a soul can grow in the spiritual life if it yields. Saint Teresa was willing to invest quality time with the Lord and this is clearly seen through her many spiritual experiences.

She led a life of high spirituality and conversed with God as with a friend. Her life and heart were always united to God. This is what made her prayer life unique. Her autoschediasm was unparalleled. Analyzing the reason as to why Saint Teresa's spontaneity was so remarkable is due to the fact of having a purity of heart and simplicity of heart. Two qualities which were ingrained deeply in Saint Teresa's soul. Saint Teresa had no hidden agendas, she came to God as she was. Awareness of her present and past sins helped Saint Teresa overcome all temptations and obstacles, for she knew very well what a disordered (mediocre) life can do to a soul. She experienced this life herself, before she finally gave herself wholeheartedly to the Lord.

"My life was full of suffering, for in prayer I saw my faults more clearly".²

Saint Teresa of Avila was clearly aware of her own faults, yet, she did not allow her shortcomings to stop her from continuing on the path to holiness. She continued being faithful. Saint Teresa was a very down to earth person. Her amalgamation of spontaneity, diligence, common sense and total trust in God provided her with the necessary capacity to overcome many hardships. Even in the way she made her daily decisions, one can clearly see her spontaneous personality.

"Y como Santa Teresa, aunque niña, empieza a ser ya la mujer que no renuncia a sus deseos, un día se marchará de casa, llevándose a Rodrigo, a buscar la tierra de moros apetecida, para que allí les descabezasen. Solo, que como no sabían calcular bien la distancia, pronto les alcanzó su tío."³

"And eventhough Saint Teresa was a child, she begins to be the woman who does not renounces to her desires. One day she left her house, taking her brother Rodrigo to go off to the land of the Moors, not out of missionary zeal but to suffer martyrdom. However, since they had no idea of figuring out the distance, their uncle found them." (English translation from above Spanish footnote).

Throughout her life, Saint Teresa continuously had spontaneous inspirations, they were part of her character. It took much courage and perseverance to undertake the mission which God entrusted to Saint Teresa. A

special mission to embark on a journey of mystical experiences which in turn will help many souls reach a profound spiritual life. She also had the mission to reform the rule of Carmel which had been known to be extremely relaxed, and God needed to use Saint Teresa to permeate a more profound prayer life among her religious sisters.

God chose Saint Teresa from very early on, even though it was not until after many years later that she responded courageously to His call. The best possible explanation for this is that God wanted it to be this way. He had a special plan for Saint Teresa's life and God was willing to wait patiently for her.

It was God's initiative, He provided Saint Teresa with the gift of her own religious vocation. An aspect of Saint Teresa's unbeatable spontaneity is extemporization taken to its maximum potential.

She was perpetually borne forward by the accelerated outpouring of her convictions. She was unflinching and steadfast. Saint Teresa perceived what was essential and went through great lengths to accomplish it.

Saint Teresa's profound inspiration was perceptible to so many. She desire to please God forever and for others to follow her example. Her love for God had no limits nor barriers. God was free to do in Saint Teresa whatever He wanted. However, this was not always the case, especially at the beginning of her religious life where she was leading a mediocre spiritual life.

"We do things. God does things. When we get these mixed up we regress spiritually. When God "moves" we should suspend our activity. Saint Teresa says, "When from the secret signs He gives us we seem to realize that He is hearing us, it is well for us to keep silence". Properly practiced, spiritual disciplines accelerate and deepen spiritual formation. But we should not ignore the Spirit by treating spiritual disciplines as a task list requiring completion when God is trying to do something else. A full spiritual life requires discipline and spontaneity. We practice spiritual disciplines because they keep us centered. But we embrace spontaneity because Jesus may engage us without notice."⁴

Saint Teresa of Avila clearly manifested spontaneity in her daily life with Jesus Christ. Intelligence and charm were two of her greatest attributes. Saint Teresa found real pleasure in being in the presence of the Lord.

"But His Majesty well knows that I can boast only of his mercy, and since I cannot cease being what I have been, I have no other remedy than to approach his mercy and to trust in the merits of his Son and of the Virgin, his Mother, whose habit I wear so unworthily, and you wear. Praise him, my daughters, for you truly belong to our Lady. Thus you have no reason to be ashamed of my misery since you have such a good Mother."⁵

Undoubtedly Saint Teresa had an intense affection and zeal for our Lady. This relationship with the Virgin Mary started when Teresa lost her mother at the age of thirteen. She turned to our Lady as a role-model and maternal care. Clearly the Mother of God had a special love for Saint Teresa as well, for she protected her and guided her throughout her life.

Spontaneity is a fruit of having a simple heart because it is basically saying that you are available to do God's will at all time. Undeniably, Saint Teresa had this great quality.

Saint Teresa possessed complete simplicity in following whatever her confessors commanded her to do. No questions were ever asked, just simple total obedience from her part. In the simplicity of her heart, she knew that if she obeyed (even if her superiors were wrong) God would reward her for her obedience.

There is so much that is recognized about Saint Teresa's life, and yet so much to still ponder. One of the main reasons Saint Teresa is such a captivating individual is due to the fact that when she spoke she did it straight from her heart. Her charming personality was contagious.

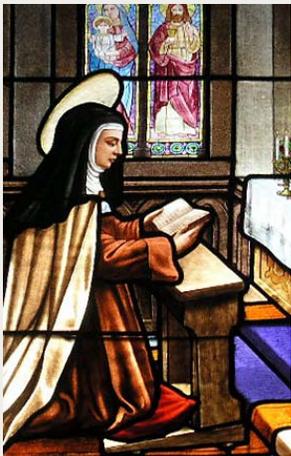
Regarding her mystical experiences, at first she was afraid no one would understand her (and that was the case in so many instances), yet when she was able to find those special souls which God had placed in her life, all fear disappeared. Her soul needed guidance and God provided for her by sending her holy confessors.

Saint Teresa was predisposed to take risks and not be intimidated of appearing ridiculous. Outright silence while in prayer was totally normal for her and for her sisters.

“Solitude walks hand in hand with silence. Solitude is genuine if an individual withdraws from people in order to be closely united to God in prayer. Solitude is not escapism, nor is it isolationism. Solitude is experienced as an opportunity. It is a time to be alone with God alone. It is a space to discover the vastness of the spiritual. It is a place where prayerful contemplation is allowed to develop and grow.”⁶

Saint Teresa integrated her spirituality with practicality extremely well. She used to strive with all her strength never to offend God and was willing to remain obedient at all costs. Even when she was in so much pain due to her suffering, she managed to be obedient to her confessors. She endured and embraced all suffering out of love for the Lord.

She was never really free from any suffering, she basically struggled with different infirmities throughout her entire life. As with everything in life, some days the sufferings were greater, at other times, they would be less severe. Nevertheless, she never complained about any of her sufferings, and that is not only admirable but treasured.



Saint Teresa was a simple, genuine person, however this does not mean she was not practical. Simplicity and spirituality go hand in hand in Saint Teresa's life. For example, she believed one could be spiritual and prayerful at the same time while doing the dishes or cleaning the kitchen floor.

In such a simple, daily task, God could do (and did) wonders in Saint Teresa's soul. Her tremendous determination is what kept her exceptionally well rounded. Even when she spoke of her own 'unrighteousness' she could light up a room by her positive demeanor. She had this uncommon (outstanding) mixture of qualities which made her totally unique.

With her simple and practical spirituality, Saint Teresa of Avila proved that you do not have to do extraordinary things in order to reach holiness, one can live an ordinary everyday life by simply doing small acts of love and kindness. This simple spirituality is worth pondering intensely, for it is not only realistic but conceivable.

Saint Teresa also demonstrated that the spiritual life cannot be disconnected from her humanity. She wholeheartedly understood who she had been, who she was, and who she wanted to be. Her simple and sincere style allowed her to grasp a stature of unimaginable influence over others.

Saint Teresa had humbly renounced to her own will, in order to surrender to God's will for her life. Her entire life proves that she was a woman with a very determined determination. She was willing to please God no matter the cost. Saint Teresa not only had direct access to God, but God had direct access to Saint Teresa.

“Saint Teresa was not bashful with “His Majesty”. She herself was intimate and affectionate at prayer. She allowed her feelings to show, and she advised the same to others: “Speak with Him as with a Father, a Brother, a Lord, and a Spouse - and sometimes in one way and sometimes in another. She tells her nuns plainly that since by their vows they are espoused to Him and He to them, they should ask Him to treat them as His Brides.”⁷

Saint Teresa was exceptionally wise, even though she did not think so herself. She never went to college, yet she was so knowledgeable. She wrote many works and poetry. Her book on the Interior Castle is a profound adventure of prayer. It was considered by many scholars as her master work. One of her most famous poetry was entitled "God alone is enough".

"Let nothing upset you, let nothing startle you. All things pass: God does not change. Patience wins all it seeks. Whoever has God lacks nothing: God alone is enough."⁸

We can clearly see Saint Teresa's blind trust in God alone. Nothing else matters to her, but to please God in everything. She is well aware that God does not change, we humans do. Saint Teresa's heart was well formed with the virtue of determination. And, this can be clearly seen in the following exhortation to determination.

"Now returning to those who want to journey on this road and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from this water of life, I say that how they are to begin is very important—in fact, all important. They must have a great and very determined determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses"⁹

Saint Teresa knew from personal experience how much this determination was necessary for she herself had struggled in her own prayer life to desist. She had suffered much due to the ordinariness she had allowed in her particular spiritual life early on in her religious vocation.

" I truly believe that the Lord highly favors the one who has real determination."¹⁰

Saint Teresa consistently went against her own will in everything, for she knew the outcome would be stupendous. She had such a deep desire to do whatever was necessary to do God's will for her life, even at the expense of her own suffering.

"Characteristic of Saint Teresa were her vivacity and charm, her determination, and her dauntless courage to carry out anything and everything God asked of her. She possessed eminent common sense, with a warm human personality that was enriched with great intelligence, and God given experience of the highest ways of prayer."¹¹

Saint Teresa is an example of a chosen soul who was aflame of love for God. She challenges us to follow in her footsteps.

"Well, see here, daughters, what he gave to the one he loved most. By that we understand what his will is. For these are his gifts in this world. He gives according to the love he bears us: to those he loves more, he gives more of these gifts; to those he loves less, he gives less. And he gives according to the courage he sees in each and the love each has for His Majesty. He will see that whoever loves him much will be able to suffer much for him; whoever loves him little will be capable of little. I myself hold that the measure for being able to bear a large or small cross is love. So, Sisters, if you love him, strive that what you say to the Lord may not amount to mere polite words; strive to suffer what His Majesty desires you to suffer."¹²

For Saint Teresa contemplative prayer was at the heart and center of everything in her life. She lived in the here and now, with her feet on the ground but her eyes fixed on heaven. Furthermore, despite all her shortcomings, Saint Teresa's spiritual life grew by having an authentic, intimate relationship with God.

Prayer was for Saint Teresa just a simple, intimate conversation with a friend. She was also strikingly aware of the devil's fear of determined souls for he knows how powerful they can be against him.

"I should consider the time of prayer as not belonging to me and think that he can ask it of me in justice when I do not want to give it wholly to him"¹³

This is logical, for the devil knows that the path of daily mental prayer is the origin of an immense sabotage to his evil plans to destroy souls, and he will do anything to make us turn back from following God by using all kinds of cheap tricks and temptations. The devil hates a determined soul, this is the reason why he hated Saint Teresa. He used all types of malevolence against her.

"If you want it to be done with trials, strengthen me and let them come; if with persecutions, illnesses, dishonors, and a lack of life's necessities, here I am; I will not turn away, my Father, nor is it right that I turn my back on you. Since your Son gave you this will of mine in the name of all, there's no reason for any lack on my part. But grant me the favor of your kingdom that I may do your will"¹⁴

Saint Teresa desired to suffer for the Lord. She endured all types of illnesses with determination and intrepidity. She walked along this long journey in total freedom. She knew she was in God's hands and that nothing happens if God did not allow it.

"This was the most terrible trick the devil could play on me, under the guise of humility: that seeing myself so corrupted I began to fear the practice of prayer. It seemed to me that, since in being wicked I was among the worst, it was better to go the way of the many, to recite what I was obliged to vocally and not to practice mental prayer and so much intimacy with God, for I merited to be with the devils. And, it seemed to me that I was deceiving people since exteriorly I kept up such good appearances."¹⁵

Saint Teresa grieved much over her past sins and this hurt her profoundly. She had total confidence in God, yet, she felt as if she had wasted precious time while she was enjoying being esteemed by frivolous people - early on in her religious life.

"Humility [true humility] does not disturb or disquiet, or agitate, however great it may be; it comes with peace, delight, and calm. Even though a soul upon seeing itself so wretched understands clearly that it merits to be in hell . . . thinks everyone should in justice abhor it, and almost doesn't dare ask for mercy, its pain, if the humility is genuine, comes with a sweetness in itself and a satisfaction that it wouldn't want to be without. The pain doesn't agitate or afflict the soul; rather, this humility expands it and enables it to serve God more. The other type of pain disturbs everything, agitates everything, afflicts the entire soul, and is very painful. I think the devil's aim is to make us think we are humble, and, in turn, if possible, make us lose confidence in God"¹⁶

This is the divergence among true and false humility. A clear understanding of this perception is pivotal for the spiritual life. True humility is notable by deep inner peace and joy, whereas false humility causes anxiety and uneasiness. Anxiety comes from having more confidence on oneself rather than on God. Saint Teresa of Avila clearly possessed true humility.

"Now be also on your guard, daughters, against types of humility given by the devil in which great disquiet is felt about the gravity of our sins. This disturbance can afflict in many ways even to the point of making one give up receiving Communion and practicing private prayer. These things are given up because the devil makes one feel unworthy."¹⁷

If there is a true, ardent love of God, then there is true humility. Saint Teresa distinctly grasped how to suffer trials for God in patience and humility. God gives to each person according to each person's needs. God recognized exactly what Saint Teresa needed for her soul to grow, and He provided for her accordingly.

She was determined to undertake the mission of imitating God's call in her life to be virtuous, especially the

virtue of humility. The humble have nothing to lose. Saint Teresa prayed with a humble heart, this is the reason why her prayer was her daily strength. Only someone who is humble can experience true freedom and joy.

Today is very common to hear people say, "I am spiritual but I am not religious", usually what they mean is that they consider themselves spiritual persons but they do not practice a specific religion. Although this standpoint may be suitable for them, it does not represent a true, mature, solid Christian spirituality. Saint Teresa of Avila was both, spiritual and religious. Her spirituality commenced perfection in the Catholic Church, most especially in the Most Holy Eucharist.

Humility is best exemplified by having an authentic, stable Christian spirituality based on the Magisterium of the Catholic Church and its faithful and doctrinal teachings. This is why the Church recognized the (God-given) wisdom of Saint Teresa of Avila and proclaimed her a Doctor of the Church.

Saint Teresa's restless heart and deep-seated humility helped her discover the joy of living adequately the authentic virtues of the Gospel, which includes -but not limited to- generosity of heart, self-detachment, meekness, self-control, and so many others. She had an engaging personality which encouraged her to live out those virtues in perfection.

Humility and meekness are the most noble all virtues. All the other virtues build upon these two in order to grow and mature in the spiritual life. Humility is knowing who we are and who God is.

Clearly, Saint Teresa of Avila did not consider herself a saint, far from it, however, she experienced God's immense love for her in a very unique way - by undergoing mystical experiences. These particular experiences bolstered her humility.



Saint Teresa never rejected an opportunity to be humble. She was honest, not only with herself and her confessors, but most importantly with God. To follow in Saint Teresa's footsteps of humility and self-detachment, oneself-will needs to intensely decrease. She trusted God completely, this is why she lived a legitimate humble life.

Real humility is realizing that whatever a person has is only granted by the grace of God and His immense love for this particular soul.

Life is an adventure worth living and Saint Teresa was an expert at living it magnificently through the virtue of humility.

In conclusion, Saint Teresa of Avila was cognizant of her many imperfections and of her past sins, however she did not permit them to interfere in her committed relationship with the Lord. Saint Teresa was spontaneous, simple, practical, determined and humble. These were not the only qualities she possessed; however, all of these qualities combined provided her with the necessary dispositions to live a virtuous life.

As once I heard a quote on virtue from Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, "Virtue is virtue only when it is spontaneous; virtue is virtue only when it is natural, unpracticed -- when it comes out of your vision, out of your awareness, out of your understanding." We see in the life of Saint Teresa that she was truly a virtuous woman, who lived virtuously in a natural and spontaneous way. Her virtue was so complete and refined that she lived it beyond its normal requirements, in a heroic way. We thank her for her example that calls us all to greater holiness still today.

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