

**Reconciling Sanctity and Service:  
The Perfect Way of Saint Teresa of Avila**

by Susan Muto

“But those who do what is true come to the light, so,  
that it may be clearly seen  
that their deeds have been done in God”  
(John 3:21)

Who of us has not felt the tension between our call to live a holy and sanctified life modeled after Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus and the inner urging to serve others for his sake like Martha cleaning the house, setting the table, and preparing the meal? (cf. Luke 10:38-42 and *Way*, 17:5-6).<sup>\*</sup> We know from the experience of having done many tasks in our life that the ways in which we can live a life of dedicated service to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Master are as many and varied as the faces of his followers throughout the world. At the base of all these ways is the life of prayer, which, in the oft quoted words of Saint Teresa of Avila, “is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends” (*Life*, 8:5), a frequent heart-to-heart conversation with him whom we know loves us. The problem I want to address is not how to pray—Teresa already does that in her reflections on the Lord's Prayer in *The Way of Perfection* (Chapters 19 to 42) – but how to become living prayer while finding the right rhythm between work and worship, labor and leisure, participation and contemplative presence in everyday life.

Teresa herself sought the harmonious integration of solitude with his Majesty and solidarity with her community. She strove to live in cloistered simplicity behind the walls of Carmel, but her life records an excess of necessary involvement that in due time affected the reform of the entire Church. At the heart of her wisdom is a wholehearted commitment. She ties herself to the crucified Christ, but she refuses to be bound by mere worldly concerns, neither for personal honor and popularity nor for visible success. She knows from experience that to find our deepest self we must lose ourselves in Christ; to gain inner freedom and the joy of being daughters and sons of God we must renounce all for his sake (cf. John 12:25).

Throughout her life Teresa tried to blend the inspirational and the incarnational, the uplift of contemplation and the ordinariness of action, ranging from peeling the potatoes for the sisters' supper to composing spiritual masterpieces. From 1560 until shortly before her death in 1582, she was active in founding new convents throughout Spain. In the midst of this detailed organization, she was receiving interior graces so intense that she records for us the exact date on which the grace of spiritual marriage was given to her, November 18, 1572 (*Testimonies*, 31). Truly Martha and Mary met in Teresa of Avila. She was a living example of total abandonment to Christ and of loving service to his Church.

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<sup>\*</sup> All citations to *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila* are taken from Volume One, containing *The Book of Her Life* (hereafter abbreviated *Life*, followed by the chapter and paragraph number) and *Spiritual Testimonies*, (hereafter abbreviated *Testimonies*, followed by the chapter number) and Volume Two, containing *The Way of Perfection* (hereafter abbreviated *Way*, followed by the chapter and paragraph number) and *The Interior Castle* (hereafter abbreviated *Castle*, followed by the number of the dwelling place, the chapter, and the paragraph). Both volumes are translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976 and 1980).

In her description of prayer as “an intimate sharing between friends,” she assures us that we can tell our Spouse, our Brother, our Comforter, our Redeemer whatever we feel and think. There is no place for secrets between lovers. Ours may be prayers of petition or ground swells of praise. No matter what form prayer takes, it signifies our conviction that without God we are and can do nothing. For Teresa the foundation of Christian prayer is humility by which she means to “walk in truth before God” (*Castle*, VI, 10:6). We have to experience, as it were, a kind of “ego desperation”—the failure of plans and projects that are humanly engineered because we have neglected to listen first to God. In such moments of loss of control, we recognize humbly that God alone is our strength, that in her words, God alone suffices!

Once we learn to walk in the truth of who we are as wholly dependent on God, we can practice the second core virtue of detachment, which, Teresa indicates, is not an exclusive but an inclusive virtue. When we embrace God totally, we embrace everything not for its own sake but as an epiphany of divine generosity. The more we live in the liberating disposition of detachment, the more we die to egoism and regain our true self as made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26-27).

The fruits of this embrace flow forth in the self-giving quality of Christian love marked by peaceful reconciliation, discretion, patience, forgiveness, and empathy. “In this house,” she wrote in *The Way of Perfection*, “all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped” (*Way*, 4:7). The emphasis on *all* prevents anyone from playing favorites or collecting community “pets” or violating the rules of humble, detached charity. It was not Mother Teresa’s purpose to burden her sisters with more rules than they already had to observe. Life had taught her that there were only three virtues that were of the utmost importance: “The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which even though I speak of it last, is the main practice and embraces all the others” (*Way*, 4:4). If these virtues become the basis of life in a community of nuns who work diligently and pray always, what follows will be the practice of charity; the avoidance of making anyone or anything but God ultimate; and the illumination of daily life by being true to oneself and God.

### **Growing in Intimacy with Christ**

Excellent directress that she is, Teresa wastes no words. She lives what she teaches and expects her sisters to act like the called, committed, and consecrated women they are. Certain inner and outer conditions may facilitate their life of prayer, but its efficacy will be revealed not through a Jesus-and-I piety but in selfless service of others for Christ’s sake. Teresa talks to her sisters and to us in this book as if she were an ambassador of the Lord to whom he has entrusted teachings of great importance for our personal and ecclesial salvation. His friends are few, but they must be of vintage stock, not succumbing to the seductions of the demonic.

To acquire the virtue of constant awareness of Christ within us, we need to remember that “the Lord does not leave us so abandoned; for if we humbly ask him for his friendship, he will not deny it to us” (*Way*, 26:2). Only lovers of the Lord know how to love others with respect and discretion. To remain in his presence, we must look at his Cross. This loving glance helps us to focus our thoughts and to make continuous acts of faith, hope, and love. Soon we may begin to acquire the virtue of detachment. By turning to Christ and affixing our memory, imagination, and anticipation on him, we find that nothing can separate us from so great a Lover. The more we exercise this power of picturing Christ alive in us, the more we will feel his presence. “It keeps us humble to know that “... if we cannot succeed in one year, we will succeed later. Let’s not regret the time that is so well spent. Who’s making us hurry? I am speaking of acquiring this habit and of striving to walk alongside this true Master” (*Way*, 26:2). Such is the best way to please God and to gain his friendship. Habits like these

remedy our distresses, failings, and weaknesses.

The reconciliation of sanctity and service is gauged by the depth of our intimacy with the Lord. Wherever we are on the path to holiness, we must see Christ as our model and seek whatever means of grace we need to make him present in our lives. Devotion to the Sacred Humanity of Jesus is never an impediment to prayer or service. Teresa insists that however lofty our presence to the mystery may be, we must remain devoted to Christ as our constant companion in weal and woe, in consolation and desolation. He is there for us in his Passion and Resurrection and preeminently in the Blessed Sacrament. Not for a moment does he leave us, even though we often forget about him. As Teresa laments in *The Book of Her Life*: “And what a pity it was for me to have left you, my Lord, under the pretext of serving you more!” (*Life*, 22:6).

Only when we live in intimate nearness to the Lord can we endure whatever demands a life of service makes upon us. A true friend like him knows what we must endure to follow him in this world. He assures us that we do not walk alone, that he is always at our side. As John, the Beloved Disciple, said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Christ in the fullness of his divinity and humanity is the Great Reconciler of any tension we may feel between contemplation and action.

### **Facets of Friendship with Christ and Others**

The rules governing friendship in the natural order apply as well to the supernatural order, though certainly divine friendship has to be purified from the imperfections of human bondings. Inspired by Teresa, we learn that to be a close friend of Christ in all that we are and do, we need to foster four degrees of mutuality. The first is *mutual encounter* comparable to the give-and-take that happens spontaneously between two loving, affectionate people. Even then they may have to engage in years of testing their relationship, but not so with Christ. “What more do we desire than to have such a good friend at our side, who will not abandon us in our labors and tribulations, as friends in the world do” (*Life*, 22:7). What cancels any possibility of spiritual friendship is the burden of habitual sin. To be friends with Christ and others, our lives must mirror the actual and sanctifying graces that continue to transform our heart.

The second degree concerns *mutual knowledge*, mindful of the familiar saying that “to know you is to love you.” Humanly speaking, shared values and interests create closer bonds between us. In a similar vein, frequent conversations with Christ enhance our receptivity to revealed truths and our awareness of the commissions he has in mind for us. Admiration is as important in this context as admonition. Much knowledge of her life and work came to Teresa through substantial locutions. Without this inner clarity she might have succumbed to demonic seduction or chose her own way over God’s guiding will (cf. *Life*, Chapters 25 and 26).

The third degree entails growth in *mutual love*, which moves us initially to embrace God and to want to be a captive of love’s call. Submission and surrender become habitual dispositions of souls awed by what Christ has done for them. As love increases, so does the desire for discipleship. “For now, as one who is in his house, you glorify the Lord and praise him with more affection and desire; and it seems you cannot fail to serve him” (*Way* 31:13).

The fourth degree signifies the unceasing gift of *mutual presence*, mindful of the promise made by Jesus to his disciples: “Abide in me as I abide in you” (John 15:4). We are with him whom we know loves us. Human friendships, however deep are limited by time and space. Naturally, friends cannot meet everyday, but the same is not true in the supernatural sphere. Through Baptism and Holy Communion we enjoy the sacramental presence of Christ moment by moment. He is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

Being with him and in him is not a gift given for personal pleasure or contentment but to make us more effective instruments in helping Christ to apply the graces of his redemption to every soul in need of forgiveness. The life of prayer and presence, of sanctity and service, is the most efficacious way to cooperate with Christ in the work of salvation. Our whole life becomes an opening to the mystery of being of one mind and one heart with him and of participating in his salvific mission. While we must make every effort to be in an habitual state of grace, free from even venial sin and striving at all times to do good, we must humbly acknowledge that “Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

Teresa knew our hearts were a veritable battlefield on which we had to resist the attacks of mortal and venial sins, but she also said that we ought not to look at our sins but at our Blessed Lord who redeemed us (cf. *Way*, 3:8). Any time we offend his Majesty, we inflict some damage on our life of prayer, deliberately putting our whims before his will, but this is no reason to despair. So great is his mercy that he reaches down to our misery and enables us to retain the grace of our friendship with him. Sin may cool the fervor of our love but forgiveness sets it aflame again. Lessons learned in pain by true servants make their souls more pleasing to the Lord. Though his best friend, Peter, betrayed him, Christ accepted his repentant heart and made him the rock on which he built his Church (cf. *Way*, 27:6).

Like this repentant fisherman, the more we acknowledge our weaknesses, the closer to Christ we will be. This is why Teresa concludes that humility embraces all other virtues. In fact, were we playing a game of chess, humility would resemble the Queen, the one piece capable of checkmating the King. As she explains:

The queen is the piece that can carry on the best battle in this game and all the other pieces help. There’s no queen like humility for making the King surrender. Humility drew the King from heaven to the womb of the Virgin, and with it, by one hair, we will draw him to our souls. And realize that the one who has more humility will be the one who possesses him more; and the one who has less will possess him less. For I cannot understand how there could be humility without love or love without humility; nor are these two virtues possible without detachment from all creatures (*Way*, 16:2).

Humility is the bridge in Teresa’s life and writings between living a holy life and giving all to God. She characterizes humble persons as those who never lose sight of who they are—creatures absolutely dependent on God for everything; recipients of undeserved gifts, who never “stop thanking God” (*Way*, 38:3). As a result, they feel an even greater obligation to serve him in whatever way he decrees. Such souls place little confidence in themselves and spend a great deal of time thanking God from whom they receive all that is good:

Self-esteem is far removed from these persons. They like others to know about their sins and like to tell them when they see themselves esteemed...In what amounts to his greater service, they are already so forgetful of self that they can’t even believe that others feel some things and consider them an affront (*Way*, 36:10).

Customarily, such servants flee from praise, prefer to accept criticism, and find in it a grain of truth. They would rather be humiliated as Christ was before his accusers than be on the defensive. As Teresa says, “This is a wonderful way to imitate the Lord who took away all our faults” (*Way*, 15:1). When it comes to serving the Lord with gladness, Teresa found that one accomplished more for his

holy reign by being held in little esteem, by living the hidden life, and by remembering that our physical, mental, moral, and spiritual help comes from the Lord, who is our strength (cf. *Way*, 15:2).

### **Servanthood as the Avenue to Holiness**

The traits of true and holy servanthood include, among others, not ambitiously seeking high offices or ranks for the sake of personal honor or gain (cf. *Way*, 12:7) and not looking at others' faults before we examine our own. It is important to guard against taking credit for accomplishments that are only possible because of virtues given to us by the Lord (cf. *Way*, 38:9). If we do have a work of significance thrust upon us, we must humbly seek the advice of others, especially our confessors (cf. *Way*, 40:4). In the face of our own misdeeds, we must not become irritated or depressed nor expect to make progress on our own, but always be happy and joyful before the Lord since, whether God made us "Marthas" or "Marys," we must come to see that "true humility consists...in great readiness to be content with whatever the Lord may want us to do...and in always finding oneself unworthy to be called his servant." Teresa goes on to say, with the wisdom that can only come from experience:

If contemplating, practicing mental and vocal prayer, taking care of the sick, helping with household chores, and working even at the lowliest tasks are all ways of serving the Guest who comes to be with us and eat and recreate, what difference does it make whether we serve in the one way or the other? (*Way*, 17:6).

What better words than these could reconcile the conflict in us between sanctity and service? Teresa is a great proponent of the wisdom of promoting a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" approach to life. She seeks what we would call today "win/win situations" because she has a secret only the wisest among us are given: Without Christ we lose; with him we gain a hundredfold. In other words, when we walk in the truth of who we are, we cannot help but love one another and be detached from the sinful traps of power, pleasure, and possession. The heart of the Gospel message is that God has "first loved us" (1John 4:19). Anyone, poor or rich, illiterate or learned, may be chosen by his Majesty to do good works and never to hurt anyone by word or deed. The virtue of detachment helps us to be other-centered. The first person from whom we have to be detached is ourselves! Only then can we grow more like Christ, empty ourselves of all that is self-aggrandizing for his sake, and purify our intentions to do whatever must be done out of love for God, in a disinterested but most effective way.

What often causes a serious split between sanctity and service is excessive stress. Were Teresa to uncover its causes, she might say that distress is inevitable if we exclude Christ from whatever we do. It is a myth to imagine that we can operate alone. Bad relationships full of resentment, jealousy, and absorption in irrelevant issues -all cause stress—not only in our own interiority but in the family or community or workplace to which we belong. Unhealthy attachments and the arousal of passions that sever us from Christ and his Church shift our stress quotient into high gear. We soar from normal stresses to "off the chart" distresses that erode respectful collaboration and pit individualistic egos against each other. Lost in the process is even courteous decorum, further exploding already hypertensive hearts. Stress rises when we ourselves do not care any longer for the overall spiritual good of ourselves and others; when we become trapped in subjectivistic feelings with little or no energy left to assess wisely an objective situation; when prejudgments of who and what is worthy of love block the outflow of compassion and make it impossible to see beneath the surface posturings of seemingly unlovable persons the presence of Christ.

The directives Saint Teresa gives us to reconcile sanctity and service can only be obeyed if we embrace everything in God and for God's sake, keeping nothing for ourselves. In this way we gain

everything, including freedom of spirit, perfect peace, and a blessed release from ingrained egoism and spiritual pride. As we see in the life of another holy woman, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, “who described herself as a tiny pen in a mighty hand,” the mountaintops of spirituality and the trenches of functionality are two branches on the one vine.

Anyone, in any walk of life, longing for liberation from self-preoccupation and union with God, can benefit from Teresa’s gentle yet firm counsel. She offers sensible, clear directives all sincerely seeking lovers of God can follow. Humility lets us find our most congenial self in Christ. Detachment enables us to live in each situation with a high degree in compatibility. We can be near to others in genuine care while maintaining reasonable and respectful distance. Charity flows over into compassion for our own weaknesses and for the vulnerability of those who people our world.

Teresa was not only a fine directress of formation. She was also an obedient directee. She placed herself under the guidance of spiritual directors, confessors, and superiors. She knew how important it was to find combined in a confessor both learning and wisdom. Lacking one or the other of these virtues, a confessor might do great harm to a penitent. This happened in Teresa’s case. She tells about the time she spoke of a matter of conscience with a confessor who had gone through many courses of theology. He did her a great deal of harm by telling her that some matters did not amount to anything. She trusts that he did not intend to misinform her, but that he simply did not know what else to say. The ideal is to speak to learned persons, who are also wise and experienced. She says emphatically, “If the appointed confessor is not spiritual and learned, they [her sisters] should at times seek out others” (*Way* 5:4). Even if a confessor has these qualities, it is still good to consult with others because it is possible for him to be mistaken. Wisdom, learning, and experience are spiritual gifts that reveal the integration of sanctity and service in the realm of spiritual direction as well as in daily life.

These gifts come to us from God. Our responses to his generosity lead us to pursue constant prayer as well as the meditative reading of Holy Scripture and other classical Christian writings like *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, which Teresa mentions as a key to her own conversion (*Life*, 9:8). She herself writes with womanly sensitivity, with a sharp intellect, and an innate capacity for reflection worthy of a Doctor of the Church. She is not baffled by the paradoxes of Christian living but handles them with humor and humility. She shows that it is possible to experience a variety of good but challenging relationships while preserving recollection. She herself functions in a “man’s world” while experiencing the heights of mystical union in her feminine soul. If one lives with Christ as the core and center of one’s life, one can serve the Church tirelessly while maintaining inner tranquility.

Teresa is a living witness to the marriage of ministry and mysticism, of service and sanctity, grounded in humility, detachment, and fraternal charity. These virtues constitute a Trinity of “be-attitudes” embodied fully in Jesus Christ, who is the humble, detached, charitable model we must emulate, whether we go forth in service or return to our “cell” in solitude.

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