

READING THE WORKS OF TERESA: KEYS TO A CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION



The author is a Carmelite friar from Madrid, with much experience of writing and lecturing on the writings of Teresa of Avila. In this article, translated by Sr Elisabeth Peeters, OCD, he offers a most helpful guide to reading the works of Teresa in the light of issues essential to our lives today.

JUAN ANTONIO MARCOS

Teresa's writings constitute a wonderful example of narrative mystical theology. By telling us about her own experience of God, she invites us to get involved in the wonderful adventure of friendship with the God who became one of us in Jesus Christ. While interpreting an author is always subjective, the following nine 'keys' to understanding Teresa (which naturally overlap at times) may be useful for guiding readers towards a healthy, authentically Teresian interpretation of her works. Taken from her own writings, they aim at helping readers to discover the full scope of her spirituality and the implications it may have for their own lives.

Evangelical humaneness

We need to read Teresa in such a way as to allow ourselves to be captivated by, and imbued with, her wonderful humanity, broad-mindedness, spiritual freedom, and amiability. She writes: 'in this house...all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped' (WP 4:7). And there are countless other passages, such as this one on freedom of spirit:

go about with a holy freedom... So do not be tense, for if you begin to feel constrained, such a feeling will be very harmful to everything good, and at times you will end up being scrupulous and become incapable of doing anything for yourself or for others. And...it will not bring many souls to God, because they will see so much repression and tenseness... Another harm derives from this attitude: it is that of judging others. There are those who advance with greater holiness...but since they do not journey by your path they at once seem to you to be imperfect... (WP 41:4-6)

This fosters what could be called a *sapiential reading*, conveying wisdom and teaching us how to live. Maxims to implement it might be: 'Grow in kindness and understanding'; and: 'Learn to stand back and give precedence to our fellow human beings.'

Living in God's presence

Teresa encourages us to grow in the awareness of God's loving presence pervading all the areas of our daily lives. God does not solve our problems, but his loving presence supports us and enables us to cope with them. Teresa frequently uses metaphors to encourage us to become aware of God's loving presence within ourselves and keep it alive in our hearts and minds. She speaks of God 'engraved in [her] soul' (L 22:4), or 'imprinting [his] love on our hearts' (L 22:14). She tells us that the impulse to become aware of his presence is a 'note or letter' from God, coming 'from this interior dwelling place where God is in our soul' (IC VII:3:9).

This fosters a *nurturing reading*, nourishing our awareness of God's loving presence in our lives. Maxims we might adopt are: 'Keep fostering an awareness of God's presence'; and: 'Nurture the basic attitude of attentiveness.'

Spiritual depth

Teresa invites us to engage in a healthy introspection, exploring the unknown realms of our interior life: 'Let's not imagine,' she remarks, 'that we are hollow inside' (WP 28:10)! The underlying image is that of the human heart as a *receptacle*: with what do we fill (or stuff) our lives and our hearts? This is all about God's indwelling in the innermost core of our being; the entire *Interior Castle* is concerned with this, as are passages such as the following:

let us imagine that within us is an extremely rich palace, built entirely of gold and precious stones; in sum, built for a lord such as this. Imagine, too, as is indeed so, that you have a part to play in order for the palace to be so beautiful; for there is no edifice as beautiful as is a soul pure and full of virtues... Imagine, also, that in this palace dwells this mighty King who has been gracious enough to become your Father; and that He is seated upon an extremely valuable throne, which is your heart. (WP 28:9)

This journey within is intimately linked with Teresa's experience of mental prayer as 'an intimate sharing between friends' (L 8:5), of God as a loving partner, and of contemplation as a growing awareness of a loving Presence within us, filling us to the brim and granting us true fulfilment.

This enables us to expand our capacity for relating with God, our fellow human beings, and our own self. True interiority will cause our hidden wounds to surface; but to the extent that we learn to accept them, it will also allow them to be healed. So, this aspect of Teresa's writings fosters a *therapeutic reading*, and maxims might be: 'Go inside, explore our inner world'; and: 'Allow our hidden wounds to surface and be healed.'

Audacity and determination

We know of Teresa's 'resolute determination' (WP 21:2) – literally, her 'determined determination' – in dealing with both spiritual difficulties and the problems of everyday life. As a foundress, she was no stranger to adversities: health problems, financial worries, troubles with bishops and neighbours, and donors imposing themselves in ways she found unacceptable. Her example encourages us to 'risk [one's] life' (L 21:4) and have the courage to do whatever the Lord tells us to do, without being bothered by what people will say or think of us. If our spiritual life fails to have bearing on our daily life, it is based only on an illusion. Edward Schillebeeckx once said that each moment of our lives is 'God's moment'.

This aspect of Teresa's writings fosters an *existential reading*. Maxims for implementing it could be: 'Have the courage to risk our lives'; and: 'Reopen closed doors' – which would apply to both inner doors and doors closed on others, often the marginalised.

Authenticity and truthfulness

Teresa speaks again and again about 'truth' and 'being truthful', especially in the final chapter of her *Life*. Truth, she says, was important to her from her earliest years: 'the Lord was pleased to impress upon me in childhood the way of truth' (L 1:4). And there is, for example, this refreshing conversation from her later years, reported at her beatification process. In a certain monastery, the nuns were asked by some visitors about their way of life. So they started describing all the wonderful aspects of it, carefully hiding the difficulties they were having in living up to the ideal. Once the visitors were gone, Teresa rebuked the nuns, saying: 'I want you always to be absolutely truthful about your way of life. A truthful answer will never fail to edify people, nor will it do harm.' This is where the 'pure heart' of the gospel and the desert fathers comes in; or, as it is sometimes termed today, 'mental hygiene'.

This aspect of Teresa's writings fosters an *environmentally beneficial reading*, promoting life-giving relationships with our fellow human beings and with all of creation. Maxims could be: 'Endeavour to become ever more authentic and truthful in our way of life'; and: 'Strive for transparency.'

Spiritual freedom

In the face of all the constraints imposed on her, and the external lack of freedom because of being a woman (cf. WP 3:7), Teresa learnt to direct all her energies towards attaining inner, spiritual freedom. Like John of the Cross, she encourages us to free ourselves from any thing or attitude which might impair our spiritual freedom and trap us. She wants us to be above such things, to attain 'dominion' over them instead of being their slaves: 'I totally abhorred any desire to become a lady of the nobility...' she writes. 'This is a kind of subservience that makes calling such persons "lords" one of the world's lies, for it doesn't seem to me they are anything but slaves to a thousand things' (L 34:4). And she exclaims: 'Isn't it wonderful that a poor nun of St. Joseph's can attain dominion over all the earth and the elements?' (WP 19:4). This is where her understanding of spiritual poverty comes in. For Teresa, poverty is above all a

matter of not allowing ourselves to be held captive or enslaved by material or spiritual goods:

I hold that poverty of spirit embraces many of the virtues. In it lies great dominion. I say that it gives once again to one who doesn't care about the world's good things dominion over them all. (WP 2:5)

This aspect of Teresa's writings fosters a *liberating reading*, for which we might have the following maxims: 'Reduce our anxieties'; and: 'Overcome our feelings of hatred – so that they do not dominate us.'

Exposure of deception

As we have seen, Teresa exposes the pseudo-values governing social life in 16th-century Spain, with special focus on the overriding role played by honour and etiquette. But in any human society, matters of prestige and reputation will play a role. We might ask ourselves which deceptive values govern postmodern society and are likely to infiltrate our own mentality. Perceptively, Teresa sees that religious communities are not immune, either:

Take careful note of interior stirrings, especially if they have to do with privileges of rank. God, by His Passion, deliver us from dwelling on such words or thoughts as, 'I have seniority', 'I am older', 'I have done more work', 'the other is treated better than I'. If such thoughts come they should be quickly cut off. If you dwell on them or begin to speak about them, the result is a pestilence from which great evils arise in monasteries. Be careful, for I know a great deal about it! (WP 12:4)

This aspect of Teresa's writings fosters a *simplifying reading*: one that simplifies our lives. We would do well to adopt such maxims as: 'Unlearn and outgrow all empty conventions'; and: 'Become simple and straightforward – refuse to complicate matters!'

Anticipated feminism

Teresa may have been the first woman in the Church to defend the cause of women. Moreover, she conceived her monasteries as places in which women were free to live the spiritual life denied

them by many contemporary theologians. The following passage from *The Way of Perfection* was crossed out by the 16th-century censor and only restored by a modern editor!

You found as much love and more faith in [women] than You did in men... Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us...so that we may not do anything worthwhile for You in public or dare speak some truths that we lament over in secret, without You also failing to hear so just a petition? I do not believe, Lord, that this could be true of Your goodness and justice, for You are a just judge and not like those of the world. 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. (WP 3:7)

This aspect of Teresa's writings fosters a *feminist reading*, but it leads to a universal maxim: 'Refuse to discriminate against our fellow human beings' – that is, all who are denied equal rights because they are somehow 'different'.

Celebrating life

Teresa knew how to celebrate life. She attached great importance to recreation (a new element she added to the Carmelite *Constitutions!*) and took obvious delight in promoting simple and playful ways of having fun with her sisters and expressing their zest for life: dancing, singing, composing little poems and songs to highlight special occasions, and so on. Recreation is explicitly mentioned when she reports:

[In Valladolid] there was an opportunity to teach Father Fray John of the Cross about our way of life so that he would have a clear understanding of everything, whether it concerned mortification or the style of both our community life and the recreation we have together. (F 13:5)

And John of the Cross, who loved dancing through the cloister with the baby Jesus in his arms at Christmas, repeatedly mentions *joy* as one of the fruits of growing awareness of God's presence. He says, for example: 'There is reason for you to be elated and joyful in seeing that all your good and hope is so close as to be within you, or better, that you cannot be without him' (SC^b 1:7).

This aspect of Teresa's writings fosters a *delightful reading*, conveying an enjoyment of life. 'Celebrate life!' we might say; and: 'Find ways of expressing our joie de vivre.'

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St Teresa gauged the authenticity of a person's spiritual life by the fruits it bears in daily life. So, *joy* and *freedom of spirit* can be said to be the fruits which guarantee that our spiritual life is healthy, and that our interpretation of Teresa is sound. Ultimately, to be true to Teresa, our reading of her works needs to have positive, humanising effects on all our creeds, our behaviour, and indeed our world.



THE CAVERNS OF JOHN OF THE CROSS: THE BOUNDLESS RICHES OF GOD



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John of the Cross, she evokes the beauty of the Andalusian countryside and links elements of the landscape to his spiritual teachings on communion with God.

JENNIFER MOORCROFT

Caverns high and deep

One beautiful spring day, John of the Cross led his friars out into the beautiful Andalusian countryside. They had been working hard, ministering to the people, having hardly any time for themselves; now they needed to refresh their own souls and spirits. The brothers soon scattered, each finding their own quiet nook where they could rest and pray. It was easy for them to pray among the lush and gentle surroundings. But John, born amid the rugged landscape of Castile, needed the challenge of a sterner haunt.

Leaving his brothers behind, he climbed up a hill covered with brush and thickets and went on, past a rushing stream, further, deeper, higher. He needed this time of solitude because he had so many responsibilities in his Order; and in such circumstances, he knew, the soul could fare very poorly. The brambles caught at his coarse habit, impeding his climb, but he would not be deterred.