

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Teresa of Avila: On Prayer and Renewal

Our diocesan Liturgy Institute held again this year at Keuka College concerned itself with "the many faces of parish prayer." Emphasis was given to the many faces of parish people who, because of their different personalities and different ways of expressing themselves, need different ways of prayer to support their lives. This concern for greater understanding of the communal prayer of the parish is very important for all of us to be conscious of and aware of the needs that are ours.



Today, I would like to look at another equally important dimension of parish prayer — the personal contemplative prayer of each individual in the parish. It is this personal prayer and attitude of contemplation which enables us to look at life with eyes of faith, so that we come to the Liturgy with enthusiasm and open hearts.

Permit me to look at contemplative prayer through the eyes and experience of a woman whose name has become synonymous with contemplation and spirituality — the great Saint Teresa of Avila.

Many of you will no doubt say, "She's out of our league. She lived in a cloister where nuns wore veils over their faces and their monasteries had enclosures and high fences. Today's world is an open world, and so, Teresa's lifestyle doesn't make sense to us."

Although I may agree that the externals of Teresa's life are not meaningful to many of us, I do, however, believe that, essentially, her experience was close to ours in important ways. First of all, she lived in an Age of Reform, in a time of great upheaval in the Church, when Martin Luther was promulgating his teaching on grace and the Inquisition was holding sway. Secondly, she struggled throughout her life to reach a new depth of prayer and faith which she needed in the midst of the confusion and errors of her time.

In her own monastery in Avila there were many women who had entered religious life for the wrong reasons. Many were living self-centered lives not directed to the service of others and not rooted in prayer. Teresa, herself, led a life of great turmoil for twenty years, vacillating between the life of prayer that God wanted of her and a more "normal" life that made less demands on her faith and generosity before God. Teresa would be the first to say that it was the power of God's Spirit that upheld her, and drove her, little by little, to change her life. She describes her struggle as "tempestuous," and she writes, "With all this, I see clearly the great mercy the Lord showed me that having to converse in the world so much, I had the courage to keep on with mental prayer."

I believe that, today, in the midst of the renewal and reforms of the nineteen-seventies, the greatest problem we face is the "lack of personal depth" and "the strength of character" to meet the challenges of change. The decade of the seventies has seen a great revival of interest in spirituality and mysticism, not only in the Church, but in the larger segments of society. Perhaps people have not been able to find roots in this world that is so mobile, so materialistic, so competitive and so lacking in security. I am convinced that people are looking for deeper meanings, for what is "real," not plastic or put on; good people are looking for what is lasting and supportive when everything else is disposable. It is this search for deeper, more authentic reality, which is at the root of every renewal effort, whether it be the Charismatic Movement, the liturgical renewal, Teen Seminars on Social Scripture, or the Transcendental Meditation Program.

To look at Saint Teresa's life is to see that her own search was, indeed, very "real." As she gradually became more rooted in the Spirit of God, she also drew closer to and was able to give more leadership to the world around her. It is a fact that the more the Lord revealed Himself to her and the more He favored her with mystical experiences, the more she gave herself in love and compassion to the people she was trying to serve. As her prayer became deeper, her vision became broader and more universal. What kind of woman was she, and what, exactly, did she do? What was her prayer life, and how did it affect her...



Teresa was an attractive woman with a great love for people and a taste for fine things. She naturally delighted in beautiful furnishings and clothing and is said to have scolded an artist who painted her portrait because the picture was not as complimentary as she would have liked it to be. Teresa wrote of her desire to please people, and of her difficulty in following her convictions when she felt she would lose favor with those she loved and respected.

Teresa of Avila lived sixty-seven energetic years despite physical illness and that disability, which would have kept another person bedridden. She travelled hundreds of miles in times when the mode of transportation was so poor. She established seventeen convents and several monasteries.

The letters and accounts of Teresa's monastic foundations, as well as her writings on prayer and spirituality, are numbered among the classics of Christian literature, despite her lack of formal education. The wording of her writings resounds with her humanness, her affection, her sense of humor, her wisdom and her profound reverence for God whom she referred to as "His Majesty." She made the most of her physical and mental capabilities, no matter how limited she perceived herself to be. God filled up what was wanting in His servant in order to accomplish His work.

Teresa counseled and at times rebuked members of royalty, as well as members of her own family. Bishops and priests sought her judgment along with her Religious Sisters. She taught her father mental prayer in the closing years of his life, and was influential in bringing about a spiritual conversion in the life of Philip II of Spain at a crucial time in his career.

And yet, as is true of any strong personality, she had many opponents along with admirers. She suffered much from harassment and misunderstanding, to say nothing of outright opposition. At one point she was imprisoned by her own Religious community to prevent the progress of her reform, and at another time she was summoned to submit to the court of the Inquisition.

In all of these events, Teresa drew more and more strength from God who was gradually revealing Himself to her more fully. She carried on continual dialogue with Him in the midst of her activities but also spent long hours of solitude in prayer. At those moments when she was caught up in ecstasy, her face became radiant. When she was called upon by her superiors to recount her experiences, her words expressed deep awe and reverence, as well as great tenderness and intimacy.

The characteristic of Saint Teresa of Avila that I find most winning is her great humility. While on the one hand she was determined to carry out her convictions regarding God's will as she saw it, on the other hand she was well aware of her own limitations. She readily submitted herself to the judgment of authorities, lest she deceive herself. She hated hypocrisy and openly told others her failings, lest they be aware only of her favors from God. She was deeply aware that her mystical experiences were special gifts. Teresa knew that it was the power of God acting through her that enabled her to carry out her unusual mission. She was convinced that the same power of God was available to anyone who loved God and would approach him in prayer, that contemplative prayer (or "mental prayer" as she called it) was for all people in the Church, not just for some elitist group. "Mental prayer," she wrote, "is nothing else, in my opinion, but friendly conversation, frequently conversing alone, with One Who we know loves us." She counseled others that if they did not succeed at first in prayer, they should persevere, for such persistence would surely be rewarded. "I can say from my own experience that whoever has begun it, let him not give it up, whatever sins he may commit, for it is the means by which he can make himself whole again, and without it this will be much more difficult."

A rare combination of mystical vision and practical realism, of creative ingenuity and administrative skill enabled Teresa to stand firmly between the worlds of the human and the divine. She bridged these worlds by her conviction that both were very real. She was neither surprised nor daunted by those who did not share her vision or who opposed her efforts to carry out her convictions. Teresa continued to fight wholeheartedly for what she believed was right.

Once near the end of her life when Teresa was on the way to establish a new monastery, and when, in her own words, "the winter was very severe and I was very old and ill," she was forced to travel on roads rutted with mud, and cross through a flooded area on pontoons, only to find a very unsympathetic bishop awaiting her at her destination. Her prayer at that time well expressed the struggle of her lifetime: "How true it is, my God, that whoever works for you is paid in troubles! And yet, what a precious price to love you if we understood its value!"

Bishop's Public Appointments

- 3 Radio Message - Family Rosary Network - 7:00 p.m.
- 6 Priests' Council Meeting, St. Bernard's Seminary - 10:30 a.m.
- 10 Installation of Very Reverend Frank E. Lioi as the Sixth Rector of St. Bernard's Seminary - 2:00 p.m.
- 11 Joint Executive Committee Meeting, Otto Schults Center, Nazareth College - 4:00 p.m.
- 15 Lawyers' Red Mass, St. Mary's Church, Rochester - 12:00 N.
- 16 Celebration of Eucharist and Homily, Teachers' Institute, Bishop Kearney High School - 10:30 a.m.
- 17 Diocesan Pastoral Council Meeting, Holiday Inn, Waterloo - 11:00 a.m.
- 17 Second Annual K. of C. Bishop's Charity Ball
- 18 Celebration of Eucharist and Homily, Installation of New Parish Council, St. Columba Church, Caledonia - 11:30 a.m.
- 20-21 New York State Bishops' Meeting
- 23 Gathering of Clergy Northeast Region - St. Joseph's Church, Penfield - 12:15 p.m.
- 24 Celebration of Eucharist and Homily, Golden Jubilee of St. Theresa Parish, Rochester - 5:00 p.m.
- 25 Celebration of Eucharist and Homily, Diamond Jubilee of St. Patrick's Parish, Corning - 4:00 p.m.
- 27 Regional Coordinators' Meeting, St. Mary's, Canandaigua - 10:30 a.m.
- 29 Becket Hall Board of Trustees Meeting - 10:00 a.m.
- 29 Priests Gathering, Notre Dame Retreat House - 12:00 N.
- 30 Knights of Columbus Clergy Vocations Night, St. Mary's School Hall, Bath - 7:00 p.m.

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