

IAIN MATTHEW OCD

ST TERESA – A MISSIONARY

*Christian hope sustains us in committing ourselves fully to the new evangelisation... We cannot be content when we consider the millions of our brothers and sisters who like us have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, but who live in ignorance of the love of God.*¹

St Teresa of Avila illuminates the depth of this Christian hope on which the new evangelisation depends. In this article we consider the scope of Teresa's missionary perspective.

I. HOW MUCH TERESA CARES ABOUT PEOPLE

Teresa's project took shape in the small community of San José in Avila, where some thirteen women sought to dedicate themselves to a life of sisterly love, mortification and prayer. The Foundress responded to their request for a teaching on how to go about this in her *Way of Perfection*. The pattern of that writing is powerfully instructive. She does indeed answer the question about how to pray, through her commentary on the Our Father, chapters 26 onwards. That commentary is preceded by a discussion of issues in prayer such as the call to contemplative prayer and the situation of those who do not seem to have this calling. This whole treatise on prayer – chapters 16 to 42 – rests on her discussion of virtue, chapters 4–15: 'What kind of people do we have to be?' "¿Qué tales habremos de ser...?" (CV 4, 1)². Her answer is: her

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio* 1990, § 86.

² Abbreviations in references to St Teresa's works in this article signify as follows: CV = Way of Perfection (Camino), Valladolid version; Ct = Letters (Cartas); R = Spiritual Relations

sisters' growth in prayer calls them to be loving, robustly detached and above all humble. So her treatment of prayer (16–42) follows on from her treatment of life (4–15). And this treatment of life follows on from chapters one to three, which she asks her sisters to read again and again as payment for Teresa's answering their original request for a lesson on how to pray.³ This means that the whole book, like an inverted pyramid, rests on these first three chapters. And in them Teresa says, that San José is a place of prayer and sisters are in the monastery not for themselves, but for the Church and for the world.

Oh my sisters in Christ! Help me to beg this of the Lord, for that is why he has brought us together here... The world is on fire... There is no time to be dealing with God about matters of small importance. (CV 1, 5)

A similar logic, the logic whereby Teresa's prescription for how to live and pray is driven by her apostolic concern, is at work in the structure of the first three chapters themselves. Chapters one and three are a passionate sharing of Teresa's sense of apostolic mission. Chapter two seems to be a digression in which an author describes the kind of poverty she wants her sisters to embrace. In fact, it is not a digression; rather the chapter serves the earnestness of her call to mission. In contrast with the burdensome buildings and obligations to benefactors which clogged the spiritual life of the convent of the *Encarnación*, Teresa does not want this new community of *San José* to be beholden to anybody. In that way, the sisters can devote themselves to things that really matter, to the real needs of the Church and the world, instead of being hostage to large properties and benefactors' personal whims.

The structure of the *Way of Perfection* (mission, life, prayer) and the structure of its first three chapters (mission, poverty, mission: poverty matters because mission matters) express through literary form the apostolic motivation of Teresa's Carmelite reform. Teresa confesses that the pattern of life which *San José* would incarnate was inspired by her ardent longing to do something for the Church, especially in the face of what she called the Lutherans. Reaching Avila news of the division among Christians in Europe galvanised Teresa's sense of the Church. If previously her ecclesial sense had been predominantly spiritual, eschatological, focused on communion with the Church in glory and purgatory, now the Church acquired for her all the earthiness of an army in the field.⁴ Teresa's community was meant to have an effect, to make a difference.

(Relaciones); M = Interior Castle, seventh Mansions. The Spanish text from which I have translated is: SANTA TERESA, *Obras Completas*, ed. T. Alvarez, Burgos 1994.

³ "En esto de oración es lo que me habéis pedido diga alguna cosa, y lo dicho hasta ahora, para en pago de lo que dijere, os pido yo cumpláis y leáis muchas veces de buena gana." (CV 4, 3)

⁴ See E. RENAULT, *The Apostolate of Contemplatives*, Darlington 1981, p. 25.

... And as my longing was, and still is, that as he has so many enemies and so few friends, these last should be good ones, I determined to do the little that was in me: to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and to try to see that these few women here should do the same, putting my trust in the great goodness of God who never fails to help those who set themselves to leave all for him. (CV 1, 2)

Let us flag up here a question to which we shall return: it can sometimes seem that Teresa was contemplative by default; a woman, a sinner, unable to preach – *mujer, ruin, imposibilitada* (CV 1, 2) – the best she could do was to pray. Hence in chapter 3 of *The Way* she explains that what we, the sisters, can do is pray that Catholic Christians do not defect, and that the “captains of this castle or city” namely, “the preachers and theologians” become holy, since help will come “from the ecclesiastical arm, not from the secular”. “And since we are incapable of helping our King in either, let us try to be such that our prayers may help these servants of God” (CV 3,2). A question we shall be considering then is whether Teresa was contemplative because she was not allowed to be active; contemplative by default?

Returning to the apostolic impetus in the story of Teresa’s reform, it is striking how the second phase of this reform, the beginning of further foundations in Castile and then in Andalusia, lasting from 1567 (Medina del Campo) until her death in 1582 (Burgos), also came as a response to the world’s need. The New World had long marked the destiny of the Cepeda-Ahumanda family, with the departure of all of Teresa’s brothers for South America and the death there of Antonio (1546), Rodrigo (1555), and Fernando (1565). It was her brother Lorenzo’s money sent from Quito that made the establishment of Teresa’s community at San José possible.⁵ But what cut into Teresa’s soul was the testimony of a returned missionary about the situation of the native Americans, a whole people who did not know Christ. It is worth reading at this point Teresa’s account of her reaction. It is definitely the sixteenth century and there are plenty of sharp stones in it, but the sense of mission which drives it is unmistakable.

Four years on – I think a bit more – I had a visit from a Franciscan friar called Alonso Maldonado, a great servant of God and a man who had the same desires for the good of souls as I did; and he could put them into practice, which I greatly envy him. He had not long arrived from the Indies. He started telling me about many millions of souls there that are being lost for want of doctrine, and he preached a sermon and gave us a talk encouraging

⁵ See V 33, 11–12; Letter to Lorenzo de Cepeda 23/12/1561 – Ct 2, 1–3; T. ALVAREZ, *Gli orizzonti di Teresa di Gesù*, Roma 2012, p. 72.

us to do penance; then he went away. I was left so grief-stricken at the loss of so many souls that I was beside myself. In floods of tears, I went off to a hermitage. I was calling out to the Lord, begging him to give me a means of doing something towards gaining some soul for his service, since the devil was carrying off so many; and that something might come of my prayer, since I was no good for anything else. I greatly envied those who, out of love for our Lord, could devote themselves to this, even if it meant their dying a thousand times. For me, when in the lives of the saints we read that they converted souls, it causes me much more devotion and feeling and more envy than all the martyrdoms they suffer. I feel this way because this is the inclination the Lord has given me. It seems to me that he values more one soul which, through his mercy, we may gain for him through our effort and through prayer, than all the services we can do him.

[§8] Well, this was how I was, with this great pain. Then, one night when I was praying, our Lord impressed his presence on me in his accustomed way, and showing me great love as if wanting to console me, he said to me: Wait a little, daughter, and you shall see great things... I was greatly consoled and fully convinced that these words would turn out to be true; but just how that might be the case I could not imagine. So another six months passed, and then there took place what I shall now relate... (*Foundations* 1, 7–8)

What she does relate is the visitation by the Carmelite superior general, Fr Giovanni Battista Rossi,⁶ and his injunction that Teresa should go from San José to make further foundations in Castile.

The influence of the New World continued. American imports were a source of fascination to Teresa. Potatoes, coconuts, rubber plants and tacamaca resin, all receive honourable mention in her correspondence.⁷ Ecuadorian silver continued to assist Teresa as her reform expanded, and as her business skills kept pace. She writes to Lorenzo in 1570: “I did no small thing in managing these affairs, and I have become so good at bargaining and business with these houses of God and of the Order that I am now well up on everything.”⁸ What inspires her is the goodness of the women in her communities and the praise they can offer to God.⁹ This delight at the progress of the foundations is salted with her anguish at the needs which the sisters’ life and prayer must address, and particularly the spiritual situation of the native Americans. She confides to her brother, who is soon to arrive back in Spain, that having him near her will be a rare consolation, since they will be able to work together for God’s glory and

⁶ Rossi (Rubeo) arrived in Avila on 12th April 1567.

⁷ See Ct 180, 4. 10; 202, 4–6; 222, 1.

⁸ Ct 24, 7 (17/1/1570)

⁹ Ibid. Ct 24, 3.

to bring some benefit to souls, since this is what pains me greatly, to see so many being lost, and these Indians are costing me dearly.

May the Lord give them light, for both here and there there is such unhappiness. As I travel about so much and many people speak with me, I often do not know what to say other than that we are worse than beasts, for we do not understand the great dignity of our soul and how we sell it short with things so short-lived as are those of earth. May the Lord give us light.¹⁰

Two dimensions of her apostolic desire become clear: first, the saving of souls – people’s ultimate healing and happiness, their coming alive in Christ; and second, the praise of God – that God should receive glory, that there should be people who would love him. Inspiring this is the mystic’s awareness of the hidden dignity of the human person (“the great dignity of our soul” which normally loses out to the more glamorous goods of this world), and the mystic’s awareness of just how worthy God is of praise. The justification for her communities’ existence is simply that: that God will be loved more, praised more and that thus his life will spread more in the world. In a priceless page from the 18th chapter of the *Foundations*, Teresa lets us see something of her courage, her mettle and her passion for Jesus.

In recounting these foundations, I am not including the great hardships suffered on the journeys with the cold and the sun and the snow – sometimes it snowed on us all day, sometimes we could not find the road, other times such sickness and fever (for, glory to God, poor health is normal for me); but then I would clearly see that our Lord was giving me energy. Sometimes, when there was a foundation in the offing, I had such sickness and pain to cope with that I would be really distressed, because it seemed to me that even to stay in my cell without lying down was too much for me; and I would turn to our Lord, complaining to his Majesty and asking him how he could want me to do what was beyond me; and then, though, the hardship continued, his Majesty would give me strength and with the fervour he inspired in me and the concern, it seems I would forget myself.

[§5] From what I now remember, I never failed to make a foundation because of fear of work, even though I dreaded journeys, especially long ones. But once I had begun, the going seemed easy, seeing in whose service it was undertaken and considering that in that house [the foundation to be made] the Lord would be praised and the most Holy Sacrament would be there. Seeing one more church is a special consolation for me, when I remember how many Lutherans are suppressing: I do not know what sufferings could

¹⁰ Letter to Don Lorenzo de Cepeda, Quito, Ecuador, 17 enero 1570, from Toledo – Ct 24, 13.

cause any fear however great they might be, in exchange for such a great blessing for Christianity. For even though we often do not think of it, the presence of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, as he is present in the most Holy Sacrament in many places, has to be a great consolation for us. For sure, it is so for me very often when I am in a choir and see such pure souls as these praising God...¹¹

This brings us back to the question: was St Teresa an enclosed religious by default, because that was the only option? I.e. the implication being that, had she lived in a different age or been of a different gender, would she have got stuck in where the action was instead of being stuck behind the bars of a cloistered monastery?

No, clearly this is not so. For one thing, her reform was a choice for a significantly more enclosed life, in the service of a more recollected and contemplative lifestyle; a free choice, which cost her dearly, but which she saw as essential for the Church. She did not mean to downgrade other vocations within the Church (see *Life* 32, 11). There were many good ways of being religious. But for her and those who walked with her, the call was to go deeper, not wider.

To go deeper, because some things depend on depth, not on width. Specifically, the praise of God depends on how free one's heart is, how transformed in charity and laid bare in humility one's soul is, how single-minded one is in dedication to God, how in tune with the hidden heartbeat of the Church one is. Having come to know God as she has, God who is so deserving of praise, it is worth sacrificing everything else in order to empower this praise. Her last *Relación*, composed the year before she died, beautifully expresses this conviction:

I still want to live, if he wills, so as to serve him more and, if I can, to contribute to even one soul loving him more and praising him through my intercession, for even though it be for a short time, it seems to me that this matters more than being in glory. (R 6)

God is glorified by his creatures being what they are called to be; above all, by human beings fulfilling their potential by coming to know God and to love God in truth. Where a person is obsessed with themselves and hardened in pride, who can reach them? Who can restore them as the voice of praise they are meant to be? What the Church's mission needs most are people prepared to visit the deep places, the lost peripheries of the spirit, the point where the door of the soul is locked from the inside; to visit that depth and to love there and so become channels through which the Holy Spirit will touch those whose spirit

¹¹ *Foundations* (F) 18, 4–5.

is frozen. “The charity of most men will grow cold”, the Saviour warns (Mt 24, 12). The contemplative vocation combats that global cooling, locating the soul in those far-off latitudes where Christ died and where the holy women wait.

Teresa suggests that this was what her reform was about when she describes her vision of Hell in the *Life*, a mystical experience, a gift (*gran merced*, 32.3) from God – terrifying though it was – which helped her to prioritise her sense of mission. The Hell revealed to her was narrow, airless isolation; the negation of love (32, 1–2). God’s mercy to her in having freed her – so she hopes – from such a destiny, leads her to praise him more: “Blessed be you, my God, forever! And how clear it is that you love me much more than I love myself!” (32, 5). And from this experience came the missionary zeal, the passion for people, which inspired her to live a more contemplative life: “From this I acquired the very great compassion [*pena*] which I feel from the many souls who are being condemned (...) and the intense impetus I feel to help souls [*los ímpetus grandes de aprovechar almas*]” (32, 6). This leads directly to her choice for deeper recollection:

After having seen this and other great things and secrets which the Lord, because of who he is, willed to show me, concerning the glory that will be given to the good and suffering to the evil, I desired a way and a means whereby I might do penance for such great evil and in some way merit such blessing. I wanted to escape from people and finally, once and for all, have done with the world. My spirit would not rest, though this unrest was not agitated, but wholesome [*sabroso*] ... I was wondering what I could do for God, and I figured that the first thing was to follow the calling which his Majesty had given me as a religious, keeping the Rule with the greatest perfection I could. (*Life* 32, 8–9)

This pivotal chapter then names Teresa’s toing and froing in and out of the monastery as the greatest obstacle to such a “doing something for God”, even though this activity meant she was doing others good by sharing the insights her own teachers had given her (32, 9). Next comes the conversation which sparked the project of forming a new community and the confirmation which Teresa received for this from the Lord, despite her misgivings (32, 10–11). So her profound perception of humanity’s spiritual need empowered her sense of mission, concretely enacted by choosing a more contemplative, more recollected life.

Teresa’s description of her vision of Hell is not easy reading. We are blessed to live in an age with a different sensibility, ecumenically and eschatologically; but what remains incontrovertible is the nexus Teresa establishes between her

sense of mission to the world and her desire to go not wider but deeper. There is a periphery which only the mystics can reach.

In one of her *Exclamaciones*, prayers written apparently after Holy Communion, composed for herself rather than (the case with all her other writings) for others, Teresa shows herself to be a channel inviting the Holy Spirit to reach and heal the lost corners of humanity, the places, the people, that anyone else in their right mind would abandon as a lost cause. Here is a translation of her text:

Oh Lord, my God! How truly are yours words of life, where all mortals will find what they long for if only they have a will to seek it! (...) You say: "Come to me all you who labour and are burdened, and I shall console you." What more do we want, Lord? What do we ask? What do we seek? Why are those of the world lost, if not because they are seeking rest? Oh God, help me! God help me! What is this, Lord? Oh, how tragic this is! Oh what great blindness, that we should seek it where we can never find it! Creator, have pity on these your creatures. See how we do not understand ourselves; we do not know what we want, nor grasp what it is we are asking. Give us, Lord, light; see how we need it more than the man blind from birth, since he wanted to see the light but could not. Now, Lord, people do not want to see. Oh, what incurable evil! Here, Lord, is where you need to show your power, here your mercy.

Oh what a hard request I make of you, my true God, asking you to love the one who does not love you, to open to one who does not knock, to give health to one who likes being sick and goes about looking for a way to get infected! You say, my Lord, that you come in search of sinners; these, Lord, are the real sinners. Do not look at our blindness, my God, but look at all the blood your Son poured out for us. Let your mercy shine into this build-up of evil; see Lord that we are fashioned by you. Let your goodness and mercy rescue us. (*Exclamaciones* 8)

Striking here is Teresa's determination to reach through prayer, that is to beg Christ to reach through his Spirit, those who have chosen to be beyond the reach of anyone. Her mission impels her to a frontier which is not geographical, but existential; not social, but spiritual.

Teresa's trust in "the blood" is the reminiscence of St Catherine of Siena. But the difference between these two contemplative and missionary Doctors of the Church is instructive. Catherine's spiritual journey called her to a life of solitude and prayer in Siena; and that prepared her for the extraordinary work of reconciliation which she was then to pursue in society and in the Church. Teresa also had a phase of intense mystical life, after her conversion in 1554, and in her

years in San José in Avila. These were then followed by fourteen years of intense activity founding monasteries around Spain. But the similarity is only partial. Catherine consciously left her solitude as a woman with a mission in society. Teresa, in her years as foundress, frequently left her cloistered community, but she did so specifically because she so believed in the importance of that contemplative community life and needed to found such communities elsewhere. Teresa was not first an enclosed contemplative in order later to bring Popes back from Avignon – contemplative first, so that she can be missionary later. She was an enclosed contemplative because that was and remained her mission, the way the ruptured church of her day could be best healed. Accordingly, when Teresa describes contemplative life – human and spiritual growth, mystical union, a constant accompaniment by Christ and inhabiting of the Blessed Trinity – this itself involves a more intense sense of mission, not to a lessening sense. Being more contemplative is being more missionary. Being more with Jesus on the mountain and in the desert, being more recollected, going deeper rather than wider, means, for those called to her communities and to her spirituality, being more, not less, effective in healing and changing the world. So Teresa exclaims of people (like her) in the seventh Mansion,

Their desire is to serve him and that through them he might be praised; and to bring help to some soul if they can. The result is that not only do they not desire to die: they desire to live, for many years, suffering the greatest trials, if only they can by this means bring it about that the Lord be praised, even just a little. ... Glory for them means being able in some small way to help the Crucified, especially when they see such offences committed against him, and how few there are who really look out for his honour without clinging to anything else. (M VII, 3, 6)

The Church's mission is contemplative at its core because mission is essentially grace, not conquest or personal achievement. That is why contemplative life is effective, because it is openness to the Gift. Those virtues of which Teresa spoke in the *Way of Perfection* – sisterly love, freedom from self, walking in truth – praise one open to the Gift, set free from all the posturing and self-worship which can beset our own projects. These virtues enable one to inhabit the peripheries of the spirit as a servant, not as a *conquistador*. Teresa's mystical fullness (described above in the seventh Mansions chapter three) fits exactly into her sense that mission is God's work, a work of grace, of "trust in God's great goodness" (CV 1, 2). It requires people – perhaps even just a few people – who together will be good friends of Christ and thereby channels of the greatness of God's mercy.

STRESZCZENIE

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Św. Teresa – misjonarka

Idea założenia przez św. Teresę z Awili żeńskich klasztorów kontemplacyjnych w Kastylii i w Andaluzji była w swojej intencji jednoznacznie apostołska. Dowodzą tego struktura *Drogi doskonałości* oraz początek *Księgi fundacji*. Intencja ta zakładała przede wszystkim zbawienie dusz oraz oddawanie chwały Bogu. Na podstawie niektórych przekazów autorstwa św. Teresy można przypuszczać, że dokonany przez Świętą wybór klauzurowego sposobu życia był wówczas jedyną dostępną dla niej opcją. Dlatego uważa się, że gdyby jej życie przypadło na inny okres dziejów, najprawdopodobniej prowadziłaby ona aktywną działalność apostołską. W artykule przywołano argumenty podające tę tezę w wątpliwość. Dużo bardziej prawdopodobny wydaje się bowiem jej celowy wybór tym głębszego życia kontemplacyjnego jako lepszego sposobu dotarcia do ludzkich zranień i osiągnięcia bardziej radykalnego uzdrowienia wewnętrznego.

ABSTRACT

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St Teresa – a Missionary

St Teresa of Avila's project, founding contemplative communities of women in Castile and Andalusia, was unequivocally apostolic in its intention. The structure of her *Way of Perfection*, and the starting point of the *Foundations* prove this. The apostolic intention was that souls should be saved and God should be praised. It might seem from her phraseology that she chose an enclosed lifestyle because that was the only option open to her, and that had she lived in a different age she would have embraced an actively apostolic life. The article argues that this is not the case, but rather that she deliberately chose a more, not less, contemplative lifestyle, as the way to reach deeper into humanity's wounds and achieve a more radical healing.

Słowa kluczowe: św. Teresa, misja, intencja apostołska, modlitwa, życie kontemplacyjne

Keywords: St Teresa, mission, apostolic intention, prayer, contemplative lifestyle