

St. Teresa of Avila on the Value of Praying - Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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SAINT TERESA OF AVILA ON THE VALUE OF PRAYING

St. Teresa of Avila, whose feast we have just celebrated, should be a patroness for everyone involved in selling. No saleswoman has ever been more enthusiastic about what she had to offer or more persuasive in showing how the payment is something anybody can afford. She points out "a great treasure" and declares, "The time will come when you will understand how trifling everything is next to so precious a reward" (*The Way of Perfection*, 21:1). Her model is Jesus himself saying, "Trade till I come" (Lk 19:13). What is she asking you to buy and what is the cost? Teresa is urging you to assign some part of your day to praying. And she guarantees a high return for your investment of time.

If Teresa were to walk into our 2004 world, she would see many similarities to her own 16th century existence. She lived during the Spanish Golden Age, an era of energy and expansion. Spain appeared on the stage of world politics as a superstar, pouring out money, manpower, and resources to make sure its policies would prevail. The home country established spheres of influence in western Europe and forged colonial conquests in the far-off Americas where Teresa's own brothers sought adventure and glory. Old ways were being turned upside down, but the conservative monarch Philip II would rather look at his realm standing on his head than grapple with all the realities challenging him.

Very different was Teresa. She knew far better than the melancholy King Philip how to come to terms with everyday problems and everyday opportunities. Born in the wind-swept city of Avila, with its towering walls baking in summer heat or snow-covered in winter, she was the daughter of a family that had purchased its way into the lower Spanish nobility. Her paternal grandfather was Jewish, a fact she never mentions but one now established by researchers. Teresa's black waving hair framed a broad forehead, dark sparkling eyes under rather thick eyebrows, a small nose, a mouth of medium size, and three very tiny moles, considered beauty marks in her day. Of middle height and inclined to roundness, she had a lively outgoing personality that invited others to draw near. She chose to become a Carmelite nun.

This woman of Castile was an engaging conversationalist. Convents of the period often functioned like social centers where people came to pass delightful afternoons in gossip and pleasant interchange. Teresa the nun welcomed her visitors warmly, adding a sprinkle of pious observations to the idle chatter. Later she regretted the waste of these years of spiritual mediocrity when much more of her time should have been given to praying—which she once explained as another kind of conversation: a conversation with God.

Teresa had not given up prayer entirely but lamented the energy squandered on useless prattle. Afterwards she wrote, "I can speak about what I have experience of. It is that in spite of any wrong a person who practices prayer does, that one must

not abandon prayer since it is the means by which the situation can be remedied. To remedy it without prayer would be much more difficult" (The Book of her Life, 8:5).

Here as in all her major writings, the reformer of Carmel is speaking directly to us. She doesn't compose a long soliloquy on God's wonders or present a third-person discourse on the objective conditions for a more fulfilling life. Instead, Teresa seems to sit down with her reader, seeking out individual needs and also possible resistances to what she proposes. She establishes a You-and-I relationship and tugs at your sleeve if she fears you might walk away.

Her works have all the ebullience and digressions of lively talk. In her eagerness to convince us, she sometimes wanders from her main idea but rarely apologizes. The detours, she tells us, have their own value. Her organization is not haphazard but it is like the schema of an open-air marketplace, not of a classroom. She offers products of eternal value whose worth she will describe in detail if only we pay attention.

She appeals, "Whoever has not begun to pray, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good. There is nothing here to fear but only something to desire" (Life, 8:5). For Teresa, spiritual riches are linked to praying. "No one can truly discover any harm that prayer can do, the greatest harm being not to practice it.... I certainly pity those who serve the Lord at their own cost, because for those who practice prayer, the Lord himself pays the cost since through their little labor he gives them delight..." (8:8).

Prayer puts us in contact with Christ Who longs to enhance our earthly life not with perishable goods but with riches that never fail. Jesus is always with us, but are we with Him? Teresa entreats us to turn away from continual absorption in pursuing worldly goals. Let some of the passing moments focus on what will never pass away. This is not to lose time but to open it up to eternal wealth.

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