

READING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SAINT TERESA

« The *Autobiography* of Saint Teresa is very useful and instructive, but it is necessary to know how to read it. And to read it as it should be read is more difficult than one would think »¹.

In these words we have the opinion of Father Silverio de Santa Teresa, a great authority on the works of the saint. It is unfortunate, in a sense, that this renowned scholar did not develop his point more fully and give us a method that would teach us to read the *Autobiography* more comprehensively. But we are grateful that he does alert us to the fact that there is a *correct* way of reading the book, one that will enable us to understand exactly what Teresa had in mind when she wrote it.

Like all great books, this one can be and is read in many different ways and in many different senses. Many (perhaps the majority) read it to form an idea of Teresa's personality, believing that it was written to give us a few personal glimpses into her life with the desire, at the same time, to teach us some spiritual truths, especially with regard to mental prayer. Those who read it this way unquestionably find great spiritual profit and are enriched with many graces.

But a truly comprehensive reading of this book requires much, much more. Unless one has achieved an unusually high degree of proficiency in the art of reading books, it can be safely, conservatively estimated that it will take *several* different readings of the *Autobiography* of Saint Teresa before one will be able to grasp the

¹ SILVERIO DE SANTA TERESA, *Saint Teresa of Jesus*, Newman Press (1944), p. 159.

essential richness as well as the human and spiritual dynamics of her life.

The purpose, then, of this article is to offer some methodological considerations for the reading of the *Autobiography*. Today many people are looking for a deeper understanding of the writings of the saint and are no longer satisfied with a mere « devotional » appreciation of her teaching. Instead, they believe that it is possible to grasp more and more of the richness of her books.

In my own experience of teaching the *Autobiography* in classes, I have found it useful to employ the rules outlined by Mortimer J. Adler for the reading of *The Great Books of Western Civilization*². This method, which is by no means the only one, has forced me and my student to come to grips with the actual message that Teresa was trying to convey to her confessors for whom she wrote her life. And the results have been gratifying, helping me to grasp for the first time in my life the actual message of a book that has been a favorite of mine for more than 30 years. Since I was not using the correct method, it has taken me all this time to sound its depths.

To teach the *Autobiography* of Teresa correctly takes time, of course, and much effort. But the book contains material so important that it more than justifies any effort. Adler would consider it to be a « primary book », which he defines as « those books which contain original communications. They are books which add something to the fund of knowledge made available by the tradition of learning. Ignorance or neglect of the tradition is likely to result in a false or shallow originality ».

Sharpening his focus on the nature of the great books, Adler brings his point into clearer perspective as he continues:

« The great books in all fields of learning are, in some good sense of the word, 'original' communications. These are the books which are usually called 'classics', but that word has for most people a wrong and forbidding connotation — wrong in the sense of referring to antiquity, and forbidding in the sense of sounding unreadable. Great books are being written today and were written yesterday as well as long ago. And... far from being unreadable, the great books are the most readable and those which most deserve to be read »³.

² ADLER, MORTIMER J., *How To Read a Book*, Simon and Schuster (1940), p. 55.

³ *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

I. PRELIMINARY CONCEPTS

Before going into the actual purpose and structure of the book, the following points should be faced as a way of better grasping the nature of any autobiography:

A. « *My Life* »

Today there is great interest, in spiritual circles especially, in spiritual autobiographies. One immediately thinks of the continued popularity of the *Histoire d'une Ame* of Thérèse of Lisieux and the *Story of a Soul* by the amiable Pope John XXIII. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is avidly studied, showing a young girl come to a deeper realization of the realm of the sacred and the holy.

Common to all these books is the same purpose that animated the writing of Teresa of Avila's autobiography. There was a desire to understand « Just what is my life? » In fact, such books are not really understood unless the question is asked and as far as possible answered, at least tentatively.

In one of his famous Gifford Lectures, Gabriel Marcel, the French existentialist, dealt with this question. He is convinced that when we ask « what is my life? », we are really asking a question that is a variation of « who am I in my deepest being? ». It is the same as asking « what am I worth? What is my ultimate meaning and value? »⁴.

When we get this far with Marcel's questions we might think that we have a solution, but the matter is far more complex because, on the human level, we will never be able to answer the question of just who we are. Hence, it follows that we do not know just what we are worth and just what our true value is. We have a human riddle that cannot be solved.

Marcel further exemplifies this issue by using a character in a play that he had written. The character is a man who has been accused by his wife of a crime, and he is totally unable to justify himself. He reflects and ponders, but no light comes to him. But in prayer, he finds a way out because he places himself completely *in the hands of the One Who knows him as he is*. He can see that without God he is forever condemned to know himself as he is not⁵.

⁴ MARCEL, GABRIEL, *The Mystery of Being*, Regnery (1951), pp. 182-209.

⁵ From his play, *L'Homme de Dieu*, cfr. *The Mystery of Being*, pp. 188-189.

In many places in Teresa's *Autobiography*, one sees that it is in the presence and in communion with God that Teresa gains genuine understanding of her own life and its meaning. This grows as she discovers to Whom she has committed herself and what ultimately prompted her to sacrifice all, totally consecrating her life and her energies to God.

B. *Reliving Her Life*

When one writes an autobiography, one is not merely remembering all that happened in the course of one's existence. Psychological studies show that one is doing more⁶. One is actually *reliving* the events as they occurred. As the writer goes back and as the events of the past begin to unfold, deep feelings and emotions are reawakened and relived. Only by keeping this in mind can we form some idea of the painful dimensions of the process Teresa had to face in coming to grips with her identity and how she lived in relation to her life-calling.

At many points in her *Autobiography*, Teresa indicates that problems have been solved completely. But at many other places she shows enormous feeling and emotion, even though the incidents occurred 20 or 30 years previously. These revelations into the soul of Teresa ought not be overlooked by the reader.

In a religious autobiography, the memory is always difficult to deal with. In Teresa's case, she is not just remembering, for example, the graces and favors of the Lord so that she can record them for her confessors. One notices that for her, they are sacred remembrances, just as biblical personages will remember and live the words that the Lord spoke to them long ago. Like Moses and Abraham, like Isaiah and Jeremiah in the days of old, Teresa cherishes the memories of the Lord's graces and this is accompanied with the deepest feeling, especially of gratitude and compunction and a sacred determination to be ever more generous in living her vocation.

⁶ HARRIS, THOMAS A., *I'm OK-You're Ok*, Avon Books (1973), pp. 25-33. Most worthy of note are his comments: « Perhaps the most significant discovery was that not only past events are recorded in detail but also the feelings that were associated with those events. And the event and the feeling which was produced by the event are inextricably locked together so that one cannot be evoked without the other », p. 27.

C. *The Technique of Role-Playing*

I was once asking a man who is professionally trained in the behavioral sciences about some of the feelings that Teresa expresses. He told me that he could answer my questions if I could tell him exactly what she wrote in the *Autobiography*. He then suggested that a very good way of understanding what this woman wrote was to role-play certain situations of her life.

The technique of role-playing has yielded satisfactory and useful insights to the helping professions. If, for example, there were a problem, any psychologist or social worker would ask certain questions. In reading Teresa's *Autobiography*, I want to read the book just as though I were one of the confessors Teresa asked to read her book. After all, she wrote this book for men and hence, I feel justified in using this method.

These are some of the questions I might ask in reading some of the more difficult passages in which she describes her problems. They are questions that professional people today naturally ask. They might go something like this:

1. Teresa, tell me in your own words just what happened.
2. Teresa, tell me how you *felt*, for example, when you had a vision of Christ in the year 1559. I want to know your *exact* feelings.
3. Teresa, how did you react to the experience? Were you frightened? Scared? Confused? Surprised or stunned?
4. Teresa, tell me what effects were produced as a result of your experiences (e.g., of your conversion, visions, locutions). In what sense were these experiences valuable to you? Why?

2. Teresa, as your confessor, what are you seeking from me? Do you think I understand what you are telling me? How can I help you further? Maybe I can at this point rephrase what you have told me and then you can tell me if I have fully understood what you have told me.

By following these basic rules, many of the pages of the *Autobiography* have come alive for me in a way that they never did before and in this way I am assured that I am coming to grips with the richness of this spiritual classic.

II. WHY DID TERESA WRITE HER AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

When Teresa was about fifty years old, she wrote the *Autobiography* as we now know it under the command of Father García of Toledo, O.P. It was a revision and expansion of the earlier copy of

her life that she had finished by the end of June 1562 in Toledo, at the insistence of another Dominican, Father Pedro Ibáñez.

There is some controversy as to the precise reason Teresa wrote an account of her life. One clear and obvious reason was that she had received very high and elevated graces in prayer as well as other divine favors, including several important visions of Christ. Teresa confesses that she often became terrified when she was being led by unfamiliar paths in her spiritual life. Fearing that she might be deceived by the devil, she took counsel with many of the outstanding spiritual authorities of her time. The reactions of these men were quite different, as we shall see, but some of them were extremely favorable, especially the two Dominican priests already mentioned.

It is legitimate to ask the precise reason these men commanded Teresa to write an account of her life. Did they plan to pass final judgment on the unusual graces of her life or the whole of her life? Did they think it could be helpful to others or did they feel that it would be helpful to them personally?⁷

Probably all of these opinions deserve merit and consideration. But perhaps it will be simpler for us to begin by taking Teresa's word in the Preface:

« I beseech Him with my whole heart to give me grace to write this account of my life, according to my confessors' command, with complete clarity and truthfulness. The Lord Himself, I know, has long wished it to be written but I have not presumed to write it. May it be to His glory and praise; and may it lead my confessors to know me better, so that they may help my weakness and I may be enabled to render the Lord some part of the service which I owe Him »⁸.

From her own account, it emerges that she is convinced that the Lord Himself for some time had wanted the book to be written and also that she hopes that, by reading an account of her life, her

⁷ For the sake of clarity, throughout this article I will limit my reflections to the original *Life* that she wrote for Father Pedro Ibáñez and which was completed in Avila in 1562. Later she will re-write the book, adding the material of later chapters, especially ch. 32-36, where she will deal with the foundation of Saint Joseph's in Avila. Many writers rightly think this material pertains to the aims of the BOOK OF FOUNDATIONS.

⁸ *The Life, The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, vol. I. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. (1976), p. 32. Unless otherwise indicated, all further quotations will be from this translation.

confessors will understand her better and be able to help her in overcoming her weaknesses.

But from the Preface it also emerges that she is experiencing a certain conflict: she is commanded to write this book and given full liberty to write « about my way of prayer and the favors which the Lord has granted me », but her confessors have subjected her to « severe restrictions » in describing what she calls her « wretched life »⁹.

Clearly, Teresa has an intuition that she can only give the full account of her life in all truthfulness if she is able to freely deal with the negative features. She will obey the confessors, but the careful reader will see that she feels constrained to bring up her sinfulness whenever this is needed to highlight the goodness of God in her life. Her uncommonly good sense tells her that she must do this from time to time; otherwise, how can she write this account of her life in all truthfulness and honesty?

When she finished the account of her life, she was pleased with the evaluation given by the Dominican priests, but she was still a bit uneasy. Not until she received the approbation of Saint John of Avila, the great apostle of Andalusia, was her soul fully at peace. She was told to get his approval by no less a person than the Inquisitor, Francisco Soto, whom she had met at Avila¹⁰. But, as we shall see, it was many years later that Teresa was able to see the deepest meaning of her own life.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE¹¹

1. *Classify the book according to kind and subject matter.*

The *Autobiography* of Saint Teresa of Avila must be classified as a book written by the saint in which she reveals the events and the spiritual meaning of her life.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁰ *Relations*, Iv, 3.

¹¹ ADLER, MORTIMER J., *op. cit.* In the following pages I will be following his *Analysis of a Book's Structure* on page 266. His four rules to be followed are: 1. *Classify the book according to kind and subject.* 2. *State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity.* 3. *Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and analyze these parts as you have analyzed the whole.* 4. *Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.*

2. *State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity.*

In this book, Teresa writes an account of her life to enable her confessors to detect the meaning of her recently experienced visions to be sure that they came from God.

3. *Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and analyze these parts as you have analyzed the whole.*

The confessor wanted Teresa to write the book in three parts: First, she was to give a summary account of her life, and this she does in the first 11 chapters of the book. Then, she was to give an account of the range of her experiences in prayer, which she does in chapters 11 through 21. Under the simile of the four waters, Teresa takes us through all the stages of prayer that she personally experienced, the methods that she used and the effects or the fruits that prayer produced in her soul. Lastly, she was to relate the current favors she was receiving from God.

A year before she died, Teresa wrote of her *Autobiography* that it is a book of the mercy of God¹². True, she originally wrote the book in obedience to the command of her confessor. And it is true that she was writing the book so that the confessor would be able to judge whether her visions were from God or were deceptions of the devil. But as Teresa related her life, she discovered that there was a special underlying meaning. I think she found the « golden key » to unlock the mystery of her life by reading the *Confessions* of St. Augustine¹³. To make this clearer, let us now show how Teresa found the mercy of God resplendent in the three aspects of her book.

In the first part of the book, Chapters 1-11, Teresa answers all the questions that would be asked were one to take a case history. Her answers would be very useful to any social worker and are of great interest to us today. She tells us in these chapters that God had always been with her in a special way. She had very good and pious parents and she was able to have a special love of God and religion from the time she was very young. By the grace of God, she was blessed with a wonderful and attractive personality, hence she was always loved and esteemed. She received a vocation to the

¹² LETTER 391, *Santa Teresa de Jesús, Obras Completas*, B.A.C., Madrid (1966), p. 1078.

¹³ *The Life*, p. 73.

religious life, and though she did not really take to this call immediately, eventually she was prepared to embrace this way of life. And in religious life she was given the grace to make rapid progress, which was a sign of God's special favor toward her. She made rapid progress in the ways of prayer, being raised to the prayer of quiet and occasionally even of union when she was only in her 20's. She fell away from prayer for a year and a half, but by the grace of God underwent a complete conversion so she was able to have the determination to actually carry out her desire and resolve to give herself completely to God forever. This was a singular grace of God.

In the second part of the book, Teresa takes us through the four waters of prayer, or ways in which Christ became more and more real and more and more the center of her life. It is in prayer that Teresa discovered her true vocation and the mission assigned to her by God. She understood her life in terms of prayer and later came to understand her mission in this way. Since so many people do not *understand* their lives and the greatness to which they are called, one can appreciate how grateful Teresa was that God allowed her to grasp that she was called to live a life of prayer and contemplation and to be able to help others travel along this same path. Teresa may have been in her 40's when she received that illuminating grace.

In the third part of the book, Teresa was able to see more of the love of God revealed in her life. This time she recounts the many special favors the Lord granted her through visions, revelations, locutions, and even the power to be instrumental in bringing the miracles of the Lord to others. These events were accompanied by deep and profound inner graces, transforming Teresa's soul more and more. She was able to see that the Lord was doing great things in her life and that she was called to inwardly rejoice and take her delight in this mysterious but marvelous plan of God. She saw that she was being prepared to be a vessel of divine mercy for others.

4. *Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.*

If we could have Teresa answer this question for herself, I think her answer would go something like this:

« My problem is that I feel very uncomfortable and disturbed in my life at this moment. On the one hand, I find that God seems to have favored me with wonderful visions and locutions. I can see that they are very advantageous to me and I am delighted. But, on the other hand, I find that I am uneasy and anxious. I wonder if

I am imagining all this and whether I am deceived, by the devil disguising himself as an angel of light. When I think of my past infidelities to God's grace, it seems that I am a very unlikely person to be receiving these special and outstanding favors. Besides, this is the opinion of Francisco de Salcedo and of Father Gaspar Daza¹⁴ and other pious people. They tell me to distract myself from these visions and forget about them. I have tried to do this, but I have not been able to overcome the power of the visions.

« But there is something else to be considered: I have grown to be a different person because of these divine favors. In my *Autobiography* I wrote in chapter 28 that if my confessors told me that one thing I had seen was true and they held it was false, I would certainly believe them because I am convinced that I should obey my confessors in all things. But in this present case, it is as if I were a poor person and another came to me and put a very precious jewel in my hand. Previously I was poor, and now I see that I am rich. Well, in this case I would like to believe you people, but the evidence of the jewels in my hand will not allow me to accept your word. That jewel is the extraordinary spiritual progress that God has brought about in my soul by means of these visions »¹⁵.

IV. WHAT WAS TERESA'S PROBLEM?

One of the ways in which we can be sure that we are reading a book properly is to discover if the author had a problem that is discussed in the book. If so, it will then be most useful to see how the problem is formulated and how it is solved.

The *Autobiography* is basically a *practical* book; it was not written to solve academic questions. Throughout the book Teresa is dealing with practical problems in her life. And practical problems are not solved by discussion; they can only be solved by *action*. We notice that when she has problems, she takes practical measures. First, she is aware of what her problem is and then she goes to the people she thinks are most qualified to help her reach a conclusion. Needless to say, the simple and direct way that Teresa deals with her problem, her earnestness in seeking a speedy resolution, is one of the most fascinating aspects of the book.

We can say that the problem can be stated thus: Teresa had

¹⁴ *The Life*, p. 153-154.

¹⁵ *The Life*, p. 187.

been receiving certain visions of the humanity of Christ when she was in prayer. This was a great favor from God and when she was experiencing visions, Teresa was convinced that God was near her and protecting her. She describes these visions thoroughly and extensively in chapters 27-29¹⁶.

However, when Teresa was not praying, she began to have doubts as to whether these favors were divinely given or were a deception caused by the devil. There seemed to be some reason to believe that they might be the work of the devil. First of all, Teresa was aware of her own sinfulness in the past, and this made her suspicious, for God does not ordinarily grant favors to those who have at times been unfaithful to divine grace. Also, there were a number of people to whom Teresa went for spiritual guidance who had very strong convictions that these were not divine favors, but that Teresa, like many other women of her time, was being deceived by the evil one. They told Teresa that she was in great danger. She wondered if her visions would meet with the approval of the Church and whether they were in accord with the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. These questions needed to be answered if her soul was to have peace.

A problem can be defined as « a felt discrepancy between the way things are and the way we would like them to be. First, a problem is always a felt discrepancy. Without this feeling, there is no subjective sense of a problem... and feeling distressed is an important first step toward personal change »¹⁸.

Teresa does not merely have intellectual doubts; she has deep and painful feelings that what she has experienced is not ordinary or common. She was in a state of severe conflict and hence, she immediately went to Father Pedro Ibanez, O.P. for help¹⁹. She considered him to be the most learned theologian in Avila and from him she sought clarification.

How Teresa Solved Her Problems

Bad and unpleasant things are not the only stressful events in life; good things can be even more stressful. And this was the case

¹⁶ The visions of Teresa that we are dealing with are the following. In June, 1560, she had her first intellectual vision of the humanity of Christ (ch. 27, 2). In January of the following year, the sacred humanity in its risen form was represented to her in an imaginative vision (ch. 28, 3). For two and a half years, i.e. from 1561-1563, she frequently received this favor (ch. 29, 2).

¹⁸ MAHONEY, MICHAEL, *Self-Change*, W.W. Norton (1979), p. 23.

¹⁹ *The Life*, p. 174.

with many of the more advanced graces and favors showered on Madre Teresa by the merciful Lord. The way Teresa solves her prayer problems will enlighten us to how Teresa gained certainty that God had deeply and mystically transformed her life.

Teresa first came into serious problems of comprehension when she was repeatedly blessed with the prayer of quiet and of incipient union with God. And, as ever, she proceeded not precipitously, but with great prudence. She wanted her problem to be judged by those who were more competent than herself. But to whom to go?

She learned of Francisco de Salcedo, « the holy layman » who was famous for his ability to guide souls in the higher stages of prayer. She went to him and told him about her life and her method of prayer and he was initially impressed with her spiritual progress²⁰. But shortly afterward he became more suspicious, thinking that if she were in these more lofty stages of prayer, then surely she would be able to free herself from all inordinate human attachments. However, Teresa insisted that though she would like to, it was not in her power to do so. Just to be on the safe side, he directed her to consult with Father Gaspar Daza, a priest of the Cathedral who had often achieved great success in leading those who practiced prayer. Teresa went to him with great confidence and put herself under his guidance. Teresa tells us the reason for her confidence: the priest's « goodness and holy life the Lord was beginning to make known to the people ». Teresa herself was convinced that many women may frequently and easily be led into deception. She hoped that this servant of God would lead her safely. But she was soon to discover that this man's methods were anything but what she needed.

« He began with the holy determination to treat me as if I were strong (and I ought to have been, considering the extent to which, as he said, I practiced prayer), so that I should give no offense of any kind to God. But when I saw how determinedly he was attacking these little habits of mine, which I have already mentioned, and that I had not courage to live more perfectly, I became distressed, and, realizing that he was treating me in spiritual matters as though I were going to become perfect immediately, I saw that I should have to be much more careful.

« In due course I realized that I should not improve by using the methods which he employed with me, for they were meant

²⁰ *The Life*, p. 153.

for a soul which was much more perfect, and I, though advanced in Divine favors, was, as regards virtues and mortification, still quite a beginner. Really, if I had had nobody else to consult, I think my soul would never have shown improvement, for the distress which it caused me to find that I was not doing what he told me, and felt unable to do so, was sufficient to make me lose hope and give up the whole thing »²¹.

If we ask ourselves what method Father Gaspar Daza was using, we find that Teresa was very much aware that he began with a holy determination to treat her as if she were perfect so that she would give no offense to God. While this was also and even more the desire of Teresa, the saint knew that grace is not the fruit of human determination.

The reaction of Teresa was perfect — *she became distressed*. On the one hand, she saw he was attacking these little faults of hers, and, on the other, she saw her own lack of courage to live more perfectly.

Furthermore, she is aware that he was not respecting her freedom. He wanted to make her perfect immediately. Teresa is alert enough to see that she should be very careful about taking his advice.

Teresa shared with Father Daza the secrets of her soul and listened seriously to his suggestions, while « at the same time she reserved the freedom to act according to her innermost conscience since she was not fully understood and was in danger of being unduly influenced by this determined priest »²².

Here Teresa regards the freedom of her own conscience as being of paramount importance. She wanted to comply with the good priest's advice, but it was simply impossible. Fortunately, this set the stage for her to meet the Jesuits.

Father Cetina, S.J., was a great grace for her, for immediately she felt that this priest understood her. Teresa is very precise in letting us know just why she felt so comfortable and safe with Father Cetina. She says:

« *He explained to me what I was experiencing* and greatly encouraged me. He said it was very recognizably God's Spirit,

²¹ *The Life*, p. 154.

²² The words are taken from *Prayer in Practice* by Romano Guardini, Pantheon Books (1957), pp. 154-155. Guardini is not writing about Saint Teresa, but I have reproduced his words because they so remarkably and accurately express just what Teresa was confronted with in the person of Father Daza.

but that it was necessary to return again to prayer, that the prayer did not have a good foundation (and that was true, for it doesn't seem to me I even understood the word), that I should by no means give up prayer, but strive very hard since God had granted me such special favors. He wondered if the Lord didn't desire to do good for many persons through me, and said other things (for it seemed he prophesized what the Lord afterward did with me) and pointed out that I would be very much at fault if I didn't respond to the favors God was granting me. In all that he said, it seemed to me, according to what was impressed upon my soul, that the Holy Spirit was speaking through him to *heal me* »²³.

Teresa points out the ways in which this young Jesuit helped her soul:

1. « He made me very ashamed; he guided me by means that seemed to change me completely. What a great thing it is to understand a soul! He left me consoled and encouraged, and the Lord helped me and him to understand my situation and how I should be guided. My soul began to improve noticeably... ».
2. « He guided my soul by stressing the love of God and allowed freedom and used no pressure if I didn't set about doing things out of love ».
3. « And God gave him the ability to command me in such a way that I obeyed him ».

Final Resolution of Her Problem

Father Cetina and the « old gentleman » learned that Saint Francis Borgia was to visit the College of St. Giles in Avila in about the year 1554, when he came as the Society's Commissary for Spain and Portugal²⁴. Because of his reputation for holiness, they decided to set up an appointment for Teresa to meet with him. The meeting was a very successful one. She spoke with him and gave him an account of her prayer because she was told that he was advancing in the favors and gifts of God.

At this time, Teresa was frequently being granted the grace of

²³ *The Life*, p. 158.

²⁴ PEERS, E. ALLISON, *Handbook to the Life and Times of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross*, Newman Press (1954), p. 155.

passive prayer, but she needed confirmation, someone to assure her that this was the working of God in her soul. Francis Borgia fully understood all that Teresa told him that afternoon and told her that her « experience was from the Spirit of God and that it seemed to him it would no longer be good to resist it when it occurred. If God bears away your soul in prayer, then you should act in this way. First of all, always begin your prayer with an event from the Passion, and then if God bears away your soul in prayer, let His Majesty bear it away ».

All this was comforting to Teresa since she was convinced that the good Jesuit was speaking from his own personal experience. Hence she writes: « As one who was well advanced, he gave the medicine and the counsel, for experience in this matter is very important ». Another very beneficial result of this meeting was that Saint Francis was able to calm down Francisco de Salcedo, assuring him that Teresa's state of prayer was from God.

Teresa's Problem of Human Attachments

But all was not well with Teresa. Father Cetina was being transferred, and this made her feel that she had again been abandoned, and she was filled with fear that she might possibly return to her former way of life. But she had the good fortune to meet another Jesuit, Father Juan de Prádanos²⁵.

Her specific problem was this: While Teresa was receiving increased favors from God and was making noteworthy progress, she still harbored many attachments that she was powerless to overcome.

How Teresa Finally Overcame Her Inordinate Human Attachments

It was under the guidance of Father Juan de Prádanos, S.J., that Teresa made even greater progress. Teresa describes the way she was guided by this young Jesuit:

1. He stressed the basic principle that she needed to consider: « that I must please God in everything and that I must leave nothing undone ».

²⁵ *The Life*, p. 160.

2. He did so « with great skill and gentleness because my soul still was not at all strong but very fragile, especially in regard to giving up some friendships that I had ».

3. He notices that there is « resistance » on the part of Teresa to give up the friendships because she felt she was not offending God and did not want to be ungrateful to the persons. Consequently, he does not force the issue.

4. He told her to commit the matter to God in prayer and to recite the *Veni Creator* for some days that God might give sufficient light about a better course of action.

The result of all this was that one day after she had spent a long time in prayer she was favored with her first rapture when she heard the words: « I no longer want you to converse with men but with angels »²⁶. The experience, she tells us, was powerful and it terrified her because the words were spoken deep within her spirit, but, at the same time, she felt great consolation when that fear left her. More importantly, Teresa assures us that « these words have been fulfilled, for I have never again been able to tie myself to any friendship or to find consolation in or bear particular love for any other persons than those I understand love Him and strive to serve Him; nor is it in my power to do so, nor does it matter whether they are friends or relatives ». She concludes her account with the words: « Now in this *rapture* the Lord gave me the freedom and strength to perform the task [breaking with all undue attachments] ».

Teresa Consults With Saint Peter of Alcántara

If her advisors had been upset when the Lord led Teresa into the higher stages of prayer, then they were even more upset when she received the grace of the vision of the Lord for more than two years. These men caused her a great deal of grief, even though this was not their intent. Still, Teresa suffered greatly, especially when one of her confessors told her to make the sign of contempt to the appearance of the Lord, the sign that was known as « giving the fig ». Teresa found this utterly revolting, but she feared that she would be unsafe if she did not obey her confessor, so she complied.

²⁶ *The Life*, p. 161.

The advice of this confessor was so unwise and so unhealthy that we might ask just why Teresa did not use her sense of independence as she had when she went to Father Gaspar Daza. And the answer lies in that she immediately intuited that Father Daza was overstepping his position. Instead of being a spiritual guide, aware that only the Holy Spirit is the true Director of a soul, Father Daza himself wanted to change Teresa's life and was determined to make her perfect. Teresa rightly did what she had to do.

But in the case of this other confessor who made her do some thing so repugnant, Teresa was guided by the sense of the Scriptures where we are told: « He who hears you, hears ME ». Teresa was trying to obey her confessor who took the place of Christ on earth. The Lord Himself approved of Teresa's tactic, but Father Banez was later able, theologically, to explain to Teresa how foolish the advice of the confessor had been.

During this whole ordeal, Teresa never found anyone who was able to bring her full and complete peace of soul. Finally, she was fortunate enough to consult with Saint Peter of Alcantara, whose sanctity was well known. She went to him without fear, for « with all his sanctity, he was very affable... he was very pleasant in his speech because he had a bright mind »²⁷.

First of all, Teresa tells us that the Lord was able to remove a great part of her trial by bringing the blessed Father Peter of Alcantara to Avila. What did Teresa do? She conferred with him and gave him a summary account of her life and her manner of proceeding in prayer. « Without any duplicity or covering over, I discussed my soul with him with complete clarity and truthfulness ».

What Were the Results of This Discussion?

Teresa writes:

« Almost from the outset I saw that he understood me through experience, which was all that I needed. For at that time I didn't understand myself or how to describe my experiences as I do now (for afterward God enabled me to understand and describe the favors that His Majesty gave me) and it was necessary that the one who understood me and explained these experiences should himself have experienced them.

²⁷ *The Life*, p. 180.

« This holy man enlightened me about everything and explained it to me, and he told me not to be grieved; but that I should praise God and be so certain that all was from His Spirit that with the exception of the faith, nothing could be truer or more believable ».

« He took the greatest pity on me. He told me that one of the worst trials on earth was the one I had suffered (which is contradiction on the part of good men), and that I had still a long way to go; for I was always in need and there was no one in this city who understood me. But he said that he would speak to my confessor and to the one who had troubled me the most, for that was this married gentleman whom I've already mentioned. As the one who felt the greatest good-will toward me, this gentleman waged the whole opposition. He is a God-fearing and holy man; but since he had seen that I had so recently been so wretched, he wasn't able to feel assured. Thus, the holy Friar Peter assured them, for he spoke to both of them and gave them motives and reasons for feeling safe and not disturbing me any more. My confessor had need of little assurance; the gentleman needed so much that the reasons were still not entirely enough, but they helped to keep him from frightening me so much ».

One of the Worst Afflictions

Saint Peter of Alcántara fully understood that one of Teresa's problems was that many *holy* people were disturbing her soul. He not only understood, but he expressed his conviction to her and told her that she had gone through one of the worst possible trials that anyone can experience. To be misunderstood is always a difficult trial, but it was even worse in the case of Teresa; she was being favored by God, and at the same time she is being frightened and terrified by the servants of God. This is a serious spiritual conflict.

Fully grasping the situation, Saint Peter of Alcántara discussed the matter with the other priests concerned, especially her confessor and Francisco de Salcedo, and he was able to calm them down. For Teresa, this was a great blessing. She adds, though, that Saint Peter was not fully able to persuade the « holy layman », but that the net result was that he no longer *frightened* Teresa.

V. Sub-problems of Teresa

1. It is evident that in writing the *Autobiography*, Teresa encountered enormous personal difficulties. The whole enterprise required

much time and strenuous effort, for she had to rethink the meaning of her whole life and try to integrate this new experience. What was so difficult? Actually, if one were to receive such outstanding revelations from God and if some of them were to endure for several years, then one would feel painfully imbalanced psychologically. Added to this was that Teresa did not have the verbal skills necessary to explain and convince her confessors of just what she was experiencing, since many of these men never had similar experiences.

2. From the lofty spiritual heights that Teresa enjoyed by the time the book ends (she was in the prayer of spiritual betrothal and was graced with deep intellectual visions of Christ), we can see that Teresa attaches a very specific meaning to what she is telling us in the first 11 chapters. Had she written the very same material a few years prior to her visions and higher stages of prayer, she might have said the same thing, but the meaning, obviously, would be different.

Teresa is very much concerned with her sinfulness throughout the book and wants to rethink that aspect of her life in the hope that it will shed light. And she felt there was good reason for doing this. After all, she was aware of her own sinfulness and, being a fully transparent person, she does all in the presence of God. She is different from most of us in that she is not only aware of her past sins, but she wants God to be aware of them. She never excuses herself in any way, fully faces her responsibilities and the consequences of her actions.

She does not recall her sinfulness for unhealthy purposes, and neither does she give the feeling that her sinful past has a negative impact on her life. Instead, she deals with the remembrance of her sinfulness in the light of the merciful goodness of God Who has forgiven her and hence it is actually a positive strength for her.

Over and over again, I have noticed that so many readers of Teresa find it extremely difficult to understand why she is constantly stressing her sinfulness and the need of humility. In addition, when they learn that in the process of canonization it emerges that she never committed a serious sin against God in her life, they are even more perplexed. What does it mean, they ask.

Sinfulness and humility, in the writings of Teresa, must be understood in the same way and the same sense that these words are employed in Sacred Scripture. In the truest sense her book is a spiritual autobiography in which she is experiencing her own salvation history in the way one would expect a person to who seeks salvation and intimacy with God and in the same manner that it is presented in the pages of the Scriptures. The reader must allow

Teresa to tell her own story and recount her own experiences. She must rethink the whole range of experiences in her prayer-life. The confessors were interested in this to see if they could detect the nature of her prayer, the effects produced and the ways prayer was being reflected in her daily life. Possibly from this experience of rethinking her life, Teresa became more and more convinced that in teaching others it is essential to stress that the waters of prayer are given by God to produce the flowers of virtue. Hence, if there are no solid virtues accompanying a life of prayer, there is good reason to fear illusion.

Teresa in chapter eight gives her classic definition of prayer, one that is often quoted by spiritual writers. But it is to be remembered that it is in the opening line of chapter 7 that we have the *foundation statement* of the saint herself that explains just what she had in mind in formulating her definition of prayer in terms of friendship with Christ. In that seventh chapter Teresa begins to feel a certain horror in her soul as she recalls how she betrayed the friendship of Christ by giving up prayer for a year and a half. So strongly does she feel about this matter that ever afterward Teresa counseled souls never to fall into the trap of thinking, under the guise of humility, that there was any reason ever to abandon prayer. For her, prayer is « to take Christ to be one's friend »; she expands this to her famous definition: « In my opinion, mental prayer is nothing but a heart-to-heart talk and frequent solitary conversing with Him Who we know loves us »²⁸. Teresa's whole treatise on prayer is so appealing — in the light of Teresa's life, she is telling us how foolish she was to refuse the graces of prayer and how happy she was when she consented to the delights God prepared for her. This is a great lesson for all her readers.

One senses in reading this book that Teresa matures gradually but unmistakably. When we finish reading the book, we find the Teresa we will always know. Previously, she did not fully understand herself and did not have full dominion over herself. But when the book comes to a close, we find that Teresa is a true and complete spiritual person.

In dealing with the third water of prayer (a most obscure stage to describe, incidentally), Teresa tells us in chapter 17 that « it is one favor that the Lord should grant this favor, but quite another to understand what favor and what grace it is; and still another to be able to describe and explain it »²⁹. This kind of intellectual matu-

²⁸ *The Life*, p. 67.

²⁹ *The Life*, p. 114.

rity is not easily achieved, nor is it acquired quickly. But it is very important, for otherwise, in the words of Teresa, « the soul proceeds with confusion and fear and is unable to walk with greater courage, trampling underfoot all the things of the world ». One can appreciate how wonderful it must have been for Teresa to have mastered this stage of spiritual growth and to be able to communicate maturely with others. Without this stage of growth she could never have become a Doctor of the Universal Church.

But the true sense of maturity that Teresa achieves is the marvelous awareness that is expressed from chapter 22 on. On different occasions she tells us « Now I am writing a new account of my life. I have become a different person than the one I formerly was »³⁰. Up until that time, her life had been lived according to the wishes of Teresa herself; now she is aware of the life of Christ Who dwells within her. So different was she now that it was observable to others, and Teresa explains that her confessor, Father Balthasar Alvarez, assured her that she was now a totally different person³¹.

To conclude this section on the problems of Teresa, we see that her manner of proceeding is truly a model for all souls who are spiritually perplexed and disturbed. Teresa was able to clearly identify her problem, then she sought the best advice possible and, by the providence of God, was able to consult with men who had been blessed by God with similar graces.

This is what gave Teresa the most comfort, that she was guided by holy men who from their own personal experience could give her the assurance that « the finger of God was present », and hence she could be assured that « the Spirit of God was the author of these spiritual events ».

When the confessors read the *Vida* of Mother Teresa and told her that they fully concurred that she had not fallen into deception but was being led by God, Teresa was enormously, but not totally, relieved. Francisco Soto, the Inquisitor she had met at Avila, had encouraged her to seek the approval of Saint John of Avila, who had the reputation of being the most competent judge of spiritual matters in Spain at that time.

It took a long time to get a copy of the *Autobiography* to the apostle of Andalusia, as he was called. And after the holy man read the book, a year before he died, he wrote Teresa a letter in which he gave his fullest approval. His letter was dated 1568³².

³⁰ *The Life*, p. 152; p. 187.

³¹ *The Life*, p. 187.

³² cfr. *Introduction* of Kavanaugh-Rodriguez, pp. 26-26.

With the receipt of this letter, Teresa had the relief she had been seeking for many years: full peace and contentment of soul.

In the truest sense, this book is the *Autobiography* of Teresa of Jesus. Up to the time of the writing of this book, Teresa always signed her letters with her family name, but from this time onward, she wanted to be known as Teresa of Jesus. This is no merely accidental feature; this title is the key to the understanding of the book. The *Autobiography*³³ is really the story of how this woman, Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda, by the call and workings of God in her soul, little by little became in name and in fact Teresa of Jesus. This process took place as Jesus overcame the hesitancy and resistance of Teresa, enriched her with His graces and favors, and gradually transformed her personality to the point that the central guiding Person in her life was Himself; and then she served her Lord with an undivided heart and had no other interest than doing the divine Will and striving for the increase of the kingdom of God on earth.

VI. A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE BOOK

When Teresa picked up her quill to begin her *Autobiography*, I doubt very much that she was thinking that it contained « her life ». For, actually, she was writing for very practical reasons and with the hope of gaining peace of mind. But she was aware that she was writing because God wanted her to.

We know that Teresa always kept a copy of this book with her, even on a journey, up until the time it was confiscated by the Inquisition. As a result of writing this book, Teresa tells us that she always got better spiritual direction because she had learned what questions to ask her confessors, how to cooperate with them and how to obtain help from them. From this point of view, the writing of the book had been a blessing and a definite stage of her spiritual maturation process.

About a year before Teresa died, she wrote a letter in which she spoke of the « great book », as she called it, and said that « It is a book of the mercies of God »³⁴. What an expressive way of

³³ From the time that Teresa founds Saint Joseph's Monastery in Avila, she never again used her family name. From then on she styles herself Teresa of Jesus.

³⁴ cfr. note 12. Also cfr. Alvarez, T. In *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, Edizioni Studium Roma (1975), vol. II, pp. 1857-1876.

referring to this book! These words, taken seriously, can unlock the deepest mystical understanding of the whole book.

As she was quickly approaching death, Teresa was able to go over the contents of this book in her mind, and she was able to view her life not as a problem nor filled with difficulties, but mystery-filled and overflowing with the mercies of God. In the Bible, the mercy of God refers to His merciful, loving, gracious *activity*³⁵ toward man in man's miserable pitiable situation, and this is how Teresa clearly views her life just before she is to go into eternity. At this time she is able better to see why God wanted this book written, and just what the Church will later acknowledge in canonizing her and in declaring her to be the first woman Doctor of the Universal Church.

So here we come to an answer that we have been searching for — the answer to the question: what kind of a book is this? We find that it is a *mystical* book. From the point of view of solving problems it is a practical book, but especially it is a mystical book in the sense of disclosing the merciful activity of God in the life of His Teresa of Jesus and of her awareness of this fact.

Just imagine how Teresa, at that stage of her life, remembers what she has written. She can see how good God had been to bless her with wonderful parents and a happy home life. She now sees that her early attraction to and love for religion were very special favors. Being drawn to understanding in her teens the importance of mental prayer and practicing it with fervor, entering the religious life, and having the grace to overcome the naturally intense and wonderful love she had for her father were all marvelous signs of God's loving presence and protection. And even when she became paralyzed, this led her to a deeper understanding of prayer and closeness with God. The death of her father did not take place until she had the unusual grace of knowing that her own father fully approved of her vocation to a life of prayer and was himself making the greatest progress in a life of intimacy with God.

As Teresa in 1580 would let her mind go back to the pages she had written in chapters 11 to 21, the section now known as « the little treatise on prayer », she now senses that God wanted them written for the good of others. It was not *her* intention to become « the Doctor of Prayer » in the life of the Church; she can now see that she was given this outstanding ability to understand and to

³⁵ *Bible Bhashyam*, An Indian Biblical Quarterly, March (1981) p. 31. The whole issue is dedicated to the mercy of God.

explain prayers to others. This was a gift of God, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

It was from Saint Augustine, the great Doctor of the West, that Teresa, herself a future Doctor of the Church, was to first learn how to think about her life. In reading his *Confessions*, Teresa learned that he used the same standard that was used in the Book of Psalms: he understood his life in terms of the mercy of God³⁶.

If this is true in general, it is even more evident when the soul is led into the higher and deeper stages of passive prayer and brought to union with Him. This was Teresa's good fortune and she was given assurance only after a long series of trials. Teresa from that time on in her life was more and more aware of what the spiritual life is — it is not the efforts of our own life, however strenuous they may be, but the personal transforming activity of God in our lives. It is the life, according to Saint Paul, « where I [Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda] live no longer, but Christ lives in me ».

« Now I am fully Teresa of Jesus. From the time I was able to enjoy continually a companionship with Christ, He broke into my life more and more, tearing down any attachment that kept me back from the fullness of His love. I could see that I was different than I had been, that my life was enlarged and enriched. I felt at the time that I couldn't have gone any farther, it couldn't have been any better, short of the beatific vision. Finally, when Christ spoke the words: « You are Mine, and I am yours » — these were substantial words of the Lord, and they *accomplished* just that.

« Singing the mercies of God forever as the psalmist urges us is an idea that I first introduced in the fourteenth chapter where I was describing the prayer of quiet. It was only when the Lord had taken over in my life, when I was under His power, that I was able to sing His mercies and want all others to do the same³⁷.

« I rejoiced because He had changed my stingy heart and egoistical heart into one that was more open to His love. And I also rejoiced because I arrived at the state of knowing *that I was loved by God Himself* and that He wanted me to know how much He loved me. Just one moment of this delight would have made the journey of life fully worthwhile ».

This mystical reading of the *Life* of Teresa is exactly what Pedro Ibanez was able to do so well. I often encourage the students to read his little treatise on *the Spirit of Teresa of Jesus*³⁸, written

³⁶ *The Life*, p. 73.

³⁷ *The Life*, p. 101.

³⁸ PEERS, E. ALLISON, *Complete Works of St. Teresa*, Sheed and Ward (1950),

between 1562 and 1564. This good Dominican knew Teresa personally and had guided her in troublesome times of her life, and using his little treatise is one way students can see if they have grasped and understood the *Autobiography*. Students often find it rewarding to match their reading skills against his, and in this way they can form an idea of how much or how little they understand the woman who wrote this spiritual classic. It is good to have a benchmark of this sterling quality.

Conclusion

To sum up in a few words the purpose of this article, it will suffice to say that I have tested the evaluation of Father Silverio and have seen that he is accurate and sound in pointing out that there are many facets to the *Autobiography* of Teresa and that there are many problems to be solved before it can be read accurately. I have in this article suggested only one possible way of reading this book with greater satisfaction. Others are needed.

Still, there remains a long way to go. I can see that many books in the Sacred Scriptures were almost impervious to millions before the advent of modern scripture scholarship and its means and methods of making texts and contexts more meaningful and clear. I am sure that similar methods could be used to study the charism of Teresa, whose teaching is so avidly sought today. Should this happen, it could be the single most promising sign of fruitful growth in teresian studies in the waning years of this century.

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³⁹ PEERS, E. ALLISON, *Complete Works of St. Teresa*, Sheed and Ward (1950), vol. III, pp. 313-333.