

Thoughts And Prayer For Today

Saint Teresa of Avila.

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Doctor of the Church.

The extracts from the writings of St Teresa which form the body of this pamphlet are to be read reflectively and prayerfully. May they lead those who read them to seek out and savour St Teresa's works more fully. May they bring them to seek, too, that deeper personal knowledge and love of Christ our Lord which is the firm foundation of real concern for others. - THE EDITOR.

INTRODUCTION.

Teresa Sanchez Cepeda Davila Y Ahumada was the daughter of a businessman of Avila, a town of Castile, in central Spain. She was born on the 28th March, 1515, being the third of 10 children, and described as 'the most loved of them all'.

When she was 15, her mother died. She had the reputation of being quite beautiful in her youth and retained her fine appearance until her last years. She had a buoyant and extrovert personality and was able to adapt herself to all sorts of persons and situations. She had literary gifts and was skilled at needlework and the domestic sciences. She was a woman of great courage.

When her mother died she appealed to the Blessed Virgin to be her mother. She attended the convent of the Augustinian nuns at Avila for her education, but soon after her mother's death she had to remain at home, owing to ill-health and her upbringing was directed by her father. When she was 17 she decided to enter a convent but her father refused his consent. Then three years later, she ran away from home and entered the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation at Avila, and her father withdrew his opposition.

It is interesting to note that she said later that this break from her family caused her pain which compared with that of death. She applied herself to the life of prayer and penance but not long after her profession she fell seriously ill and spent some time out of the monastery seeking relief, but unskilled medical care only added to her troubles, and her health was permanently impaired.

At this time she was paralyzed in her legs for three years. Her cure from this paralysis she attributed to St. Joseph. Though she never abandoned prayer, the next 18 years of life was a period of lukewarmness. From time to time she enjoyed special lights in prayer, but she was held back by her desire to win the favour of those about her. But she finally overcame this in an experience of conversion before 'a representation of Christ most grievously wounded.'

Now 39 years of age she began to enjoy a vivid experience of the presence of God in her soul. At the same time she remained conscious of her own sinfulness. She sought help from many priests. Some attributed her graces to the deceit of the devil. Others gave her encouragement to persevere

on the way of mystical prayer. Among the latter were two other saints, Francis Borgia, the Jesuit, and Peter Alcantara, of the discalced Carmelite Fathers. In the course of time she had several extraordinary spiritual experiences, such as the piercing of her heart, a spiritual espousal and mystical marriage.

The Great Reform.

There were many distractions in the large and relaxed community in which she lived. Teresa aspired to the life of perfection. She began with the reform of herself, and then set about the establishment of a smaller and more fervent monastery in Avila. In face of criticism and opposition from both the clergy and the people of the town she finally set up the Convent of St. Joseph of the Reformed (discalced) Carmelite rule. Even then she did not find peace. She had to face a lawsuit as well as persistent public criticism. But by the end of 1562 the storm passed and she was able to live in peace for some five years. She occupied much time during this period at writing and completed her 'Way of Perfection' and 'Meditations on the Canticle'.

From 1567 she was much engaged in making new foundations of discalced Carmelites throughout Castile.

In this work she met Father John of the Cross, one of the Discalced Brethren who gave her great support and help. Thus when she had to return to her original home, the Monastery of the Incarnation, at Avila, he co-operated with her in greatly improving the spiritual state of those nuns.

Conflict.

Her work of reform met with great opposition. Still she established reformed monasteries at Salamanca, Segovia and Seville. At that point open conflict arose between the older group of Carmelite priests and the reformed, discalced Fathers. Father John of the Cross was imprisoned and Teresa herself had to retire to a monastery. In the midst of all this conflict Teresa wrote, along with other works, her greatest book, 'The Interior Castle'. The King intervened, and finally a complete separation was made between the two branches of the Carmelite Order.

Teresa then returned to the visitation of her convents and the work of founding new ones. She set up Carmels at Villeneuve, Palencia, Soria, Burgos and finally at Granada.

In September, 1582 Teresa reached Alba de Torres and fell gravely ill. After weeks of intense suffering she died there on October 4th. She is buried there.

Teresa of Avila was declared Blessed by Pope Paul V in 1615, and seven years later canonized by Pope Gregory XV, along with her contemporaries and fellow countrymen, St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Francis Xavier, and the apostle of Renaissance Rome, St. Philip Neri.

A Doctor of the Church.

Doctor of the Church is a title given to certain ecclesiastical writers on account of the great benefits the Church has gained from their doctrine. In addition to great learning, sanctity of life is required, for the title is given only to canonized saints. So it is not so much the person's ability to expound the faith, but rather the evidence that one's writings give of the work of the Holy Spirit in one's soul by which one savours and enables others to savour the things of God. Such writings draw men to God.

St Teresa's Writings.

Her books were written over many years and in different circumstances. They show a certain maturing of her thought and her prayer. The three greatest of them are valuable for her teaching on prayer and its necessity for all types of men and women. Her principal works are:

The Autobiography – a manifestation of her spiritual state for her directors with a later addition of 11 chapters on prayer.

The Way of Perfection – a treatise on the major virtues addressed to her nuns. It uses the Our Father as a means of teaching prayer at a greater depth.

The Interior Castle – contains Teresa's mature thoughts on the complete spiritual life. Prayer is emphasised but other elements are discussed. Each stage in the development of the life of union with God in prayer is studied as an apartment in this castle, and its consequences for every other phase of the individual's life.

A Carmelite.

Now, let St Teresa guide us.

PART I — REFLECTIONS:

GOD CARES.

— 'God cares for us better than we can care for ourselves and He knows of what each of us is capable. What is the use of governing oneself if one has surrendered one's whole will to God? We are unprofitable servants: what do we suppose it is in our power to accomplish?'

MUTUAL SUPPORT.

— 'People trouble so little about things pertaining to the service of God that we must all back each other up if those of us who serve Him are to make progress. People think it a good thing to follow the pleasures and vanities of the world and there are few who look askance at these; but if a single person begins to devote himself to God, there are so many to speak ill of him that self-defence compels him to seek the companionship of others until he is strong enough not to be depressed by suffering. Unless he does this he will find himself in continual difficulties. It is a kind of humility for a man not to trust himself; but to believe that God will help him in dealing with those with whom he has intercourse.'

THE CHOICE IS THE LORD'S.

— 'Remember that there must be someone to cook the meals and count yourself happy in being able to serve like Martha. Reflect that true humility consists to a great extent in being ready for what the Lord desires to do with you and happy that He should do it, and in always considering yourself unworthy to be called His servants. If contemplation and mental and vocal prayer and tending the sick and serving in the house and working at even the lowliest tasks are of service to the Guest who comes to stay with us and to eat and take His recreation with us, what should it matter to us if we do one of these things rather than another? I do not mean that it is for us to say what we shall do, but that we must do our best at everything, for the choice is not ours but the Lord's.'

IN TIME OF TRIAL.

— 'When we are busy, or suffering persecutions or trials, when we cannot get as much quiet as we should like, and at seasons of aridity, we have a very good Friend in Christ. We look at Him as a

Man; we think of His moments of weakness and times of trial; and He becomes our Companion. Once we have made a habit of thinking of Him in this way, it becomes very easy to find Him at our side, though there will come times when it is impossible to do either the one thing or the other.

— ‘For that reason it is advisable to do as I have already said: we must not show ourselves to be striving after spiritual consolations; come what may, the great thing for us to do is to embrace the Cross. The Lord was deprived of all consolation; they left Him alone in his trials. Let us not leave Him; for his hand will help us to rise more effectually than our own efforts.’

WISE DISCRETION.

— ‘This is no time for believing everyone; believe only those whom you see modelling their lives on the life of Christ. Endeavour always to have a good conscience; practice humility; despise all worldly things; and believe firmly in the teaching our Holy Mother the Roman Church.’

LOOK UPON CHRIST.

— ‘Those of you whose minds cannot reason for long or whose thoughts cannot dwell upon God, but are constantly wandering, must at all costs form this habit. I know quite well that you are capable of it – for many years I endured this trial of being unable to concentrate on one subject, and a very sore trial it is. But I know the Lord does not leave us so devoid of help that if we approach Him humbly and ask Him to be with us He will not grant our request. If a whole year pass without our obtaining what we ask, let us be prepared to try for longer. Let us never grudge time so well spent. Who, after all, is hurrying us? I am sure we can form this habit and strive to walk at the side of this true Master. I am not asking you now to think of Him, or to form numerous conceptions of Him, or to make long and subtle meditations with your understanding.

— ‘I am asking you only to look at Him. For who can prevent you from turning the eyes of your soul (just for a moment, if you can do no more) upon this Lord? See, He is only waiting for us to look at Him. If you want Him, you will find Him. He longs so much for us to look at Him once more, that it will not be for lack of effort on His part if we fail to do so.’

CHRIST LOVES US.

— ‘Whenever we think of Christ, we should remember with what love He has bestowed all these favours upon us, and how great is the love which God has revealed to us in giving us such a pledge of the love which He bears us; for love begets love. And though we may be only beginners, and very wicked, let us strive ever to bear this in mind and awaken our own love; for, if once the Lord grants us the favour of implanting this love in our hearts, everything will be easy for us and we shall get things done in a short time and with very little labour. May His Majesty give us this love, since He knows how much we need it, for the sake of the love which He bore us and through His glorious Son, who revealed it to us at such great cost to Himself.’

ACCEPTANCE OF SUFFERING.

— ‘If You, Lord, are willing to suffer all this for me, what am I suffering for You? What have I to complain of? I am ashamed, Lord, when I see You in such a plight, and if in any way I can imitate You, I will suffer all trials that come to me and count them as a great blessing.’

CHRISTIAN COURTESY.

— ‘Try then to be as pleasant as you can without offending God, and to get on as well as you can with those you have to deal with, so that they may like talking to you and want to follow your way of life and conversation, and not be frightened and put off by virtue.’

TRUE SELF-KNOWLEDGE.

— ‘However high a state the soul may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon it, and this it will never be able to neglect even should it so desire. Humility must always be doing its work like a bee making its honey in the hive; without humility all will be lost. Still, we should remember that the bee is constantly flying about from flower to flower, and in the same way, believe me, the soul must sometimes emerge from self-knowledge and soar aloft in meditation upon the greatness and majesty, of its God... I do not know if I have explained this clearly: self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it; so long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility.

— ‘As I see it, we shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God: let us think of His greatness and then come back to our own baseness; by looking at His purity we shall see our foulness: by meditating upon His humility we shall see how far we are from being humble.’

HUMILITY, THE TRUE FOUNDATION.

— ‘Fix your eyes on the Crucified and nothing else will be of much importance to you. If His Majesty revealed His love to us by doing and suffering such amazing things, how can you expect to please Him by words alone? Do you know when people become really spiritual? It is when they become the slaves of God and are branded with His sign, which is the sign of the Cross, in token that they have given Him their freedom. Then He can sell them as slaves to the whole world, as He Himself was sold, and if He does this He will be doing them no wrong, but showing them no slight favour. Unless they resolve to do this, they need not expect to make great progress.’

— ‘For the foundation of this whole edifice, as I have said, is humility, and, if you have not true humility, the Lord will not wish it to reach any great height; in fact, it is for your own good that it should not; if it did, it would fall to the ground. Therefore, if you wish to lay good foundations, each of you must try to be the least of all, and the slave of God, and you must seek a way and means to please and serve all your companions.’

THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

— ‘You know that God is everywhere; and this is a great truth, for, of course, wherever the king is, or so they say, the court is too; that is to say, wherever God is, there is Heaven. Remember how St. Augustine tells us about his seeking God in many places and eventually finding Him within himself.’

THE WISDOM OF FAITH.

— ‘O secrets of God! We can only surrender our understanding and realize that of itself it can do nothing to fathom the greatness of God. It is well that we should remember here how Our Lady the Virgin, with her great wisdom, submitted in this way, and how, when she asked the angel: “How shall this be done?” he answered: “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you; the power of the most high shall overshadow you”.’

— ‘Thereupon, she was no longer concerned to argue about it; having great faith and wisdom she at once recognised that, in view of this two-fold intervention there was neither any necessity for

further knowledge on her part nor any room for doubt. She was not like certain learned men, who, not having been led in this way of prayer by the Lord and not having the beginning of spirituality, try so hard to reduce everything to reason and to measure everything by their own understanding that it looks as if all their learning is going to enable them to succeed in comprehending all the wonders of God. If only they would learn something of the humility of the most holy Virgin!’

CHRIST IN THE SOUL.

— ‘Do not suppose that the interior of the soul is empty. If we took care always to remember what a guest we have within us, I think it would be impossible for us to abandon ourselves to vanities and things of the world, for we should see how worthless they are by comparison with those which we have within us. What does an animal do beyond satisfying his hunger by seizing whatever attracts him when he sees it? There should surely be a great difference between the brute beasts and ourselves, as we have such a Father. Perhaps you will laugh at me and say this is obvious enough; and you will be right, though it was some time before I came to see it.

— ‘I knew perfectly well that I had a soul; but I did not understand what that soul merited, or Who dwelt within it, until I closed my eyes to the vanities of this world in order to see it: I think, if I had understood then, as I do now, how this great King really dwells within this little palace of my soul, I should not have left him alone so often, but should have stayed with Him and never have allowed His dwelling-place to get so dirty.’

CHRIST’S LOVE IN WORD AND DEED.

— ‘I conclude by advising you not to be surprised at the tender words which you may read of in Scripture as passing between God and the soul. What amazes and bewilders me more, considering what we are, is the love which He had for us, and has still. Yet such love He has, and there can surely be no words with which He can express it as clearly as He has already expressed it by His actions. If you love me, I would beg you when you reach this point, to pause a little and think of the Love He has shown us, and of all He has done for us. Once we realize that His love was so strong and powerful that it, made Him suffer so, how can we be amazed by any words which He may use to express it?’

TRUE LOVE OF GOD.

— ‘Those who really love God, love all good, seek all good, help forward all good, praise all good, and invariably join forces with good men and help defend them. They love only truth and things worthy of love.’

— ‘Do you think it possible that anyone who really and truly loves God can love vanities, riches, worldly pleasures and honours? Can he engage in strife or feel envy? No, for his only desire is to please the Beloved.

‘Such persons die with longing for Him to love them and so they will give their lives to learn how they can please Him better...

— ‘There are degrees of love for God, which shows itself in proportion to its strength. If there is little of it, it shows itself but little; if there is much, it shows itself a great deal. But it always shows itself, whether little or much, provided it is real love for God.’

PART II — PRAYER.

REVERENCE IN PRAYER.

— ‘You must know that whether or no you are practicing mental prayer has nothing to do with keeping the lips closed. If, while I am speaking with God, I have a clear realization and full consciousness that I am doing so, and if this is more real to me than the words I am uttering, then I am combining mental and vocal prayer. When people tell you that you are speaking with God by reciting the Our Father and thinking of worldly things — well, words fail me. When you speak, as it is right for you to do, with so great a Lord, it is well that you should think of Whom it is you are addressing, and what you yourself are, if only that you may speak to Him with proper respect.’

PREPARATION FOR PRAYER.

— ‘Who can say it is wrong if, before we begin reciting the Hours, or the Rosary, we think Whom we are going to address, and who we are that are addressing Him, so that we may do so in the way we should? I assure you, that if you gave all due attention to a consideration of these two points before beginning vocal prayers which you are about to say, you would be engaging in mental prayer for a very long time.’

PRAY WITH CHRIST.

— ‘Let us now return to our vocal prayer... As you know, the first thing must be examination of conscience, confession of sin and the signing of yourself with the Cross. Then, as you are alone, you must look for a companion and who could be a better companion than the very Master who taught you the prayer that you are about to say? Imagine that the Lord Himself is at your side and see how lovingly and humbly He is teaching you and, believe me, you should stay with so good a friend for as long as you can before you leave Him. If you become accustomed to having Him at your side and if He sees that you love Him to be there and are always trying to please Him, you will never be able, as we put it, to send Him away, nor will He ever fail you. He will help you in all your trials and you will have Him everywhere. Do you think it is a small thing to have such a Friend as that beside you?’

A CRY FOR MERCY.

— ‘My soul seems to find rest, my Lord, in meditating upon the joy which it will have if by Your mercy it be granted to enjoy You.

— ‘How late have my desires become enkindled, and how early, Lord, did You go in search of me, calling me to spend myself wholly in Your service! Did You perchance, Lord, forsake the wretched or turn from the poor beggar who sought to approach You? Can it be, Lord, that there is any limit to Your wonders or to Your mighty works?

— ‘O my God and my Mercy! Now will You be able to show Your mercies in Your handmaiden! Powerful are You, great God. Now will it become clear, Lord, if my soul, looking upon the time it has lost, is right in its belief that You, in a moment, can turn its loss to gain. I seem to be talking foolishly, for it is usual, to say that time lost can never be recovered. Blessed be my God!’

LORD – THAT I MAY LOVE YOU!

‘I sometimes remember the complaint of that holy woman, Martha; her complaint was not merely of her sister — I feel sure that the chief cause of her sorrow was the thought that You, Lord, had no compassion on her for the labour that she was enduring nor cared whether or no she was with You.

Perhaps she thought that You had less love for her than for her sister, and this would have troubled her more than serving One Whom she loved so dearly, for love turns labour into rest...

— ‘Shall I complain with this holy woman? I have no reason to do so, for I have ever found in my God far greater and stronger proofs of love than I have known how to ask or to desire. I have nothing to complain of save that Your loving kindness has borne with me too long. What, then, can one so wretched as I, ask of You? That You will give to me, my God (as St. Augustine said), so that I may give to You, to repay You some that I owe You; that You will remember that I am Your handiwork; and that I may know Who my Creator is, and so may love Him.’

AN ACT OF THANKSGIVING.

— ‘When I meditate, my God, upon the glory which, you have prepared for those who persevere in doing your will, and think how many pains and trials it cost Your Son to gain it for us, and how little we had deserved it, and how bound we are not to be ungrateful for his wondrous love which has taught us love at such a cost to itself, my soul becomes greatly afflicted.

— ‘How is it possible, Lord, that all this should be forgotten, and that, when they offend You, mortal men should be so forgetful of You? O my Redeemer, how forgetful are men! They are forgetful even of themselves.’

AN ACT OF LOVE.

— ‘Taught by You we pray: “Your will be done!” - that is, may the Lord fulfil His will in me, in every way and manner which You, my Lord, desire.’

— ‘Do You grant me the grace of bestowing on me Your Kingdom so that I may do Your Will, since He has asked this of me. Dispose of me as of that which is Your own, in accordance with Your Will.’

REJOICE IN THE LORD.

— ‘Rejoice, my soul, that there is One Who loves your God as He merits. Rejoice that there is One Who knows His goodness and worth. Give Him thanks for having given us on earth One Who knows Him — His only Son. Beneath this protection you will be able to approach His Majesty and beseech Him that, since He delights in you, all things on earth may not suffice to make you cease delighting in Him, and rejoicing in the greatness of your God and in the way wherein He merits love and praise.

— ‘You can beseech Him, too, to aid you to bear some small part in the blessing of His name so that you may say with trust: “My soul does magnify and praise the Lord”.’
