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Teresa of Avila

Sixteenth-century Spain was ruled by men. Men governed the homes and ran the family businesses. Men preached from the pulpits and lectured at universities. All positions of authority both in the church and in the state were held by men. "The very thought that I am a woman is enough to make my wings droop," Teresa used to say.¹ With good reason. When Teresa wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs, the manuscript was burned at the order of her confessor because he thought it "a dangerous innovation" that a woman should presume to touch on such a subject.² It is all the more remarkable then that Teresa managed to establish herself as a great church reformer and a theologian of lasting fame.

Teresa's career was like a storm that only gradually gathered momentum. Born at Avila in 1515, she entered a convent of Carmelite Sisters in 1536. For 17 long years she led the life of a "don't press me too hard," middle-of-the-road contemplative nun. In 1553 she experienced a second conversion, which was followed by nine years of an intense spiritual search. In the last 20 years of her life (1562-1582) she became a public figure, the recognized leader of the new Discalced Order of Carmelites, both for men and women. In this period she personally took part in the foundation of 18 new monasteries and convents, encouraging would-be candidates and instructing superiors, fighting off opponents, completing practical arrangements. She also proved a formidable writer. Apart from producing hundreds of meditations, letters, maxims and spiritual

testimonies, she composed five major works: her autobiography, *Conceptions of the Love of God*, *The Way of Perfection*, the book of the *Foundations*, and *The Interior Castle*.

Teresa has the distinction of being the first of only two women who have been declared Doctor of the Church. She owed this recognition mainly to her teaching on prayer. Teresa always maintained that, given the right disposition, everyone could be led to higher states of prayer in which we come face to face with God in a tangible manner. In a short chapter like the present one, it is obviously not possible to cover all aspects of Teresa's teaching in this regard. It seemed to me that it would be more profitable, for our purpose, to restrict ourselves to some practical advice Teresa has to give on how to experience God through prayer, and that we might achieve this best by studying especially how one passage from the gospels, namely the one concerning the Samaritan woman, proved of great help to Teresa herself. We shall attempt to relive how God revealed himself to Teresa through this bible text in a very special manner.

In Her Father's Home

Don Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda and Donna Beatriz D'Avila Ahumada, Teresa's parents, possessed a small mansion in Santo Domingo Square in the center of Avila. It was a kind of compromise between a castle and a merchant's home popular with the lower nobility in those days. High, gray stone walls surrounded the property on all sides. Entering through the heavy oak door in the gateway facing the square, one came upon an inner court of cobblestone, with a fountain in the middle, colonnades on the sides and, in the corners, flights of stairs going up to living rooms on the first floor. The rooms upstairs were dark and somber, the furniture austere by our standards. In the course of the

day, most activity would take place downstairs: in the colonnades, or in the kitchen rooms and parlors beyond the colonnades.

It was in this courtyard that Teresa spent a lot of time as a teenager, playing with her friends or talking to relatives who had come to visit. From eyewitness reports we may well imagine what she looked like: her long, black, wavy hair and her sparkling eyes; her orange skirt trimmed with black velvet galloons; the golden bracelet on her arm; the pendant on her satin blouse. Teresa was inquisitive and lively. We are told that, just like her mother, she had a taste for reading. Without the knowledge of the strict Don Alonso, mother and daughter devoured the romantic literature of the time, the many stories of gallant knights and their ladies.³ Teresa joined in the adventurous games of her elder brothers. On one occasion she left Avila with Rodrigo "to go to the land of the Moors and die a martyr's death." At another time the two wrote a novel of their own, spinning a fantastic story of chivalry and heroism.

The Cepedas were deeply religious people. Statues and holy pictures could be seen in various rooms. One painting in particular was very dear to Teresa. It depicted the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, as narrated in John 4:4-42. Jesus was sitting by himself at the side of the well talking to the woman from Sychar who had come to draw water. Jesus was telling the woman that if she understood who he was, she would be the one asking for water: He could give her water that would slake her thirst forever. The painting bore the woman's response as an inscription: "*Domine, da mihi aquam,*" "Lord, give me that water." Teresa was intrigued by this episode in Jesus' life:

Oh, how often I remember the living water of which the Lord spoke to the woman of Samaria! I am so fond of that Gospel. I have loved it ever since I was quite a

child—though I did not, of course, understand it properly then, as I do now—and I used often to beseech the Lord to give me that water.⁴

Teresa had often read this gospel passage. Explanations had been given her in sermons and instructions. She must have gazed upon the painting many times, as children do with objects they like, and in her youthful fantasy she must have seen herself standing there in front of Jesus! It spoke to her imagination, this being alone with Jesus and speaking to him face to face. It helped her to pray. It made her ask for that mysterious water that wells up within the soul unto eternal life, and which Jesus alone can give.

In the Convent of the Incarnation

When Teresa became a nun, she brought with her a set of contradictory motives. On the one hand, the religious atmosphere at home, periods of reflection during illness, a previous stay in a convent and the reading of the lives of saints had engendered in her a genuine desire to dedicate herself to religion. On the other hand, her natural talents and interests, her pleasure in companionships and her popularity with friends and acquaintances, drew her to social involvement. As the rules of the convent were rather lax, she spent a good deal of time entertaining guests, visiting the homes of friends (sometimes for weeks on end) and taking part in the affairs of society.

When, through a combination of factors, it dawned on Teresa in 1553 that she was living the life of a halfhearted religious and that God called her to a higher commitment, the episode of the Samaritan woman began to play a new role in her life. She began to understand that she would never be able to raise herself from her lukewarmness, that Jesus would have to give her that living water of grace that alone could make her into a truly spiritual person. When Teresa's

father died in 1543, Teresa asked for the painting of the Samaritan woman as a part of her inheritance, and she hung it in her cell as a treasured possession. Now Teresa would spend long periods kneeling in front of the painting and repeating with all her heart that ardent petition: "Lord, give me that water."

"O life, who gives life to all! Do not deny me this sweetest water that you promise to those who want it. I want it, Lord, and I beg for it, and I come to you. Don't hide yourself, Lord, from me, since you know my need and that this water is the true medicine for a soul wounded with love of you."⁵

It was in this period that an incident happened that showed how much the painting meant to Teresa. She had read in a book that it was an imperfection for religious persons to possess ornate paintings. As Teresa had just made up her mind to live according to the strict observance of apostolic poverty, she was troubled in conscience about the painting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman she had in her cell. It was the only costly object she still had; others had been given away in an earlier purge. Teresa felt upset and confused. She argued to herself that anything more than paper images conflicted with religious poverty. But then, had this religious painting not helped her in her devotion to Christ? With her characteristic common sense and sound judgment, she eventually decided to retain the painting. Her love for Christ was more important than poverty or mortification. "Since love is better than poverty, I should not renounce everything that awakens my love."⁶ She gave away the heavy frame with its "many carvings and adornments," but kept the picture itself.

Like many of her contemporaries, Teresa made good use of religious images. She complained of a poor imagination, of not having the ability as others had of representing persons or things in one's mind. She found this particularly frustrating when she tried to

think of Christ. She states: "I have never succeeded to picture him within myself no matter how much I read about his beauty or how many images I have seen of him. I am then like a person who is blind or in darkness."⁷ She says this was one reason why she liked images so much: They helped her to focus attention on Christ. The painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman was of special value to her because it fulfilled precisely this function. "I always carried with me a painting of this episode of the Lord at the well, with the words inscribed: 'Lord, give me water.'"⁸

The Water of Life

It was after 1553 that Teresa began to have what she called her "supernatural" experiences. Certain things began to happen to her while she was at prayer and she knew they were brought about by God. Yet the developments were so startling and unexpected that in the beginning she did not know how to respond to them. On no account did she want to become a prey to illusions and hallucinations. By vigorous self-examination, by discussion with saintly men and theologians and, most of all, by continued searching in prayer, she gained an understanding of how God was drawing her to himself. Being so deeply involved herself and having analyzed the process as carefully as she did, she acquired unique insights into how we get close to God. Few theologians have taught as eloquently and clearly as she did how we can experience God.

In a nutshell, Teresa's doctrine can be summarized as follows: If we want God to take hold of us, we have to make time for "mental prayer." This means that apart from whatever vocal prayers we may be accustomed to saying, we need to set time aside for meditating about God and for speaking to him in our own words. Mental prayer basically consists in talking to God as we would to a very close and dear friend.

Mental prayer is a seeking of contact with God, a desire to get to know and love him better, time spent in his company.

Such mental prayer requires an effort on our part. God usually expects us to take some trouble before he shows his hand. In the beginning, mental prayer will consist in our reading some scripture passage, our thinking about the implications, our formulating some prayer in response and making various acts of the will, such as expressions of repentance, resolve, love and desire. But at a certain stage God takes over. At first in very small ways, then in a very noticeable manner God makes his presence felt, so that gradually we find that prayer is not something we are doing, but something God is working in us. These actions of God in our soul are "supernatural" experiences that help us greatly in committing ourselves more fully to God.

Teresa teaches that such experiences are open to all. She describes how God makes himself known to us in the initial stages. It may be that all of a sudden we know, not just notionally, but as an indisputable fact, that God is present with us. We feel his loving gaze on us, we sense his nearness in an indescribable manner. Then again, something may happen in us which Teresa calls "recollection." It is as if we withdraw into our inmost self, as if deep within us our will is clasped by a mysterious force. At other times we may unexpectedly feel our soul flooded with a sense of peace and joy. In this "prayer of quiet" we experience a great happiness and tranquillity different from anything we ever experienced before.

If we respond to these initial manifestations of God, he may well lead us on to higher forms of mystical awareness. Among these, Teresa mentions ecstasy or rapture; feeling God's touch by a "spiritual wound"; being so close to God that we see him, as it were, before us or hear him speak; enjoying mystical union. These peak experiences too are open to all, but, Teresa

says, few people walk the narrow road that leads to them.

To explain the different stages we can go through, Teresa compares mental prayer to watering a garden. She says there are four ways of doing this: We may draw water from a well, which is laborious and produces little effect; we may turn the water wheel (this too involves a lot of work, but produces better results); we may have an irrigation system (which requires even less effort on our part); or we may receive a plentiful rain (in which case we need not do anything at all). So too, in prayer we often have to exert a lot of effort without feeling much profit. We are, as it were, laboriously drawing water from the well of our own thinking. Everything changes when God starts giving us the living water of spiritual experiences that well up in our hearts by themselves. "Love is continually bubbling up in them. . . It reminds me of little springs which I have seen gushing up and which keep on incessantly stirring up the sand all around them."⁹ Teresa saw that this was the living water about which Christ had spoken to the woman of Samaria.

Many people, Teresa says, are very close to receiving a direct experience of God. But because they have not had the taste for it, they neglect the practice of mental prayer and allow themselves to be distracted by other things. The gospel text of the Samaritan woman received a totally new message for her in this light. Jesus told the Samaritan woman:

"If you only knew what God is offering
and who it is that is saying to you:
Give me a drink,
you would have been the one to ask,
and he would have given you living water. . . .

"Anyone who drinks the water that I shall give
will never be thirsty again;
the water that I shall give

will turn into a spring inside him, welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:10-14,JB).

If people would only understand what Jesus is promising here, if only they were to taste the water he is offering to them, they would do everything in the world to obtain this water.

I am very sorry for them. They seem to me like people who are very thirsty and see water a long way off. . . . their strength has come to an end; their courage has failed them. . . though perhaps they are only a couple of steps from the fountain of living water, of which the Lord said to the Samaritan woman that whoever drinks of it shall not thirst again. How right and how very true is that which comes from the lips of truth himself! In this life the soul will never thirst for anything more, although its thirst for things in the life to come will exceed any natural thirst that we can imagine here below. How the soul thirsts to experience this thirst!¹⁰

There is nothing we can do to force Christ to give us the living water of a supernatural experience. But if we remain faithful to the practice of mental prayer, if we humbly and patiently wait for him to show his hand, if we earnestly seek him and keep asking, "Lord, give me that water," we can be sure that Christ will fulfill our request.

"If any man is thirsty, let him come to me!

Let the man come and drink who believes in me!"

As scripture says: From his breast shall flow fountains of living water (Jn 7:37-38,JB).

Remember, the Lord invites us all; and, since he is truth itself, we cannot doubt him. If his invitation were not a general one, he would not have said: "I will give you to drink." He might have said: "Come, all of you, for after all you will lose nothing by coming; and I will give drink to those whom I think fit for it." But, as he said we were all to come, without making this condition, I feel sure that none will fail to receive this living water unless they cannot keep to the path.¹¹

Laboring for Christ

Teresa's mystical experiences did not stop her from bearing many harassing responsibilities. To get an idea of what this meant, let us consider Teresa's position at Avila in 1572. In the preceding years she had been exceedingly occupied in establishing new foundations of her Discalced Order. In just three years' time (1568-1570) she had assisted in setting up five new convents and two monasteries. In 1571 she founded the convent at Alba de Tormes and then became temporary prioress of the convent at Medina del Campo, an earlier foundation, to consolidate the community. Then, quite unexpectedly, she was commanded by the apostolic delegate to become prioress of the Convent of the Incarnation at Avila, the convent where she had originally joined but which had refused to join the reform.

Teresa balked at the appointment. She knew the situation at the Incarnation only too well. Most of the 130 nuns in this convent would object to a tightening of the rule as the apostolic delegate demanded: They were used to their frequent visits to relatives' houses, to wearing jewelry over their habits, to organizing parties with music and dancing and to endless gossiping in one another's cells. Moreover, even the well-intentioned nuns in the community resented the fact that Teresa had been imposed from above, not elected according to custom. Teresa once wrote, "I fear a discontented nun more than I fear many devils." In the Convent of the Incarnation she would have to face 130 discontented nuns! This was something she had not bargained for. Starting a new foundation with a group of novices keen on living a life of perfection was one thing; being forced to discipline a battalion of unwilling nuns was quite another!

At first Teresa was firmly resolved not to accept the assignment. Then, while at prayer, it came to her mind that she should be ready to do anything for even

the least of Christ's brethren. She heard Christ complain to her: "Those nuns in the Incarnation are sisters of mine and you hold back from helping them!"¹² Full of misgivings, she decided to go. On October 6, 1571, she came to the convent to be installed by the Carmelite Provincial. The reception was a disaster. A large body of nuns refused her entrance. When some supporters tried to clear a way for her, a man-to-man fight broke out. The local police had to be called. Only under armed protection could Teresa be taken to the chapel and officially inducted as the prioress.

The ensuing months in the winter of 1571-1572 tried Teresa's organizational and diplomatic skills to the extreme. Not only did she have to win the goodwill of the inmates of the convent in spite of having to introduce unpopular restrictions, she also had to solve practical problems such as where to find food for the sisters and how to make the community self-supporting. An exaggerated dependence on relatives and benefactors was one of the causes leading to the decline of the religious spirit. So Teresa cajoled, argued, encouraged, instructed, wrote letters and worked at the spinning wheel from morning till night. But all her many worries and activities did not lessen her union with God through prayer. A person who truly loves God, she says in her *Conceptions of the Love of God* written in those months, "delights in imitating, in some degree, the most toilsome life led by Christ."¹³

Again, it was the gospel text of the Samaritan woman that had a special message for her in those days. As soon as the woman from Sychar understood that Jesus was a prophet, she ran back to her village to bring others to him.

I have just remembered some thoughts which I have often had about that holy woman of Samaria, who must have been affected this way. So well had she understood the words of the Lord in her heart that she left

the Lord himself so that she might profit and benefit the people of the village. This is an excellent example of what I am saying. As a reward for this great charity of hers, she earned the credence of her neighbors and was able to witness the great good which our Lord did in that village. . . . This woman, in her divine inebriation, went crying aloud through the streets. To me the astonishing thing is that they should have believed a woman—and she cannot have been a woman of much consequence, as she was going to fetch water. Great humility she certainly had; for, when the Lord told her of her sins, she was not annoyed (as people are nowadays—they find it difficult to stand home truths) but told him that he must be a prophet. In the end, her word was believed; and merely on account of what she had said, great crowds flocked from the city to the Lord. . . . This, I think, must be one of the greatest comforts of all—I mean to see good coming to souls through one's own agency.¹⁴

The Power of a Scripture Text

Throughout this short sketch I have been adducing examples of how the passage of the Samaritan woman played a role in various stages of Teresa's religious life. Was this the only passage that inspired Teresa? Obviously not. Other scripture texts too made a lasting impression on her, such as the conversion of Mary Magdalene (Lk 7:36-50),¹⁵ or such phrases as, "My delight is to be with the children of men" (Prv 8:31).¹⁶ But it remains true that the gospel text of the Samaritan woman fascinated her in a special way. It is worth investigating its implications.

Sacred Scripture was for Teresa the universal norm of faith and the most important source book for her meditations. In this sense she frequently stressed the validity of the whole Bible. No experiences, however supernatural they may seem, no teachings, however plausible they might be, can be from God if they are not in conformity with scripture.¹⁷ Teresa was re-

solved to carry out with all her might even the smallest command contained in scripture.¹⁸ For inspiration and guidance she turned in preference to scripture, especially the gospels. "I have always been fond of the words of the Gospels and have found more recollection in them than in the most carefully planned books."¹⁹ Yet she also saw that some passages of scripture have a relevance for certain individuals that they don't have for others. In a very revealing discussion on the *Canticle of Canticles*, she expressed her exasperation with those who either laugh at the allusions of love between the bride and bridegroom or feel embarrassed by them. For some people, she wrote, these same verses had been extremely helpful. "I know someone who for many years had misgivings about this and nothing could reassure her until it pleased the Lord that she should hear some texts from the *Canticles* from which she realized that her soul was being well guided."²⁰ Although the scripture has a universal validity, not all parts are equally relevant to every individual. To a particular person God may speak more through one text than through many other ones.

This is an important realization in our attitude toward scripture. Although there is an objective meaning in the Bible valid for all, there is also a specific message different for each person. In some way this is true in every form of communication in which the same message is addressed to a multiplicity of persons. According to the principle, "The message is in the hearer," each person receiving the message will interpret it in his or her own way. This is all the more true in the case of scripture when God uses it to establish a link with a particular man or woman. Certain texts then assume a highly personal and specific relevance, eminently meaningful in the circumstances and expectations of the person concerned.

John 4:4-42 was such a text for Teresa. We have seen how profoundly it influenced her and how it re-

peatedly acquired new relevance in successive situations. As a young girl Teresa was intrigued by the face to face encounter with Christ; then by the woman's pleading for help. Later Jesus' words on the "living water" became a great source of enlightenment and encouragement regarding her experiences of the Divine. Then again, the Samaritan woman's return to Sychar strengthened Teresa in her own resolve to bring others to Christ. To Teresa it must have looked as if the story of the Samaritan woman had been specially inspired for her, that it had been given as a model to express different realities of her life: her previous sins and lukewarmness, her encounter with Christ, her taste of the living water, her apostolate of love. Throughout her life Christ spoke to Teresa in the words of John 4:4-42; she always discovered new meaning and confirmation in these words; they became a pattern of her vocation.

We would do well to recognize that each one of us has favorite texts, meaningful to us in a way they can never be to others. We are not mistaken in thinking that such passages may well have been specially inspired for us. Or, at least, we are correct in considering that the special relevance these verses have for us are a genuine part of God's inspired intention. For scripture is meant to address us also as individuals, to touch our hearts and our lives where they are different from others. We would do well, like Teresa, to treasure such choice texts, to integrate them ever more fully into our lives. After all, it isn't the multiplicity of scripture passages, but the depth to which some passages penetrate, that will determine the efficacy of God's word in our life.

It is also useful to reflect on the visual representation with which Teresa intensified her self-identification with the Samaritan woman. We have already mentioned how she refused to give up the painting of the incident at the well when she was undergoing

her second conversion. Then she decided to keep it with her because it strengthened her love for Christ. Also, later on, she kept feeling the need of having some representation of the event with her in her first new foundation, the Convent of St. Joseph (1562), so she constructed a well in the middle of the compound which she called "The Fountain of the Samaritan woman." She also commissioned an artist to make a painting depicting the scene. Presumably she had left the other painting in the Convent of the Incarnation. In Medina del Campo (1567) there was a little hut in the garden which she called the resting place of the Samaritan woman. Time and time again we meet this need of keeping the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman alive through concrete things and visible images. In this respect Teresa was a child of her times. Statues, paintings and buildings were still used as visible extensions of scripture. But Teresa's action also demonstrates a general human need. By following her example we may enrich our own experience of the scriptural text.

Teresa was a balanced person. She liked to be left alone in prayer and reflection, yet never shunned hard work or heavy responsibilities. She could talk about sublime things in straightforward and down-to-earth language. At times she could be lost in speechless ecstasy for hours; at other times she was humble enough to seek comfort in the simple words of scripture, especially those of her favorite texts. She enjoyed the highest forms of contemplation, but was never ashamed to admit that visual representations helped her. Perhaps it needed the mind and heart of a woman to experience and express the "wholeness" of a life of prayer.