



Comisión Internacional Const. 1991
International Commission Const. 1991

The Ecclesial and Apostolic Spirit of the Teresian Charism

The ecclesial and apostolic ideal is an integral element of the Teresian charism and the manner of life envisioned by St. Teresa for her daughters, and her sons. This ecclesial and apostolic spirit is expressed in Chapter 7 of the 1991 *Constitutions*. There are seven numbers: the ecclesial-apostolic charism of Carmel, (124-125); the apostolate of the Discalced Carmelite nun as purely contemplative: prayer and immolation for the Church (126); the missionary dimension of the contemplative life (127), insertion in the local Church (128); the possibility to offer to the faithful a place to pray and worship (129), and promotion of the ecclesial purpose of the monasteries.

I will leave it to my Carmelite Sisters listening to this conference to read those sections of the *Constitutions*, which are rich in content and meaning.

I would like to begin my reflection by highlighting some of the mystical experiences that awakened and deepened St. Teresa's consciousness of the mystery and needs of the Church and the world.

It would take us too far afield to review St. Teresa's journey of prayer (her mystical experience) that led to her complete conversion she shares with us in the book of her *Life*, especially the first ten chapters and in chapter 24 of the *Life*. As we know from our study of her mystical life, Teresa experienced prayer as an intimate sharing and friendship with Jesus Christ who healed and transformed her. Prayer expanded her soul and filled her heart with love for others, the Church, and the world. Prayer transformed her consciousness and made her acutely aware of her need for God's mercy in

her own life as well as humanity's need and yearning for God's merciful and healing love. As St. Teresa's mystical experience deepened, she became progressively conscious of the mystery and needs of the Church and the world. In the book of her *Life*, she wrote: "In turbulent times, strong friends of God are needed to support the weak."

There are two mystical experiences that profoundly transformed Teresa's life and her awareness of humanity's need for healing and transformation. The first is her experience of hell that she recounts in chapter 32 of her *Life*. She confesses that this was one of the greatest graces of her life because it revealed to her where she could have been if it were not for God's mercy. It was as though she experienced the depth of her own sinfulness, wounded human nature, and where she would end up if it were not for God's merciful love who freed her. It generated within her great compassion for souls, a compassion born from a deep consciousness of her "misery," as she often expresses it, her human fragility, and her capacity to sin if it were not for God's grace.

"I don't know now such an experience was possible, but I well understood that it was a great favor and that the Lord desired me to see with my own eyes the place His mercy freed me from...Hence I repeat that this experience was one of the greatest favors the Lord granted me because it helped me very much to lose fear of the tribulations and contradictions of this life as well as to grow strong enough to suffer them and give thanks to the Lord who freed me, as it now appears to me, from such everlasting and terrible exile (L.32.3-4).

"From this experience also flow the great impulses to help souls and the extraordinary pain that is caused by the many that are condemned. It seems certain to me that in order to free one of them alone from such appalling torments I would suffer many deaths very willingly." (L. 32. 6)

The second mystical experience was the "transverberation," the "grace of the dart," that she recounts in chapter 29 of the *Life*. (L. 29:13-14.) As you know, Teresa does not refer to this mystical experience as the "transverberation," rather, "the grace of the dart." This mystical experience did not take place once, but several times. "On the days this lasted I went

about stupefied.” (L.29.14) She refers to this grace again in the *Sixth Dwelling Places*, chapter 2. 4.

“The grace of the dart” was a wound of love, a love that pierced her heart and set her on fire with the love for God. Her soul expanded and she was graced with zeal for the salvation of souls. It fueled her active life leading her to begin a reform of the Order beginning with St. Joseph’s. It deepened her humility and self-surrender. Inspired by this grace, she made a vow to always do the most perfect and most conducive for God’s glory.

A few years ago, a University art professor and scholar gave a lecture to our Institute of Carmelite Studies in Washington, DC. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the image of the “transverberation.” In his research, he discovered that in many of the early foundations of St. Teresa’s monasteries, particularly in some of the Latin American Carmelite monasteries, the nuns placed a painting of the “transverberation” in their choir or chapel. Evidently, the “grace of the dart” reminded the nuns that their vocation was to allow the love of God to wound their hearts and thus become vessels of love for the salvation of the world.

From this, I think we can say that for St. Teresa, the vocation of her daughters is to allow themselves to be wounded by God’s love, to allow their hearts to be pierced by God’s love and expanded in order to become vessels of God’s compassionate love in a world in desperate need of God’s mercy, healing and transformation. Her daughters go apart for the welfare and salvation of all. Having received God’s healing merciful love, they empathize with the brokenness of humanity. Having received themselves abundant mercy, they become a well-spring of grace and peace, a shining light in the darkest caverns of the human heart.

In a prophetic experience, Teresa discovered that she “was called for more:” “*Well, going about with such great affliction, while I was in prayer one night, our Lord represented Himself to me in His usual way. He showed me much love, manifesting His desire to comfort me, and said: "Wait a little, daughter, and you will see great things."* (F.1.8) She understood perfectly what the Lord said to her: she, a contemplative woman, cloistered and sick, received from the Superior General permission to found as many monasteries

as possible. And from this moment she began her foundations. She traveled and founded her monasteries in the manner of the Apostle St. Paul. The power that motivated her to push ahead was: her ardent love for Christ, to pray for the Church and the wellbeing and salvation of the world.

Teresa wrote the *Way of Perfection* for her new fledgling community who were embarking on a new way of living the Carmelite life. They needed formation, so she set out to form them as a community.

In the first three chapters of the *Way of Perfection*, she presents her charismatic ideal:

“At that time new reached me of the harm being done in France and of the havoc the Lutherans had caused and how much this miserable sect was growing. The news distressed me greatly, and, as though I could do something or were something, I cried to the Lord and begged Him that I might remedy so much evil. It seemed to me that I would have given a thousand lives to save one soul out of the many that were being lost there. I realized that I was a woman and wretched and incapable of doing any of the useful things I desired to do in the service of the Lord. All my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these few friends be good ones. As a result, I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live her do the same.” (W. 1.2)

Teresa was attuned to the signs of the times. Great political and religious division and violence ravaged the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation. Teresa also learned about the injustices and cruelty of the Spanish conquistadores towards the indigenous people from a Franciscan Friar, P. Alonso Maldonado, who had served as a missionary in America. She recalls this encounter in chapter one of the *Foundations*. Fr. Alonso’s description of the mistreatment of the indigenous people enkindled within her deep compassion for them and awakened her genuine vocation that she called a vocation for souls: *“I cried out to the Lord, begging him that he give me the means to be able to do something to win some souls to His service, since the devil was carrying away so many, and that my prayer would do some good since I wasn't able to do anything else. (F.1.7)*

Because the Lord had so many enemies, and so few friends, good friends were needed. Therefore, these few women of St. Joseph's were called to embrace Gospel radicality, to live the evangelical counsels as perfectly as possible, and to be good friends of Christ and good friends of one another. This is the Teresian charism: good friends of Christ and good friends of one another in a life of unceasing prayer for the benefit of the Church, to pray for the world and the leaders of the Church. Teresa specifies clearly their apostolic purpose:

“The world is all in flames; they want to sentence Christ again, so to speak, since they raise a thousand false witnesses against Him; they want to ravage His Church – and are we to waste time asking for things that if God were to give them we'd have one soul less in heaven? No, my Sisters, this is not the time to be discussing with God matters that have little importance.” (W. 1.5).

“Do not think it is useless to have these petitions continually in your heart, for with some persons it seems a difficult thing for them not to be praying a great deal for their own soul.” (W.3.6)

I have always been struck by St. Teresa's words in the *Way of Perfection*. They are like a cry in the night: *“The world is all in flames; they want to sentence Christ again.”* She discovered in this reality a call from God to act and to call her daughters of St. Joseph's to unite themselves to this urgent mission, impressing upon them an apostolic meaning to their vocation. They were to keep in their hearts the sufferings and needs of the world and the Church. They were not in Carmel for their own salvation, but for the salvation and transformation of the world.

When we look, at our world today: the wars, the massive violence, the greed for wealth and riches, disrespect for the dignity of human life from conception to old age, the deprivation of the poor and homeless; merciless world leaders avaricious for power and control who destroy the lives of men, women, children who simply want to live in peace. When we hear of the deplorable plight of immigrants searching for a safe home for their family, and Christians who are persecuted because of their faith, we realized that the world is in flames, and Christ, who identified himself with the poor, the homeless, the hungry, and the imprisoned, is being crucified again.

Teresa realized that human forces are insufficient to stop the destructive fire of division in the Church of her time or the evil present in the world. Prayer is crucial, urgent, and of utmost importance to heal our world.

Teresa draws upon the image of a well-fortified walled city, like Avila, where a Lord strikes his enemies from within the walled city. Every monastery, therefore, is like a walled city, a little castle, where the nuns by prayer, sacrifice, and growth in a virtuous life will help Christ and the servants of God who labor for the Church.

“For as I have said, it is the ecclesiastical, not the secular, arm that will save us. Since in neither the ecclesiastical nor secular arm can we be of any help to our King, let us be useful in helping those servants of God who through much toil have strengthened themselves with learning and a good life and have labored so as now to help the Lord.”
(W.2.2)

Teresian prayer is born from a desire and strong determination to do something for the Church, its ecclesiastical leaders, and the world. Prayer takes us beyond ourselves and unites us with others in this world because all human beings are connected at a profound level of being by the very fact that God created us for a communion of life with God and with one another. We are essentially united by God by our very creation. Prayer calls us to live our vocation faithfully and to respond to the historical situation in which we live. Prayer as friendship with God immerses us into this world of flesh and blood, joys and sorrows, good and evil.

Contemplative prayer gradually purifies and heals us of our egotism, our disordered attachment to self, and opens us to a communion of life with God, others and creation. The inner transformation that take place in our personal lives, in our own hearts, will have a transforming effect outside the walls of the monastery and in our society and world. It is important to remember that any interior spiritual work we surrender ourselves to with determination will have a healing effect in our world. This is why the image of a “walled city or little castle” wherein the nuns are dedicated to a life of prayer is so powerful. It calls us to take our contemplative life seriously and to surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s purifying and healing love through contemplative prayer, striving to grow in the three fundamental virtues of

love of neighbor, detachment and humility, as well as the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Surrendering ourselves to God's self-communicating love in contemplative prayer and striving to grow in self-knowledge and the virtues is the path toward transformation that brings about the transformation of our world. The more we are transformed, the more our world is transformed and healed.

"I repeat, it is necessary that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarfs." (7M.4.10)

As people of prayer, we know ourselves loved by God, saved by God, and now we desire to become an instrument of salvation for others. This is what Teresa tells us in the *Seventh Dwelling Places*: "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage, the birth always of good works, good works." (7M.4.6). Wherever there is love, there is service and commitment.

For Teresa, prayer transforms us into apostles, men and women of service. Again in the *Seventh Dwelling Places*:

"It will be good, Sisters, to tell you the reason the Lord grants so many favors in this world. Although, if you have paid attention, you will have understood this in learning of their effects. I want to tell you again lest someone think that the reason is solely for the sake of giving delight to these souls; that thought would be a serious error. His Majesty couldn't grant us a greater favor than to give us a life that would be in imitation of the life His beloved Son lived. Thus I hold for certain that these favors are meant to fortify our weakness, as I have said at times, that we may be able to imitate Him in His great sufferings."

To imitate Christ in His great sufferings means to be a person of self-giving love and compassion for others. Again, Teresa expresses this profoundly:

"Keep in mind that I could not exaggerate the importance of this. Fix your eyes on the Crucified and everything will become small for you. If His Majesty showed us His love by means of such works and frightful torments, how is it you want to please Him only with words?"

Do you know what it means to be truly spiritual? It means becoming the slaves of God. Marked by His brand, which is that of the cross, spiritual persons, because now they have given Him their liberty, can be sold by Him as slaves of everyone as He was.” (7M.4.8)

Teresa shows how prayer leads to an active commitment:

“When I see souls very earnest in trying to understand the prayer they have and very sullen when they are in it -for it seems they don't dare let their minds move or stir lest a bit of their spiritual delight and devotion be lost- it makes me realize how little they understand of the way by which union is attained; they think the whole matter lies in these things. No, Sisters, absolutely not; works are what the Lord wants! He desires that if you see a Sister who is sick to whom you can bring some relief, you have compassion on her and not worry about losing this devotion; and that if she is suffering pain, you also feel it; and that, if necessary, you fast so that she might eat -- not so much for her sake as because you know it is your Lord's desire. This is true union with His will.” (5M.3.11)

In the *Seventh Dwelling Places*, Teresa responds to a question her Sisters ask: “How can we as cloistered woman help the Church? We can't preach or teach like the apostles. We have no active apostolate.” Teresa impresses upon her daughters that they must begin where they live and with whom they live. They must set themselves to the task at hand. Apart from the fact that by prayer they will be helping greatly, they need not be desiring to benefit the whole world but concentrate on those around them, in their community, and their deed will be greater since they are more obliged to them. Their love for one another, their humility and selfless acts of charity will have a transforming effect on society, the Church and the world.

“Do you think such deep humility, your mortification, and service to all and great charity toward them, and the love of the Lord is of little benefit? This fire of love in you enkindles their souls, and with every other virtue you will be always awakening in them. Such service will not be small but very great and very pleasing to the Lord. By what you do in deed, that which you can – His Majesty will understand that you would do much more. Thus He will give you the reward He would if you had gained many souls for him.” (7M.4.14)

Teresa encourages her daughters to be realistic, to avoid “building castles in the air,” rather, love where they are planted, in the here and now with those with whom they live. Your love will have a transforming effect on the Church and the world. Even the smallest acts of love in daily life have the power to heal and transform our world. *“The Lord doesn’t look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love for which they are done.”* (7M.4.15)

Saint Teresa describes the apostolic value of prayer: *“If beginners with the assistance of God struggle to reach the summit of perfection, I believe they will never go to heaven alone; they will always lead many people along after them.”* (L.11.4)

Love is a powerful energy at the heart of the universe because God created all things out of love and for love. St. John of the Cross reminds us in the *Spiritual Canticle*, that in creating our world, God looked at all things with the image of His Son and communicated to all of creation natural being, beauty, and supernatural being and grace. Therefore, when we open ourselves to God’s self-communicating love through contemplative prayer, we transcend ourselves and become in the words of the theologian, Bernard Lonergan, “being-in-love.” “Being-in-love” meant so much to St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross. The Spanish word, ‘enamorada’ (a soul in love)– to be in love – resounds throughout their works. We are called to be in love, to fall in love with Jesus Christ and thus to become ‘being in love.’ In the words of St. John of the Cross, we are called to be “wounded” by God’s love in order to become transformed into the “Beauty” of Christ and thus radiate Christ’s beauty and love to the world.

Mystical Love has a force that transcends and penetrates walls, frontiers, time and space. If this were not true, our contemplative life would lose its deepest meaning and purpose.

We recall St. Thérèse who found her vocation to be love in the Heart of the Church. She was given the charismatic grace to understand the transforming power of Love at the Heart of the Church.

“I understood that the Church had a heart and that this Heart was burning with Love. I understood that it was Love alone that made the Church’s members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs were not shed their blood. I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACE ALL TIMES AND PLACES ... IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL.”

Then, in excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love...my vocation at last I have found it...MY VOCATION IS LOVE!”
(MS. B)

St. Thérèse was given the charismatic grace to understand the transforming power of Love at the heart of the Church, and of creation! The more she surrendered to this love and expressed her love in the smallest actions of daily life, the more the Church suffering, missionaries, and the Church militant would benefit and be transformed. She offered her life as an act of love in the Heart of the Church for the salvation of the world, so that God’s Merciful love would be known and loved. She expressed the power of love in her act of Oblation to Merciful Love. St. Thérèse offered herself as a “victim,” a vessel, through which the Merciful Love of God would flow through her to the Church and the world.

During the last months of her life when she entered a dark night of faith, Therese sat at the table and joined all her brothers and sister who struggle with their faith and doubts about God and eternal life – atheists, agnostics, unbelievers. She believed and hoped that her suffering would have salvific value for all those who doubt God’s presence and love in this world.

In Stanza 29 of the *Spiritual Canticle*, St. John of the Cross reminds us of the transforming and energizing power of love lived out in daily life : “For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these other works put together.” (SC. 29.2)

I would like to conclude with a quote from Pope Francis’ *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, no. 6:

“Dear contemplative sisters, without you what would the Church be like, or without all those others living on the fringes of humanity and ministering in the outposts of evangelization? The Church greatly esteems your life of complete self-giving. The Church counts on your prayers and on your self-sacrifice to bring today’s men and women to the good news of the Gospel.

The world needs you every bit as much as a sailor on the high seas needs a beacon to guide him to a safe haven. Be beacons to those near to you and, above all, to those far away. Be torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time...Like Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, announce to us, “I have seen the Lord!” (Jn 20:18). Cherish the prophetic value of your lives of self-sacrifice. Do not be afraid to live fully the joy of evangelical life, in accordance with your charism.”

Fr. Daniel Chowning, OCD
Washington, March 2026