

PRAYER AND RECREATION

THE NEW PARADIGM OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN TERESA OF JESUS

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Ávila, May 27th, 2026

Introduction

Every charism arises in the Church as an action and response of the Holy Spirit to the demands and needs of humanity. And for that very reason, a charism is never a static reality. Still, a gift that continues to grow and be enriched by the life of each person who adheres to its living experience, and that remains open to collaboration with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Teresa of Jesus understood this in this way, and therefore she sees each nun as an active protagonist and called to ‘be a foundation for those to come. For if we who now live had not fallen away from what those in the past did, and those who come after us do the same, the building will always stand firm... For it is clear that those who do not remember so much those who passed many years ago as they do those whom they see present’ (*Foundations*, ch. 4, §6). The charism, then, is received as a gift that must be enriched and transmitted in each of its members, as subjects responsible for its germination and transmission.

The Teresian charism was born in a specific historical context. It is forged in Teresa of Jesus’s openness to the experience of God, through which her life is transformed, all in attentive listening to what God is stirring within her. The privileged space of spiritual growth and maturation, as well as her knowledge of God and of herself, was possible—as she herself confesses and acknowledges (*Life*, ch. 23, §1)—thanks to the path of prayer, lived and understood as ‘an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us’ (*Life*, ch. 8, §5).

This is not the place to stop and analyse the Teresian historical context or that interior process of transformation. But to speak of central aspects of the charism, we will necessarily have to refer to that experience that progressively opened her to a profound communion with the heart of God, enlarging her life toward the deep desire of ‘what I could do for God’ (*Life*, ch. 32, §9). In this exposition, I intend to share some reflections that may help us better understand the value of both prayer and recreation from the

perspective of Saint Teresa of Jesus. Only some points would need to be expanded and deepened.

It is evident that Saint Teresa, when undertaking the foundation of the convent of Saint Joseph, aligns herself in continuity with the life of Carmel, seeking new forms of living what she understands to be essential. Beyond whether she had or did not have an exhaustive knowledge of the Rule and its mitigations, what is certain is that in Teresa, there is a clear orientation toward recreating a community that centres its gaze on the fundamental evangelical aspects, to which she refers both in *Life* (chs. 32–36) and in *The Way of Perfection*.

To better understand the importance of prayer and recreation for Teresa, it is necessary to pay attention to other aspects that, by their character and understanding, emerge as elements that take on a profoundly original and novel dimension in light of the inspiration she received through her experience of God. And that helps us understand, in its charismatic dimension, the value and importance of recreation in relation to the other constitutive elements of the Teresian charism.

1. A religious life centred on Christ and on evangelical values

The first great novelty and evangelical intuition of Teresa, the fruit of her friendship with Jesus (whom she names and experiences as ‘true friend’ (Life, ch. 22, §6), ‘living book’ (Life, ch. 26, §5), etc.), is a renewed way of understanding religious or consecrated life. I think it is important to pause briefly on this. Teresa already intuits, from the first foundation, that the path of discipleship entails a fundamentally Christocentric perspective, which emerges in her decision to place prayer at the centre of life (Life, ch. 36, §6; ch. 32, §19; ch. 36, §30), in her option for a life characterised by poverty (Life, ch. 33, §§12–13; ch. 35, §§2, 3–4; ch. 36, §27), and in a communal spirit (Life, ch. 32, §11; ch. 35, §12; ch. 36, §26), all carried out with a spirit of joy and gentleness (Life, ch. 35, §12; ch. 36, §30).

Unlike what was customary in her time, Teresa prefers to speak of ‘counsels of Christ’ rather than ‘vows.’ This preference is not accidental. It is not a habitual term in Teresian language or in her era. Still, when Teresa uses the word ‘counsels,’ she does so in ‘very

significant' contexts linked to the life project that God asks her to carry out (*Life*, ch. 35, §§2, 4; *Way*, ch. 1, §2; *Relations*, ch. 2, §3). This option reveals three things:

- A **positive** reading of consecration.
- A **Christocentric** vision: the 'evangelical' counsels center the gaze on the way of being and living of Jesus Christ, as the one who gives content to the values constituting religious consecration: 'I determined to do the little I could, which was to **follow the evangelical counsels with all the perfection** I could and **to try to get those few nuns who were here to do the same**' (*Way*, ch. 1, §2).
- A **formative** purpose above the normative: Teresa seeks to form persons above the temptation of reducing vows to mere norms of life. And from there she forges the 'virtues' of the Carmelite (as she develops in *The Way of Perfection*), of the one who prays, of the one who decides to **be a servant of love** (*Life*, ch. 11, §1). A path that, for Teresa, is identified with the following of Christ.

This is an aspect that emerges as profoundly novel in her historical context and in the global history of consecrated life. The triad of vows was first described as the nucleus of religious life in the canonical formulation of the Rule of the Trinitarian Order, approved by Innocent III in 1198. But it will not be until the seventeenth century, with Saint Vincent de Paul, that one begins to speak of evangelical counsels more broadly. However, it will not become part of the official language of Church law until the twentieth century.

But Teresa innovates, already in the sixteenth century, by calling them "counsels," grounding these values in a perspective of following Jesus: imitating him in his humanity, choices, values, and unconditional surrender to the Father. That's what we must be like' (*Way*, ch. 4, §1; ch. 3, §2), as followers of Christ, Teresa summarises in the three virtues-counsels, which existentially express the content of the evangelical counsels: poverty-detachment, chastity-love of one another, humility-obedience. It is the way of being of the disciple and therefore of the one who prays. And it manifests the centrality that the mystery of the humanity of Christ has for her, both in her mystical experience and in her charismatic inspiration (*Life*, ch. 22; *Interior Castle*, 6th dwelling, ch. 7). Not in vain does she place it at the hinge of the *Book of Her Life*, between the treatise on prayer that explains her new life, and the narrative beginning of that new life from chapter 23 onward.

Indeed, if we approach *The Way of Perfection*, we immediately discover that the first chapters are an invitation to life in an evangelical key. To follow Christ is to opt for a way of life centred on a relationship that will deeply mark the human person's existence. Therefore, for Teresa, discipleship and prayer are not practices but a form and style of life, which necessarily entails a way of being: the way of being of the disciples of Jesus.

This entails adopting fundamental options that will, at the same time, mean a change and a progressive transformation in the disciple's life, not as a prior requirement, but as a beginning, a path, and a goal. All these values, or virtues that Teresa offers us and that, for her, synthesise 'the evangelical counsels,' mean that the 'treat of friendship' will go on transforming the person: the result of learning to know oneself and of wanting to know Christ... In the end, Teresa reaches the point of genius when she discovers that the goal of everything is to love and to serve (*Exclamations*, 5, 2; *Interior Castle*, 7th dwelling, ch. 4, §§6, 12).

2. Prayer, essential to the following of Christ

For Teresa, prayer is a treat of friendship; it is entering onto the path that makes it possible for us to have a direct, personal, and continuous treat with the Master, the Spouse, the Friend, the centre of our lives. Teresa cannot conceive that someone might be a friend, an apostle, or a disciple without a treat or direct encounter with Jesus, with God. We know that one of Teresa's laments was to see that there were so few true friends of God (*Way*, ch. 1, §2), so few who truly knew him. Prayer opens us to know him, to dialogue, to create true friendship.

Teresa opens the practice of mental prayer to the existential dimension, to the encounter, to learning, to the process of human maturation, and to the knowledge of God. In the Christian tradition, prayer has always been present and has also been presented and lived in the key of friendship, though in minority circles. Teresa has the genius and originality of having recovered that sense.

We see the Teresian innovation in her experience and definition of prayer in the key of friendship (*Life*, ch. 8, §5), but also in its efficacy and apostolic dimension. A dimension that orients the meaning of the life of Carmel as prayer of intercession (*Life*, ch. 39, §5; *Way*, ch. 1, §§2, 5), but also as testimony of life (*Way*, ch. 3, §§2–5). It also emerges as a

‘novelty’ to link prayer to affective security: prayer is born of knowing oneself to be loved, not from the effort to love. This inverts the ascetic logic predominant in the conception of prayer practice in her time (*Life*, ch. 8, §5). And not only that: at the same time that Teresa innovates in terminology and in more evangelical and Christocentric fundamental contents, she connects inseparably religious life with prayer as a treat of friendship with God. And as we shall see later, she also connects community and encounter with others to something fundamental in the life of prayer.

We could say that Teresa rescues Jesus' way of praying as the way of praying of the Christian: open to the encounter with God the Father, to enter into communion with him, and to let that encounter transform oneself. A prayer, like that of Jesus, that has profound communal implications (Jn 17), and that happens in life and illumines life.

It is important to keep in mind, moreover, what Teresa repeats in *The Way of Perfection* and the *Mansions* (*Way*, ch. 22, §8 / ch. 25, §3; *Interior Castle*, 1st dwelling, ch. 1, §7). There she leaves clear evidence that, for a prayer to be authentic and true, it must meet three conditions: awareness of what is said, to whom it is said, and by whom it is said. In fact, specifically in the mention she makes in the *Mansions*, it is accompanied by the insistence on the importance that self-knowledge has in the path of prayer (*Interior Castle*, 1st dwelling, ch. 2, §§8–9; *Life*, ch. 10, §§4–5; ch. 13, §§15–16). This is another supremely important aspect that, in connection with the life of prayer, underscores the significance of ‘recreation’ as a space where one can truly continue growing in that knowledge.

On the other hand, unlike what was habitual and normative in the convents of her time, Teresa does not perceive either silence or solitude in an ascetical key. They are indispensable for Teresian prayer (‘being many times alone’), but they are interior spaces necessary to be with Jesus: a space of interior freedom and intimacy. Something that becomes very present in the Teresian soliloquies (*Exclamations*). This will explain why Teresa will give preference to communal life and charity above silence. And she will have no qualms about ‘contradicting’ tradition, opening space for the two moments of recreation in the day.

3. An apostolic community

However, that prayer does not distance her from the importance and centrality of an authentic community life, of exchange and interrelation.

Teresa lived in a community during her journey through prayer as a necessary support. A path in which she also needed help and accompaniment, and in which the group of ‘the five of us who at present love one another in Christ’ played a supremely important role: ‘let us try to get together sometimes to undeceive one another, and to say in what we could amend ourselves and please God more; for there is no one who knows oneself as well as those who look at us, if it is with love and care to profit from it’ (*Life*, ch. 16, §7). ‘The things of the service of God are now so weak that it is necessary for those who serve Him to shore one another up to go forward’ because ‘charity grows by being communicated and there are a thousand good things that I would not dare to tell if I did not have great experience of how much depends on this’ (*Life*, ch. 7, §22).

Initially, some of the values that configure Teresa’s dynamic community have already emerged here, open to sharing life and experience within the ambit of recreation. Teresa understands prayer as a source of a more human community, because it is centred on the humanity of Christ: ‘Christ is a very good friend because we behold Him as man’ (*Life*, ch. 22, §10). A community that has Christ at the centre welcomes and lives the human as a fundamental value. Therefore, the community becomes a true path of communion and encounter with Christ:

- The reduced number to **thirteen**, inspired by the apostolic community: ‘in this house, which is not to have more than thirteen... here all must be friends, all must love one another, all must cherish one another, all must help one another’ (*Way*, ch. 4, §7; *Life*, ch. 36, §29). Behind the symbolism of the ‘apostolic college’ there is, moreover, hidden the profound interconnection between prayer (friendship with Jesus), apostolate (being witnesses to the resurrection), and style of life—recreation or fraternity—as the testimonial expression of the true disciple: the testimony of fraternal love.
- The rupture with class distinctions: even the prioress must participate in the humblest tasks. ‘The schedule for sweeping should begin with the mother prioress so that in everything she may give a good example’ (*Constitutions*, ch. 22, §4). Recreation becomes a place of co-participation.

- Community as **gift** and as **responsibility**: each one is called to ‘be a foundation for those to come’ (*Foundations*, ch. 4, §6). Mutual exchange, knowledge, care, and the practice of love, which are expressed in a jovial and fraternal way in recreation.

For Teresa, direct contact with others, as an occasion for mutual knowledge, is fundamental. Here one can live the horizontal dimension of the commandment of love, not as an ideal sentiment, but in the concrete reality of life, in the difference and plurality of the members of the community. Community is the space where the authenticity of love for God is put to the test, something that for Teresa has a fundamental weight, because she knows the incidence that the experience of love has on the rest of life: ‘And if this commandment were kept in the world as it should be, I think it would be of great help in keeping the others; but, more or less, we never manage to keep it with perfection’ (*Way*, ch. 4, §5).

What is more, she intuitively sees that the great evils of religious life occur when the community begins to crumble. Of this she warns her nuns with great seriousness, alluding to the plague of murmuring and criticism, and other evils: ‘And if any of these things last, or factions, or desire to be more, or a little point of honor (it seems my blood freezes when I write this, thinking that it could ever come about, because I see it is the principal evil of monasteries), when this happens, consider yourselves lost. Think and believe that you have thrown your Spouse out of the house and that He needs to look for another lodging, since you are throwing Him out of His own home’ (*Way*, ch. 7, §10).

It is not enough to wear a habit and fulfil some norms; something more is asked of us: ‘It seems we who wear the religious habit and take it of our own will and leave all the things of the world and what we had for Him... think that everything is already done... But it must be with the condition...’ (*Way* [3M], ch. 1, §8). And the Teresian condition is to form oneself in the school of the virtues of Christ: ‘Believe me that the whole matter does not consist in wearing the religious habit or not, but in exercising the virtues and surrendering our will to God’s in everything, and that the plan of our life be what His Majesty orders it to be, and that we not want our will to be done but His’ (*Way* [3 M], ch. 2, §6). ‘Oh, this is true prayer... I would not desire any other prayer than that which makes me grow in the virtues...’ (Letter to Father Gracián, 23 October 1576).

4. Prayer–community–recreation: in communion with the will of God

An approach to the theme that draws on what is proper and characteristic of other religious orders can help us perceive the value of recreation in the Teresian charism. Among the monastic orders and the feminine convents of all orders, silence was practically the absolute norm. There was no recreation like the one Teresa introduced. I have already pointed out that for Teresa, silence is a supremely important value. Still, she considers it necessary to favour communion with God, which is fundamental to the life of Carmel.

Over against that horizon, Teresa establishes two moments of recreation with normative rank:

- First time: after the midday meal. ‘After eating, the prioress may give permission for all to speak together about whatever gives them most pleasure...’ (*Constitutions*, ch. 9, §6).
- Second time: after Compline and the evening prayer. ‘After compline and prayer... the prioress may give permission for the sisters to speak together... and let the time be as the prioress thinks best’ (*Constitutions*, ch. 9, §8).

At the moment when Teresa introduces this ‘novelty,’ she delays the beginning of the greater silence: ‘At eight o’clock, winter and summer, the bell is rung for silence’ (*Constitutions*, ch. 2, §5), whereas the Rule of Carmel imposed it from Compline, which in winter was recited at five o’clock in the afternoon.¹

¹ This double innovation—two spaces of communal conversation and a shortened greater silence—was perceived by her contemporaries as a serious contravention of the Rule. The *Constitutions of Alcalá* (1581), drawn up by the official legislators of the Order in Teresa’s absence, suppressed the second recreation and imposed: ‘The greater silence is to be kept from the said Compline until the next day after Prime. This is to be kept with great care.’ Teresa reacted with vivacity to this regression. When the visitor Juan de Jesús Roca tried to limit the time of recreation, she wrote to Father Gracián: ‘If they are not to have recreation on the days they receive Communion, and they say Mass every day, then they will never have recreation. And if the priests do not keep that, why should the other poor ones keep it?’ (Letter to Father Gracián, 19 November 1576). The argument is twofold: recreation is frequent (if it is suppressed on Communion days, it disappears) and it must not become a disproportionate ascetical burden for non-priests.

Already in the last months of her life, Teresa continues defending the time of recreation against those who question it: ‘Compline and recreation are done as usual. I have asked lawyers and told them the inconveniences, and also that the Rule says that silence is to be kept until “Preciosa” no more, and that here we have it all day’ (Letter to María de San José, 8 November 1581). Teresa appeals here to a juridical interpretation of the Rule: Saint Albert’s greater silence reached only until ‘Preciosa’ (the antiphon sung at going to bed), not until the next day. Therefore, recreation is not a relaxation, but a correct reading of the Rule over against a later tradition that had hardened it.

But what is the reason for this introduction and novelty? I think that one reason for all this can be found in the etymological sense of the word recreation: to re-create. That which gives it a profoundly continuous character with what the path of prayer and the living of the evangelical counsels implies. It is true that recreation is a space of encounter and fraternity and that the human dimension is very present in Teresa; in the Constitutions, chapter IX, §7, mentioning that games are not permitted, she affirms afterwards: ‘for the Lord will give grace to some to give recreation to others. Based on this, all is time well spent.’ The communal encounter is thus a charismatic exchange in which each sister is the bearer of a grace that can ‘recreate’ the others.

The communal encounter is the space of the authenticity of prayer and of testimony, and the maximal expression of consecration. It is the exercise of love of neighbour and the principal apostolate inseparable from prayer: love of God and love of neighbour: ‘How much more so the true lover, who loves everywhere and always remembers the Beloved! It would be a hard thing if prayer could be had only in corners’ (*Foundations*, ch. 5, §16). Recreation thus becomes a privileged space. Not separated from life, but forming part of life: where to live the commandment, where to put to the test our communion with the will of God, as the true value of Carmelite conventional life. Some texts that illumine these realities, but that we find present throughout the whole Teresian process of discernment, would be: ‘If you understood how much this virtue [love of neighbour] matters to us, you would not attend to anything else... works is what the Lord wants... This is the true union with His will’ (*Interior Castle*, 5th dwelling, ch. 3, §§9–11). ‘When you see yourselves failing in this [love of neighbor], even though you have devotion and consolations... believe me, you have not reached union’ (*Interior Castle*, 5th dwelling, ch. 3). In the end, for Teresa true union with the will of God is readiness for service, the practice of love of neighbor (*Interior Castle*, 5th dwelling, ch. 3, §§7–8). And therefore she places works of service to the sisters ahead as true union with the will of God: ‘No, sisters, no; the Lord wants works... This is the true union with His will, and that if you see one praised much, you rejoice much more than if you were praised. This, in truth, is easy, for if there is humility, one will rather feel pain at being praised. But this joy at seeing the virtues of the sisters understood is a great thing, and when we see some fault in one of them, we feel it

as though it were in ourselves and conceal it' (*Interior Castle*, 5th dwelling, ch. 3, §11; cf. *Interior Castle*, 7th dwelling, ch. 4, §§6, 12).

Authentic prayer, Teresa will say, produces persons who are more conversable, not inaccessible hermits: 'the more holy they are, the more sociable they are with their sisters... This is what we must strive for greatly: to be affable and to please and give contentment... especially to our sisters' (*Way*, ch. 41, §7). Recreation opens up those real, concrete spaces where prayer becomes true life.

One last annotation I referred to earlier is that recreation is also a privileged occasion for self-knowledge. A knowledge necessary to amend oneself (*Life*, ch. 16, §7) and mutual support to persevere in service (*Life*, ch. 7, §22). Recreation serves 'to reveal the Sisters' faults and to provide a little relief so that the rule may be kept in its strictness' (*Foundations*, ch. 13, §5). But also to connect life with prayer, so that afterwards one can delve deeper into the light we can always receive through relationships with others, which can help us grow in humility and truth.

5. The other great intuition and innovation of Teresa: Love gives value to all things (surpassing dualism)

A classic of theological and spiritual discussion has always been the binomial of action and contemplation. Something that has, in a blunt way, marked the way of understanding the distinct forms of consecrated life. That would be fine if the consequence were not confrontation, dualism, and opposition.

Also, in this, Teresa of Jesus opens a new panorama that also has much to do with the binomial prayer-recreation: Are they opposites or complementary? Is one more important than the other? Where is the measure or the balance? Certainly, Teresa lived and suffered this struggle in her own interior. Her experiences of God initially led her to project her life in 'serving God,' in wanting to save souls. And nevertheless, she had to accept the reality and condition of her time, which, as she remembers in the *Way*, has women 'cornered' (*Way*, ch. 3, §7). That struggle, expressed in the *Exclamations* 5, where Teresa sets herself to defend Martha before Jesus, concludes Teresa, clarifying her life and vocation: 'only love is what gives value to all things; and that it be so great that nothing hinders it from loving is what is most necessary' (*Exclamations*, 5, §2).

That key, together with the other dimensions pointed out previously, gives prayerful continuity to the whole of life and to the dynamism of Carmel: ‘...understand that if it is in the kitchen, among the pots and pans, the Lord is there helping you in both interior and exterior matters’ (*Foundations*, ch. 5, §8). Teresa thus overcomes the dichotomy in favour of a harmonisation of life, in which recreation and prayer are distinct yet complementary ways of living what is essential: love. ‘The active and contemplative lives are joined... so that she and Mary walk together’ (*Way*, ch. 31, §5). Communal recreation is the active and communal moment of the day, shared work, laughter—but it is not for that reason separated from the prayerful and contemplative moment. Both ‘walk together.’

And so she underlines almost at the conclusion of the book of the *Mansions*: ‘Believe me, Martha and Mary must go together to welcome the Lord and have Him always with them, and not do Him the bad hospitality of not giving Him food... His food is that in all the ways we can we bring souls to be saved and always praise Him’ (*Interior Castle*, 7th dwelling, ch. 4, §12). And I add: Isn't this a revaluation of recreation, of shared life, also as a space of salvation?