

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF ST TERESA OF JESUS (1990)

Shortly after his accession to the papacy in 1724, the Dominican Pietro Francesco Orsini decreed a special feast in honor of St Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), who had been canonized a century earlier in 1622. First established in 1726 for the Discalced Carmelites, the Feast of the Transverberation of Holy Mother Teresa's Heart was later extended to Spain as a whole. As we shall see, it was highly fitting that a Dominican Pope—known as Benedict XIII—took this initiative. For the Feast of the Transverberation solemnizes an amazing event in the life of an uncommon woman which eventually would bring her into close contact with the Order of St Dominic. Today, Teresa of Ávila, doctor and mother, continues to instruct us by her life and mystical teachings.

The phenomenon took place sometime in the course of 1559, shortly after her final "conversion," or, as she put it, after "nearly twenty years on that stormy sea" [cf. *Life* ch 48]). The incident began with a vision of angels. Teresa originally identified them as "Cherubims," but her Dominican confessor and trusted spiritual guide Dominic Báñez later corrected this misconception. In a marginal note to her *Life* (1562-5), he wrote: "It seems more like those which are called Seraphims." On the assumption that Dominicans can best identify one choir of angels from another, Báñez's speculation has prevailed. Thus, Crashaw's poem "The Flaming Hart" carries the subtitle "Upon the book and picture of the *seraphicall* St. Teresa).

In any event, this is how St Teresa narrates what happened to her:

It pleased the Lord that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall, but short and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. . . . In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it, and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. (*Life* ch. 29).

The transverberation of her heart formally inaugurated an effusion of mystical occurrences in the life of Sr Teresa—ones which included visions of Dominican saints (cf. *Life* ch.40). And these continued until her death in 1582.

Through these mystical phenomena, God variously and variously instructed St Teresa in the ways of his love. But the same "experiences"—as she herself refers to them—also caused her a certain uneasiness. Recall that she lived at a time when the Church, largely because of the Lutheran Reform, took a cautious view of private religious experiences. In order to interpret her "experiences" correctly, St Teresa developed the habit of relying on her confessors. Sometimes, however, she was disappointed with the results of her consultations.

In one of her autobiographical Notes (*Relations* IV), Teresa recounts why, at one point, she came to mistrust certain "spiritual persons" from whom she had constantly sought advice and approbation. She reasoned that "spiritual people could as easily be deceived as she herself. She wanted, therefore, to discuss the subject with learned men of note, *even if they were not greatly given to prayer*, for she only wanted to know if all she had experienced was in conformity with Holy Scripture. . . . With this end in view she began to discuss these subjects with Fathers of the Order of Saint Dominic" Thus began a tradition which associates the spiritual heritage of Carmel with the theology of the Friars Preachers even to this day.

Although St Teresa's reasons for turning to us might appear much like damning the Order with faint praise, her decision nonetheless brought the Carmelite Reform into contact with the eminent figures who came out of the Dominican *studium* at Alcalá de Henares. We have already mentioned the great Báñez, but there was also the Inquisitor, Fray Vicente Barrón; the confessor to Philip II, a certain Master Chaves; the young Fray Pedro Ibáñez, Lector at Avila (who was one of her earliest supporters), the aristocratic Fray García de Toledo; the noted Salamanca moralist, Master Bartolomé de Medina; and many others. These contacts, we can be sure, left their mark on her spiritual instruction.

Take, for example, St Teresa's teaching about "the Good Jesus." First of all, she reminds us that since the vivacity and permanence of our spiritual lives depends on it, we must talk to Jesus. St Teresa, moreover, gives specific instructions of her own for establishing friendly conversation with Jesus. In her *Way of Perfection* (c. 26), she writes:

I am not asking you now to think of him, or to form numerous conceptions of him, or to make 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.

This method of bringing Christ into our lives, she again instructs us, "should be the beginning, the middle, and the end of prayer for all of us" (*Life*, c. 13).

Today, St Teresa extends her invitation to each one of us: "Who can prevent us from turning our eyes of faith upon this Jesus?" We know that Dominic Báñez surely helped St Teresa to understand that God loves us, not because we are good, but because He is. For Teresa, the devil is "a lover of lies and a lie himself" (*Life* ch 32). As a lie, the devil blackmails us with our sins, urging us to turn our eyes and attention elsewhere than to "the Good Jesus." All the saints warn us of his trickery, but today our Holy Mother Teresa insists: "I am asking you only to look at Him."

Looking to "the Good Jesus" can lead to all sorts of unexpected surprises. Communication means friendship. Since we possess Jesus as a friend, our hearts experience their own transverberations. And this "experience" remains as close as the name of Jesus comes to our lips. Friendships, moreover, change us. So we become like the Jesus with whom we converse.

This happened to St Teresa: "What power this gift has! . . . It cannot fail to draw the Almighty to become one with our lowliness," she writes in *The Way of Perfection* (ch 32). But the poet best captures the figure of Teresa of Jesus. His words also form a prayer for us who today look to Carmel in order to renew old friendships:

O thou undaunted daughter of desires!
By all the dour of Lights and Fires;
By all the eagle in thee, all the dove;

By all thy lives and death of love;
By all the heavn's thou hast in him
(Fair sister of the Seraphim!);
By all of Him we have in Thee;
Leave nothing of my Self in me.
Let me so read thy life, that I
Unto all life of mine may dy.

Richard Crashaw (c. 1613-49)

"Hymn to St Teresa"

Romanus Cessario O.P.