

Teresa Reflection

Mary McDevitt, IHM

October 15, 2015

Today we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Teresa Avila. Many of us know the story of Teresa's life and her spectacular contribution to mystical literature and to the reform of the Carmelites. Teresa was given the grace to reflect upon and write from her very own experience. For this reason she has been called the Mystic for Mystics.

Today I will spend a few minutes reflecting on what made Teresa not only a saint, but a great saint. In a current book, political analyst Professor Aaron Miller states that to be truly GREAT (he was speaking of U.S. Presidents) one must possess these three special gifts: Crises, Character, and Capacity.

The author proposes that to respond creatively in challenging situations creates a lasting and transformative legacy. What do we know about Teresa of Avila and the crises she faced?

Crises

First of all, Teresa was writing about interior prayer, especially the prayer of recollection. She knew that recollection was essential if one were to advance to the prayer of quiet and the contemplative prayer of union. The Inquisitors were suspicious of what was a departure from the usual way of vocal prayer. They could not be persuaded or even acknowledge that a woman could have spiritual authority. They said: "Let women stick to their spinning."

At the beginning of her religious life Teresa was not exemplary. She lived and enjoyed nearly 20 years as a member of the lax Carmelite convent of the Incarnation. She loved a habit adorned with buckles and pleats. She enjoyed parlor conversations. Yet, her most personal crisis was a war between her love for what could be deemed WORLDLY pleasures, and her intense desire to answer the prompting of the Spirit of God.

Teresa was educated far beyond the average women of her day. She wrote from her lived experience. If one is able to view Teresa's documents in Spain, one discovers that the red marks with which the Inquisitors circled as errors later revealed that la Madre was correct. It is clear that Teresa was taught by the Holy Spirit

Teresa's father was a converted Jew. This meant that the family could not be considered nobility by Church and government leaders. Spain had a preoccupation with purity of blood lines. If her Jewish ancestry had been known she could not have entered Carmel.

The Sisters at the Incarnation convent, who had become lax, were not eager to reform themselves according to the Primitive Rule of Carmel. Although experiencing poverty and poor health, Teresa kept faithful to her call and mission. Her writing was often completed at night on her knees with the text propped up on a windowsill. Teresa met and dealt creatively with these personal and political crises.

Character

The second pre requisite for being known as an exceptional leader is that of character. This word from the Greek means engraved; stamped or marked. This word describes people who have ambition, physical courage, and discipline.

She was known by many as a woman whose exceptional contemplative experience grounded her to follow her mission. Teresa loved to be loved; she loved to cook, and to dance. Her favorite color was orange. Teresa's writings added color and humor to the text. She used graphic metaphors: castle, garden, water, caterpillars and butterflies. She called her biography, *The Book of God's Mercies*.

From early resentment, her Carmelite sisters grew to love her. Yet there were differing views about her character. One papal nuncio, Fillipo Sega, wrote:

"Teresa of Avila. Do not mention her name. She is a restless gadabout, a disobedient woman who invented wicked doctrines and called them

devotion; she transgressed the rules of enclosure in disobedience to the Council of Trent and her superiors. She taught others against the commands of St. Paul who had forbidden women to teach.”

Yet Teresa remained loyal to the Church. But is it any wonder that she said: To be a woman in the Church is enough to make my wings fall off.” And on her death bed she prayed: “After everything, Lord, I die a daughter of the Church”. This seems to be a sigh of relief after her troubles with the Inquisition.

Capacity

Crises and character go a long way in describing what one may call a great leader. The third quality is capacity. This refers primarily to the ability to get things done. Getting great things done means being able to address the needs of the moment while assessing what might develop on a future horizon.

Teresa modeled contemplation that moved her to action. She assisted others, especially helping her sisters to develop an interior life. She surrendered to divine guidance. She was an ecstatic mystic and at the same time, a skillful administrator. She was a penitent when she needed to be ...and an epicurean when she could be.

She was an exceptional business woman, and showed her skill in the management of her convents. Her core message, which she modeled in her own life, was the discovery of God’s presence in her soul. If there is a core message in her prayer it is: “become fully present to God in prayer”. She wrote in *The Way of Perfection* “Remember how St. Augustine tells us about seeking God In many places, and eventually finding God within himself.”

Teresa was the architect of the renewal of disalced Carmelite nuns. She worked to reconnect this ancient community with their contemplative origins of silence, solitude and interior prayer.

Was she effective? Did she get things done? With poor health, and little money, and many stumbling blocks, Teresa founded 17 Carmelite convents for women and four monasteries of men.

A blessing that the life and mission of Teresa offers us is that it was not in spite of her human qualities, her neuroses and compulsions that Teresa was a great saint... No, her life and teaching show us that when one is attentive and open to the guidance of the Spirit, transformation is possible in any raw material, if one has an open heart

Someone has said that a good leader is not a thermometer but a thermostat. Teresa could not only feel the temperature; she gently adjusted the dial and transformed situations making them life-giving.

Teresa became, through her fidelity to Spirit's prompting a reformer, author, foundress, saint, and the first woman doctor of the church. Her lively and lovable personality has made her one of the great saints of all times.