

Day Four: Great things in the ordinary

The fourth day of our pilgrimage is spent back in Avila itself, visiting the Incarnation, the royal monastery of St Thomas, and the cathedral.

When Teresa entered the Monastery of the Incarnation it was still a relatively new foundation, having been established as a full Carmelite monastery only in 1515, the year of Teresa's birth. The origins of the community go back further, however, to a community of *beatas*, or holy women, who came together to live a common life under the foundress Doña Elvira Gonzalez de Medina in 1479. At this point, the community was housed in a former synagogue within the walled town, but in 1495 the city council gave them a plot of land outside the walls, the site of the old Jewish cemetery, and the community moved to its present location. Similarly, the Dominican Monastery of St Thomas was still a comparatively young monastery in Teresa's time. It was founded in 1482, but had quickly become a popular destination for the Catholic monarchs who used the royal quarters as a summer palace. The monastery still contains the confessional where Teresa would make her confession to her Dominican spiritual advisors. In contrast, Avila's cathedral is the oldest Gothic style cathedral in all of Spain. Building work began as early as 1091 and so the architecture clearly exhibits the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic styles. It is dedicated to Christ under the title of El Salvador, The Saviour.

Our pilgrims begin their day today celebrating Mass at the Monastery of the Incarnation in the chapel which commemorates the 'transverberation' or piercing of St Teresa's heart. Teresa lived at the Incarnation for the first twenty seven years of her religious life, and then for a further three years during her term of prioress from 1571. It was at the Incarnation that Teresa experienced some of her most profound mystical encounters with the Lord. Knowing, as we do, all the spiritual graces which were to be given to Teresa in her later years, it is easy to forget that her religious life had a fairly inauspicious start – she didn't really want to be a nun, and speaks of forcing herself to overcome her aversion to the idea. In the same way, it is all too easy to gloss over the first twenty years of Teresa's time at the Incarnation as being rather insignificant; years which were marked by debilitating illnesses and during which her spiritual life was anything but extraordinary. During this time Teresa lived the very ordinary, humdrum, unremarkable spiritual life with which we are all too familiar. For the first twenty years, Teresa found it almost impossible to pray, abandoning even the attempt to do so for a period of nearly two years. In this first stage of her religious life, Teresa knew the struggle of lending oneself to the purifying, transforming work of the Spirit, as God gradually lessened her enthrallment to the things of the world and slowly diverted her attention, and her affection, to himself. Teresa

speaks eloquently of the pain of this struggle, the constant conflict between her attraction to earthly matters and those of God:

I should say that it is one of the most painful lives, I think, that one can imagine; for neither did I enjoy God nor did I find happiness in the world. When I was experiencing the enjoyments of the world, I felt sorrow when I recalled what I owed to God. When I was with God, my attachments to the world disturbed me. This is a war so troublesome that I don't know how I was able to suffer it even a month, much less for so many years.

(Life, 8.2)

As Teresa says, this went on year after year, with little consolation or relief. We tend to forget that when Teresa – the great doctor of the mystical life – writes for beginners in prayer, she writes in all sympathy for the pain, effort and dryness they endure. No wonder she set such store by the determination to begin, and the courage to persevere. Yet Teresa can also assure us in all honesty that the beginning of prayer marks a new life, a new way of living in Christ and of allowing him to live in us.

The life dealt with up to this point was mine; the one I lived from the point where I began to explain these things about prayer is the one God lived in me [...] may the Lord be praised who freed me from myself.

(Life, 23.1)

Despite all the extraordinary experiences this new life was to bring, Teresa never lost her understanding of the importance of the ordinary, of the significance of fidelity in little things (a doctrine which her spiritual daughter St Thérèse was to take up with such effect), and the crucial victories which are won in the tiny battles to overcome our everyday pettinesses and sinfulness. In fact, when Teresa receives the first impulses to do something great for God, she knows quite clearly that the secret will be in accomplishing this in the little things, in ordinariness. Thus, Teresa's first resolve is simply 'to follow the call to the religious life, which His Majesty had given me, by keeping my rule as perfectly as I could' (*Life*, 32.9). Even after St Joseph's is founded, and Teresa is teaching her first community how to live, this focus on the vital importance of the ordinary is not lost. Teresa begins the *Way of Perfection* saying. '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 here do the same' (*Way of Perfection*, 1.1). The world, as Teresa perceived it all too clearly, is in flames, but the fire will be extinguished most effectively by the daily commitment to charity, life's little battles of

humility and detachment, and the ongoing, unfailing, doggedly persistent fidelity to prayer, here, today, in this place, now. St Teresa of the everyday, pray for us!

Pilgrims' Liturgy

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

We pray for the grace to recognise that the here and now matters. We pray for hearts that will respond to the immediate and to the insignificant. May we never cease to find God's grace in the present moment, and to serve him in the person before us.

We pray for the grace to endure the painful process of purification. May we never lose heart, or cease to trust in God's providential love for us. May we encourage one another, as we journey ever deeper into his vision for our perfect being.

Lord God, through the teaching of St Teresa and all the Carmelite saints help us to attain perfect love. May we always live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, and serve faithfully until death him who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.