Praying with St Teresa

All the quotations from Teresa in this leaflet are taken from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez’s translation of her collected works produced by the Institute for Carmelite Studies in Washington.

For those readers who would like an introduction to Teresa’s spirituality and teaching on prayer there are a number of excellent introductory texts and guides which explain her approach and give practical guidelines.

All these can be obtained from:

Carmelite Book Service
Boars Hill
Oxford
OX1 5HB

www.carmelite.org.uk/Books.html

More than anything, Teresa wants us to begin praying. Both the Carmelite Third Order and the Discalced Carmelite Secular Order run pilgrimages and study days across the country. More details can be obtained from:

Discalced Carmelite Secular Order:
Jane Nicholson, OCDS
jnicholson@faracharity.org
www.carmeldiscalcedsecular.org.uk

Carmelite Third Order:
John Berry, TOC
70 Unett Street
Hockley
Birmingham
B19 3BL
cyberberry93@gmail.com
www.carmelite.org/index.php?nuc=content&id=8

What is the Carmelite Forum?

This leaflet is produced by the Carmelite Forum of Britain & Ireland, a joint initiative of the Order of Carmelites and the Order of Discalced Carmelites.

Members represent groups living or interested in Carmelite spirituality in the twenty-first century. These include nuns, friars and lay members of the two Carmelite Orders.

Throughout 2014 - 2015 the Forum will be celebrating the 500th anniversary of Teresa’s birth.

Planned events include:

Opening Mass: Carmelite Priory, Kensington
Wednesday 15th October 2014, 7pm

Academic conference:
Teresa of Avila 1515 - 2015: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition
St Mary’s University, Twickenham
18 - 20th June 2015
www.smuc.ac/inspire

Pilgrimages:
National Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, 11th July 2015
Avila, 31st August - 7th September 2015

Closing celebration: Aylesford Priory, Kent
Saturday 17th October 2015

For more information visit:
Website: www.teresaofavila.org
Email: info@teresaofavila.org
Facebook: teresa500
Twitter: @carmeliteforum

Teresa 500
The fifth centenary celebrations of the birth of St Teresa of Avila
2014 - 2015
Teresa’s teaching was significantly influenced by this context. Knowing that reciting vocal prayers was the only form of prayer recommended for women, Teresa took this as her starting point and demonstrated how, when said attentively, even the most ordinary of vocal prayers can lead to the highest forms of mystical encounter. At the same time, the relationship between the necessary hard work required of the individual, and the complete graviety of God’s action, remained a constant theme throughout Teresa’s teaching.

When Teresa advocates reciting vocal prayers like the Our Father or Hail Mary she cautions that they should also be accompanied by recollection. By this she means attention or ‘mindfulness’, sometimes also described as mental prayer. For Teresa, mindfulness is an awareness of God’s presence. ‘We should see and be present,’ she says ‘to the one with whom we speak.’ This means both striving to become aware of God’s closeness and bringing ourselves into this presence. This is most easily done, Teresa suggests, by imagining Christ close by and looking at us. ‘Just remain there in his presence... and if we are able we should occupy ourselves in looking at Christ who is looking at us.’ To begin with, this active concentration may require a great deal of effort. Teresa speaks of the need for a ‘resolute determination’ to persevere, ignoring distractions and enduring the times when it feels as if nothing is happening; her advice to us is not to give up.

I’m not asking you to do anything more than look at Him!

Teresa’s own experience was that as we learn to be still and conscious of his presence, God gradually takes over. The mind quietens and there is a new sense of peace and recollection. The awareness of God’s presence becomes less of a task and more of a gift, as we feel ourselves more and more united to him. For some, this experience may culminate in a particular mystical encounter, but Teresa assures us that for everyone there will be delight in God’s presence and the joy of being united with him.

For Teresa, however, the point of prayer is not that it should be some pleasurable experience; prayer should always result in good works. As the soul becomes used to spending time with God, it grows in the strength to serve others, to endure trials and to practice the love of neighbour which is the only possible proof of our love of God. Teresa also sees prayer as a task undertaken on behalf of the church and for the good of the whole world.

Throughout her writings, Teresa illustrates her teaching with practical images drawn from everyday life.

The four waters
In the Book of her Life, Teresa contrasts the human effort required in prayer and the gratuitous action of God. She likens this to four different ways of watering a garden. In the early stages, the soul makes a great effort. This is like the laborious filling of a bucket at a well or, as God begins to provide some help, the use of channels to distribute water around the garden. As God’s help increases, prayer becomes like a stream or river which soaks the ground more directly. Finally, union with God is like torrents of rain falling from heaven.

The interior castle
In her most mature teaching on prayer, Teresa describes the soul as a castle containing many rooms, with God himself dwelling at the centre. The soul’s progression through the various stages of prayer is like its journey through the castle to the innermost rooms. At the centre, the soul is united with God and shares in his divine life.

The silkworm
Again in her final work, Teresa wished to describe how the soul gradually loses all ambitions, attachments and self-delusion. To capture this idea, she turned to the image of a silkworm building a cocoon and entering into it to undergo a process of transformation. Likewise, the soul enters into Christ and is willing to die in him. From the cocoon, the soul emerges utterly new, as a free and beautiful as a butterfly.

Friendship
Teresa’s most consistent understanding of prayer is that it is friendship with Christ. Prayer is what happens when friends spend time together, sharing joys and sorrows, or enjoying silent companionship. As such, prayer is above all a task of love, and ‘the important thing is not to think much but to love much.’