

## 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](http://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](mailto:jnicholson@faracharity.org)  
[www.carmeldiscalcedsecular.org.uk](http://www.carmeldiscalcedsecular.org.uk)

*Carmelite Third Order* :

John Berry, TOC  
70 Unett Street  
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B19 3BL  
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[www.carmelite.org/index.php?nuc=content&id=8](http://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 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Teresa's birth.

Planned events include:

### Opening Mass:

**Carmelite Priory,  
Kensington**

**Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2014, 7pm**

### Academic conference:

***Teresa of Avila 1515 - 2015:  
Mystical Theology and Spirituality  
in the Carmelite Tradition***  
**St Mary's University, Twickenham**

**18 - 20<sup>th</sup> June 2015  
[www.smuc.ac/inspire](http://www.smuc.ac/inspire)**

### Pilgrimages:

**National Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2015  
Avila, 31<sup>st</sup> August - 7<sup>th</sup> September 2015**

### Closing celebration:

**Aylesford Priory, Kent  
Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2015**

For more information visit:

Website: [www.teresaofavila.org](http://www.teresaofavila.org)  
Email: [info@teresaofavila.org](mailto:info@teresaofavila.org)  
Facebook: [teresa500](https://www.facebook.com/teresa500)  
Twitter: [@carmeliteforum](https://twitter.com/carmeliteforum)



[WWW.TERESAOFAVILA.ORG](http://WWW.TERESAOFAVILA.ORG)

# Teresa 500

The fifth centenary celebrations  
of the birth of St Teresa of Avila  
2014 - 2015

## 2. Teresa and Prayer

The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland

St Teresa of Avila is today regarded as one of the great Christian teachers of prayer. Despite this, she never described a formal method for how to go about praying. In fact, she directs her advice to those who, like herself, have 'minds so scattered they are like wild horses' and are unable to practise intellectual or thought-based meditations. Teresa's teaching is drawn from her own experience of struggling to pray, and of her awareness that all prayer is ultimately the gift of God.

Sixteenth-century Spain had seen a widespread spiritual renewal, characterised by the desire for an authentic interior life and a deeper experience of prayer. Unfortunately, this movement had also led to certain excesses. Undue emphasis was placed on a radical passivity in prayer, while traditional practices including vocal prayers, attending Mass and receiving the sacraments were rejected. There was also a new obsession with mystical phenomena such as visions and ecstasies, with some people setting themselves up as mystics and leading many into error. As part of a backlash, spiritual books became less available and women were instructed to restrict themselves to saying simple prayers like the *Our Father*, attending Mass and practising self-denial.

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 gratuity of God's action, remained a constant theme throughout Teresa's teaching.

*Begin with determination!*

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 quietsens 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.'

*Christ is a very good friend*