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### **Finding the Mystic within you - As lived by St Therese and St. Teresa of Avila**

The month of October every year invites us Carmelites to read, reflect and pray on the lives of the two great Women Saints of the Church. The question is whether their lives have anything to offer us today in 2023 in our life situations? The question I raise springs out of my Visitations of three provinces and my interactions with sisters officially or casually. I have always appreciated the many great things we A.Cs. are doing in various fields with deep commitment and often with meagre resources. My hats off to you all. I do feel humbled seeing the missionary spirit, with the exception of a few, in most of you.

One thing, however, that I have noticed in general, is a gradual decline in our spiritual lives. There is a laxity in prayer life. No wonder, then, that a kind of vocation crisis in the congregation is raising its head. Professed sisters leaving or wanting to leave. Some are asking questions as to why they are here, or make statements like “I am not happy”. Are the reasons for decline: a) Too many external activities, b) Worries and cares of the family, c) Too much time on mobile and social media, d) midlife crisis or some other reasons? Each one needs to look at one’s own life. And yet I feel that our two women saints can help us find some directions, if not solutions, to our emerging crises.

Recently I came across a book, “Finding the Mystic Within You”, by Peggy Wilkinson O.C.D.S. I would like to share with all of you dear sisters my reflections on it, interspersed with some tips from Sts. Therese and Teresa.

The author in her book, says, “we are all mystics, lovers and contemplatives. Love and contemplation are the language and activity of heaven and that earth is the soul’s apprenticeship to heaven”

Karl Rahner, the famous Jesuit theologian wrote, “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist.” Note that he is not saying, 'Religious of the future', but 'Christian of the future...'. At face value it seems like an impossible task that 'the Christian of the future...' should be a mystic. And what about you and me? Carmelites? Should it be foreign to Carmelites to be Mystics or women of prayer? It is a challenging task but not an impossible one.

What does it mean to be a mystic? It means experiencing God in our daily lives. Seeing through and beyond the happenings of each day and allowing God to touch us, love us, heal us, and draw us close to Him by our response to His VERY immediate and immanent love and mercy.



This, then, brings us nicely into contact with one of our most loved saints - **St Therese of Child Jesus**, a mystic who lived a very ordinary life. Therese understood that so many of the activities we do in life are boring and hum-drum. Nevertheless, with each present moment – no matter what we are doing – we have the opportunity to grow in grace and holiness by performing our duties faithfully and for the love of God. The essence of her sanctity is in the realization that great love, not great deeds, is what makes us holy. This is Therese's "Little Way". It involves the recognition that God is present in every moment of our lives no matter how insignificant our lot in life may be.

In the 'Story of a Soul' – her autobiography, one can readily see how she constantly sought the Lord in all situations and circumstances with an attitude of loving surrender. Once she found that her vocation was love, then no matter what happened to her, including her final year of life spent in the darkness of faith and in great pain, as her lungs and intestines were eaten up by tuberculosis, 'was not an obstacle'. She died with these words on her lips. "Oh! I love Him! My God! I love You!" She constantly sought the Lord through love. She had the insight (because she was vigilant and readily alert) to see beyond all the simple, mundane and often painful happenings of everyday life and found God in them. Such was her faith, but above all, love. This insight is mystical. It is to this insight that you and I must fall back on in our moment of 'boredom', 'spiritual dryness', 'lack of meaning in religious life', 'hurtful experiences with our superiors or sisters'. It calls for us to be alert, attentive and focussed and approach each day, each moment of the day in faith and absolute trust and surrender to the immediate love and mercy of God.

Another of St Therese's mystical experiences was a Eucharistic one. She relates that she received exceptional graces when she made her first Holy Communion at age eleven. She relates the following in her autobiography, ***The Story of a Soul***: "Oh, how sweet the first kiss of Jesus was! It was a kiss of love. I knew that I was loved and I declared: 'I love you and I give myself to you forever!' ...on that day it was no longer a matter of gazing: it was a union. There were no longer two of us. Therese had disappeared like a drop of water in the depth of the ocean. Only Jesus remained..."

My dear sisters, would it not be great for us to emulate her disposition during our morning Eucharist, rather than dragging our feet to the chapel, as if to fulfil a routine imposed on us by our rules? It would also be good for us in preparation to go back to some of our profound experiences, maybe First Holy Communion; Our Call to

religious life which made us leave all and everything; First vows; Final Commitment or some other deep experience of God's Love.

Peggy Wilkinson says, becoming a “contemplative” in the world is not a negative withdrawing from the world, or a self-centred occupation aimed solely at self-improvement. It is a positive step, a potential growth experience, just as seeking an education would be, or developing our talents. It is our responsibility to develop our fullest potential in every facet of our humanity. By opening our souls to God and allowing Him to transform them, we will be of far more benefit to ourselves and to others.

And what does the great **Doctor of the Church, St. Teresa** tell us about being a mystic/contemplative?

In her book, “Interior Castle”, she writes, “Let us desire and be occupied in prayer and not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have the strength to serve”.

As mentioned above, one of our present concerns in the congregation is the decline in our 'spirituality' and 'prayer life' or our 'relationship with God'. It would be worth looking at the points which Teresa recommends even if we learnt them in the formative years. It is always good to begin anew to discover the God within us.



-) A comfortable position for prayer is necessary. To be uncomfortable and a constant shifting of position, will increase distractions. But if we become too comfortable it is easy to fall asleep and this many sisters shared with me when talking about their prayer life.

“Be still and Know that I am God” - Psalm 46:10

-) A notebook for jotting down any insights that formed during prayer can be invaluable. One’s own inspirations may be the best preparation for prayer. Distractions will always be part of us human beings. “You cannot begin to recollect yourselves by force but only by gentleness, if your recollection is going to be more continual” (Interior Castle, St Teresa of Avila.II:1).

-) Discipline: Setting aside a regular time and place for silence and solitude. Faithfulness in keeping our commitment to pray, regardless of whether or not we feel like it and squeezing time out by all means to do it.

Focussing our attention, being present to God within, as against thinking of God who is at a distance, requires the calming of our faculties, and stilling our busy mind which is always planning, with thoughts running wild, to be able to bring ourselves to the still point as St Teresa says, "Your spouse will never take His eyes off you" (Way of Perfection, Ch. 26:3).

-) Intention: Seek the Giver, not the gifts. 'What happens or does not happen during prayer is not as important as what we are becoming - like God'. Teresa says, "For perfection as well as its reward does not consist in spiritual delights, but in greater love and greater deeds done in justice and truth" (Interior castle, III: 2,10).

-) Attitude: A life of prayer is faith in action. It invites us to practise the virtues of patience, humility, openness and receptivity. "Leave the soul in God's hands, let Him do whatever He wants with it, with the greatest disinterest about your own benefit as is possible and the greatest resignation to the will of God." (Interior Castle: IV: 3,6).

### **Conclusion:**

Dear sisters, I am convinced that the great work you all are doing with deep commitment will bear much more fruit when we are anchored in our spiritual life. In addition, those of us facing problems with meaning of religious life or with other sisters in the community, can certainly find more sense if we take the examples of prayer from our two Carmelite saints.

May Saint Therese and St Teresa pray for us.

My team and I wish you a very Happy Feast for both these occasions.

**Sister. M. Nirmalini A.C.**  
Superior General