

The Book of Her Life



Saint Teresa of Ávila

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Preface

The first thing the reader should know is that this work does not aim to be an academic study of the autobiography of Teresa of Ávila. Rather, it emerges from a passionate, sustained engagement with her writings over the years; from a deep admiration for her person and her inner journey; and from the profound resonance her words have had in my own spiritual life.

The reason that led me to modernize the original text and accompany it with extensive commentary is the desire to make the rich human and spiritual legacy of this giant of the soul accessible to contemporary readers—not necessarily Catholic, nor versed in mystical literature. Although this endeavor arises from a personal process of reading, admiration, and interior resonance, it has been carried out with a clear and deliberate aim: to preserve the spiritual essence and unique character of Teresa's voice, while gently updating the vocabulary and grammatical structures to ease the reading experience today.

This is not, therefore, a free adaptation or a complete rewriting in modern idiom. It is a respectful modernization that seeks to stay close to Teresa's original tone—intimate, vivid, and impassioned—while removing some of the barriers posed by archaic language and complex syntax. The goal is not to simplify her message, but to allow its full intensity, subtlety, and transformative power to emerge clearly and vibrantly for today's reader.

We live in an age deeply in need of the teachings of the great mystics. In a world increasingly absorbed by the external, the immediate, and the quantifiable, the inner dimension of the human being runs the risk of being buried beneath noise, haste, and a flood of stimuli. The mystical tradition—so vibrant in Teresa—offers not escapism or superficial comfort, but a radical invitation to reconnect with what is essential: silence, truth, love, the presence of the divine within the heart; our true spiritual identity. In contrast to a culture that has made material well-being its ultimate horizon, the mystics remind us that there is no fulfillment without depth, no freedom without transcendence. That is why returning to Teresa—not as a historical figure, but as a living guide of the soul—is an act of interior resistance and, at the same time, of hope. Her words, born of experience and enkindled by love, remain a luminous beacon for those who sense that life on the surface is not enough—that there is another life, deeper and truer, waiting within: the Kingdom of God within us, which Jesus urges us to seek.

For Teresa's voice to continue illuminating today's seekers, a bridge must be built between her original language and our own. Saint Teresa wrote her work in sixteenth-century Spanish, using expressions and idioms that today, for many, seem archaic and obscure the spiritual experience she so generously shared. The richness of her language is undeniable, but time has rendered certain terms and constructions less accessible to modern readers. With this translation, I have sought to clarify the message without diluting its depth, striking a balance between fidelity to the original text and the necessary adaptation for modern comprehension.

Saint Teresa wrote *The Book of Her Life* at a crucial moment in her existence, between 1561 and 1565, when she had already reached considerable spiritual maturity and possessed extensive experience both in her inner life and in the reform of the Carmelite Order. She wrote much of it in response to the express request of her confessor, Fray García de Toledo, a Dominican and distinguished theologian who wished to gain a deep understanding of her mystical experiences and spiritual journey. This commission also served the purpose of submitting her inner life to the discernment of experts capable of judging the authenticity of her experiences. At that time, Teresa was facing criticism and suspicion regarding her visions and ecstasies, and *The Book of Her Life* thus became a way to explain and justify her path, offering a sincere, detailed, and courageous testimony of her relationship with God.

The work is addressed to a specific recipient, whom Teresa repeatedly refers to as “vuestra merced,” a formal and respectful expression indicating that the book was initially intended for a particular individual: Fray García de Toledo, one of her confessors and chief spiritual advisors during that period. He, moved by admiration and a desire for theological clarity, asked her to write down all that was occurring within her soul. Later, the text was reviewed and revised at the instruction of Father Domingo Báñez, also a Dominican and one of the most influential theologians of the era, to whom Teresa entrusted her conscience. Through this narrative, written in obedience and with full trust in her confessors, Teresa shares with humility and transparency the depths of her soul and God's action within her, offering at the same time a spiritual document of exceptional value.

The historical context in which Saint Teresa wrote was especially complex. Sixteenth-century Spain was deeply shaped by the influence of the Counter-Reformation, a movement that arose in response to the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther. Through the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Catholic Church sought to reinforce orthodoxy and combat any doctrinal deviations. In this climate, mystical manifestations and extraordinary spiritual experiences—such as Teresa's—were viewed with caution and often suspected of harboring heretical elements. The Inquisition, charged with safeguarding the purity of the faith, closely

monitored those who, like Saint Teresa, claimed to have visions and mystical experiences. As a result, she had to be extremely careful in describing her experiences, always striving to demonstrate the authenticity of her spiritual path and ensure her words would not be misinterpreted.

The *Book of Her Life* received varied responses from Church authorities, religious communities—including her own—and society at large. On one hand, some ecclesiastical authorities expressed reservations and even suspicion toward her mystical experiences, viewing them as potentially problematic or exaggerated. The inquisitorial climate fostered an atmosphere of mistrust toward any spiritual manifestation that might appear unorthodox. The work was thoroughly examined, prompting Teresa to explain and clearly defend the authenticity of her visions and ecstasies. However, her sincerity and the transparency with which she shared her experiences eventually earned her the approval of many within the Church, including influential figures who recognized the depth of her spirituality.

Within religious communities, Teresa's work inspired both admiration and discomfort. Many of her contemporaries saw her as an extraordinary figure, capable of attaining uncommon levels of intimacy with God. However, the reform of the Carmelite Order that she spearheaded generated tensions among its members, especially among those who felt threatened by the changes she proposed. For the Discalced Carmelites, her work became a model of inspiration and an essential spiritual reference; for others, it represented a source of challenges and even internal conflicts.

In broader society, the reception was also mixed. For many, Teresa was a courageous woman and a visionary who dared to express her experiences in a way few in her time would have attempted. At a time when the role of women was severely limited, she broke boundaries and became a symbol of what can be achieved through deep faith and resolute will. Nevertheless, there were also those who viewed her as a controversial figure, both because of the unconventional nature of her mystical experiences and the active role she assumed in reforming her Order. Over time, her person and her work gained increasing recognition, culminating in her canonization and her proclamation as a Doctor of the Church—an affirmation of her enduring legacy as one of the great mystics and theologians in Christian history.

This edition has a distinctly pedagogical character, which was also a vocation of the Saint's original text. For this reason, each chapter has been accompanied by commentary, highlighting the main ideas so that the reader has the opportunity to become familiar with them through a second reading. The commentaries aim to

deepen the message of Teresa, offering a second layer of reading that emphasizes the essential points and facilitates their understanding.

In these commentaries, I have introduced historical and psychological references, as well as connections with other works and mystics, thereby enriching the context and offering the reader a broader and deeper view of Teresian thought. In particular, I have drawn parallels between the teachings of Saint Teresa and those of *A Course in Miracles*, a contemporary thought system that, like the Saint's work, may be regarded as a Christian-rooted manual of holiness. *A Course in Miracles* shares many elements with the spiritual path Teresa describes, especially regarding the search for inner truth and the personal relationship with the divine.

By presenting the similarities and differences between these two approaches to spirituality, I seek to build a bridge between the mindset of sixteenth-century Spain and that of today's world. This allows the modern reader to better understand and embrace the Saint's work by finding in it resonances with contemporary teachings more familiar to their cultural horizon. Thus, the references to *A Course in Miracles* not only enrich the reading but also facilitate the practical application of Teresian teachings in today's context.

I have taken great care to ensure that Saint Teresa's words do not lose their force, that her thought is not diluted in the comfort of simplified language, but rather reaches those who approach it with an open heart with renewed vigor. I have replaced words and expressions that would seem strange today with more accessible ones, without sacrificing the direct and sincere character that defines the author. In doing so, I have sought to preserve Teresa's warm, intimate, and vibrant tone, aware that each of her words is a window into the soul of a woman who dared to recount, without reserve, her experience of encountering God.

I invite the modern reader to walk alongside Teresa, to be imbued with her experiences and teachings, and to enjoy this spiritual journey, as relevant today as it was centuries ago. In this renewed text, Teresa remains the friend who shares her doubts, her ecstasies, and also her daily struggles. My hope is that this translation will help her words continue to touch hearts, open inner paths, and remind us, as she herself teaches, that the journey toward truth and faith is always possible—and always within reach for those who dare to embark upon it.

On Spiritual Knowledge

At the outset of reading *The Book of Her Life*, it is important to remember that we are not dealing with an autobiography in the modern sense of the term, nor with a doctrinal treatise. What Teresa of Ávila offers is, above all, the testimony of an inner journey, of a transformation of consciousness that unfolds through prayer, affective experience, spiritual discernment, and a radical listening to the Mystery.

To properly understand the nature of this kind of narrative, it is helpful to distinguish between two philosophical approaches to knowledge: epistemology and gnoseology.

Epistemology is the discipline that studies the criteria for the validity of knowledge. It inquires into the rational, empirical, or logical foundations that allow us to affirm that something is true. From this perspective, knowledge must be justifiable, transmissible, and verifiable. Applied to the fields of history, science, or philosophy, this perspective has been essential for the construction of rigorous and critical knowledge. However, traditional epistemology tends to exclude from its scope those forms of knowledge that do not conform to its demands for objectivity, such as mystical experience.

Gnoseology, by contrast, is concerned with the act of knowing in all its forms. It is not limited to demonstrable knowledge, but also considers intuitive, symbolic, affective, and contemplative knowing. From this standpoint, spiritual experience is not a deviation, but a full expression of the human capacity to access reality in ways that cannot be reduced to instrumental reason. Gnoseology recognizes that there are modes of knowing that rest not on proof, but on inner transformation, on certainties that are not argued but lived.

Teresa clearly belongs to this second tradition. What she narrates in her *Book of Her Life* is not intended to persuade from the outside, but to bear witness from within. When she writes, “*It is a glorious madness, a celestial frenzy, where true wisdom is learned in an indescribably pleasurable manner.*” (16, 1), she is not describing a psychological hypothesis, but an experiential form of knowing that breaks with conventional categories. And when she says, “*God engraves in the soul’s deepest depths what He wishes her to understand, without words, images, or forms...*” (27, 6), she refers to a kind of knowing that does not pass through discursive comprehension, but through a deep, direct intelligibility that impresses itself upon the soul with the clarity of lived experience.

From a classical epistemological perspective, many of Teresa's statements might seem unfounded or unverifiable. But from a gnoseological perspective open to the full range of human experience, those same statements reveal a form of knowledge that radically transforms the subject. Teresa offers no arguments, but traces of a path; she does not develop concepts, but shares states of consciousness. When she says, "*In this state, even the body becomes an obstacle, and any attempt to communicate this joy becomes a burden. If the soul manages to be completely united in this joy, it cannot even desire or do anything else. If it can, then it is no longer in full union*" (18, 1), she is describing an experience of inner unification in which the usual categories of thought dissolve.

In another passage, she confesses, "*If the soul tries to read, it cannot distinguish or clearly recognize the letters; it sees that something is written, but since the intellect does not cooperate, it cannot read it even if it tries. It hears but does not understand what it listens to.*" (18, 10). This testimony suspends our common ideas of knowledge as a controlled and deliberate act. In mystical experience, to know is to be filled—not to dominate the object of knowledge, but to be transformed by it.

And when Teresa says, "*It contemplates everything without becoming entangled in anything and feels shame for the time it wasted entangling itself in vain pursuits.*" (20, 25), she directly challenges the notion that knowledge is always the fruit of study or rational effort. There are moments when the soul accesses a direct, unmediated understanding that she describes as "understanding without understanding" or as "infused wisdom."

Reading Teresa, therefore, requires a different attitude from the one we adopt toward a philosophical essay or systematic theological text. It demands a gnoseological openness: allowing her testimony to resonate with our own experience, without rushing to judge it by external criteria. As Teresa says: "*It seems that there, without words, all is understood.*" (27, 10). And in this context, "without words" means opening oneself to a form of knowledge that is embodied, alive, profoundly personal, and transformative.

This work does not so much call to be analyzed as to be accompanied. And in that accompaniment, if we allow ourselves to be touched by the authenticity of her experience, we may discover within ourselves a form of knowing we had not suspected: a wisdom born of silence, of love, and of presence.

Teresa: Woman, Writer, and Mystic

To speak of Teresa of Ávila is to delve into a world of words emerging from the depths of a tumultuous era and a life marked by a constant struggle between submission and the need for expression. During her years at the Convent of the Incarnation in Ávila, Castile was a hotbed of sociocultural change. The discovery of the New World, the Council of Trent, and the growing spiritual rigidity of the Inquisition defined the landscape. Amid this whirlwind, Teresa began to shape her voice—a voice that, though often met with imposed silences, found its own paths to be heard.

When books in the vernacular were banned in 1559, Teresa suffered the loss of works that had nurtured her spiritual formation. Yet this moment of dispossession also marked a turning point. Stripped of the external authorities that had guided her learning, she turned to her own experience. Her “living book,” as she called it, emerged from her mystical experiences and a pedagogical drive to share with other women, who lacked access to Latin, what she had discovered herself. In the act of transforming personal experience into written word, her literary authority began to take shape.

Teresa wrote during a time when Inquisitorial scrutiny shaped every published word. Far from intimidating her, this control pushed her to explore the folds of language, finding ways to speak without explicitly saying. With unparalleled skill, she navigated silences and allusions to convey messages that bypassed the barriers of censorship. In her writings, the interplay of knowledge, speech, and silence becomes a constant dance—a strategy that allowed her to construct a discourse without directly challenging male or ecclesiastical authority.

In this precarious balance, Teresa also rooted her writings in divine authority. The presence of God in her words not only legitimized her discourse to her contemporaries but also allowed her to project her voice without seeming to contradict theologians, confessors, or superiors. Despite this apparent submission, she never fully renounced her identity as a writer. Teresa was keenly aware of her ability to shape language and fought for a space where she could define herself on her own terms, without being merely an echo of the divine.

Teresa of Ávila had to contend with a world that gave her neither space nor voice. She was born into an environment filled with barriers, where her status as a woman, her descent from Jewish converts, and her provincial bourgeois background placed her at a disadvantage. Added to this was her identity as a mystic—a condition the

Inquisition often associated with heresy, especially in women. But Teresa displayed remarkable intelligence and cunning to ensure her voice was not silenced. She wrote at the command of her confessors or as a fulfillment of divine will, shielding herself from accusations of ambition or vanity. Yet recent research reveals that Teresa deeply enjoyed writing, finding in it a source of joy and purpose.

Her carefully crafted rhetoric emphasized her humility. She spoke of her “many sins” and “lack of education” as a strategy to avoid being seen as a threat. This apparent submission was, in fact, a tactic to share her experiences. She herself acknowledged that “it is enough to be a woman to have one’s wings fall,” but she never let this stop her. Works like *The Book of Her Life* showcase her honesty and her ability to balance the narrative of her personal story with teachings that guided others on the path of prayer. Although in public she claimed writing was a burden, in private she hinted at how essential writing was to her soul.

One reason her work remains so powerful is that Teresa did not write from theory but from the heart of her lived experiences. Often, her audience was God, whom she addressed with tenderness and familiarity, as though every page were a love letter. She sought to convey the passion of her divine encounters—the fire that consumed her and that she wanted to share with others. She succeeded in expressing the ineffable, making the divine both accessible and desirable.

After her death in 1582, her figure was reshaped by the forces of orthodoxy. Her works were manipulated to align with post-Tridentine ideals of sainthood, relegating her literary authorship in favor of her sanctity. Yet, even beneath this layer of idealization, the writer Teresa endures—the woman who found cracks in the structures that sought to silence her. In those cracks, Teresa discovered how to redefine the boundaries of the sayable, establishing herself as one of the greatest literary voices of her time.

Reflecting on the courage required for every word she wrote, on the silent battle she waged against the barriers of gender and class, and on how she left a legacy that continues to inspire those who approach it, moves and motivates all of us—her readers and students of sanctity.

Teresa: Human Love, Divine Love

In her *Book of Her Life*, Teresa of Ávila offers us a vision of love that transcends the boundaries between the divine and the human, between the spiritual and the philosophical. Teresa not only lived a relationship with the sacred but explored it through a language enriched by both erotic passion and a mysticism that seeks the soul's truth. In her vision of love, God is not an abstract concept but a presence felt with both body and soul, transforming every human experience into something profound and full of meaning. When Teresa speaks of her love for Christ, she conveys a sense of something that surpasses religious devotion, resembling an intensification of human love in its purest and most dazzling form.

For Teresa, the image of Christ is both the source and the driving force of her love. This love is not merely spiritual but also physical and sensory. To her, love for Christ begins with the perception of His figure, initially diffuse but later clarified in the heart of the beholder. It is an image with the power to captivate, to seduce, to draw Teresa out of herself and into something greater. She describes this process with a boldness and eloquence rarely found in mystical literature: Teresa sees Christ with the "eyes of the soul," a vision so vivid that it leaves an indelible mark on her being. This type of experience can be understood as a kind of infatuation, not so different from human love; rather, it is an extension of that same feeling, a form of love that intensifies what we already know, lifting it to a transcendental plane.

What is most striking is how Teresa finds meaning in the divine through her experience as a passionate, embodied human being. For her, loving God is not different from loving with the full intensity of human passion; in fact, it means loving with an elevated, superlative form of eroticism. This perspective invites us to reconsider the role of faith within the context of love. Teresa's philosophy of love is grounded in the conviction that love for Christ is not merely an act of faith but a genuine movement of the soul, an impulse that compels her to accompany Him, to be with Him in His moments of solitude, as in the Garden of Gethsemane. To love Christ, for Teresa, is a continuous state where Christ is always present, and her love becomes the axis of her entire existence.

Another fundamental aspect of Teresa's philosophy of love is her ability to transform what is intimate and personal into a universal truth. When she speaks of her love for Christ, Teresa reminds us that we have all, in one way or another, experienced that first love that overwhelms us, making us see the other as almost divine, radiating a beauty that illuminates everything else. In her writings, Teresa turns this

experience into something accessible to all, an invitation for each person to live their own version of that love, understanding that the divine is not something distant or foreign but resides in the depths of our being.

Teresa of Ávila also stands out for her understanding of humility and detachment as essential elements of true love. For her, detachment means letting go of anything that prevents us from giving ourselves fully to the beloved. It means ceasing to seek security in worldly things to focus on a higher and purer love. Humility is not merely a moral posture but a disposition of the soul that allows it to receive divine grace, opening the doors for love to flourish without limits. Through this renunciation and detachment, Teresa finds true freedom—a freedom that can only be found when one loves unconditionally.

For Teresa, love is not something that can be understood solely with the mind; it is a state of being, a way of living in truth and in the presence of the other. She describes mystical union as a state of "glorious madness," a celestial delirium that detaches us from all that ties us to the mundane and allows us to live in the joy of God. In this sense, Teresa's philosophy of love becomes a path to truth—a truth that is not reached through speculative knowledge but through the direct experience of love. The experience of loving God, as Teresa describes it, is one of fulfillment that illuminates and transforms all that we are.

Ultimately, Teresa of Ávila's philosophy of love is an invitation to live love fully, without reservations or fear. It is a love expressed in both the everyday and the divine, one that makes no distinction between human affection and love for God, for the two merge and enhance each other. Teresa teaches us that to love is, ultimately, an act of courage and total surrender, an act that leads us to discover the true nature of our being and to achieve a union with the divine that transforms our existence into something rich with meaning and beauty.

Teresa's Demon

In the vast Christian tradition, the figure of the devil has held a central place as the embodiment of evil and the adversary of the soul seeking union with God. However, not all voices within that tradition have resonated in the same tone. In the case of Teresa of Ávila, her vision of the devil diverges from the more terrifying and spectacular depictions that dominated the early modern period, offering instead a more complex, subtle, and fundamentally spiritual image.

This appendix proposes a reading of *The Book of Her Life* through the lens of its demonological discourse, highlighting how Teresa constructs, throughout its pages, the image of a feeble, conquerable devil who operates primarily through deception and confusion, and whose power fades in the light of contemplation.

A deceptive, not omnipotent, demon

Far from conceiving the devil as an autonomous force that rivals God, Teresa presents him as an illusionist, whose main strategy is to disturb the imagination of the one who prays. His sphere of action is limited to inner suggestions, erroneous thoughts, and disordered emotions. In this sense, her demon inherits the Augustinian tradition, which sees him as vanquished since the crucifixion and subordinate to divine will.

This devil cannot act without God's permission, and his influence can paradoxically result in the soul's benefit by testing and strengthening it. Temptation then becomes a field of spiritual learning, rather than an insurmountable threat. Teresa herself affirms this emphatically: "I care no more for them than for flies" (ch. 25). This comparison, far from being casual, operates as a rhetorical minimization that strips him of drama and power.

The true weapons: humility, discernment, and prayer

In *The Book of Her Life*, one of the greatest dangers Teresa identifies is spiritual deception: confusing God's action with that of the devil or with one's own desires. This risk affects not only the praying soul but also the confessors tasked with discerning it. For this reason, the saint insists that knowledge of the devil's ways is key to neutralizing him. To recognize his tricks is to strip him of his power.

Humility is presented as the most effective defense. Not a false humility instilled by the devil to discourage spiritual pursuit, but a genuine humility that does not renounce the desire for holiness or the longing for union with God. "Sometimes the devil made me believe that it was presumptuous to desire such great things; other times, that it was impossible to attain them being as I was" (ch. 23). This distinction

allows Teresa to defend her practice without falling under the accusation of pride, while also guiding other souls in similar situations.

The devil as an explanation for external resistance

In her account, Teresa also attributes to the devil many of the obstacles encountered in the path of Carmelite reform: opposition from prelates, logistical difficulties, internal divisions within convents... Every obstacle is interpreted as part of the spiritual battle. However, this vision does not generate fear but determination. The devil acts because the work is good. His presence, rather than discouraging, confirms the chosen path. “It seems the devil is greatly distressed when a soul begins to give itself completely to God” (ch. 13).

An empowering experience

Teresa’s spiritual growth also transforms her view of the devil. In the early stages, there is doubt, fear of being deceived, anguish over whether her inner experiences come from God, the devil, or her own mind. But as she becomes more grounded in contemplation, Teresa receives an inner light that allows her to discern clearly. That light, which she recognizes as God-given, becomes a source of authority and freedom. “A clarity of truths came to me so great that, even if I wanted to, I could not doubt” (ch. 27).

This experience culminates in a kind of spiritual empowerment. Prayer strengthens, teaches, and protects her. The devil is no longer a threat, but an opportunity to love God more and trust more in His protection. “Although the devil may place great fears before her, if she perseveres in prayer, all becomes smooth” (ch. 8).

Conclusion: a theology of inner victory

In *The Book of Her Life*, the devil is not the protagonist. He does not take center stage, nor does he dominate the narrative. Rather, he is a secondary actor whose power diminishes as prayer deepens. The true story is that of the soul which, despite fears and uncertainties, allows itself to be guided by divine light until it attains an inner freedom that no one can take away.

Through this discourse, Teresa not only defends herself from potential inquisitors, but also offers a hopeful and liberating vision of spiritual struggle. Her demonology, far from fostering fear, reinforces trust in God and in the soul’s ability to overcome trials through faith, knowledge, and love. In turbulent times and under constant scrutiny, this perspective was undoubtedly a bold affirmation of inner freedom and an invitation to live contemplation without fear.

How to Speak the Ineffable Without Being Silenced

The Book of Her Life was written by Teresa of Ávila in a historical and cultural context that granted her no authority to speak publicly—especially not on complex spiritual matters. A woman without academic training or knowledge of Latin, chronically ill, and suspect due to her status as a visionary in an age marked by religious scandal, Teresa understood that every word she wrote could be scrutinized and potentially silenced. The result is a deeply personal work that nevertheless deploys a sophisticated rhetorical strategy: *attenuation*.

Attenuation is a rhetorical technique by which a speaker softens or modulates the impact of their words, either to protect themselves, to safeguard the listener, or to increase the acceptance of what is being said. In Teresa's writing, this strategy becomes a means of discursive survival: it allows her to affirm her mystical experiences without openly challenging the ecclesiastical hierarchy that monitors her. This is not mere politeness, but a deliberate method of inserting herself into a male-dominated discourse space without diminishing the strength of her testimony.

Throughout *The Book of Her Life*, Teresa makes extensive use of attenuating devices. She uses diminutives ("*pobrecitas*," "*mujercitas*," "*rinconcito*") to disarm statements that might seem harsh or presumptuous. She employs modal verbs ("*it seems*," "*I believe*," "*it might be*") and expressions of doubt to frame her insights as personal impressions rather than doctrinal assertions. She often narrates her own experiences in the third person or in impersonal constructions, as if they belonged to someone else. She even depersonalizes verb tenses or introduces conditional and subjunctive moods that diminish the tone of certainty.

Teresa also restricts the scope of her claims with expressions like "*as far as I can tell*" or "*to the extent of my understanding*." She justifies her statements, corrects herself in real time, asks forgiveness from the reader or her confessor, and offers tactical concessions before asserting her point. She sometimes implicates her interlocutor ("*your reverence will understand this better*," "*as your reverence well knows*") to diffuse her personal responsibility. These devices not only soften her message, but also construct an image of a humble, dependent, obedient author—an image that, in her time, was the only one that could gain her a hearing.

This strategy serves three purposes. First, it protects Teresa: it lowers the risk of censure and shields her from accusations of vanity, heresy, or arrogance. Second, it preserves the dignity of her interlocutors: she shows deference to her confessors

and readers, avoiding anything that might be perceived as presumptuous or superior. And third, it ensures the communicative effectiveness of her message. As pragmatics has shown, there is no real communication without the listener's consent. Teresa does not merely want to speak—she wants to be understood and believed.

This strategy of attenuation should not be mistaken for weakness. On the contrary, it reveals spiritual and rhetorical intelligence. Teresa keenly understands the unspoken rules of her time and uses them skillfully to say what she wishes without being silenced. She knows she cannot present herself as a teacher, so she cloaks herself in ignorance. She cannot claim authorship in her own right, so she presents herself as an instrument of God. Yet beneath this appearance of docility, a firm and persuasive voice emerges—one that articulates one of the most profound and complex mystical experiences in the history of Christian spirituality.

Far from being merely a stylistic resource, attenuation in *The Book of Her Life* reveals the tension between the authenticity of a spiritual experience and the power structures that seek to contain it. Through this strategy, Teresa is able to speak the ineffable without being censured; to speak with authority without seeming authoritarian; to be, in short, a woman who writes, teaches, and transforms in a time that would have preferred her silence.

Intellectual Acknowledgments

The present edition of *The Book of Her Life* by Saint Teresa of Ávila, along with the accompanying commentaries and essays, is the result of an intensive period of study and reflection. Over this time, I have consulted dozens of scholarly articles, monographs, and essays on Teresa's life, work, and thought, as well as on her historical, linguistic, and theological context. Each of these readings has left its mark, directly or indirectly, on the development of this work.

However, I wish to express particular gratitude to several authors whose writings have been especially inspiring and fruitful in the composition of specific essays included in this edition.

First, I am deeply grateful to Facundo Sebastián Macías, whose brilliant study *El discurso demonológico en Teresa de Ávila: la construcción del endeble demonio frente a la contemplación* (Tiempos Modernos, no. 29, 2014) was a decisive source for the article titled *Teresa's Demon*. His lucid, rigorous, and well-contextualized approach enabled me to understand Teresa's strategy of disarming fear through a theology grounded in humility and self-knowledge.

I also wish to acknowledge the influence of Francisco García-Rubio's article *El inconsciente ideológico teresiano: los escenarios metafóricos animistas del cuerpo y el alma en el "Libro de su vida"*, which helped illuminate the treatment of love within Teresa's mystical experience. His insights substantially informed the essay *Teresa: Human Love, Divine Love*, in which I attempt to show the continuity between human love and divine union as Teresa lived and expressed it.

Likewise, I express my gratitude to Rosa Navarro Durán and to other scholars who have worked on female authorship in the mystical literature of the Spanish Golden Age. Their studies on the rhetoric of humility, inquisitorial censorship, and the construction of female spiritual authority were instrumental in the writing of *Teresa: Woman, Writer, Mystic*. These works helped me to deepen my understanding of how Teresa skillfully navigated the constraints of her time to find a voice that, without compromising her devotion, boldly affirmed her identity as an author.

Finally, I am especially thankful for the work of María José Pérez González, whose article *Estrategias de atenuación en el Libro de la Vida* was key to the development of *How to Speak the Ineffable Without Being Silenced*. Her detailed and well-documented analysis enabled me to grasp the rhetorical richness with which Teresa

modulates her discourse, and how this strategy allowed her to affirm her experience without being silenced.

This acknowledgment does not imply full agreement with the positions of these authors, nor does it seek to limit the interpretation of their works to the use I have made of them. My intent is to express an intellectual and spiritual debt to those who, from various perspectives, have contributed to revealing new layers of meaning in the work of Teresa of Ávila and to highlighting the extraordinary power of her voice.

Chronological Biography

1515 (March 28): Born in Gotarrendura (Ávila), Spain, to Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda and Beatriz de Ahumada. Her birth name is Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada.

1527: At the age of 12, she loses her mother—a deeply formative experience that leads her to take the Virgin Mary as her spiritual mother.

1531: Sent to the convent of the Augustinian nuns of Santa María de Gracia in Ávila, where she begins to feel drawn to religious life.

1535 (November 2): Enters the Carmelite convent of the Incarnation in Ávila, against her father's initial wishes.

1537 (November 3): Professes as a Carmelite and takes the name Teresa of Ávila.

1538–1539: Suffers a severe illness that brings her to the brink of death and ushers in a period of intense spiritual introspection.

1542: After recovering, she resumes life at the convent, though she begins to feel dissatisfaction with the laxity of the Carmelite Rule.

1554: Experiences a profound spiritual conversion upon contemplating a deeply wounded image of Christ—an event that marks the true beginning of her mystical life.

1560: Takes private vows to pursue a life of greater perfection and begins to consider reforming the Carmelite Order. Her mystical visions and states become more intense.

1562 (August 24): Founds the convent of Saint Joseph in Ávila, the first house of the Carmelite Reform, established under strict conditions of poverty, prayer, and enclosure.

1565: Completes the writing of *The Book of Her Life*, a spiritual autobiography composed out of obedience, recounting her mystical experiences and interior development.

1567: Meets Fray John of the Cross and inspires the reform of the male branch of the Carmelite Order, giving rise to the Discalced Carmelites.

1568: The first Discalced Carmelite monastery is founded in Duruelo, under the guidance of Saint John of the Cross.

1571: Appointed prioress of the Convent of the Incarnation in Ávila, where she faces resistance from the non-reformed nuns.

1573: Completes *The Way of Perfection*, a work written to guide her nuns in the interior life and contemplative prayer.

1575–1577: Encounters opposition from the Calced Carmelites, who resist the Reform. Endures ecclesiastical trials and interrogations, particularly during her time in Seville.

1577: Writes *The Interior Castle* or *The Mansions*, her most profound mystical work, in which she portrays the soul as a castle inhabited by God. It will be published posthumously in 1588.

1582 (October 4): Dies in Alba de Tormes (Salamanca) at the age of 67. Her last words are: “At last, Lord, I am a daughter of the Church.”

1610: *The Book of the Foundations* is published for the first time, recounting her travels, hardships, and experiences in founding new reformed convents.

1614: Beatified by Pope Paul V.

1622: Canonized by Pope Gregory XV, alongside Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Francis Xavier, Saint Philip Neri, and Saint Isidore the Farmer.

1970: Proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI, becoming the first woman to receive this title.

PROLOGUE

1. I would have liked that, just as I was instructed and permitted to write about my way of praying and the graces the Lord has granted me, I had also been given the freedom to speak in detail and with clarity about my great sins and my wretched life. This would have been a great consolation to me. However, this has not been allowed, and I have been placed under many restrictions in this regard. Therefore, I ask, for the love of the Lord, that whoever reads this account always bear in mind that my life has been so miserable that I find no saint who returned to God with whom I can compare myself. For I understand that, once called by the Lord, they did not return to offend Him. I, on the other hand, not only grew worse but seemed to deliberately resist the graces His Majesty granted me, like someone who, feeling more obligated to serve, also realized that they could not repay even a small part of what they owed.

2. Blessed be He forever, who waited so long for me. I beg Him with all my heart to grant me the grace to tell this story with clarity and truth, as my confessors have instructed me to do, and because I know that the Lord has willed it for some time, though I had not dared to do so before. May it be for His glory and praise, and so that those who read this, knowing me better, might help me in my weakness to serve Him in at least some small measure of what I owe Him. May all things praise Him forever. Amen.¹

¹ Commentary on the Prologue

In the Prologue, Teresa openly states the reasons that led her to write her account. Above all, she does so out of obedience. It was at the express request of her confessor, Fray García de Toledo, that she began to put her story into writing—at a time when her mystical experiences—visions, locutions, ecstasies—were arousing suspicion and unease in certain sectors of the Church. Previously, other confessors, such as Fray Pedro Ibáñez, had encouraged her to seriously discern what she was experiencing within, helping her to interpret those phenomena as gifts from God rather than deceptions of the devil. But it was under Fray García's guidance that she received the clear mandate to recount everything in detail.

This commission placed her at a crossroads: on one hand, her profound humility made her reluctant to speak about herself; on the other, obedience—which for her was sacred—compelled her to overcome her inner resistance. This tension is felt from the very first paragraph of the *Book*, and it permeates the entire work. Teresa writes, yes, out of obedience, but also out of a desire to bear witness to God’s action in her soul, so that others might come to understand the greatness of divine love and the importance of the path of prayer.

CHAPTER 1

In which it is discussed how the Lord began to awaken this soul in her childhood toward virtuous things and the importance of having virtuous parents.

1. Having virtuous and God-fearing parents would have been enough, if I were not so wretched, combined with the help the Lord gave me, to become a good person. My father had a great love for reading good books and had them translated into the vernacular so that we, his children, could read them. This, together with the care my mother took to ensure that we prayed and became devoted to Our Lady and certain saints, began to awaken in me, as I recall, from the age of six or seven, a desire for virtue. I was greatly aided by the fact that my parents encouraged only virtue in us, as both of them were very virtuous themselves.

My father was a man of great charity toward the poor and deep compassion for the sick, even toward the servants; so much so that he never allowed slaves in his household because he felt immense pity for them. Once, a slave belonging to his brother stayed at our home, and he treated her with the same care as his own children. He said he could not bear, out of compassion, for anyone not to be free. He was a man of great integrity. He was never heard to swear or gossip, and he was exceptionally honest.

2. My mother also possessed many virtues and endured her life with great illnesses. She was extremely modest. Despite her great beauty, she never showed vanity, nor did she seem to notice it, for when she died, at barely thirty-three years of age, she was already dressing as if she were much older. She was very gentle and had great understanding. She suffered much hardship in her life but died as a true Christian.¹

3. There were three sisters and nine brothers among us. All, by God's goodness, turned out virtuous—except me, who was my father's favorite. It seems that, before I began to offend God, there were

reasons for this favoritism, as when I think of the good inclinations the Lord had given me, I feel great sorrow for how poorly I took advantage of them.

4. As for my brothers, none discouraged me from serving God. There was one who was almost my age, and we read the lives of the saints together. He was the one I loved most, although I also felt a great affection for the others, and they loved me in return. When we read about the martyrdoms the saints suffered for God, it seemed to me they paid a very small price to go and enjoy Him, and I greatly desired to die in this way—not out of love, as I thought, but out of the desire to enjoy soon the great blessings I read about in heaven. So, with this brother, we looked for ways to achieve it. We planned to go to the land of the Moors, begging for the love of God to be beheaded. It seems that the Lord gave us courage even at that tender age, though we never found a way, as having parents seemed to us the greatest obstacle. **II**

We were greatly moved by reading that punishment or reward was eternal, and we often spoke about it. We would spend long periods repeating to each other: "Forever, ever, ever!" In doing so, it seemed the Lord was engraving in us from childhood the path of truth. **III**

5. Seeing that it was impossible to go somewhere to be killed for God, we decided we would become hermits. In an orchard that was part of our home, we tried as best we could to build hermitages, piling small stones that quickly collapsed. Thus, we found no way to fulfill our desires. Now, in remembering this, I am moved to see how early the Lord gave me what I later lost through my own fault.

6. I gave alms as much as my means allowed, though they were very limited, and I sought moments of solitude to pray my devotions, which were numerous, especially the Rosary, as my mother was very devoted to it and instilled that devotion in us. I loved playing with other girls at being nuns and creating monasteries, and it seems that,

deep down, I wanted to be one, although not as much as I desired the things I have already mentioned.

7. I remember that when my mother died, I was about twelve years old, perhaps a little younger. Realizing what I had lost, I went in distress to an image of Our Lady and begged her, with many tears, to be my mother. It seems to me that this plea, made with such simplicity, has helped me because I have clearly experienced that this sovereign Virgin has always aided me whenever I have entrusted myself to her, and ultimately, she has brought me back under her protection.

Now I deeply regret not being steadfast in the good intentions that began in me at that time.

8. Oh, my Lord! It seems You were determined to save me. May it be so, for Your Majesty's sake. And in showing me so many mercies as You have, would You not also have wanted, not for my benefit, but for Your honor, to prevent this dwelling, where You so constantly desired to reside, from becoming so defiled? Even saying this exhausts me because I know that all the fault was mine, for I do not believe there was anything left You could have done to make me wholly Yours from that age.

When I think of blaming my parents, I cannot do so either, for in them I saw nothing but goodness and care for my well-being.

But when I passed that age and began to recognize the natural gifts the Lord had given me (which, according to others, were many), instead of being grateful to Him for them, I used them to offend Him, as I will now recount.^{IV}

^I Perhaps the first thing that stands out in this chapter is that Teresa was not born into just any family environment, but into a very particular setting, surrounded by deeply devout souls and a strong moral consciousness. From an early age, she breathed an atmosphere steeped in the aspiration toward the transcendent. The education she received and the emotional bonds she formed in childhood—with her loved ones and with the world—undoubtedly shaped, from a very young age, her

sense of self, her understanding of God, and her perception of reality. This is inevitable.

II It is no surprise that in their childhood games, both Teresa and her younger brother Rodrigo de Cepeda y Ahumada, four years her junior, would emulate the lives of their heroes: the saints of the Church. The rest of their lives was a faithful and honest continuation of that early vocation. Teresa sought and found holiness through her religious profession, while Rodrigo became a soldier, dying at the hands of the so-called “infidel” Indigenous peoples of the Americas after a life of extraordinary adventures. In the end, both fulfilled their childhood goals and brought their dreams to life, each in their own way.

III Particularly significant is the impact that her first encounter with an absolute idea had on her, as highlighted in her brief account of those early years: “We spent long hours repeating to one another: Forever, forever, forever!” Eternity—Teresa’s *forever*—is the transcendent dimension of time, the dwelling place of God. It is no wonder that the boundless magnitude of this timeless idea overwhelmed the sensitive mind of the young Teresa, for it is a concept inaccessible to the personal mind, which is accustomed only to the finite.

IV Commentary on Chapter 1

From the very first lines, Teresa reveals that her spiritual journey did not emerge from a void, nor was it the result of a sudden conversion; rather, it had deep roots in the family context in which she was raised. Her opening narrative underscores the decisive importance of a childhood surrounded by virtuous examples, where the reading of saints’ lives, Marian devotion, compassion for the poor, and unaffected honesty were lived as everyday values. In this sense, Teresa elevates family experience to a theological category: the human soul is fertile ground, but it is parental care that serves as the rain that awakens it.

The chapter is not a mere nostalgic recollection of childhood, but a confession shaped by memory—a memory that, in contemplating its beginnings, grieves over its failings. From the vantage point of her present writing, Teresa judges her deviations with severity, yet always with a clear awareness of the mercy that has sustained her. This tension between what could have been and what was defines her entire autobiography: a struggle between God’s prevenient grace and human frailty resisting it.

Especially moving is the episode from her childhood in which she and her brother plan to flee to the land of the Moors in order to be martyred. Though the plan fails, Teresa recognizes in that childish impulse the seed of an authentic vocation. It is not heroism that moves her, but the desire to be with God as soon as possible. This distinction is essential: even in its most immature form, her longing is not born of obligation, but of love.

The scene of the hermitages they build in the family garden reveals, with tenderness and depth, a desire for a life apart from the world. It is not mere play: it is the

symbolic gesture of a soul that already senses—if not fully understands—its contemplative destiny. Solitary prayer, almsgiving, a fondness for the rosary, and games in which they pretend to be nuns all reinforce this inner inclination that will later be fulfilled.

The moment when, motherless, Teresa tearfully entrusts herself to the Virgin as her new mother marks a decisive turning point. The simplicity of the act and its future resonance—“she has always helped me”—bear witness to a living and filial relationship with Mary, one that remains a constant throughout her work. It is not an external devotion, but an affectionate and real bond, lived with the trust of one who knows she has been heard.

The chapter’s conclusion, tinged with sorrow over the contrast between the gifts she received and the poor use she would later make of them, introduces the penitential tone that runs through the entire autobiography. Yet even here, her lament is not bitter: it is the humble acknowledgment that God did all things well, and that only human freedom can squander what was sown. In this way, the first chapter inaugurates a narrative not centered on Teresa’s merits, but on the mercy of God, who pursued her from childhood with tireless love.

CHAPTER 2

How she gradually lost these virtues and the importance of associating with virtuous people during childhood.

1. I believe I began to stray for the reasons I will now recount. Sometimes I reflect on the mistake parents make when they do not ensure that their children are always surrounded by examples of virtue in every aspect. Although my mother was as virtuous as I have mentioned, by the time I reached the age of reason, I barely learned from her virtues, and instead, the wrong things I saw harmed me greatly.

She had a fondness for books of chivalry, though she never read them to the detriment of her duties. She would read them while working, perhaps to distract herself from the great challenges she faced or to keep us occupied and away from other dangers. However, my father was so concerned about it that he did everything possible to prevent her from reading them in front of us.

I began to imitate her and acquired the habit of reading these books. This small fault I observed in my mother was enough to cool my desire for virtue and to start committing other faults. I thought there was nothing wrong with dedicating many hours of the day and night to such an empty pastime, even though I did so in secret from my father. My obsession grew to the extent that if I did not have a new book, I felt discontented.

2. Gradually, I began to become overly concerned with my appearance. I became obsessed with looking good and pleasing others. I took great care of my hands, my hair, perfumes, and all the superficial things that could catch my attention. These vanities absorbed me greatly because I was very curious and meticulous. I had no ill intentions, for I never wished anyone to offend God because of me. However, I lived for many years with an excessive obsession with

cleanliness and details, which at the time seemed harmless but now I clearly see were detrimental.¹

In our home, my father allowed only close relatives to enter, as he was very modest. I wish he had been equally careful with some of my cousins. Now I understand the danger of associating, during the age when virtues should be formed, with people who not only lack them but also encourage indulging in worldly vanities.

My cousins were about my age, or a little older. We were always together. They loved me dearly, and I pleased them by conversing with them and listening to stories of their interests and nonsense, which were not at all good. The worst part was that this relationship began to incline my soul toward things that ultimately became the root of many of my errors.

3. If I could advise parents, I would tell them to be extremely careful about whom their children associate with during this stage of life because it is a very delicate period. Our nature tends more easily to evil than to good.

This happened to me. I had an older sister who was very honest and virtuous, but I did not take her as an example. Instead, I was influenced by a relative who often came to our home. Her behavior was so frivolous that my mother tried many times to keep her away from us, as if she sensed the harm she would cause me. However, she could not prevent it, as there were many reasons for her to enter our home.

I grew fond of this woman and spent much time with her, sharing conversations and amusements. She not only supported my pastimes but even introduced me to new vanities and spoke to me of her own experiences and superficialities, further fostering my inclination toward them.

It was when I began associating with her, around fourteen years of age or a bit more, that my soul started to lean toward what would become my greatest problem. Up until that point, I had not lost my fear of God, nor had I committed mortal sins. I had a deep sense of

honor and would have done nothing to compromise it. This respect for my honor was so strong that no circumstance or person could have made me renounce it.

Oh, if only I had had the same strength to avoid going against God's honor that I had to preserve my reputation! I did not realize that, by protecting my honor in some respects, I was losing it in many others.

4. My obsession with maintaining my honor was extreme, yet I did not take the necessary means to preserve it completely. I only cared about not ruining it entirely, though I did not make enough efforts to protect it fully.^{II}

My father and my sister were concerned about this friendship and frequently reprimanded me. However, they could not prevent this woman from continuing to enter our home. I was also very skillful in keeping this relationship secret. Now, as I recall all this, I am astonished at the harm that a bad company can do. Had I not lived it, I would not believe it.

Especially during youth, a bad influence can cause enormous harm. This relationship changed my character so much that practically nothing remained of the natural inclination toward virtue that I had as a child. This woman and another friend with similar interests practically shaped my character toward superficiality.

5. Here I understand the great benefit of a good company.^{III} I am convinced that if, at that age, I had been surrounded by virtuous people, I would have persevered in virtue. If I had had someone then who taught me to fear God, my soul would have gained the strength not to fall.^{IV} But having lost that fear entirely, all I had left was the fear of losing my honor, and that fear tormented me in everything I did. I dared to do many things that went against my honor and against God, always thinking they would not be discovered.

6. At first, I thought that the bad influences I had were what caused me harm. However, the fault was not entirely theirs but mine, because later my own malice was enough to incline me toward evil. I

also had maids who gave me opportunities for all sorts of faults. If any of them had had the courage to advise me well, perhaps I would have benefited from it. But just as my affections blinded me, their interest blinded them.

Although I was not inclined toward very evil things, as I naturally abhorred dishonorable acts, I did enjoy frivolous pastimes and conversations. However, by putting myself in dangerous situations, I not only put myself at risk but also my father and brothers. God protected me from greater evils, making it clear that He sought to save me even against my own will. Still, my honor was damaged, and it aroused suspicions in my father.

It seems that no more than three months had passed since I began with these vanities when they decided to take me to a monastery in the city. There, young people like me were educated, though none had such base customs. Everything was done with great discretion: only I and a few relatives knew the reason. They took advantage of the fact that my sister had married and that I was left alone at home, without my mother, to do it without raising suspicion.

7. My father loved me dearly, and I was so skillful at hiding things that he would never have believed all the evil within me. Thus, I did not fall out of his favor. The time of my faults was brief, and although there were suspicions, nothing was clear. As for me, I was so afraid that my honor would be compromised that I did everything possible to keep it secret, though I did not think that what I was doing could not be hidden from God, who sees all.

Oh, my God! What harm comes from thinking that our faults can remain hidden from You! I am convinced that many evils would be avoided if we understood that it is not about protecting ourselves from people but about not displeasing You.

8. The first days in the monastery were very difficult for me, more because of the shame that my vanities had been discovered than for being there. But I was already tired of my previous life and still

greatly feared offending God. I tried to confess frequently, and that gave me some peace.

Within less than eight days, I was already feeling much more at ease and even happy to be there, more so than in my father's house. All the nuns loved me greatly, for the Lord gave me the grace to be pleasing wherever I was. Although at that time I was entirely opposed to the idea of becoming a nun, I was glad to see the life of those religious women, who were very honest, fervent, and reserved.

Despite this, the devil continued to tempt me, and some people from outside the monastery tried to disturb me by sending me messages. As there was no opportunity for them to reach me, nothing came of it.

My soul began to recover the good desires of my early childhood, and I realized the great favor God grants by placing someone in the company of good people. It seems that the Lord sought every possible way to bring me back to Him. Blessed be You, Lord, for Your patience with me! Amen.

9. There was one thing that could serve as a slight excuse, though my faults were many: the relationship I maintained was with someone whom I believed would end in marriage. Moreover, there were people, even those who heard my confessions, who assured me that in many things I was not offending God.^v

^vIn this chapter, Teresa—already deeply seasoned in spiritual matters—writes at the age of forty-seven about how books of chivalry and her own vanity drew her away from God in her youth. What might seem trivial to the average person is, to the saint, a cause for scandal.

To truly understand Teresa in the reproaches she directs at herself, one must not view her through the lens of the world—neither that of today nor that of five centuries ago. Hers is the retrospective gaze of someone whose mind is set on the highest goal: union with God. Her extreme sensitivity and distress over everything that once led her astray from her great love must be regarded with deep respect; Teresa is not mistaken. Turning one's gaze away from God is an abominable act in which we all, as human beings, inevitably fall—and yet rarely acknowledge. In this light, the

unease Teresa feels over her former distractions and frivolity becomes a powerful reminder of our profound need to forgive ourselves by forgiving others.

II Then there is the whole matter of honor, which weighs heavily on Teresa: her reputation, the judgments others may pass on her. These things concern her deeply. It has taken her much spiritual maturity to come to the realization that the only judgment that truly matters is God's. That is why she looks back in horror and exclaims, "O my God! What harm it does to think that our faults might remain hidden from You!"

III Teresa rightly warns us of the importance of keeping good company in youth. Human relationships are opportunities to convey to others the idea we hold of ourselves and, consequently, the idea we have of everything else—which, in the end, is nothing more than a projection of our own identity. In that exchange, we either reinforce that fundamental idea, the matrix of our worldview, or we reshape it by taking others as models.

IV One can only agree with Teresa in her warnings about the importance of choosing friends and mentors wisely. However, it is difficult to fully share her assertion that, had someone in her youth taught her to fear God, her soul would have found the strength not to fall. It is true that fear can dissuade us from certain inappropriate behaviors, but what we often call "fear" in this context is closer to prudence than to actual fear. Strictly speaking, the expression "fear of God" is an oxymoron, for fear and God are profoundly opposed concepts: God is love—the source and fullness of all love, and the only true reality. To teach others to fear God, understood as literal fear, is a deficient and spiritually barren pedagogy. Nevertheless, it is likely that Teresa's use of the term reflects more an ideological inertia of the spiritual pedagogy of her time, in which "fear of God" functioned as a conventional expression of reverence, humility, and awareness of one's own fragility. And the truth is, if there is one saint in the entire canon who relates to God with extraordinary closeness and familiarity, it is Teresa. Her way of speaking to God—affectionate, direct, even playful at times—contradicts any notion of a spirituality grounded in fear.

V Commentary on Chapter 2

In these paragraphs, Teresa offers one of the most profound and mature reflections in her early autobiography: the shift from an external view of guilt (the influence of others) to a deeply internalized understanding of her own spiritual responsibility. She acknowledges—without excuses—that the corruption of her soul was not merely the result of her surroundings, but of her own seduced will. This self-awareness does not stem from neurotic remorse, but from a longing for truth: Teresa has begun to view her life in the light of God, not of the world.

There is a striking honesty in her confession of how bad company, fear of losing her honor, and the skill of concealing her faults led her to live a double life. But she also offers a crucial lesson for the modern reader: the illusion that merely hiding our faults will keep us safe. Teresa un.masks that lie with a powerful statement that ought

to be inscribed in every awakened conscience: “What harm it does to think that our faults might remain hidden from You!”

Her entry into the monastery is presented not as punishment, but as redemption. It is not merely a change of place, but of spiritual atmosphere: the presence of honest and devout religious women awakens the first pure desires that she had buried beneath layers of vanity and fear. Teresa begins to discover—almost without realizing it—the principle at the heart of all spiritual renewal: it is not enough to turn away from evil; one must also return to the company of the good.

Finally, when she mentions that her confessors did not always find fault with her behavior, Teresa subtly introduces a disturbing element: spiritual error does not always come from rebellion, but can also stem from misguided direction by those meant to guide. This insight remains relevant today: many sincere souls go astray not out of malice, but from a lack of true discernment in their spiritual mentors.

Thus, in this part of her narrative, Teresa begins to move from guilt to awareness, from fear to awakening, and from worldly distraction to the first whisper of her vocation.

CHAPTER 3

How good company began to awaken her desires again and how the Lord began to enlighten her about the deceptions in which she had lived.

1. When I began to enjoy the good and holy conversation of a nun who slept with the young women in the monastery, I was very happy to hear her speak of God, for she was a very discreet and holy woman. I remember that I always liked to hear good things about God, at any moment in my life. This nun told me how she had decided to become a religious just by reading that passage from the Gospel that says: "Many are called, but few are chosen." She also spoke to me about the great reward that the Lord gives to those who leave everything for Him.

The influence of this good company began to dispel the bad habits I had acquired before and to bring back thoughts of eternal things. It also managed to diminish somewhat the great aversion I had towards the monastic life, which was very strong.

If I saw any of the nuns weeping while praying or displaying special virtues, I felt great envy for them. This caused me much grief because my heart was so hard that even when reading the Passion of Christ, I was unable to shed a tear.

2. I stayed in that monastery for a year and a half, and during that time, I improved significantly. I began to pray many vocal prayers and asked all the nuns to pray for me, so that God might show me in which state I should serve Him. However, I still desired not to be a nun, and I prayed that God would not call me to that state, though I also feared marriage.

After that time, I felt a bit more inclined towards religious life, though not in that monastery. Some of the virtuous practices I observed there seemed exaggerated, especially in the younger nuns

around me, which did not help to consolidate my decision. If they had all had a more unified and consistent attitude, perhaps they would have influenced me more positively.¹

I also had a very close friend in another monastery, which inclined me, if I ever became a nun, to want to go where she was. At that time, I thought more about what pleased my senses and vanity than what was truly best for my soul. Thoughts about becoming a nun would appear from time to time, but they would soon vanish. I could not bring myself to take that step.

3. During this time, although I was not entirely neglectful in seeking my salvation, the Lord seemed more interested than I was in preparing me for the state that truly suited me. He gave me a serious illness, which forced me to return to my father's house.

Once I recovered, they took me to visit my sister, who lived in a village. My sister loved me dearly, and if it had been up to her, I would never have left her house. Her husband also loved me very much, or at least showed me all the affection and attention possible. I owe this to the Lord, who always granted me a warm reception wherever I went, something I now see as a great favor from Him.

4. On the way to my sister's house, I passed by where one of my father's brothers lived, a wise man of great virtue. He was a widower, and the Lord was also preparing him for Himself, for in his old age, he gave up everything, became a friar, and died in such an exemplary way that I believe he now enjoys God's presence. This uncle wanted me to stay with him for a few days. His life revolved around reading good books in the vernacular, and almost always, his conversations were about God and the vanity of the world. He would ask me to read to him, and though I was not very fond of those books, I pretended interest in pleasing him.

I have always had an extreme inclination to please others, even when it was inconvenient for me. In other people, this might be a virtue, but in me, it has been a great fault, for often I acted without discretion.

Oh, my God, what paths You took to prepare my soul for the state in which You wanted me to serve You! Without my desire, You forced me to strive against myself. Blessed be You forever. Amen.

5. Although I stayed with my uncle for only a few days, the words of God, both those I read and those I heard, and his good company, had such an effect on my heart that I once again remembered the truth I had known as a child: that everything in this world is fleeting, and the vanity of the world soon comes to an end. I began to fear what would happen to me if I died at that moment, for I understood that I deserved hell.

Despite everything, my will was not yet inclined to become a nun. However, I saw that it was the safest and best state. Gradually, I began to decide to force myself to accept that path.

6. For three months, I fought this inner battle, forcing myself with the thought that the sufferings and trials of being a nun could not be greater than those of purgatory, and I certainly deserved hell. So it was not so much to live my life as if in purgatory, since afterward, I would go directly to heaven, and that was my greatest desire.

In this inner struggle that led me to decide on this state, I believe what most motivated me was servile fear rather than love for God. The devil constantly put it into my head that I would not be able to endure the hardships of religious life because I was used to too many comforts. I countered this by remembering Christ's sufferings and thinking that it was not too much to endure some trials for Him. Even the thought that He would help me bear them encouraged me. Although I do not remember clearly, I think I thought in this way. During those days, I suffered many temptations.

7. Around that time, fevers and intense fainting spells had left me very weak, as my health had always been delicate. However, my love for good books had already taken root, and this gave me new life. I read the *Epistles of Saint Jerome*, which filled me with encouragement, so much so that I finally decided to speak with my father. Telling him was almost like taking the step of taking the habit, for I was

so careful with my honor that, once spoken, I would never have gone back.^{II}

My father loved me so much that I could not convince him to allow it, not even with the pleas of other people whom I asked to intercede for me. The most I could obtain from him was that he would let me do as I wished after his death.

However, I already distrusted myself and my own weakness. I feared I would not fulfill what I desired if I let more time pass. Therefore, it did not seem right to wait, and I sought another way, as I will tell next.^{III}

^I In Chapter 3, Teresa mentions that some of the virtuous practices of the young nuns in the monastery she entered initially seemed exaggerated to her—an impression that negatively affected her inclination toward religious life at that time. Although she does not explicitly detail which practices she found troubling, both the historical context and her other writings suggest she was referring to behaviors such as extreme penances, overly emotional devotions, or attitudes that could be perceived as spiritual zeal taken to excess. These might have included harsh fasting, excessively prolonged prayer without moderation, or physical displays of piety that she may have viewed as theatrical or lacking in balance.

Regarding the lack of unity and coherence among the nuns, Teresa appears to suggest that not all of them lived out their virtues with the same spirit of sincerity or balance. This could be seen in discrepancies in their religious practice—some more rigid or extreme, others perhaps too relaxed or even negligent in their vocation. Teresa perceived these differences as a lack of communal coherence, which made it difficult for the monastic environment to be truly inspiring and spiritually edifying.

These observations highlight a fundamental characteristic of Teresa's thought: her pursuit of an authentic and balanced spirituality, one that avoided both laxity and excess—any tendency that might distract from the true aim of union with God. This vision would later shape her reform of the Carmelite Order, in which she sought to establish communities unified in spirit, with devotional practices that were moderate yet deeply sincere.

^{II} The *Epistles of Saint Jerome* to which Teresa of Ávila refers are the letters written by Saint Jerome (ca. 347–420), one of the Fathers of the Church and the translator of the Bible into Latin, known as the *Vulgate*.

These letters cover a wide range of topics, from doctrinal and theological issues to reflections on ascetic life and practical advice for Christian living, particularly addressed to consecrated virgins, monks, and other religious figures.

Teresa mentions these epistles among her spiritual readings, and their content greatly influenced her vision of monastic life. In them, Jerome ardently defends asceticism, detachment from the world, and total commitment to God—themes that deeply resonated with Teresa’s reformist ideals. Reading these letters likely strengthened her conviction to dedicate herself fully to religious life and to promote a spirituality that was austere yet authentic within her communities.

In the context of her time, Jerome’s emphasis on renunciation of the world and on a life of prayer would have provided Teresa not only with spiritual inspiration but also with a practical model for her reforms within the Carmelite Order.

III Commentary on Chapter 3

In this chapter, Teresa recounts one of the pivotal moments in her vocational journey: the slow reawakening of her desire for God after a period of spiritual tepidity. The figure of an exemplary nun serves as a spiritual catalyst, and the narrative shows how a single life truly devoted to God can awaken in others the echo of a forgotten truth. This awakening, however, is neither immediate nor triumphant; Teresa describes an interior struggle between attraction and aversion, longing and resistance. The soul, she implies, may remember the light and still fear the commitment that light demands.

Especially striking is her description of the “great aversion” she felt toward monastic life, which reveals how deeply she was shaped by her affections and her aesthetic sensibility. The vocational decision does not present itself as an irresistible calling, but rather as a rational and arduous choice, motivated more by fear of hell than by love of God. Teresa neither disguises nor idealizes her motives; on the contrary, she acknowledges her weakness and the fragility of her will as an essential part of her path. This honesty is one of the most moving aspects of her narrative.

In the figures of her pious, widowed uncle, and of her sister and brother-in-law, Teresa perceives instruments of God gently distancing her from the world without coercion. The Lord, she says, seemed more eager than she was to prepare her. The spiritual journey appears here as something gradual, woven from ordinary threads: a conversation, a reading, a relationship. There are no miracles or ecstasies at this stage, only a discreet and effective divine pedagogy.

The narrative reaches particular depth when Teresa describes the inner conflict between her love of honor and her impulse toward consecration. Telling her father she wishes to become a nun amounts to an irreversible decision—and yet she makes it. It is a decisive break with indecision, not born of sudden illumination but of a will that exerts itself, that compels itself with a logic that is imperfect but honest enough: “better purgatory in this life than risking hell.” This spirituality of fear is not yet the mature love she will later embrace, but it contains a profound truth: the soul that chooses God—even without great consolations—finds in fidelity the first step toward true freedom.

With this chapter, Teresa offers a psychological portrait of vocation not as something extraordinary or angelic, but as a human drama in which God acts with patience and constancy, even in decisions driven by fear or necessity. In doing so, she reminds us that grace does not demand prior perfection, only humble availability. At this point in her journey, hers was precisely that: a first yes—hesitant, yet real—that opened the way for everything that would follow.

CHAPTER 4

How the Lord helped her to force herself to take the habit and the many illnesses His Majesty began to give her.

1. During the days in which I was struggling with these decisions, I convinced one of my brothers to become a friar by speaking to him about the vanity of the world.¶ We both agreed to leave together early in the morning for the monastery where my friend was, which was the one I felt most inclined to join. Although, in this last decision, I was already in such a disposition that I would have gone to any monastery where I thought I could serve God best, or wherever my father wanted, because what mattered most to me was the remedy for my soul, and I was not at all concerned with seeking rest or comfort.

I remember, with absolute clarity and truth, that when I left my father's house, the pain I felt was so immense that I do not think it will be greater even when I die. It felt as though each bone in my body was separating from the other. Since I did not yet have such a strong love for God as to surpass the love I had for my father and my relatives, it was an enormous struggle. If the Lord had not helped me, my own reflections would not have been enough to make me move forward. It was He who gave me strength against myself, allowing me to accomplish it.

2. As soon as I took the habit, the Lord made me understand how He favors those who strive to serve Him. No one understood the immense inner effort I had made; they only saw my great desire. From that moment on, I experienced immense joy for having chosen that state, a joy that has never left me to this day. God transformed the dryness of my soul into great tenderness.

Everything related to religious life filled me with happiness. I remember that sometimes, while sweeping for hours I used to dedicate to vanities and pleasures, I felt liberated from them, and this

produced in me such profound joy that I could not understand where it came from. 11

When I remember this, I feel there is no difficulty, no matter how grave it seems, that I could not face. For I have experienced that if, at the beginning, one strives to act for God, even though the soul may feel fear at first, the greater the effort, the greater the reward and joy afterward.

Even in this life, the Lord rewards it in ways that only those who experience it can understand. I have verified this many times, even in very difficult matters. That is why I would advise that when a good inspiration presents itself insistently, do not hesitate to put it into practice out of fear. If the intention is pure and only seeks to please God, there is no need to fear that anything will go wrong, for He is powerful in all things. Blessed be He forever. Amen.

3. Oh supreme Good and my rest! All the mercies You had granted me up to this point were sufficient. With Your compassion and greatness, You led me through so many paths to such a secure state, to a house where there were many of Your servants from whom I could learn to grow in Your service.

I do not know how to continue when I remember the way I made my profession, with how much determination and joy I lived it, and the betrothal I made with You. I cannot speak of this without tears, and they should indeed be tears of blood, for my heart should break from the pain of having offended You so greatly after all of this.

Now I understand that I was right in not feeling worthy of this great vocation, for I have used it so poorly. But You, my Lord, allowed Yourself to be wronged by me for almost twenty years, bearing with my faults so that I might improve.

It seems, my God, that I promised You not to fulfill any of what I had offered. Although that was not my intention at the time, my subsequent actions showed otherwise. This only highlights even more who You are, my Spouse, and who I am.

It is true that many times, amidst the sorrow for my great faults, I find consolation in the joy I feel at the abundance of Your mercies.

4. In whom, Lord, can Your mercies shine more brightly than in me, who with my evil deeds have darkened the great favors You began to grant me? Alas, my Creator! If I try to find an excuse, I have none. No one is to blame but myself. For if I had responded with even a bit of the love You showed me from the beginning, I would not have been able to direct it towards anyone but You, and that would have resolved everything. But since I did not deserve it nor was I fortunate enough, now I turn to Your mercy, Lord.

5. The change in lifestyle and diet affected my health greatly. Although I felt great joy, it was not enough to keep me well. The fainting spells began to worsen, and I suffered such intense heart pain that it frightened those who witnessed it, in addition to many other ailments. I spent the first year in very delicate health. Although I do not think I offended God much during this time, the physical suffering was so severe that it often left me senseless, and sometimes I lost consciousness completely.

My father, seeing my condition, did everything he could to find a cure. Since the doctors in my city could not help me, he decided to take me to a place where it was said they cured similar illnesses and assured they could treat mine. A family friend who had lived with us for a long time accompanied me, since the monastery where she was a nun did not have strict enclosure.

6. I remained in that place almost a year, and for three months I underwent a treatment so painful that I still do not know how I managed to endure it. In the end, although I withstood the cures, my body could not bear it, as I will explain.

The treatment was supposed to begin at the beginning of summer, but I arrived at the place in the middle of winter. During that time, I stayed at the house of the sister who lived in the village, waiting for April, as it was nearby, and it was more practical not to keep coming and going.

7. Before leaving, my uncle - the one I already mentioned - gave me a book called *The Third Alphabet*, which teaches the prayer of recollection.^{III} Although during that first year I had read good books (since I already understood the harm other books had done me and decided not to use them anymore), I did not know well how to proceed in prayer or how to recollect myself. For this reason, I was very happy to find this book, and I resolved to follow its teachings with all my strength.

The Lord had already given me the gift of tears and a love for reading. So I began to dedicate time to solitude, to confess frequently, and to follow the path that the book indicated, using it as my teacher. Because I did not find a confessor who truly understood me, even though I searched for the next twenty years, it harmed me greatly, causing me to fall back many times and, on some occasions, almost lose myself completely. A good spiritual guide could have helped me avoid the occasions when I offended God.

The Lord began granting me so many mercies at the beginning of this journey that, by the end of the nine months of solitude I spent there, I already felt His great favor. Nevertheless, I was not as free from offending God as the book indicated I should be, although I tried. It seemed almost impossible to maintain such purity, although I did take care not to commit mortal sin. Oh, if only I had always taken such care! But unfortunately, I paid little attention to venial sins, and that ended up harming me.

The Lord began to grant me so much on this path that, by His goodness, He granted me the prayer of quiet and, on some occasions, even union. However, I did not understand either of these states or how much I should value them. I believe it would have greatly benefited me to understand what they meant.^{IV}

It is true that these experiences of union lasted so briefly, perhaps not even as long as it takes to say a Hail Mary. But the effects they left on me were so profound that, although at that time I was not yet twenty, I felt as if I had the world under my feet. I remember feeling

pity for those who pursued worldly things, even when these were lawful.

I tried, as much as I could, always to keep Jesus Christ, our good and Lord, present within me. This was my form of prayer. If I thought of any passage of His life, I represented it internally. However, I spent most of my time reading good books, which were my greatest delight.

I did not have much capacity to reflect with the intellect or use my imagination, which has always been very dull in me. Although I tried to represent the humanity of the Lord internally, I never managed to do it well. Although this practice, if persevered in, leads more quickly to contemplation, it is also very laborious and difficult.

When the will does not find something present upon which to place its love, the soul feels unsupported and inactive, which causes great loneliness and dryness, as well as an intense struggle against thoughts.

8. People with my disposition need to have a greater purity of conscience than those who can rely on their understanding to act. Those who reflect on what the world is, what they owe to God, what Jesus suffered, and how little they serve Him, find strength in these reflections to defend themselves from thoughts, occasions, and dangers. However, those who cannot resort to this have more difficulty and need to spend much time reading, as they cannot draw anything from within themselves.

This way of proceeding is extremely burdensome. If a teacher insists that someone with this disposition remain in prayer for a long time without the aid of reading, it can be so difficult that the person may not be able to endure it. It could even harm their health if they persist, for it becomes a heavy burden. For those who cannot enter into mental prayer, reading, even briefly, can be an indispensable tool for recollection.▼

9. Now I understand that it was the Lord who arranged for me not to find someone to guide me at those times, because it would have

been impossible for me to persevere during the eighteen years in which I went through this work and great dryness. Since I could not reflect or delve deeper, I never dared begin to pray without a book, except immediately after receiving communion. I felt that without a book, my soul was as defenseless as if I were going into a great battle without weapons.

The book was for me like a shield that protected me from the blows of the many thoughts that assailed me. It helped me recollect my soul and gave me comfort. The dryness was not constant, but it always appeared when I lacked the book, for my soul became disordered, and my thoughts scattered. Upon opening a book, I began to find calm, as if it caressed my spirit. Sometimes I read a lot, other times very little, depending on the grace that the Lord gave me at that moment.

In those beginnings I mention, it seemed to me that as long as I had books and the possibility of being alone, nothing could take away the good I had found. I believe it would have been so, with God's help, if I had had a teacher who advised me on how to avoid occasions of sin from the beginning and helped me quickly escape from them if I fell.

If the devil had attacked openly at that moment, I believe I would not have sinned gravely again. But he was so subtle, and I was so weak, that all my good resolutions did not help me much. Still, the days I served God faithfully strengthened me to endure the terrible illnesses I later suffered, with the patience that His Majesty gave me.

10. Many times, I have marveled at God's great goodness, and my soul has been filled with joy contemplating His magnificence and mercy. Blessed be He for everything, for I have found that He never leaves unrewarded, even in this life, any good desire, however small or imperfect it may be.

My deeds, though vile and imperfect, this Lord of mine improved, perfected, and gave value to them. On the other hand, He hid my sins and faults, even from those who had seen them, allowing their eyes

to be blinded and removing them from their memory. He covered my faults and made virtues shine in me that He Himself placed, almost forcing me to have them.

11. Now I want to return to what I have been commanded. If I had to describe in detail how the Lord dealt with me in these beginnings, I would need a much greater understanding than mine to express what I owe Him and to reflect my great ingratitude and wickedness, for I forgot all of that. Blessed be He forever, for bearing with me for so long. Amen.^{VI}

^I The brother whom Teresa of Ávila persuaded to become a friar was Antonio de Cepeda y Ahumada, one of her younger siblings. Antonio joined the Order of Saint John of God, a hospitaller order devoted to the care of the sick and the poor, known for its austere lifestyle and deep commitment to charity.

Antonio de Cepeda lived a religious life marked by service and compassion, in keeping with the ideals of the Order of Saint John of God. However, his path did not attain the historical or spiritual prominence of his sister Teresa. In her writings, Teresa expresses pride and satisfaction at having influenced Antonio's decision, viewing it as a fruit of her desire to lead others to God.

Antonio's choice to embrace this life confirms the profound impact Teresa had within her own family, showing her ability to inspire radical decisions of faith among those closest to her.

^{II} In this chapter, Teresa shares her initial doubts and inner resistance to God's call to take the habit, revealing the profound struggle she experienced in the face of such a life-defining commitment. Yet she also speaks of the immense joy she felt once she embraced that vocation—a joy, she says, that never left her. With that step, Teresa found clarity, purpose, and firm direction for her life.

We all long to feel that our existence has meaning, that we are doing something worthwhile. We need a mission—but discovering it is not always easy, for it requires listening to an inner voice that is subtle and often contradicts what the world calls “common sense.” That voice, however, has unmistakable traits: it leads us toward activities where our natural gifts flourish, fills us with joy in doing them, and is not driven by selfish motives.

Teresa heard that call and urges us fervently to be faithful to it, because only by responding to that inner voice can we find true peace, clarity, and joy. What more valuable thing can the world offer us than that?

How right she is when she tells us: “...I would advise that when a good inspiration presents itself insistently, it should not be left unfulfilled out of fear. If the intention

is pure and seeks only to please God, there is no reason to fear that anything will go wrong...”

On another note, the symbolism implicit in purifying her mind of worldly vanities while sweeping the convent floor is particularly striking. One can easily sense a deep correspondence between the external act and the inner process. The human mind, mimetic by nature, tends to align in thought and emotion with what it beholds or values. In this sense, the mind is chameleon-like: it adapts and takes form according to the psychic environment that nourishes it. Thus, as Teresa joyfully swept the convent floor—time she had once spent on frivolous amusements—her consciousness was also shedding the impurities that had held it back. The physical act of cleaning becomes a living metaphor for the spiritual process of purification, humility, and renunciation of the ego, through which her soul began to align with the simplicity and truth of divine love.

III *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, written in 1527 by the Franciscan Francisco de Osuna, is one of the most important mystical works of the sixteenth century and had a profound influence on figures such as Teresa of Ávila during her spiritual formation. This book serves as a practical guide to attaining union with God through interior recollection, prayer, and the purification of the soul. Its approach is rooted in an accessible and personal spirituality, directed especially toward laypeople and religious individuals seeking to deepen their spiritual lives. The author organizes his teachings in the form of an “alphabet,” a pedagogical structure designed to aid in the understanding and memorization of spiritual principles.

Osuna emphasizes the importance of recollection, which consists in withdrawing the senses and scattered thoughts in order to center oneself on the presence of God within the soul. According to him, God is not found outside, in the noise of the world, but within each person, dwelling in the innermost depths. Recollection, then, is a means of returning to the center of one’s being, where the soul may enter into intimate dialogue with the Creator. This process requires silence, stillness, and the renunciation of external and internal distractions, allowing the soul to rest in God and be transformed by His presence.

Another central theme of the *Third Spiritual Alphabet* is the purification of the soul, which is achieved through virtue, detachment, and the struggle against disordered desires. Osuna stresses that spiritual progress depends on the soul’s readiness to receive divine grace, which entails a conscious effort to reject all that distances one from God. This inner labor forms the foundation for achieving peace of soul—a deep serenity that arises when one lives in harmony with the divine will.

Prayer holds a central place in this work, particularly mental and contemplative prayer. Osuna invites readers to practice a simple, loving form of prayer, free of artifice, which enables the soul to recollect itself and communicate with God without intermediaries. For him, this form of prayer is the most effective means of

experiencing mystical union—a state in which the soul and God encounter one another in profound and transformative intimacy.

Francisco de Osuna insists that the path to God is not reserved for mystics or members of religious orders, but is open to all believers who genuinely wish to deepen their relationship with Him. For this reason, his language is clear and accessible, intended to inspire and guide his readers in their everyday spiritual lives. Ultimately, the *Third Spiritual Alphabet* is an invitation to discover God in the silence of one's own heart—through recollection, prayer, and the sincere pursuit of a virtuous life, in an ongoing process of purification and total surrender to divine love.

IV A brief explanation of the three types of prayer mentioned in this chapter:

PRAYER OF RECOLLECTION: THE BEGINNING OF THE INTERIOR JOURNEY

The prayer of recollection is a form of prayer taught and practiced by Teresa of Ávila, especially intended for those beginning to deepen their spiritual lives. It involves focusing one's attention and heart on the interior presence of God, gathering the senses and scattered thoughts to direct them toward Him. It is a preliminary and necessary step to entering into a more intimate and profound relationship with God, opening the path toward higher states of prayer. This form of prayer entails withdrawing from external noise and turning inward, where God dwells in the depths of the soul. It is an exercise in interiorization aimed at setting aside both external and internal distractions in order to experience a more conscious and personal communion with God. Teresa describes it as “drawing inward,” and notes that it is a practice in which the soul seeks to contact God within its own inner sanctuary.

This practice prioritizes interior focus, seeking God within, recognizing His presence in the soul. It requires calming the senses and thoughts, setting aside worldly concerns and noise. It is rooted in the faith that God dwells in the soul, which instills deep trust in the effort to seek Him there. It is also a simple exercise of loving attention and will, free from elaborate techniques or complex formulas.

To practice it, one should find a quiet place free of external distractions and choose a setting conducive to prayer. The posture should be comfortable—whether seated or kneeling—allowing for focus and recollection. It is important to quiet the mind and senses, letting go of unnecessary thoughts and worries; if distractions arise, one should gently return to the intention of the prayer. The key lies in recognizing God's presence within, meditating on the idea that He is present in the depths of the soul. Short phrases such as “Lord, I know You are here with me” can help maintain this awareness. From there, one may speak to God from the heart or simply remain in silence, in a posture of loving attentiveness and contemplative listening.

The fruits of this practice are numerous. The prayer of recollection brings inner peace, helping to calm the emotions and find serenity amid difficulties. It also heightens sensitivity to God, making it easier to perceive His presence and guidance in daily life, and it fosters spiritual growth, serving as an important step toward more advanced forms of prayer, such as the prayer of quiet and the prayer of union. Teresa

recommended this practice to those who wish to grow spiritually, as it helps to cultivate a deeper, more personal relationship with God, grounded in interiorization and trust in His constant love and presence.

PRAYER OF QUIET: THE GIFT OF DIVINE PEACE

This is a deeper state in which the soul begins to experience the peace and joy that come directly from God. It is less active than the prayer of recollection, as divine grace takes the leading role. Although the soul remains aware of what is happening, it feels “captured” in a sweet stillness, in which the will is united with God, even if the understanding and memory may still wander to some degree.

The prayer of quiet is a fruit of the prayer of recollection. When the soul succeeds in recollecting itself and centering on God, He may act more directly, bestowing peace and consolation. It is an intermediate stage: the will is joined to God, but the whole being is not yet fully immersed in Him.

PRAYER OF UNION: FULL COMMUNION WITH GOD

This is a much deeper experience, in which all the faculties of the soul—will, understanding, and memory—are absorbed in God. It is a state of complete communion, where the soul and God are united in intimate encounter. Here, no human effort is involved; God takes full initiative, and the soul simply experiences His presence so deeply that it seems to lose all sense of time and place.

The prayer of union is the culmination of the previous stages. The prayers of recollection and quiet have prepared the soul for this experience by training it to focus on God and to yield itself to His grace.

Teresa describes this process as a path of growing intimacy with God, in which human effort (especially in the prayer of recollection) gradually gives way to divine action (prayers of quiet and union). This itinerary reflects the spiritual transformation of the soul as it opens itself completely to divine grace.

▼ Teresa then explains the difficulties she faced in finding a way of praying that suited her natural disposition. In simple terms, we might say that there are two kinds of people when it comes to imagination. Some could be called imaginative—those who are able, even inclined, to envision meaningful stories that move and inspire them; they can create inner worlds at will. Such individuals do not require external stimuli to focus their minds and hearts on a specific idea, for they are capable of doing so through sheer intention. These are the people we say can “daydream.”

Others, however, find this much more difficult, as they lack that particular capacity—and Teresa was one of them. She needed to rely on the reading of devotional books or on contemplating nature in order for her mind to reach those levels of focus. Teresa’s testimony teaches us that there is no single way to pray, and that each person must find the means and the form by which to draw closer to God. Her realism, courage, and good sense stand as both an example and a profound invitation to spiritual freedom.

VI Commentary on Chapter 4

This chapter marks a decisive turning point: Teresa takes the habit and, with it, breaks definitively with the world. She does not do so in a state of mystical ecstasy, but through the suffering of a choice that runs counter to her emotional attachments. Her description of leaving home—"as if each bone were being torn apart"—is one of the most vivid in *The Book of Her Life*. This pain reveals the deeply human dimension of her surrender: not the triumph of one who has conquered the world, but the tearing of one who allows herself to be conquered by God.

The contrast between this interior struggle and the immediate consolation she receives upon taking the habit is striking. God responds to her effort with a tenderness that dissolves all resistance. What was once dryness becomes joy; what was fear becomes freedom. This pattern will repeat throughout the work: God disproportionately rewards each small step the soul takes toward Him. The process is not automatic or mechanical, but deeply experiential. Teresa makes no attempt to hide that many of her initial motivations were servile, nor does she conceal her later failures. But neither does she deny the evident truth that every act of fidelity was met with grace.

The chapter also offers an implicit reflection on the mystery of vocation. Teresa admits she did not possess enough love to sustain her decision, but that the Lord granted it to her. Vocation thus appears not as something the soul owns, but as a gift received in proportion to the soul's response. There is no merit in the will alone; there is grace in the will that allows itself to be upheld.

The tone with which Teresa recalls her religious profession is deeply moving. She does not boast of it, but weeps over how much she has failed since. Yet this sorrowful memory of a broken covenant does not lead her to despair; rather, it becomes a more fervent praise of God's mercy. The chapter thus becomes a hymn to divine fidelity—a fidelity that sustains even those who betray it.

The illness that follows can be read symbolically as a purification of that first surrender. Her fragile body cannot sustain the initial fervor, and Teresa is forced to stop. Yet this apparent setback is, in truth, an advance: her reading of the *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, her discovery of the prayer of recollection, and her first experiences of interior quiet and union will become the true foundations of her spiritual life. Here, she begins to sense that God is found not only in obedience and sacrifice, but also in interior silence and loving presence.

The sincerity with which Teresa recounts her limitations—her inability to sustain discursive meditation, her constant need for books, her lack of imaginative skill—is revealing. She does not try to appear saintly, but instead tells the truth of the process through which God led her. And in that lies much of the power of her narrative. She shows how the Lord adapts His pedagogy to each soul, respecting its nature and working from within its limits.

Finally, Teresa acknowledges that not having a good spiritual guide was a great disadvantage. But even that, she now sees as part of God's plan: had she had one, she might not have learned to trust in Him alone. The trust born of failure, the humility that springs from error, and the fidelity renewed after every fall—these are the great themes that begin to take clear shape in this chapter. And all of them are a prelude to the great transformation that, even now, she does not yet foresee.