

TERESA OF AVILA: *The Life of Saint Teresa*. New Translation by J.M. Cohen, Penguin Classics, 1957

Among the women of Christendom, the bold Teresa of Avila has succeeded in transmitting a profound and enduring record of the nature of spiritual reality and of Christocentric mystical experience. In this biography, written at the request of her spiritual directors, she writes with great honesty of both her human weaknesses and her extraordinary spiritual attainments.

She often speaks of her own “depravity”, of her sins and her failings. One can only conclude that she was a harsh mistress as regards her own conduct. Yet she emerges as one with profound compassion for and understanding of the weaknesses of others. Interestingly, the recently sainted Padre Pio of Pietrelcina spoke equally scathingly of his own “sinfulness”. One can only wonder where that puts the rest of us.

Teresa rejoiced in her discovery of the cloister. Like Thomas Merton, her transformation began the moment she entered the monastery. She immediately felt herself at home. She repeatedly affirms the importance of the advice offered by her spiritual directors, and offers much insight into the benefits that such counsels may confer. Teresa did not work in isolation, but regularly sought out those who she believed would be helpful in her own spiritual development. She particularly valued the counsels of her Jesuit mentors.

Although Teresa placed a high value on the qualities of learnedness and knowledge in those who would act as spiritual guides, she placed a much higher value on the attributes of prudence and experience in directors. She observed that the “man of learning” is more often useful to those who have traveled some way along the spiritual path than to those who are taking their first steps.

Teresa describes fully her own trials and sufferings, revealing a remarkable acceptance of physical pain, mental discomfort, and existential uncertainty that would drive most people to the edge of despair. The transparency of her discourses is at times unnerving. She writes with great openness of the immense difficulties she often experienced in prayer and in other matters.

Teresa offers us privileged entry into her life world. Her experiences far transcend those described by such writers as Richard Bucke, William James, and Abraham Maslow. Teresa offers a reflective chronicle of the extraordinary graces that infused her life. She urges her readers to remain fearless and constantly receptive when confronted by the powerful and transformative states that can occur during the practice of interior prayer.

Teresa offers the perspective of one who has experienced directly such phenomena as physical levitation, “locutions”, and mystical vision. She viewed these as not only unexpected and uncalled-for graces, but also as helpful manifestations that enabled her own community to think less harshly of her seemingly difficult and contradictory nature.

Teresa breathes humility and egolessness when she describes the workings of pure grace, rather than viewing such phenomena as the consequence of merit won through personal effort and spiritual discipline.

Teresa was a woman of extremes, as capable of experiencing fully the rapture of physical levitation and luminous vision as to endure indescribable physical pain and mental despair. She was also a woman of

unstoppable ambition who gently neutralised the opposition of many, even within her own order, who were hostile to her ideas. Her reforms brought great spiritual renewal to the Carmelite order.

In this remarkable autobiography, Teresa reveals the full extent of her personality. She also provides the reader with a vivid account of the extraordinary reality she inhabited for most of her life.

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Introduction

The autobiography of Santa Teresa is the story of a most remarkable woman's entry into the religious life, and at the same time a literary masterpiece that is, after *Don Quixote*, the most widely read prose classic of Spain. . . . The book, as we have it gives an account of Teresa's life up to her fiftieth year, 1565, but it was certainly begun some seven or eight years before the date when it was asked for by her confessors, and was addressed in the first place to those four close spiritual friends whom she mentions in Chapter 16 as her fellow members of "the Five". . . .

Her language flows, as does that of Cervantes, like good talk; and she shares with Cervantes also a taste for proverbs and pithy country sayings. Teresa was a woman of little reading. *The Imitation of Christ* and Saint Augustine's *Confessions* were two of the few books that she knew well. p 11

Teresa was no cold intellectual, but quickly became involved in the life and problems of anyone with whom she came into touch. We see her compelling a priest who was living in sin to throw away the amulet with which his mistress had 'enchanted' him, and to set about mending his ways. We learn too, later in the book, of the alarm with which various other priests viewed her when they began to hear her confessions. They were very much afraid that she might become attached to them in the worldly sense: a suspicion which she found quite absurd. p 12

Teresa's *Life* ends just when she has passed the watershed between her years of spiritual endeavour and those in which she combined the religious life with one of great public activity. In these later years she wrote two books as great as the one before us: *The Foundations*, which tells the tale of her journeys and of the sixteen houses that she founded after St Joseph's, and *The Interior Castle*, otherwise called *The Mansions*, an analysis of inner prayer and spiritual states which is probably her masterpiece. p 13

She did not herself know how to explain her loftiest experiences, but left it to God to explain them through her. There are several descriptions by her fellow nuns of moments when they saw her with glowing features, writing as if at a heavenly dictation. But not all the supernatural states that possessed Teresa were equally welcome to her. She herself tells how, in prayer, she would be lifted into the air, to

her own consternation and to the alarm of those sisters who were praying beside her in the choir.

These mysterious levitations were matched after her death by the equally mysterious incorruptibility of her body. Both are well-known phenomena which occur in the histories of many saints and that can only be accounted for by some actual change in the physical structure that takes place at the same time as spiritual transformation. In Teresa's case the fragrance that surrounded her uncorrupted body led to most disgraceful results. In the wild rush to acquire sacred relics, various of her limbs were torn from her corpse. Her old friend Father Gracian, who had only lately so disappointed her by failing to accompany her on a journey, inaugurated her dismemberment by cutting off one of her hands. p 16

She was probably twenty-one when she took the Carmelite habit, and for about twenty years after that engaged in a continuous "strife and contention between converse with God and the society of the world." Her resulting breakdown in health is fully described by herself. At twenty-five, she seems to have been a complete invalid, and it was not till she was forty that the principal symptoms of her malady disappeared. p 17

Her supernormal experiences were the reality, and outward events moved her not at all. Her dearest concern seems to have been the instruction of her thirteen nuns at St Joseph's, for whom she composed her second book, *The Way of Perfection*. At the same time, also, she began to write more fully of her early spiritual development in a series of "Relations," intended, like the *Life*, to be read by her confessors. p 17

The writing of the *Foundations* was followed by that of *The Interior Castle*, an amplification of those chapters in the *Life* that describe the progress of the soul in terms of the various 'Waters.' This book, which develops another metaphor, that of the soul's seven 'Mansions,' is more mature in its experience than the *Life*, and more uniform in its composition. It was written at great speed in 1577, as the outcome of a vision that came to Teresa on Trinity Eve of that year.

From 1568 onwards Teresa was greatly strengthened by the formation of a company of Discalced friars who accepted her reform, chief among whom was her friend and pupil Juan de Yepes (1542-91), known to us as St John of the Cross. He became spiritual director of St Joseph's in 1572, but was seized and thrown into prison by his Unreformed brothers a year later. He was subjected to great hardships, and remained in captivity for fourteen years. Teresa herself was on occasions forced to resort to the highest authority in the land, Philip II himself, to save herself from similar treatment. p 18

"One of the things that makes me happy here," she wrote from her foundation at Seville, "is that there is no suggestion of that nonsense about my supposed sanctity. That allows me to live and go about without fear that the ridiculous tower of their imagination will come tumbling down on top of me." A year or two later she is congratulating herself on *just* beginning to be a true nun.

Nevertheless the world persisted in believing that Teresa was a saint, and in 1622, a bare forty-five years after her death, she was canonized. In 1814, when Spain, with

the help of its English allies, was driving out its French conquerors, she was proclaimed the national saint of her country. p 19



The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus and some of the favours granted to her by God, written by herself at the command of her confessor, to whom she submits and directs it.

If parents were to ask me for advice, I would tell them to take great care what people their children consort with at this age. For great harm comes of bad company, since we are inclined by nature to follow the worse rather than the better. So it was with me.

. . . . I am sometimes astonished at the harm which a single bad companion can do, and if I had not experience in the matter I should never believe it. This is particularly so when one is young, for then the evil effects are worst. I wish that parents would take warning by me, and consider this very carefully. As a result of my intercourse with this person, I was so changed that I lost nearly all my soul's natural disposition to virtue, so influenced was I by her and by another who was given to the same kind of amusements. . . .

I could not have been pursuing these vanities for more than three months when they took me to a convent in the city where I lived, in which girls like myself were educated, though there were none there as depraved as I. pp 27-28

When I took the habit the Lord immediately showed me how He favours those who do violence to themselves in order to serve Him. No one saw what I endured, or thought that I acted out of anything but pure desire. At the moment of my entrance into this new state I felt a joy so great that it has never failed me even to this day; and God converted the dryness of my soul into a very great tenderness. All the details of the religious life delighted me. In fact sometimes when I used to sweep the house at hours that I had once spent on my indulgence and adornment, the memory that I was now free from these things gave me a fresh joy, which surprised me, for I could not understand where it came from. When I remember this freedom, there is no task, however hard, that I would hesitate to undertake if it were put before me. p 33

Now although, if they persevere, men may arrive more quickly at contemplation along this road where they cannot work with the intellect, it is a very laborious and painful

one. For if the will is left without employment, and love has no present object to occupy it, the soul remains without support or activity, solitude and dryness give great pain, and stray thoughts attack most fiercely. People who are made like this need a greater purity of consciousness than those who can work with the intellect. If we can reflect on the nature of the world, on our debt to God, on Our Lord's great sufferings, on our own small service in return, and on what He gives to those who love Him, we get material with which to defend ourselves against stray thoughts, also against perils and occasions for sin. But those who cannot make use of this method run a far greater risk, and should frequently resort to reading, since they can get help in no other way. p 36

It seems to me now that it was by God's providence that I did not find anyone to teach me. For I believe it would have been impossible for me to persevere for the eighteen years during which I suffered this trial and these great aridities, through not being able, as I have said, to meditate. All that time, except immediately after taking Communion, I never ventured to start praying without a book. My soul was as much afraid to engage in prayer without one, as if it had to fight against a host. With this protection, which was like a companion and a shield on which to take the blows of my many thoughts, I found comfort, for I was not generally in aridity. But always when I was without a book, my soul would at once become disturbed, and my thoughts wandered. As I read, I began to call them together again and, as it were, laid a bait for my soul. Very often I had to do no more than open a book. Sometimes I read a little, sometimes much, according to the favour which the Lord showed me. p 37

A really learned man has never led me astray; and these others cannot have done so willingly; it was only that they knew no better. I supposed them to possess knowledge and that my whole obligation was simply to accept what they said. This I willingly did because their instructions were lax and gave me considerable liberty. p 40

I would not speak the slightest evil of anyone, and it was my practice to avoid all gossip. I kept it always in mind that I must not allow others to say, or to say myself, anything about another that I would not like to be said about me. I kept this rule most rigidly on all possible occasions, though not so perfectly that I did not break it now and then when difficult situations occurred. But on the whole I kept it; and this so impressed the sisters who were with me and talked to me that they adopted the habit too. It came to be understood that where I was it was safe to turn your back; and it was the same with my friends and relations, and those who learnt from me. p 46

The way of true religion is so little used that friars or nuns who begin truly to follow their calling have more to fear from members of their own communities than from all the devils. p 52

My complaints have not been so troublesome, but they still bother me in many ways. In particular, for the last twenty years I have suffered from morning sickness, and cannot take any food until past midday - sometimes not until much later. Now that I take Communion more frequently, I have to bring it on at night before I go to bed, with feathers or in some other way; and this is much more disturbing. But if I do not, I feel much worse. I think I am never quite free, either, from aches and pains, which are sometimes very severe, especially around the heart, though the fainting-fits, which were then so continuous, are now very rare, and I have been free for the last eight

years from paralysis and from those attacks of fever that I used to have so often. But I take my complaints so lightly now that often I rejoice in them, believing that the Lord is in some way served by them. p 55

I led a very wretched life, for as I prayed I gained a clearer knowledge of my faults. On one side God called me, and on the other I followed the world. All divine things gave me great pleasure; yet those of the world held me prisoner. I seem to have wanted to reconcile two opposites as completely hostile, one to another, as the spiritual life and the joys, pleasures, and pastimes of the senses. I found great difficulty in praying, for the spirit was not the master but the slave; and so I could not shut myself inside myself - which was my whole method of procedure in prayer - without shutting a thousand vanities in with me. I spent many years in this way, and now I am astonished that anyone could have suffered so much without giving up the one or the other. p 57



In truth, I am the weakest and wickedest of mortals. But I believe that one who humbles himself, though strong, and who trusts not in himself but in someone who has had experience in these matters, will lose nothing. Of myself I may say that if the Lord had not revealed this truth to me, and given me constant opportunities of speaking with persons who practise prayer, I should have gone on rising and falling again until I tumbled into Hell. I had plenty of friends to help me fall. But when it came to picking myself up I found myself completely alone. Indeed, I wonder

now that I did not remain where I fell.

p 60

However sinful a man may be, he should not abandon prayer once he has begun it. It is the means by which all may be repaired again, and without it amendment would be much more difficult. p 62

I had a very deep veneration for the glorious Magdalen, and very often thought of her conversion, especially when I was taking Communion. p 67

However clearly I may wish to explain this matter of prayer, it will be very obscure to anyone who has not the experience. I shall describe certain impediments, which I believe prevent men from advancing on this path, also certain other courses of danger about which the Lord has taught me by experience. More recently, I have also discussed the subject with men of great learning and persons who have led spiritual lives for many years; and they have seen that in the twenty-seven years during which I have practised prayer, ill though I have trodden the road and often though I have stumbled, His Majesty has granted me experiences for which others need thirty-seven, or even forty-seven, although they may have progressed in penitence and constant virtue. p 75

The soul which begins resolutely to tread this path of mental prayer, and can manage not greatly to care about consolations and tenderness in devotion, neither rejoicing

when the Lord gives them nor being discouraged when He withholds them, has already gone a large part of the way. p 81

Let us endeavour always to look at the virtues and good qualities that we find in others, and to keep our own great sins before our eyes, so that we may see none of their failings. This is one way of working; and although we may not be able to manage it perfectly at once, we shall acquire one great virtue by it: we shall consider everyone else better than ourselves. Then, with God's grace - which is always necessary, since when we do not have it all efforts are useless - we shall begin to progress. p 92

As there are many mansions in heaven, so there are many roads leading to them. Some people derive benefit from imagining themselves in hell, and others, who are distressed by thinking of hell, from imagining themselves in heaven. Some meditate on death. Others, if they are tender-hearted, become exhausted by always dwelling on the Passion, but derive great benefit from thinking of the power and greatness of God as revealed in His creatures, and of His love for us, which is expressed in all things. This last is an admirable method, so long as it is combined with frequent thoughts on the Passion and the life of Christ, the past and present source of all our good. p 93

It is very important that the director shall be prudent - I mean a man of sound understanding - and that he shall also be experienced. If he has learning as well, that is a great advantage. But if these three qualities cannot be found together, the two first are the more important, because we can always find learned men to consult when we have need of them. I mean that learned men are of little use to beginners, unless they also practise prayer. I do not mean that beginners should not have conversations with men of learning, for I would rather see spirituality based on truth than accompanied by prayer. Learning is a great thing, for it teaches us who know little, and gives us light. Then, when we come to the truths in Holy Scripture, we act as we should. God deliver us from foolish devotions! p 94

Although learning may not seem necessary in a director, my opinion has always been and always will be that every Christian should endeavour to consult some learned person, if he can; and the greater his learning the better. Those who take the oath of prayer have great need of learning; and the more spiritual they are, the greater the need.

Let us not deceive ourselves by saying that learned men who do not practise prayer cannot be suitable directors for those who do. I have consulted many such, and for some years now have sought them out most eagerly because of my increased need of them. I have always got on well with them; for even though some of them have no experience, they are not enemies of the spirit or ignorant of its nature, for they are familiar with the Holy Scripture, where the truth about it can always be found. p 95

Everything is of use to beginners who are setting out on this high journey, and will help to keep their feet on the right road. To return, however, to what I said about meditating on Christ at the pillar - it is good to reflect for a while and think of the pains He suffered, and of why he suffered them, and of who it was that suffered them, and of the love with which He suffered them. Yet we should not always weary

ourselves by pursuing such thoughts, but rather stay there beside Him, with all our thoughts stilled. We should occupy ourselves, if we can, by gazing at Him who is gazing at us, and should keep Him company, and talk with Him, and pray to Him, and humble ourselves and delight in Him, and remind ourselves that we do not deserve to be there. Anyone who can do this, though he may be at the very beginning of prayer, will make great progress; and this form of prayer is very beneficial - at least my soul has found it so. pp 96-97

All that the soul has to do at these times of quiet is merely to be calm and make no noise. By noise I mean working with the intellect to find great numbers of words and reflections with which to thank God for this blessing, and piling up its sins and faults to prove to itself that it does not deserve it. Then the commotion starts, the intellect works and the memory seethes. Indeed these faculties sometimes tire me out, for though I have very little memory I cannot keep it under control. The will must quietly and wisely understand that we cannot deal violently with God; and that our efforts are like great logs of wood indiscriminately piled on, which will only put out the spark. It must admit this and humbly ask: 'Lord, what can I do now? What has the slave to do with her Master, or earth with heaven?' Or let it speak any words of love that suggest themselves, in the firm and sure knowledge that what it says is the truth. But let it pay no attention to the intellect, which is merely being tiresome. p 106

In this life of ours the soul's growth is not like the body's, although we speak as if it is and it really does grow. A child that has grown up and whose body has formed does not shrink and become small again. But this may, by the Lord's will, happen to the soul, as I know by my own experience, which is my only means of knowledge. This must be in order to humble us for our own greater good, and to prevent our being careless during this exile of ours. For the higher we climb the more cause we have to be afraid, and the less reason we have to trust in ourselves. p 109

Even preachers have the habit of so framing their sermons as to displease nobody. Their intentions are good and their activities splendid, but they do not persuade very many to amend their lives. Why is it that there are so few who are led by sermons to abstain from public sin? Do you know what I think? It is because preachers have too much worldly wisdom. They do not fling all restraint aside and burn with the great fire of God, as the Apostles did; and so their flames do not throw out much heat. I do not say that their fire could be as great as the Apostles', but I wish they had more than I see they have. p 115

In a state of prayer as sublime as this, the soul realizes that the Lord is doing His work without any labouring of the intellect, which is merely amazed, as it seems to me, at seeing God play the part of the good gardener. For when God brings a soul to this state He can do all this and much more, and this is the effect of His action. He will not let it do any work itself, except to delight in the fragrance that the flowers are beginning to give off. p 117

The virtues, then, are now stronger than they were during the preceding prayer of quiet. The soul sees that it has changed, and is unconsciously beginning to do great things with the fragrance given off by the flowers. It is now the Lord's will that they

shall open, so that the soul may see that it possesses virtues, even though it also knows very well that it cannot and never could acquire them in many years, whereas the celestial Gardener has given them to it in a flash. p 118



How what is called union takes place and what it is, I cannot tell. It is explained in *mystical theology*, but I cannot use the proper terms; I cannot understand what *mind* is, or how it differs from *soul* or *spirit*. They all seem one to me, though the soul sometimes leaps out of itself like a burning fire that has become one whole flame and increases with great force. The flame leaps very high above the fire. Nevertheless it is not a different thing, but the same flame which is in the fire. You, sirs, with your learning will understand this. I cannot be more explicit. pp 122-123

While seeking God in this way, the soul is conscious that it is fainting almost completely away in a kind of swoon, with a very great calm and joy. Its breath and all its bodily powers progressively fail it, so that it can hardly stir its hands without great effort. Its eyes close involuntarily, and if they remain open, they see almost nothing. If a person reads in this state he can scarcely make out a single letter; it is as much as he can do to recognize one. He sees that there are letters, but as the understanding offers no help, he cannot read them, even if he wants to. He hears but does not understand what he hears. In the same way, his senses serve no purpose except to prevent the soul from taking its pleasure; and so they tend to do him harm. It is the same with the tongue, for he cannot form a word, nor would he have the strength to pronounce one. The whole physical strength vanishes and the strength of the soul increases for the better enjoyment of its bliss. The outward joy that is now felt is great and most perceptible.

However long this prayer lasts, it does no harm. At least it has never done me any; however ill I might have been when the Lord granted me this grace, I never remember an occasion when I experienced any bad effects from it. On the contrary I was left feeling much better. But what harm can so great a blessing possibly do? The outward results are so evident that there can be no doubt some great thing has taken place. Nothing else could have robbed us of our bodily strength, yet have given us so much joy that it is returned to us increased. pp 125-126

Let no one, I repeat, who has started to pray be discouraged and say: "If I fall back into sin, it will be better for me not to go on practising prayer." I believe it will be worse for such a person to give up prayer and continue in his evil ways. But, if he persists in prayer, he may be sure that it will bring him to the haven of light. pp 129-130

Let men remember His words and consider what He has done for me, who grew tired of offending before He grew tired of forgiving. He never tires of giving, nor can His mercies ever be exhausted. Let us, then, not grow weary of receiving them. p 135

Although this [rapture] is delightful, the weakness of our nature makes us afraid at first, and we need a much more determined and courageous spirit than for the previous stages of prayer. Come what may, we must risk everything and leave ourselves in God's hands. We have to go willingly wherever we are carried, for in fact, we are being borne off whether we like it or not. In this emergency very often I should like to resist, and I exert all my strength to do so, especially at such times as I am in a public place, and very often when I am in private also, because I am afraid of delusions. Sometimes with a great struggle I have been able to do something against it. But it has been like fighting a great giant, and has left me utterly exhausted. At other times resistance has been impossible; my soul has been carried away, and usually my head as well, without my being able to prevent it; and sometimes it has affected my whole body, which has been lifted from the ground.

This has only happened rarely. Once, however, it took place when we were all together in the choir, and I was on my knees, about to take Communion. This distressed me very much, for it seemed a most extraordinary thing and likely to arouse considerable talk. So I ordered the nuns - for it happened after I was made prioress - not to speak of it. On other occasions, when I felt that the Lord was about to enrapture me again, and once in particular during a sermon - it was our patron's feast and some great ladies were present - I lay on the ground and the sisters came to hold me down, but all the same the rapture was observed. Then I earnestly beseeched the Lord to grant me no more favours if they must have outward and visible signs. p 137

The effects of rapture are great. One is that the mighty power of the Lord is made manifest. We see that against His Majesty's will we can do nothing to control either the soul or the body. We are not the masters; whether we like it or not, we see that there is One mightier than we, that these favours are given by Him, and that, of ourselves we can do absolutely nothing. This imprints a deep humility upon us. I confess that in me it aroused a great fear, at first a very great fear. One sees one's body being lifted from the ground; and though the spirit draws it up after itself, and does so most gently if it does not resist, one does not lose consciousness. At least I myself was sufficiently aware to realize that I was being lifted. The majesty of One who can do this is so manifest that one's hair stands on end, and a great fear comes over one of offending so great a God. p 138

How I wish that someone could really explain this to you, my Father, if only so that you could tell me what it means. For this is the habitual state of my soul, nowadays. Whenever I am not busy with something, it is plunged into these death-like yearnings; and I am afraid when I feel them coming on, because I know that I shall not die. But once I am in them, I long to suffer like this for the rest of my life, although the pain is so extreme as to be nearly unbearable. Sometimes my pulse almost ceases to beat at all, as I have been told by the sisters who sometimes see me in this state, and so understand better now. My bones are all disjointed and my hands are so rigid that sometimes I cannot clasp them together. Even next day I feel a pain in my wrists and over my whole body, as if my bones were still out of joint. p 140

I know by experience that the soul in rapture is mistress of everything, and gains such freedom in one hour or even less that it cannot recognize itself. It perfectly well sees that this is not its own achievement, and does not know how it has come to possess

such a blessing. But it clearly realizes the very great benefit that each of these raptures brings. No one will believe this who has not experienced it; and so people do not believe the poor soul that lately they saw so wicked, when they suddenly see it aspire to such heroic heights. For now it is not content to serve the Lord in small things, but wishes to do so in the greatest way it can. This they consider a temptation and a folly. If they knew that this ambition arises not from the soul but from the Lord, to whom it has surrendered the keys of its will, they would not be so astounded. p 144

When it looks on this divine Sun, it is dazzled by the brightness; when it looks on itself, dust clouds its eyes and the little dove is blind. So it happens very often that the soul is utterly blinded, absorbed, amazed, and dazzled by the wonders that it sees. Thus it acquires true humility that will never allow it to say any good of itself, or to permit others to do so. . . . It knows that it possesses nothing here and that it cannot ignore this knowledge which it has acquired by direct vision, even if it wishes to. Therefore it shuts its eyes to the things of this world, and opens them to take in the truth. p 146

From the time that the Lord began to grant me the favour of these raptures until now, this strength has continued to grow in me, and He, in His kindness, has held me with His hand to prevent my turning back. This being the case, I do not imagine that I am doing anything of myself, but entirely understand that this is the Lord's work. I think, therefore, that any soul to which the Lord is granting these favours and who walks in humility and fear, always realizing that all this is the Lord's own doing and that we play next to no part in it, may mix with any sort of people. However disturbing and vicious its company may be, it will not be affected or moved in any way. On the contrary, as I have said, distractions will be a help and a source from which the soul may derive great profit. It is the strong that are chosen by the Lord to benefit others, even though their strength does not come from themselves, and when the Lord brings a soul to this state, little by little He communicates very great secrets to it. p 151

There is a difference between the degree of fortitude that God gives us in the early stages, when a rapture is over in the twinkling of an eye, and is almost imperceptible except through the effects that it leaves behind, and what we receive later on when our raptures are of longer duration. I often think that this must be because the soul does not completely prepare itself at once. The Lord gradually trains it, giving it resolution and manly strength to trample all earthly things underfoot. This He did in the shortest time for Mary Magdalene, and He has done the same for other persons, according to the measure in which they have allowed Him freedom to act yet cannot bring ourselves to believe that even in this life God will reward us a hundredfold. p. 160

The more I tried to turn my mind to other things, the more the Lord enveloped me in that sweetness and glory, until I felt entirely surrounded by it. I could not flee from it in any direction, and so things went on. All this so concerned me that I was quite distressed. But the Lord was much more concerned on my behalf in those two months; He granted me favours and revealed Himself to me to a far greater degree than He had done before, in order to show me that resistance was no longer within my power. I began to feel a new love for the most sacred Humanity; my prayers began to settle, like a house that now had some foundations; and I began to be more addicted to penances, which I had neglected because of my severe illnesses. p 170

Having spent a great part of one day in prayer, beseeching the Lord to help me content Him in every way, I began the hymn; and as I was reciting it a rapture came on me so suddenly that it almost carried me away; it was so plain that I could make no mistake about it. This was the first time that the Lord had granted me this grace of ecstasy, and I heard these words: 'I want you to converse now not with men but with angels.' This absolutely amazed me, for my soul was greatly moved and these words were spoken to me in the depths of the spirit. They made me afraid therefore, though on the other hand they brought me much comfort, after the fear - which seems to have been caused by the novelty of the experience - had departed.

These words have been fulfilled. For I have never since been able to form a firm friendship, or to take any comforts in, or to feel particular love for, any people except those whom I believe to love God and to be trying to serve Him. This has been something beyond my control; and it has made no difference if the people have been relatives or friends. p 172

It will be as well, I think, to explain the nature of these locutions which God bestows on the soul and to describe the soul's feelings when it receives them, in order that your Reverence may understand them. For since the occasion of which I am speaking, on which the Lord granted me this favour, it has become a common occurrence with me; and it is so to-day, as will be seen in what I have still to say. The words are perfectly formed, but are not heard with the physical ear. Yet they are received much more clearly than if they were so heard; and however hard one resists it is impossible to shut them out. . . .

I will explain also how those locutions that come from good spirits differ from those that come from evil ones, and how they may be - as sometimes occurs - caused by the intellect itself, or by the spirit talking to itself. I do not know whether this is possible, but only to-day it has struck me that it is. I have plenty of proof concerning those cases when the locutions are of God. I have been told things two or three years beforehand that have afterwards been fulfilled, and so far none of them has proved untrue. There are other ways too in which the spirit of God can be plainly detected, as I shall tell later. pp 174-175

Sometimes these words are of such majesty that, even if we do not know from whom they come, they make us tremble if they are spoken in reproof, and if they are words of love consume us with love. Furthermore, as I have said, they speak of things that were very far from being in our memory, and take the form of such long sentences spoken so quickly that it would have taken us a very long time to make them up ourselves; and if we had done so, I do not think that we could possibly have been unaware that they were of our own composition. So there is no reason why I should dwell any longer on this matter, for I think it would be a marvel if any experienced person were taken in, unless he deliberately wanted to be. p 176

Either a soul wishes to understand or it does not. If it is rejecting what it hears, and is far too frightened to want to hear anything, or has other reasons for preferring to be quiet during its times of prayer and not have these experiences, how can the intellect have the time to make up speeches? For this requires time. But when the locutions are

genuine, they instruct us without any cost in time, and make us understand things which it would probably take us a month to put in order for ourselves. What is more, the mind and soul themselves are amazed at some of the things they understand. This is how things are, and anyone with experience will know that what I have said is literally true. p 177

Although I have sometimes seen devils, as I shall tell by and by, I have hardly been afraid of them since. In fact, they have seemed to be afraid of me. I have acquired an authority over them, given me by the Lord of all things, and now I take no more notice of them than of flies. They appear to be such cowards, that their strength fails when they see anyone who despises them. . . .

I am sure I am more afraid of these people who are so frightened of the devil than I am of the devil himself. He cannot do me any harm, but they, especially if they are confessors, can be most disturbing. p 183

Reflect that what I am saying is not a fraction of what could be said. I have only written as much as is needful to explain the kind of vision and favour that God gives to the soul. But I cannot describe what the soul feels when the Lord allows it to understand His secrets and wonders. The joy is so much above all others felt on earth that it gives us a rightful loathing for the pleasures of this life, all of which are but dross; and it is odious to bring them into the comparison, even if we might enjoy them for ever. And what are these joys that the Lord gives us? Only one drop of water from the great overflowing river that He has prepared for us. p 192



Luis Tristán, S. Pietro di Alcantara, XVI sec., Palazzo arcivescovile, Toledo

There are many other things about him [Peter of Alcantara] that I should like to say, but I am afraid that your Reverence will ask me what this has to do with me - I have been afraid of that even as I have been writing. So I will stop here, adding only that he died as he had lived, preaching and admonishing his friars. As he saw that his end was approaching, he recited the psalm, *I was glad when they said unto me*. Then he fell on his knees and died.

It has been the Lord's pleasure that I should have more to do with him since his death than in his life, and that he should advise me on many subjects. I have often seen him in the greatest glory. The first time he appeared to me, he spoke of the blessedness of his penance, which had won him so great a prize, and of many other things as well. A year before his death he appeared to me, when I was on a journey. I knew that he was soon to die and told him so, though we were many miles apart. As he drew his last breath, he appeared to me again and said that he was going to rest. I did not believe in this experience, but related it to a number of people, and a week later came the news that he was dead - or, to put it better, had entered into eternal life.

See then how his life of hardships has ended in great glory. I think that he is a much greater comfort to me now than when he was here. The Lord once told me that no petition made in his name would fail to be heard. I have had many things granted that I have asked him to ask of the Lord. Blessed be He for ever! Amen. pp 193-195

One day when I was at prayer, He was pleased to show me His hands only; their beauty was beyond description. This put me in great fear, as does every new experience at the beginning, whatever supernatural favour the Lord may be granting me. A few days later I saw that divine face also, which seems to leave me completely entranced. I could not understand why the Lord was revealing Himself to me gradually like this, since He was afterwards to grant me the favour of seeing Him whole. But finally I realized that His Majesty was pandering to the weakness of my nature. May He be blessed for ever. So base and vile a creature as I would not have been able to bear all this glory at once and, knowing this, in His compassion, He gradually prepared me. . .

Such is the beauty of glorified bodies, and such the supernatural glory which surrounds them, that it throws all who gaze upon them into confusion. I was so awe-struck, indeed, as to be completely upset and bewildered. Soon afterwards, however, I felt quite certain and secure; the effects quickly dispelled all my fears p 196

I will only remark that if there were nothing else in Heaven to delight the eye but the great beauty of glorified bodies, that alone would be a very great bliss, particularly if it were the Humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. For if His Majesty reveals Himself on earth to the degree that our wretched state can bear, what will it be like when that blessing is enjoyed in its entirety? p 197

If I were to spend many years imagining how I could invent anything so beautiful, I could not do it. I should not know how to begin. For in its whiteness and radiance alone it exceeds anything that we can imagine.

It is not a dazzling radiance but a soft whiteness and infused radiance, which causes the eyes great delight and never tires them; nor are they tired by the brilliance which confronts them as they look on this divine beauty. The brightness and light that appear before the gaze are so different from those of earth that the sun's rays seem quite dim by comparison, and afterwards we never feel like opening our eyes again. It is as if we were to look at a very clear stream running over a crystal bed, in which the sun was reflected, and then to turn to a very muddy brook, with an earthy bottom, running beneath a clouded sky. Not that the sun or anything like sunlight enters into the vision; on the contrary, its light seems the natural light, and the light of this world appears artificial. It is a light that never yields to darkness and, being always light, can never be clouded. It is of such a kind, indeed, that no one, however great his intellect, could imagine its nature in the whole course of his life; and God brings it before us so swiftly that even if we needed to open our eyes in order to see it, we should not have the time. But it does not matter whether they are open or closed; if the Lord wishes us to see it, we shall do so even against our will. No distraction or effort is strong enough to resist it; no diligence or care of our own can attain it. This I have learned from thorough experience. pp 197-198

O my Jesus, if only one could describe the Majesty with which You reveal Yourself! How utterly You are lord of all the world and the heavens, and of a thousand other worlds; and of countless more worlds and heavens that You have created! And from the majesty with which You appear the soul realizes that it is nothing to You to be lord of all this.

p 199

Almost always Our Lord appeared to me as He rose from the dead, and it was the same when I saw Him in the Host. Only occasionally, to hearten me if I was in tribulation, He would show me His wounds, and then He would appear sometimes on the Cross and sometimes as He was in the Garden. Sometimes too, but rarely, I saw Him wearing the crown of thorns, and sometimes carrying the Cross as well, because of my deeds, let me say, and those of others. But always His body was glorified.

p 206



Though I often have visions of angels, I do not see them. They come to me only after the manner of the first type of vision that I described. But it was our Lord's will that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire. They must be of the kind called cherubim, but they do not tell me their names. I know very

well that there is a great difference between some angels and others, and between these and others still, but I could not possibly explain it.

In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it - even a considerable share.

p 210

I sometimes had to endure - and still have to, though to a lesser degree - the greatest spiritual trials, accompanied by bodily pains and tortures so severe that I could scarcely control myself. At other times I suffered from even graver physical ailments though if I was free from spiritual distress, I bore them with great joy. But when both kinds of pain came on me together, it was a great trial and reduced me to sore straits. I forgot all the favours that the Lord had bestowed on me; all that was left me was a memory, as of something in a dream, and this greatly distressed me. For at such times the understanding becomes dull, and so I was bothered by a thousand doubts and suspicions. I wondered whether I had not misunderstood everything, and whether it was not all my fancy. I felt that it was bad enough for me to be deluded myself

without my also deluding those good men. I thought of myself as so wicked that all the evils and heresies which had arisen must be due to my sins. p 215

By now I have had so much experience of the devil's work that he knows I can recognize him and so torments me less in these ways than he used to. His part in an experience can be detected by the restlessness and discomfort with which it begins, by the turmoil that he creates in the soul so long as it lasts, also by the darkness and affliction into which he plunges it, and by its subsequent dryness and indisposition for prayer or anything else that is good. He seems to stifle the soul and constrict the body, making them both useless. p 215

It is my intellect and my imagination, I think, that are harming me here. My will, I believe, is good, and well-disposed to all that is good. But this intellect of mine is so wild that it seems like a raving lunatic. Nobody can hold it down, and I have not sufficient control over it myself to keep it quiet for a single moment. Sometimes I laugh at myself, and am aware of my wretched state. Then I observe my intellect, and let it alone, to see what it will do; and, miraculously - glory be to God! - it never turns to things that are really wrong, only to indifferent matters, and casts around here, there, and everywhere, for something to think about. I then become more conscious of the very great favour that God bestows on me when he binds this madman in the chains of perfect contemplation. I wonder what would happen if those who think me good were to see me in this distracted state. p 219

Once when I was in an oratory he [Satan] appeared on my left hand, in a hideous form. I particularly noticed his mouth, because he spoke to me, and it was terrifying. A great flame seemed to issue from his body, which was intensely bright and cast no shadow. He said to me in a dreadful voice that I had indeed escaped from his clutches, but that he would capture me still. I was greatly frightened and made shift to cross myself, whereupon he disappeared, but immediately came back again. This happened twice and I did not know what to do. There was some holy water near by, some drops of which I threw in his direction, and he did not return again. On another occasion I was tormented for five hours with such terrible pains and such inward and outward disquiet that I do not believe I could have stood it any longer. The sisters who were with me were terrified, and had no more idea what to do for me than I had of how to help myself. p 222

I have endured the severest bodily pains in the course of my life, the worst, so the doctors say, that it is possible to suffer and live, among them the contractions of my nerves during my paralysis, and many other agonies of various kinds, including some, as I have said, caused by the devil. But none of them was in any way comparable to the pains I felt at that time, especially when I realized that they would be endless and unceasing. But even this was nothing to my agony of soul, an oppression, a suffocation, and an affliction so agonising, and accompanied by such a hopeless and distressing misery that no words I could find would adequately describe it. To say that it was as if my soul were being continuously torn from my body is as nothing. The fact is that I can find no means of describing that inward fire and that despair which is greater than the severest torments or pains. I could not see my torturer, but I seemed to feel myself being burnt and dismembered; and, I repeat, this interior fire and despair were the very worst of all. pp 233-234

I could now see, He said, what sufferings those saints who had founded religious orders had gone through, and indeed they had had to endure much more than I could imagine, but we must not let that trouble us. He told me certain things to say to my companion, and to my very great astonishment we at once felt comforted by what had happened, and courageous enough to stand up to everybody. And so we did, for there was hardly anyone among the prayerful, or indeed in the whole place, who was not against us, and did not consider our project absolutely absurd. p 238

While things were in this state, aided by the continual help of many people's prayers, we practically completed the purchase of a house. It was a small one, but this did not trouble me in the least, for the Lord had told me to start in the best way I could and in due course I should see what His Majesty would do. And how well I have seen it! So, though I knew that our income would be small, I believed that the Lord would manage things in other ways and would give us help. p 240

I was very unpopular throughout the convent for wanting to found a more strictly enclosed house. The nuns said that this was an insult to them; that I could serve God just as well where I was, since there were others there better than myself; that I had no love for my own house, and that I should have been better employed raising money for it than for founding another. Some said that I ought to be put in the prison-cell; but others, though only a few, came out on my side. I saw quite well that in many respects my opponents were right, and sometimes I could make allowances for them. But as I could not tell them my principal argument - that I had been obeying the Lord's commands - I did not know what to do and was therefore silent. p 241



On St Clare's day, as I was going to Communion, that saint appeared to me in great beauty and told me to take courage. She promised that she would help me if I went forward with what I had begun. I conceived a great devotion for her, and she has truly kept her word. For a convent of her Order, which is close to ours, is at present helping to maintain us. What is more, she has gradually brought this plan of mine to such perfection that the same Rule of poverty which obtains in her house is also observed in ours, and we live on alms. p 246

I can never meet anyone whom I like very much without immediately wishing to see him wholly given to God, and sometimes these yearnings of mine are so strong that I cannot resist them. Although I want everyone to serve Him, my desire in regard to those I like is particularly strong, and so I importune the Lord frequently on their behalf. p 252

I was astonished at all the trouble the devil was taking about a few poor women, and at the universal belief that a mere dozen sisters and a Prioress - for I must remind those who opposed us that this was to be our number - would do such harm to the town whilst living so strictly. If there had been anything wrong or mistaken about the plan, it would have affected them alone. There was no possible way in which the town

could be damaged, and yet our opponents saw all sorts of dangers in it, and so fought us with a good conscience. pp 272-273

While I was praying in the church before entering the convent, I fell into an almost complete rapture and saw Christ, who seemed to receive me with great love, place a crown on my head, and thank me for what I had done for His mother. On another occasion, after Compline, when we were all praying in the choir, I saw Our Lady in the greatest glory, clothed in a white robe, beneath which she seemed to be sheltering us all. I saw this as a sign of the high degree of glory to which the Lord would raise the nuns of this house. p 274

All the trials that we have suffered will, I believe, have been to good purpose. True, the Rule is rather strict; meat is never eaten except in cases of necessity, there is an eight months' fast, and there are other ascetic practices, as can be seen from the primitive Rule. Yet this comes very easily to the sisters, and we follow certain other practices in addition, which we have thought it necessary to make for the more perfect observance of our Rule. I trust in the Lord that what we have begun will prosper, as He told me it will. p 275

In the course of time, the Lord showed me other great secrets, and He sometimes does so still. The soul may wish to see more than is put before it, but this is impossible; there is no way in which it may do so. I never saw more on any occasion, therefore, than the Lord was pleased to show me. But what I saw was so great that the least part of it was enough to leave the soul amazed, and so to benefit it that it considers all the things of this life as of small account. I wish that I could describe at least some small part of what I learnt, but when I consider how to do so I find that it is impossible. The mere difference between the light we see here and the light of vision is inexpressible. Both are alike light, but the brightness of the sun seems dull in comparison with that other. pp 283-284

When His Majesty reveals these truths to us, the very deep impression that they make upon our souls clearly shows us that we could not possibly acquire them for ourselves in this very short time. With that experience, I lost almost all my fear of death, which had always terrified me. Now it seems to me a very easy thing for a servant of God that in a single moment the soul should find itself freed from this prison and at rest. This moment in which God raises and transports the soul to show it things of such a sublime excellence seems to me very like that in which the soul leaves the body. In just such a single instant it finds itself in possession of all its blessings. p 285

I think that this experience also helped me greatly to recognize my true home and to realise that here we are but pilgrims. It is a great thing to see what awaits us there, and to know where we shall live hereafter. . . . It sometimes happens that my companions and those who give me the greatest comfort are amongst those whom I know to dwell there; they are, as I see it, the people who are truly alive, whilst those who are on earth are so dead that I seem unable to find a companion in the whole world, especially when these raptures come upon me. p 285

I have seen great things concerning other members of the Society of Jesus to which this Father belonged, and concerning the Order as a whole. I have several times seen

them in Heaven with white banners in their hands and, as I say, I have seen other visions of them that are truly wonderful. I have a great veneration, therefore, for the Order, with which I have had many dealings. I see too that their lives conform to what the Lord has told me about them. p 288

From all the visions I have seen I have never learnt that any soul escaped purgatory, except those of this Father, of the saintly friar, Peter of Alcantara, and of the Dominican father whom I have mentioned. It has pleased the Lord to show me the degrees of glory to which some souls have been raised, and He has shown them to me in the places assigned to them. There is a great difference between some of these places and others. p 294

In answer to my prayers, the Lord has very often delivered souls from grave sins and brought others to great perfection. As for rescuing souls from purgatory and such notable acts, the Lord has granted me so many favours of this kind that I should exhaust myself and my readers if I were to describe them all. But he has done more through me for the salvation of the soul than for the health of the body; all this is very well known, and there are many witnesses to it. It used to cause me very great scruples, for I could not help believing that the Lord was doing this because of my prayers. I say nothing of His principal reason, which is His pure goodness. But these favours are now so numerous and have been observed by so many people that it no longer distresses me to believe this. pp 296-297

It is dangerous to keep counting the years that we have practised prayer. For even though it may be done in humility, it always seems liable to leave us with the feeling that we have earned some merit by our service. I do not say that we deserve nothing or that we shall not be well rewarded. But any spiritual person who believes that by mere number of years during which he has practised prayer he has earned these spiritual consolations, will, I am sure, fail to reach the peak of spirituality. Is it not enough that God has thought him worthy of being guided by His hand and prevented from committing those offences into which he fell before he began to pray? pp 300-301

In all this we need experience and a master. For when the soul has reached this point, many things occur that need to be discussed with somebody. But if one seeks guidance and does not find it, then the Lord will not fail one. For even though I am what I am, He has not failed me. . . . The Lord grants these favours to many more women than men, as I have heard from the saintly friar Peter of Alcantara, and have also observed for myself. He used to say that women made much more progress on this path than men, and he gave excellent reasons for it, which there is no reason to repeat here, all in women's favour. p 309

He told me that conversation with good people was never a bad thing, and that provided what I said was always well considered and virtuous I should not abstain from their company. It would do me more good than harm. This gave me a great deal of comfort, for sometimes I used to think that I was not sufficiently detached, and then I wanted to give up seeing people altogether. The Lord always gave me advice about everything, even to the extent of telling me how to deal with certain weak persons and with others. He never ceases to take care of me. But I am sometimes

distressed to see how little I do in His service, and how I am forced to spend so much more time than I would wish in a body as weak and miserable as mine. p 312

May it please the Lord that I have fallen into no errors, for my intention and wish have been to be accurate and obedient, so that through me the Lord may receive some praise. This is what for many years I have been praying for. As the works I have performed are not sufficient to gain this end, I have ventured to put together this story of my unruly life, though I have wasted no more time or trouble on it than was necessary for the writing of it. I have merely set down what has happened to me in all possible simplicity and truth. p 314