

Teresa of Avila and the Risk of Contemplative Life

Reverend Fathers, sisters and brothers, friends in Christ;

I am deeply touched to be invited today to speak to you about the Mother of the reformed Carmel and Doctor of the Universal Church, Teresa of Jesus. Since my student days, the writings of St Teresa and St John of the Cross have been a source of inspiration and guidance, and it was my privilege some thirty five years ago to write a brief introductory study of St Teresa's teachings as well as more recently to compose, from time to time, various shorter studies of aspects of her thinking and teaching – as much to clarify my own studies in her work as to provide any insight for others. But it is a very particular honour to be awarded a doctorate by this august institution. My debt to Carmelites living and departed, and above all to the great Doctors of the sixteenth century, is enormous; and today we have also had occasion to celebrate the legacy of St Edith Stein, that great twentieth century Carmelite teacher, whose philosophical and theological creativity are still capable of astonishing the reader, and whose philosophical anthropology has been of the greatest interest and importance to my own thinking. To be associated even a little with the spiritual and intellectual heritage of Carmel is such a privilege, and I can only express my deepest gratitude to the Order and the College for today's invitation and for all that is done here and in the Order at large for the glory of God and the growth of souls.

1.

Some years ago, I wrote a brief essay¹ on St Teresa's use of the gospels in her spiritual teaching, concluding that she was especially drawn to the gospel of Luke and in particular to the figure of Mary Magdalene – understood in the traditional way as identical with the sinful woman of Luke 7 and with Mary of Bethany in Luke 10. We know from several of her *Spiritual Testimonies* that the Feast of the Magdalene was more than once the occasion of significant moments of vision or insight, and there is a story (preserved in the memoir of Teresa by Diego de Yepes) of Teresa receiving a locution from Christ in which he assures her that she will be to him what Magdalene was on earth, a revelation that may be identical with what is described in *Testimony* 28.² What interests her in the composite 'Magdalene' figure is that she is presented as a person who is exposed to attack and criticism because of her scandalous behaviour towards Jesus: what the sinful woman in Luke 7 and Mary of Bethany have in common is that they need to be defended by Jesus against those who accuse them of irresponsibility, excessiveness or impropriety. In the *Interior Castle* (7.4.13), Teresa elaborates the theme, vividly describing the scandal occasioned by a woman of status compromising her honour by walking openly and unaccompanied in the streets, as Magdalene does in search of Jesus, finally entering a stranger's house to find him.

As I suggested in that essay, Teresa sees the life of a female contemplative as 'transgressive': her concern for a new form of religious life in which there was no reflection in any way of the prevailing systems of social differentiation had certainly

¹ Included in Rowan Williams, *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today*, London, Bloomsbury 2017, as 'Teresa and the Scriptures', pp. 131-49.

² *Testimonies* 17, 28, 37; Yepes cited on p.368 of Kavanaugh/Rodriguez.

exposed her to suspicion and criticism. And there is a distinct resonance also to the way she speaks here about going unaccompanied: Magdalene is 'perhaps' (*por ventura*) alone because she is not really aware of what she is doing, since she is exalted by love. Her search for Jesus is a matter of stepping away both from the definitions and expectations imposed from outside and from any kind of self-consciousness working within. The journey into contemplative intimacy with Christ is a journey towards the profound independence that arises from complete dependence on God. Teresa, like Mary Magdalene, walks alone because walking with a protector, a servant or a chaperone, a *duenna*, would anchor her security in the social system and so qualify or compromise her decision to be recreated in relation to Christ alone. In her own life, of course, Teresa was by no means averse to utilizing the advantages available to her in the shape of influential friends and allies, and insisted always on her submissive fidelity to male confessors; but she is just as insistent that the definition of the Carmelite life that she is shaping with such detail and subtlety in her writing is irreducibly at odds with the intricate patterns of patron-client relations that dominated the religious institutions she had grown up with, the various ways in which convents of men and women worked within the arrangements of mutual advantage that held civic society together in her day.

To belong to a contemplative community of the kind she was creating was to embark on a risky venture, a sort of collective version of the Magdalene's solitary walking through the city streets. This is a calling to a form of life that is not part of a scheme of exchange in the ordinary way. The religious does not offer his or her prayers as a social good among others, to be traded in return for benefactions and assurances of protection. Jesus will answer for us, 'as he did for the Magdalene' (*Castle* 6.11.12). No other protection is necessary; and this is a relation that can have nothing transactional about it. We have nothing to 'trade' that will be of use to Christ. The religious life that Teresa envisages is a simple receptivity to the grace of Christ, the friendship that he offers without discrimination (a theme that pervades *The Way of Perfection* especially, not least in her famous meditations on the Lord's Prayer beginning in ch.27). And the focal risk accepted by the Teresian religious is precisely having nothing with which to 'negotiate': there is no property or possession or skill that can make us a suitable 'partner' for God. There is only the invitation to receive. 'In this contemplation....we don't do anything ourselves. Neither do we labour, nor do we bargain, nor is anything else necessary' (*Way* 32.10). This in itself is not a particularly distinctive message, perhaps, but what *is* distinctive about Teresa's treatment of the theme is, first, the close connection with her overall approach to issues of honour and equality within the religious community and, second, the application of the theme specifically to the life of female religious. The community's own style of living has to express the central quality of contemplative prayer as radical dependence and freedom from the defence of status or advantage; and the deep-rooted assumption that female religious are supposed to be dependent on male authority is gently but persistently and firmly interrogated. As she says in ch.29 of the *Way*, if ecclesiastical authority does not respond with appreciation to the life of the religious, that is neither here nor there; the accompaniment that matters is that of God in Christ, always present in the centre of the finite self (see in particular, *Way* 29.6, summarizing briefly the fundamental premise of the *Interior Castle*).

2.

We are always already accompanied. This is the essential insight that Teresa develops in her most extended writing on the process of contemplative maturation: the Magdalene walking through the streets alone is in fact walking in the company of Christ, in that her wandering search, which will lead her into dangerously unfamiliar places, is shaped simply by what the late Sebastian Moore called 'the pressure of God to be' in the world. The risk of prayer is to allow what already *is* to come to perceptible birth in us, without any attempt on our part to conform this process to our expectation or our supposed need. And this perspective is undergirded by Teresa's conviction that 'what already is' is Christ, and that Christ in us is eternally moving towards the Father who is his eternal source (this is, I have argued³, a central aspect of Teresa's understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist). Our natural place is within this movement of love. But for our own journey to arrive at its destination in union with the movement of the Son to the Father, we must be detached from our adherence to the securities of the world in which the ego has to be defended against any loss of status because its solidity and worth depend on its place within an overall system of values that can be exchanged, balanced, bargained over. Separate from this marketized scheme, the self is lost, rootless and vulnerable; but involvement in the scheme is a source of unrelenting anxiety, since any negotiated status, any human system of honour, is unstable and in need of constant maintenance. It is worth adding that this kind of marketized social vision is not unique to the world of functionalist modernity and capitalist trade that we are familiar with; all human societies work to some extent with models of status and advantage that need constant attention. Late modern capitalism is simply an unusually extreme and comprehensive version of this (as Pope Francis has spelled out, especially in *Fratelli tutti*).

But the importance of Teresa's analysis of the risk of the contemplative life is that she is presenting us with a powerful theological challenge about the kind of community the Church must be if it is to stand against the dehumanizing cultures of our time. We might phrase the question in terms of what kind of institutional patterns of life will embody the risk that Christ-oriented contemplation represents. If what the world needs for its healing is the release of the Christ who is already moving and active in the centre of each human agent, the Church must constantly ask itself what it is doing to enable this and to recognize it. Teresa believed that the crises of her own era could ultimately be met only by the stripping back of the common life of prayer to a condition of undefended poverty. And she was in an unusually good position to set out the logic of this demand as a person who was herself at risk in very obvious ways, as a woman who acted as a teacher of prayer and as the daughter of a family of Jewish converts. Despite the status that went with her family's wealth, they lived in permanent insecurity as members of an ethnic minority automatically suspect to civil and religious authorities. It is as though for her the inescapable paradoxes and strains of her social situation opened the door to her recognition and embrace of the contemplative process of stepping beyond a security that – simply mirrored the fragile 'security' sought in her society. It is not simply that she believed simplicity of life to be a suitable ascetical environment for prayer; simplicity of life, with its financial uncertainties and its insistence on the involvement of

³ See 'Teresa and the Eucharist', *Holy Living*, pp.151-166.

all in the practical work of the convent, and so on, all this was imperative because the unprotected character of prayer – ‘unaccompanied’, in the sense of being without external reassurances, supports and consolations – required that the common life must be similarly unprotected.

This was, for Teresa, bound up with a variety of practical recommendations. Houses should be modest in scale, and communities small – small enough to avoid both hierarchies and factions appearing. Superiors should serve a limited term and should then return to the common work of the convent. Communities should avoid the temptation to accept generous endowment or subsidy in return for the promise of spiritual benefits for donors. There should be both a ready compliance with the canonical discipline of the Church and a refusal to become embroiled in ingratiating oneself with the hierarchy. Social distinctions based on family and ancestry (and thus, by implication, race) should be rigorously excluded. And the *Way of Perfection* takes this further: ‘when books are taken away’ (by the Inquisition), the sisters will be able to depend on the plain words of the prayers they know to instruct them about their spiritual growth – another kind of ‘unaccompanied’ journeying. Magdalene-like solitude in the Church may be a matter of enclosure and austerity but it is also a matter of living patiently and imaginatively with circumstances that make ‘external’ reinforcement and reassurance inaccessible. Teresa is well aware of the risk of articulating this last point; she wraps it neatly into an appeal to the fidelity of the women in the gospel narratives who stand at the cross of Jesus, but seems perfectly well aware that she is pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable to her male censors (and the outcome in terms of the fate of her original manuscript amply bears this out).

It is of course an area in which her convergence with John of the Cross is plain, although the perspectives are distinct. John’s spiritual schema approaches the risk of the life from the point of view of the praying self, increasingly denuded of manageable, desirable, intelligible objects. John describes the reduction of the life of the spirit to sheer naked openness, as the natural energies of memory, intelligence and will are reborn as hope, faith, and love. These natural energies must let go of any finite goal that will limit or shrink them; made in the divine image, they are fully themselves when God is their object. They grow by being – once again – ‘unaccompanied’ in the Teresian sense, sustained by nothing but their innate capacity for opening to the act of Christ and thus coming to carry the act of Christ in the world. Teresa in effect describes much the same in the last sections of the *Castle* (the fifth to seventh *moradas*), but her focus is more on what the witness of both the individual sister and the entire life of a community declare about the nature of the journey. And – very specific to Teresa - the readiness of women to undertake this subversive and transgressive work of shared contemplation in poverty is a sign of the extreme and absolute nature of the calling to which they are responding, and thus to the scale of the promise represented by their way of life, which is nothing less than the act of God in Christ released more fully in the world.

3.

We could say that the risk Teresa identifies is the challenge of setting ourselves free from a slavish concern with ‘results’. It is certainly not that we should see the

contemplative life as something self-contained, unconnected with the transformation of our environment; as we have seen, there is a strong critique of unexamined social or racial or gendered power built in to Teresa's writing; but the point of her emphasis on the independence of the life, its freedom from the obligation to justify itself in terms of what society at large considers effective, is to underline the logic of 'releasing the act of Christ'. Implicit in this is the idea that just as we are accompanied by God in Christ in the daily pattern of prayer, so we come to 'accompany' the world we inhabit in a similar way: we cannot offer the kinds of reassurance that the social world demands, a range of problem-solving techniques that guarantee a measurable improvement in living conditions, a peaceful settlement to international disputes, the healing of countless specific individual and collective ailments. We cannot in this sense 'protect' the world any more than we can be protected by anything except Christ. Transfiguration and healing are real, but they are Christ's work not ours; and for that work to break through, we must be empty enough to prepare the way, not reducing this transfiguration to the triumph of our agenda or our organization.

It is a fine balance, and not at all a recipe for withdrawal from 'the world' – except in the fundamental sense of withdrawal from illusions of our ability to resolve things. In our own day, this is perhaps most eloquently expressed in the writings and witness of figures like Dorothy Day and Madeleine Delbrel. The latter's image of the Church waiting for our commitment and self-offering in order to sit down at all the bedsides of those in need or pain⁴ captures something of this. Madeleine Delbrel, whose spiritual perspective owed a good deal to Carmel as well as to Charles de Foucauld, saw the contemporary 'desert' into which the disciple must go as not simply the urban wasteland of poverty, unemployment and alienation from Christian practice, but as the simple fact of being unable to *control* the situation so as to guarantee success, tangible fruits of action. 'Solitude' can mean the constant experience of loss and uncertainty,⁵ precisely the 'unaccompanied' journey of Teresa's Magdalene walking through the streets into strange and disconcerting places, so that the Church may be more fully and consciously where Christ is. The servant of God will desire 'nothing to separate them from this sinner, this pagan whom they came to seek by their immobile departure, that departure which commanded them simply to remain where they were.'⁶

'Immobile departure'; it is a striking turn of phrase, very typical of Madeleine Delbrel, and it reflects something of what Teresa is apparently driving at in her reflections on the 'Magdalene' stories. The contemplative envisaged by Teresa (more specifically the female contemplative) in one sense 'departs' very visibly from social convention and propriety, walking unaccompanied in the streets; but it is just this unaccompanied walking that constitutes an 'immobility', a fidelity to the always already given presence of Christ. To accept other models of the prayerful life, other models of conventual order, would be to move away from Christ and so to move away also from the true state of the world. It would be to claim a position of advantage, a separate place from which

⁴ Madeleine Delbrel, *The Holiness of Ordinary People*, ed. Gilles Francois and Bernard Pitaud, San Francisco, Ignatius Press 2024, p.64.

⁵ *Ib.*, p.152.

⁶ *Ib.*, p.74.

privileged souls and minds descend to offer help to the less fortunate. The contemplative here walks away from the unfreedom of the world of transaction or contract, from security and predetermined roles in society, towards the internal place of alignment with Christ as he moves towards the Father. Just as Christ in moving towards the Father moves towards where he already is, so we in moving towards Christ move to where we belong, where we are rooted. And for Madeleine Delbrel, this also means that we are 'immobilized' at the side of those whose need or suffering calls us with the voice of Christ; we have no liberty to move away from accompanying him wherever he is present.

4.

Teresa is writing for those who have literally distanced themselves from the social world, Madeleine for those who have very definitely elected not to. But both are writing about a similar kind of risk involved in the bare fact of standing before Christ in complete receptivity, being where he is. De Foucauld, according to Madeleine, 'helped us to lose faith in prestige and to acquire faith in our own disappearance.'⁷ It would not be an inappropriate summary of a great deal of Teresa's work. But the question remains of what this means for the life of the wider Church and indeed for a workable theology of the Church. The first thing to say is that, if it is true that our human nature is fulfilled in what I have called the 'release' of Christ in us so that the world around us may find healing, then the contemplative journey represents a calling central to the Church's identity and integrity, saving it from yielding to the temptation to identify with a programme – whether of evangelization in the conventional sense or of diaconal service and advocacy. Both those things emerge organically from the desire to be where Christ is and to align with and be immersed in his action. Without this, the Church becomes dependent once again, not on Christ but on the expectations of a social order grounded in contract and debt: I give only what I owe, I receive only what I purchase. My worth is inseparable from my performance, my delivery to the social audience of a satisfactory embodiment of the function prescribed for me. Teresa clearly sees the gender inequalities of her day as producing one of the more inflexible and limiting instances of this. It would be unhelpfully anachronistic to think she has a proto-feminist agenda in mind; but she is using the feminine ecclesial experience to think with, using it to clarify something about the fundamental nature of ecclesial life. If that life is ultimately the active life of Christ in his Body, the taking up of the cross in self-forgetfulness is at the centre of the service and following of Christ; and Teresa has spelled out how this abandonment of self-consciousness is what enables the Magdalene-like disciple to risk mockery or opprobrium by opting for poverty or insecurity.

Thus a 'risk-averse' Church is likely to be less than enthusiastic about the full challenge of Teresian contemplation. It may be tolerant or even encouraging about spiritual exploration in a generalized sense, but it will not so readily translate this into forms of common life that seek to exemplify radical dependence on God's indiscriminate grace. Such aversion to risk has both 'leftist' and 'rightist' forms: it may be evident in a preoccupation with the causes and campaigns of the day, or in sustained anxiety about

⁷ Ibid., p.112.

orthodoxy and its boundaries. Neither of these is necessarily trivial by any means, but the problem arises when they become handholds for a security that eventually immobilizes the Church in a way rather different from what Madeleine Delbrel had in mind. But there are many other ways in which the avoidance of risk may be manifest. Clericalism remains an issue for the Church – and I include in this the churches outside the communion of Rome as much as those within. As a way of securing ecclesial life through an over-rigid division between the baptismal charism and the specific grace of ministerial orders, it can readily become a self-protective institution, reluctant to take visible responsibility or to share such responsibility. Even the current synodal process within the Roman Catholic Church – welcome in so many ways – reveals, at different times and in different contexts, both a deep nervousness of shared responsibility and an over-ambitious confidence in vaguely defined ‘democratic’ process as a simple way forward – both of these once again slipping in the direction of protective mechanisms that do less than justice to the Church’s character as a community of mutual gift rather than mutual debt, and as a community whose origins and legitimacy do not lie in successful human performance. For the same reason, a Church that is theologically vague about its sacramental life and careless or perfunctory in liturgical habit can give the message that it is not in fact worshipping in the confident expectation that God is actively present. A Church that has low expectations of its own people as well as its Lord, low expectations of the capacity of the faithful to learn and grow, will once again fall readily into dependence, dependence on managerial success in maintaining externals. And the wide variety of ways in which routine preoccupation with such institutional externals can dictate priorities in the use of resources tells us something of the inner fear of what self-forgetting practice involves.

The Church cannot exist as a large-scale Carmelite convent nor purely as a network of communities like those of Madeleine Delbrel or the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus. The range and diversity of its engagements with the surrounding society are more than any single model, even the most evangelically faithful one, can embody. But the significant question is how the Church ‘institutionalizes’ its own responsibility to something other than effective performance, humanly guaranteed continuity, and suitably clear structures of command. What Teresa proposes is that the contemplative life, as she envisages it for her sisters, could and should be among other things one such institutionalized reminder. As we have seen, what is meant by ‘contemplative life’ is bound up with a style of daily corporate living that is unambiguously participative, egalitarian and free from the familiar patterns of hierarchy – and in this sense the communities of Dorothy Day and Madeleine Delbrel are part of the same picture. They have in common with the Teresian Carmel a delicate balancing act between ecclesial fidelity and a freedom in respect of particular hierarchical habits of power (reminding hierarchy that it exists as a vehicle not of control but of charismatic enabling).

So the renewal of the Church’s life *as Church*, not as religious organization, requires the gifts that the Magdalene’s journey through the streets alone can give. This is what constitutes the Church as witness and companion for – potentially – every human situation, because it is this that brings to the surface the accompaniment that is always already there for us and for all. We are not called to guarantee its results; Madeleine

writes of the 'apostolate that demands a simplification of one's whole being, a rejection of all prior gain, of all our social selves...This kind of evangelic poverty makes us totally agile so that we can join any one of our brothers, on any terrain, without any innate or acquired baggage that prevents us from running towards him.'⁸ Work, administration, planning and the rest remain essential but never determinative; what matters is the self-forgetting urgency of following where Jesus is to be found.

The contemplative life for Teresa includes the presence of those who are not primarily 'contemplatives' in the strict sense of practitioners of a specific kind of prayer (*Way of Perfection* 17.2); and this is possible because the life as a whole speaks of the abandonment of and liberation from self-images, whether that is embodied in the sheer poverty and simplicity of the common life or in the practice of prayer – and indeed in the mixture of 'Mary' and 'Martha' in the mature contemplative (*Castle* 7.4.12-13). Thus to speak of the centrality of contemplation in the Church is not to insist on a single mode of praying for all, any more than it is to identify a spiritual elite of some kind who constitute the 'real' Church. The point is that the Church's integrity is bound up with the Church's readiness to question any drift towards externally derived assurance; and this drift is precisely what is questioned both by the contemplative suspicion of potentially idolatrous and self-serving concepts of the divine, and by a commitment to poverty, or at the very least to a willingness to let go of privilege without struggle or to redeploy wealth and resource. And these are made possible, as Teresa says, by the kind of vision that pushes aside self-consciousness and self-images because of its intrinsic authority. For the contemplative practitioner, this is a matter of personal commitment to the purgation of any image or concept that reflects the subjectivity of the praying mind; but the consistency and clarity of this commitment plays its part in communicating to the less consistent practitioner the possibility of living in detachment and openness. Together, they contribute to the making of a Church that is able to stay with Christ where he is to be found and to walk away from unconverted patterns of power, from factional politicization of the community's concerns, and from self-protective fears.

Rather surprisingly, one of the Magdalene narratives that Teresa does not reflect on is the account of Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus (though there may be an allusion in *Way of Perfection* 34.10). Mary Magdalene is, in John's Gospel, the first to announce the resurrection to the apostolic community, after her meeting in the garden with a Jesus who urges her not to cling to him. It is perhaps not inappropriate to end this brief reflection on Teresa's understanding of contemplative vocation and its risks with an observation on this narrative. Mary is sent back to the city - and to a risk-averse body of disciples, not yet aware of the full scope of their calling. She is told not to 'secure' herself by holding on to a Jesus external to herself – yet only that incarnate manifestation of the risen Body of the Lord can point her towards this. She must 'depart' from the presence of a temptingly immediate and material vision, since the very nature of that immediate, material vision is to be itself a 'departing' reality – an embodied divine presence always 'on the way', moving towards the divine Source, the Father, through the *exodos* of abandonment and death. To be immobile in faithfulness to this incarnate reality is to be caught up into his movement into the paternal mystery, where, as Julia Kristeva has put

⁸ Ibid. p.108

it, there is a 'dissolution of the Ideal Father, of the Other in the one who prays, and also in the writer.'⁹ The finite self is united with the loving and self-giving Source in and through the Son's unceasing movement into and repetition of that self-giving. So the Magdalene departs from the kind of security that involves an isolated self shoring up its boundaries by alliance with and dependence on another precarious isolated self, another materially confined self. Instead, the self is both displaced or de-centred and re-established as a dimension of or in the eternal and unbreakable relation of Source and Word, Father and Son. In that relation of what I have elsewhere called 'non-dual non-identity', the self is both accompanied and unaccompanied: anchored in unbreakable relation and dependent on no alien or enforced definition by the power-systems of the human world. Called by her unique name, Mary is released to be with Christ and to act in and for Christ, and Christ is 'released' to act in her – specifically in her faithfulness to the task of realizing and manifesting the good news of the resurrection ('I am with you always....').

So she walks back to the city streets and enters the place where the apostles are – a place of strangers, because they do not yet know who and what they must become, as Mary knows. She has forgotten to be afraid; she is free to look not at herself but at the overflowing promise that is Christ. She contemplates and invites us, with Teresa to look where she looks.

⁹ 'The passion according to Teresa of Avila', in Peter Tyler and Edward Howells, ed., *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition*, Routledge 2017, pp.99-106, quotation from p.104.