

## **8. Teresa of Avila: Theology of the Human Person**

In spite of many challenges, Teresa developed a theology of the human person as *Capax Dei*, that is, she saw humans as creatures with an infinite capacity for God. Reflection on her experience, encounters with God, knowledge of Scripture, and the wisdom gained from other spiritual writers, led Teresa to see human beings as made in God's image with enormous potential for opening the self to make room for Christ. Her ideas are a reverse image of sixteenth century Spanish society that diminished and ostracized persons who could not claim "pure blood."

**I. Lovable and Capable: The Human Person as Capax Dei:** Teresa's theology of the human person was hard won. In spite of being an outsider on many levels and the opposition she faced from various directions, she teaches that the human person should not be taken for granted, dismissed, categorized, or limited since each person has infinite value as God's dwelling place. A distinctive note of her anthropology is that she steadfastly included women as having access to the higher reaches of contemplative prayer. God in Christ desired to dwell in everyone, not just men or those with theological or clerical credentials.

Teresa turns to the image of a castle (a familiar structure in sixteenth century Spain) to describe the spiritual journey. Like the many mansions of John's Gospel, Teresa's imaginative castle is large and has lots of rooms (apostentos) - a place of infinite variety and richness (John 14:2). Interior Castle 1.1.8, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (1979)

Well aware of the ravages of sin, Teresa is nonetheless convinced that sin is not so powerful that it threatens to overwhelm the god-like quality of humanity. She laments that we are so rich but settle for so little. At the outset of *The Interior Castle*, she writes: "It is a shame and unfortunate that through our own fault we don't understand ourselves or know who we are." (Interior Castle 1.1.2). She is not talking about "pure blood," but about persons whose major identity is being loved by God. She writes that the soul is "a paradise where [God] says he takes his delight" (Interior Castle 1.1.1).

Since Genesis, Jews and Christians have linked knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Self-knowledge does not mean simply gathering information about ourselves, but seeing ourselves as God sees us. Rowan Williams summarizes Teresa's thought: "By seeing God we see more clearly what we are - muddled, distracted, but in motion toward the love of God." -Teresa of Avila, pp. 115-116  
Teresa knew how easy it was to get lost. She knew about the subtlety and

complexity of the devil's wiles aimed at keeping her tied up in knots and full of self-regard. And yet she wrote: "Let's not imagine that we are hollow inside." The Way of Perfection 28.11, She became convinced that human identity entailed something "incomparably more precious" than she could have imagined.

Although Teresa had extraordinary experiences of God, she taught that ordinary prayer, like an intimate conversation with a friend, was available to all. All that was necessary was to bring one's full self to God, in weakness as well as strength. Teresa acknowledged that not everyone would be called to the specific way she proposed, but this did not matter to her, since the point is not a certain form of meditation but love (Foundations 5.2). Teresa teaches us to be in awe of who we are - God's dwelling place.

**II. The Individual in Community:** We Are Made to be With and For Each Other  
Teresa's theology of the human person may seem individualistic on the surface, but it is deeply communal in orientation. While her primary community was a small group of enclosed women religious, she never lost sight of wider horizons: family, Church, the ill and poor, and the new world that was being discovered.

It may seem surprising that an enclosed contemplative would place so much emphasis on love of neighbor and service to the world (Interior Castle 1.2.17). Yet the three regular monastics who are Doctors of the Church envisioned a theology whose "bottom line" is love of others.

We are in this castle together. Teresa wrote: "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works.. .I repeat it is necessary that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarves." (Interior Castle VII.4.6). Intimacy with God is not a private, exclusive relationship, but a gift given to benefit others in active, compassionate, healing love (Life 18.4; 19.4; Interior Castle V.3.1).

Friendship is a cornerstone of Teresa's theological vision of the human person. She had an understanding of mutuality in human relationships and in her relationship with God. In the seventh mansions, God tells her twice that "it was time that she consider as her own what belonged to Him and that He would take care of what was hers" {Interior Castle VII.2; VII.3.2).

She saw conversation about the joys and trials of the spiritual life as a fitting way to nurture friendship with God {Life 7.20). She knew the comfort of finding others

who were also spiritually wounded, but still willing to help each other (Life 34.16).

**III. Teresa's Gifts to the Present:** In 1627, on the occasion of her nomination as co-patron of Spain (with Santiago de Compostela), Jesuit Rodrigo Nino preached about Teresa: "Sanctity in women usually consists in being quiet, obeying, staying in a corner and forgetting about oneself; O new miracle and rare prodigy! Not by keeping quiet, but by speaking, teaching and writing; not only by obeying, but by ordering, commanding, governing; not by observing enclosure but by traveling, disputing." As quoted in *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* by Alison Weyer, pp. 164-165 We are blessed that Teresa stood her ground as theologian, offering her vision of the human person as capable of hearing and following God's invitation to friendship and intimate love.

Like other medieval authors, Teresa did not completely escape the tradition that saw the body as a hindrance to holiness. Nevertheless, she overcame this view in significant ways. She wrote: "To be always withdrawn from corporeal things and enkindled in love is the trait of angelic spirits, not of those who live in mortal bodies. It's necessary that we speak to, think about, and become the companions of those who, having had a mortal body, accomplished such great feats for God." (Interior Castle VI.7.6). The theological foundation for this positive assessment of embodied human life was Teresa's reverence for Christ's humanity, including his bodiliness. Because Christ had a body, all human bodies were rendered sacred. Teresa speaks to our pluralistic age when she acknowledges how many different paths to God there are. Each Christian pursues her or his own unique way {Life 13.13).

Teresa views the human person as a reflection of the very being of God. Her Christian anthropology provides a needed complement to contemporary self-understandings that depend inordinately on psychology and economics. Her way leads from a narrow, petty self-preoccupation to self-transcendence. Inner personal transformation leads to action for justice. According to Teresa, when it comes to God and the human person, we simply think too small (Interior Castle VII. 1.1).

## **Reflection Questions**

1. Teresa suggests that grace is like an abundant rainfall. How do you describe grace? Call to mind an experience in which you felt fully human - alive, loving, and free. Such moments reveal a key aspect of what it means to be a human being and a child of God. To what extent do you link the ups and downs of everyday life with faith?
2. What language do you use to describe your identity - psychological, economic, social, or other? Do you ever think of yourself in theological terms? How important do you think you are in God's eyes? What is your response to Teresa's idea that our true identity is to be a dwelling place for the Trinity and servant to the world? Give a concrete example of each.
3. Does Christ's humanity give insight into what it means to be a Christian in the twenty-first century?