

*Teresa of Avila*  
*Spiritual Leadership*  
*By Nakin Lenti*

The life of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic and a patron saint of Spain, is known to us largely through her autobiography which she began writing at age 47. In this account of her life she describes the long slow process by which she achieved spiritual transformation and became a saint through sheer force of will and the grace of God.

The last 20 years of her life she took on the responsibility for religious reform within the Carmelite Order to which she belonged. She would have been content with a life of solitude, absorbed in prayer and divine contemplation, but her true calling was to be in the world, but not of the world. Between 1562 –1582 she founded 22 monasteries and convents throughout Spain. And in the face of great opposition and intrigue had gotten her reformed order recognized by the Church.

The Carmelite Order developed from a single community of hermits living on Mount Carmel in Palestine in the early years of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The hermits, ordinary laymen, came to the Holy Land as pilgrims during the Crusades. They wanted a place to seek God in solitude and silence. The monasteries were intended to be places of contemplation, prayer, and complete renunciation modeled after the lives of the early Church Fathers like St. Anthony of the Desert. Owing to harassment by the Muslims in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, they were forced to leave the Holy Land and migrate west into Europe where their eremitical origins were not understood. To make them acceptable, the Church granted them mendicant status, making them friars like the Franciscans and Dominicans. But over time the strict religious disciplines of the Order were relaxed and original spirit of the Primitive Rule gave way to The Mitigated Rule, under which the convents and monasteries adopted a more secular attitude and a certain laxity toward spiritual disciplines.

When Teresa entered the convent of the Incarnation in 1536, it was home to about 180 women including servants and laywomen who arranged themselves according to rank, personal tastes, and the size of their fortune. They wore jewelry and expensive clothes, chattered unscrupulously among themselves and, gossiped with male and female guests alike in the convent parlor. As one cleric described it, “The convent had become, for the most part, a lodging for young, single ladies who couldn’t find a husband.”

Free to come and go as they please, the noise was always excessive, and those who troubled to observe the religious disciplines were in the minority. The parlor became a center for social activity for visitors who may have had a superficial interest in spirituality but were mainly interested in gossip and worldly events.

As a young nun the parlor was particularly troublesome for Teresa. She was witty, charming, intelligent, and beautiful as well as personally magnetic. Men were very attracted to her. Even though she went to the parlor out of obedience, and considered it a distraction to her spiritual life, she found that her gift for conversation involved her with men much more than she liked. She may have considered it harmless, but, from time to time, she found herself developing strong attachments for some of her male visitors, who naturally had one aim—to win her to themselves. For over 20 years Teresa struggled inwardly with her worldly tendencies and the drying up of her spiritual life. As she said of herself, “All the things of God gave me pleasure, but I was held captive by those of the world.” She was an ideal reformer because in spite of her best intentions, she remained vulnerable to worldly temptations even after having had numerous visions of Christ.

In 1554 at age 39, she attained to a high state of ecstasy and experienced a spiritual rebirth. She said of this experience that it divided her life into two parts—her own life and her life in God. A significant turning point in her life after many years of inner struggle, she was finally able to transcend worldly temptations, and remained, thereafter, in constant communion with the Lord. “From that day on,” she wrote, “my resolution to give up everything for His sake became unshakeable.”

It was during this period of her life when Teresa was withdrawing from the noise and bustle of the convent of the Incarnation that she first made the acquaintance of Dona Guiomar Ulloa. An extremely wealthy and influential widow, Dona Guiomar was very much taken with Teresa's spirituality and offered her refuge in her house where, for months on end, she could remain absorbed in Divine contemplation.

Teresa understood well the problem of trying to please God and the world at the same time. She pondered often what the Carmelite order had been before the Mitigated Rule and spoke of it often to her close friends and the young nuns within the convent who shared her fervor for the spiritual life and looked to her for guidance. She felt a need to return to the spirit of the original primitive rule upon which the order was founded not only for herself but for the younger nuns to whom she felt a duty and an obligation. But it wasn't until she was in her mid-forties that she felt the inner guidance to act upon this desire, and considered deeply the founding of a reformed order based upon the Primitive Rule.

In her own words she said, "One day after communion, His Majesty (her name for God or Christ) earnestly commanded me to strive for this new monastery with all my powers, and He made great promises that it would be founded and that He would be highly served in it. He said it should be called St. Joseph and that this saint would keep watch over us at one door, and our Lady at the other, that Christ would remain with us, and that it would be a star shining with great splendor."

In 1560 Teresa with her small group of dedicated nuns and laywomen alike, began to devise the means of setting up a small convent and worked ceaselessly to get the new convent built and approved. They first needed to persuade her confessor, who, although he didn't object to the idea, referred Teresa to the Carmelite Provincial who had the final authority. He seemed pleased with the idea and promised his authorization. However the news exploded on the town of Avila like a bombshell. In her own convent she was ridiculed and considered presumptuous for her ideas. She was denounced from the pulpits

and in the convents where laxity was permitted they took a dim view of a return to primitive austerities.

Teresa unperturbed by all the uproar and opposition saw herself only as an instrument in God's hands and accepted all difficulties with great equanimity and cheerfulness of mind knowing with unshakeable certainty the rightness of her mission. However, this was a foretaste of the opposition she would face for the next twenty years.

The Provincial under the pressure of public opinion and influenced by people of rank and importance withdrew his authority. Teresa was ordered to give up the idea of a new convent and, for the time being, had to obey her confessor waiting patiently for the right moment to act again.

Anticipating trouble with the local authorities, Teresa and her friend, Dona Guiomar, an ardent supporter of Teresa's work had already appealed to Pedro Ibanez, a Vatican representative and powerful ally. After careful consideration, he gave them his unqualified approval. Teresa could not disobey her confessor but, urged on by Ibanez, Dona Guiomar, in her own name and in the greatest possible secrecy, asked Rome for authorization to found a convent in accordance with the primitive rule of the Carmelite Order. It would be under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Avila rather than the Provincial of the order.

Enmeshed in a web of espionage Teresa had to proceed with the utmost secrecy. In order to allay suspicion she had her sister and brother-in-law purchase the house for the new convent in their name. She stayed with them for some months while they kept up the pretense of setting up house. The new convent would be very poor but very clean.

All seemed to be going according to plan except the brief from Rome authorizing approval was late in arriving. In the meantime Teresa had begun her autobiography and spent many days and nights in prayer and ecstasy. But on Christmas night, 1561, the prioress of the Incarnation suddenly ordered Teresa to Toledo to stay with Dona Luisa de

la Cerda, whose husband had just died. She was inconsolable and demanded Teresa's presence immediately. This wealthy and influential woman couldn't be refused but this was the kind of enforced distraction that Teresa had hoped to avoid.

In the course of her six-month visit Teresa turned this seeming intrusion to good account. Dona Luisa and Teresa became fast friends and she introduced Teresa to many of her aristocratic friends who, like, Dona Guiomar, would become supporters of Teresa's reforms. Thus, what seemed like a major obstacle in Teresa's efforts to start a convent ultimately paved the way for the first convent and many others.

What's impressive here is that Teresa seemed to understand the need for patience and to wait and see what God had in mind. After months of delay the brief from Rome finally arrived and they opened the new convent August 24, 1562. The nuns at the Incarnation viewed Teresa as a traitor. They accused her falsely of arrogance, treachery, and disobedience, and detained her at the Incarnation while they tried to find ways to close down her new convent. Ultimately they were unsuccessful because of Teresa's powerful allies within the Church.

Teresa's reforms, based upon the Primitive Rule, were not just a matter of austerities and spiritual discipline but were meant to reawaken in the hearts of the nuns a sole desire for God and put them squarely on the path that led to Him, and Him alone. She envisioned small groups of not more than 12 or 13 nuns, who would live as a community of hermits, "meditating on the law of the Lord day and night and keeping watch in prayer." Living in an atmosphere of charity and humility, they would support and help each other to grow in friendship with God.

At a time when all other convents and monasteries were dependent upon patronage, gifts and grants, from the nobility Teresa's convent was built upon the principle of uncompromising poverty without the aid of grants or the begging of alms practiced by so many religious orders. They would sustain themselves on whatever offerings were left at

the convent door. Whatever else was needed would be earned by spinning and needlework to be left outside the convent gate at an undetermined price.

Silence and solitude was the cornerstone of their lives. To make possible the highest form of devotion the nuns were totally enclosed. There was no parlor and no visiting hours to interfere with prayer and contemplation but only cells, a chapel, and a refectory.

The Mass would be celebrated only as a devotional observance without pomp and display. When they sang, it was only to God. Teresa dressed her nuns in coarse sackcloth. They went barefoot or wore only rope sandals as the first Carmelites did on Mount Carmel two centuries before in Palestine. They came to be known as, Discalced, or, unshod, symbolizing their withdrawal from the world. The Mitigated rule, known as, Calced, or, shod, came to represent a compromise with worldly values.

In his book, *The Art of Supportive Leadership*, Swami Kriyananda says that genuine leadership is only of one type: supportive. It leads people; it doesn't drive them. It involves people; it doesn't coerce them. It never loses sight of the most important principle governing any project involving human beings, that people are more important than things.

In her founding of the first convent of St. Joseph's in 1562, she proved adept at the art of supportive leadership: working with a small group of nuns who were in tune with her ideals, rather than trying to convert 180 women who weren't interested.

Humility and obedience was one of the hallmarks of Teresa's leadership style. Even though she was the spiritual mother and foundress of the order, she herself was an example of the qualities she was trying to teach. This was especially evident in her submission to the authority of the prioresses that she herself chose. Confronted with harshness or unkindness, or treated coldly when she visited one of their convents she returned only her unconditional love as a mother to an errant child.

Her ability to inspire others and work with people's strengths led ultimately to the reformation of the convent of the Incarnation, where she was considered an enemy. She won them over not through harshness and criticism, but through patience, humility, and loyalty to their higher selves. In 1571 she was named prioress of the convent against her will. This appointment, under the pretext of restoring monastic discipline, was in fact a ruse to prevent her from founding more convents. The nuns, however, expecting the worse, greeted her with apprehension and open hostility, and the police had to be brought in to maintain order.

But on the day of their first chapter meeting Teresa explained to the nuns that she had accepted this appointment only under the vow of obedience and was distressed by it.

“I come here solely to serve you,” she said, “and I hope the Lord will greatly assist me in doing this.” She had no intention of forcing the primitive rule upon them, but only to help them live according to their own rule. “My only desire is that we should all strive to serve the Lord in peace.”

Then placing a statue of Our Lady of Mercy on the rostrum and kneeling before it, she took her place among them acknowledging that Mary was the real prioress and she was acting only on her behalf. Their fears alleviated, many of the nuns who once despised Teresa soon became enthusiastic supporters of her reforms.

Four years after the founding of St. Joseph's in 1566 Teresa was visited by the Master General of the Carmelite order, Juan Bautista Rubeo, who not only approved of her reforms, but gave her permission to found other convents as well. Teresa's Carmelite reform became an integral part of the church's Counter Reformation in response to the Protestant Reformation set in motion by Martin Luther. In rapid succession she established convents at Medina del Campo, 1567; Malagon and Valladolid, 1568; Toledo and Pastrana, 1569; Salamanca, 1570; Alba de Tormes, 1571; Segovia, 1574; Veas and Seville, 1575; and Caravaca, 1576. At Medina del Campo, 1567, she met John of the

Cross. Inspired by her example, he wanted to found a monastic branch of the reformed order among the friars and became her male counterpart in the reform movement.

The special challenge for the Discalced friars were twofold: they lacked the dynamic leadership of a person like Teresa. John of the Cross, although a great mystic, couldn't adapt to a leadership role until much later in life. Their fervor for reform was in part diluted because they were still under the jurisdiction of the Mitigated Rule. Hence the need to separate these two branches of the Carmelite order into independent provinces.

Teresa's success in founding convents was due in large part to her ability to delegate authority. Her criterion for choosing prioresses relied much more on her intuition than on appearances. Catalina de Cristo, a woman who could neither read nor write and knew nothing of administration, was a good example of the qualities she looked for in a prioress. When the nuns objected to her appointment, Teresa said of her, "She knows a great deal about the art of loving God, and she is very intelligent: no more is needed to know how to govern and she will be just as good as any other prioress we have.

During the foundation of the convent at Beas, 1575, Teresa first met Jerome Gratian, a young Discalced Carmelite friar of great promise, whom she felt could assume responsibility for the reformed order. A man 30 years her junior, she saw in him a person capable of supporting and succeeding her. She appointed him head of the order and put herself under his direction and obedience. Immediately, he insisted that Teresa, against her better judgment, found a convent in Seville in the province of Andalusia outside the jurisdiction of the Discalced and in his zeal for reform organized several more. In doing so, he set himself up inadvertently in opposition to Rubeo, Master General of the Order, who never gave her permission outside the province of Castile.

The confusion came about because of dual jurisdiction within the Order itself. On the one hand there was Rubeo, Master General of the Order, and on the other there was the king, Phillip II, and the Papal Nuncio. In his zeal for monastic reform, Phillip II wanted to extend Teresa's work into the very heart of the Mitigation. He considered that Rubeo was

moving too slowly. The King, with authority from Rome, appointed Gratian Apostolic Visitor of Andalusia accountable only to him. This appointment gave Gratian jurisdiction over the Calced and Discalced. This, of course, was unacceptable to the Calced friars who complained to Rubeo and threatened to assassinate Gratian, whom they viewed as a young upstart. Teresa, fearing for Gratian's life, and realizing the precarious position they were in, begged Gratian to write Rubeo and explain this difficult situation to him, but it was too late. Rubeo had already denounced Teresa and the Discalced movement and ordered closed all monasteries he did not authorize. In addition Teresa was forbidden to proceed with further foundations. She was ordered to return to Castile immediately and to remain confined indefinitely to a convent of her choosing. The Provincial of the order, Salazar, declared her apostate (fallen) and excommunicated. The Papal Nuncio, in her support, ordered her to finish the Seville foundation. She spent the next year confined to the convent in Toledo where she continued to administer and direct the work.

Ill-will between the Calced and Discalced orders turned to hatred. At a time when women were little thought of, the Mitigated friars were jealous of Teresa's success, the veneration with which she was surrounded, and the general admiration which her monks and nuns aroused, as well as the austerities which the Discalced practiced. They were particularly upset by the return of the Primitive Rule adopted by the convent of the Incarnation at Avila and were afraid that this thirst for austerities would eventually spread to all the monasteries

They sought to undermine her reputation with a well-organized campaign of calumnious propaganda. They accused her of having lovers and founding convents for immoral purposes. Spies were planted within her order, and number of her monks, including, Gratian, and, John of the Cross, were kidnapped and imprisoned.

Bribery, violence, and intimidation seemed to be the order of the day. Even though the propaganda campaign failed at the official level, lies, rumors, and false accusations preceded her wherever she went, and she was met with a wall of suspicion and distrust. Through it all she never complained and retained a sense of humor regarding the constant

stream of accusations brought against her. Her response to the persecutions was a summons to prayer in all her monasteries and convents “in order that whatever is for the greatest service of God may come to pass.” Fearless and courageous in the face of constant hardship she was always joyful and thankful for all the trials that God sent to her believing that all was for the best.

Her main objective was separation of the Calced and Discalced branches of the Carmelite Order, which she felt would be forthcoming within a year or two. Unfortunately the Papal Nuncio, Ormaneto, one of Teresa’s most powerful defenders, died. He was replaced with Felipe Sega, an enemy of the Reformed order. In December 1578, his envoys issued Teresa a decree. This decree, under threat of the severest penalties, placed Discalced monks and nuns under the jurisdiction of the superiors of the Mitigated Order. This was a death-blow for the reform. In addition Teresa was to be transferred to another convent and retired for the rest of her days.

Facing her enemies with dignity and calm, she admitted defeat for the first time. She went into her cell and prayed deeply. Her voice interrupted by sobs and weeping, she accused herself of being the sole cause of all the trouble. Sitting alone in the refectory later that night she sat motionless, her face ashen and withdrawn. Nothing could distract her from the thought of her work in ruins. Suddenly Christ appeared to her and standing by the table began to feed her Himself as one feeds a child.

He said to her, “Daughter, eat... I see how many sufferings you are enduring...take heart, it is nothing.” Teresa emerged the next day fully recovered. Her face now tinged with the fire of ecstatic rapture, a smiling calm never left her. The decree never enforced, she continued her active reform.

Many months before realizing by this time that her enemies would stop at nothing to destroy her she had written Phillip II, the king of Spain, several times imploring his support and protection. Even though an ardent supporter of her reforms and the most powerful man in Christendom, he was, for whatever reason, unresponsive to her requests.

It wasn't until 1579 when a group of emissaries took it upon themselves to visit the king on Teresa's behalf that he took action.

Immediately the king sent for the Nuncio Felipe Sega: "I have heard about the war that the Calced are waging against the Discalced friars and nuns. I cannot do otherwise than regard such attacks with misgiving. I have been informed that you are not helping the Discalced in any way. In future see that you range yourself on the side of virtue."

Sega with little choice obeyed the king's orders and released the Discalced from obedience to their Calced superiors. He later asked the king to separate the Calced and Discalced into independent provinces. In 1581 Pope Gregory VII formally announced the separation of the two orders. This meant that the Discalced could now draw up their own guidelines, elect their own leaders, and control their own destiny without interference from others. The whole affair, now regarded as virtually and happily finished, Teresa said, "When I consider the means Our Lord has used to turn the malice and cruelty of the enemies of Carmel solely to our advantage, I am speechless with wonder."

That same year Teresa began drawing up The Rule and Constitution for the Discalced Order based upon her experience and astute observation. Among other things she emphasized poverty, humility, cleanliness, and not too many observances what she would call "useless" devotions. In her novices she insisted on good health and common sense. To a surprised listener she explained, "Our Lord will give them devotion. We shall teach them prayer, but common sense? We can't do anything about the lack of intelligence, and the devil knows only too well how to take advantage of it."

With the adoption of the Rule, Teresa was anxious to let go the reins of active leadership, but still she was called upon for the guidance and administration of the work even as famine was sweeping the land. She was elected prioress of the convent of St. Joseph's in Avila and at age, 67, she undertook to found one more convent in the city of Burgos.

Death now was the final sacrifice in the last days of her life. Teresa, who would never admit that she was unwell, was in fact actually dying. After a long and difficult journey from Burgos she stopped at the convent at Medina del Campo hoping for a little rest before hastening on to Avila. From the moment she arrived she was treated shabbily both by the prioress, Alberta Bautista, who refused her supper and even the slightest amenities, as well as Antonio de Jesus, Vicar Provincial of the order, whom she hadn't spoken to in many years.

One of the first Discalced monks, he and John of the Cross founded the first monastery at Duruelo, 1568. From the very beginning he had never shown Teresa the loyalty she deserved. He had plotted against her to get himself elected Provincial of the order even though Gratian was the person she had in mind. Over the years he had grown resentful of Teresa's authority and now at age 72 he had become an obstinate, bitter old man, taken with his own self-importance.

She loved him in spite of the fact that he lacked common sense and had intervened on his behalf to get him appointed Vicar Provincial or Vice-President of the order, so he wouldn't be completely unhappy. For many years he had been nursing grievances against Teresa and now he was now exacting his revenge on this sick and dying woman by ordering her to Alba de Tormes, where the Duchess of Alba was demanding her presence for her daughter who was pregnant. Teresa was utterly overwhelmed. Her health alone would have been ample justification for refusal but in the absence of the Provincial she owed her obedience to him. She said merely, "I shall obey your Reverence."

The trip itself, utterly pointless, was the whim merely of a wealthy aristocrat. Teresa suffered unbearably with every jolt and bump in the road. So ill that she could not eat, her heart began to fail, and she suffered from a high fever and extreme weakness. She thought she was going to die in the carriage. By the time she arrived in Alba de Tormes, she had to be put to bed immediately. Not accustomed to giving in to weaknesses of the body her concerns to the last were for her nuns and the work.

She was planning to leave for Avila as soon as possible, but by the end of September she had begun to relapse and knew she was going to die.

Her last words to her nuns were brief: “My daughters and ladies, for the love of God I ask you to observe the Rule and Constitutions well; if you keep them strictly, no further miracle will be necessary for your canonization. Don’t imitate the bad example which this bad nun has given you, and forgive me.”

She died October 4, 1582.

