



Engaging Aging

Aging in the Interior Castle of Teresa

By Sister Marjorie Robinson, OCD

Celebrations have begun throughout the world marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Teresa of Jesus (March 28, 2015). Reflecting on her writings in my own prayer as a Carmelite, I began to wonder what she might have to say about the experience of aging. What inspirations might St. Teresa of Avila offer to religious as we move into the autumn of life?

Examining the Context

This 16th century Carmelite saint, mystic, Doctor of the Church, teacher of prayer, and foundress of monasteries lived at a time when the greatness and power of Catholic Spain was felt throughout the New World. Her monasteries in Spain were flourishing and filled with young sisters. Because life spans were relatively short by comparison to today's standards, people didn't have much time to ponder their elder years. In this social and cultural period of expansion and growth, concern about aging was not a preoccupation.

St. Teresa of Avila's major writings are devoted to prayer and growth in the spiritual life. She speaks from her own experience to all who are on the journey, regardless of the stage in their spiritual development. Teresa had a great appreciation of the soul's beauty and capacity for God. In her work, *The Interior Castle*, she tells us, "The soul of the just person is nothing else but a paradise where the Lord says He finds His delight.... I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvelous capacity."

Sister Marjorie Robinson, a Discalced Carmelite Nun from the Monastery of the Incarnation in Beacon, New York, currently serves as prioress of her community and as treasurer of the Carmelite Communities Associated. Sister is also active in the Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities and has represented her Carmelite association at Federation meetings in Germany and Mexico. Her deepest joy and fulfillment comes from community life, sharing with her sisters a love for the Carmelite way of life as envisioned by St. Teresa, with its unique blend of community and prayer in solitude.



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*“Love...
cannot
possibly be
content
with
remaining
always the
same.”*

*Teresa of Avila
The Interior Castle*

Aging in the Interior Castle of Teresa, continued

Interior Castle

Reflecting further on Teresa and the experience of aging, I felt myself particularly drawn to *The Interior Castle*, written five years before her death at age 67. To describe the spiritual journey, Teresa chose an image with which she was familiar: “We consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places.” Teresa takes readers through the various dwelling places of the castle until ultimately the soul reaches the center where God dwells.

Approaching the Castle

I invite you to explore the seven dwelling places of *The Interior Castle* with fresh eyes and a heart purified through prayer and life. Approach the castle, not seeking to find yourself in a specific dwelling place, but recognizing the dwelling places you have already visited in your own spiritual journey. View life from your center. This is the perspective from which the older, mature Teresa wrote *The Interior Castle*. You’ll hear yourself exclaiming: “Ah, yes, that’s what it was all about. Ah, I see now,” and “Oh, that’s what was happening.” You will be pleased to find that the differences from one dwelling to another are less defined and more muted, flowing, inviting, reassuring, surprising, and affirming of the uniqueness of each person’s growth, of their relationship with God.

Quotidian Mystery

Everyone may not experience the kinds of mystical graces described by Teresa. However, in life we catch glimpses of God’s mercy, love and grandeur. We have only to pause and consider the graces of our transitions and their invitations to transformation. Teresa writes, “The Lord has now fortified, enlarged, and made the soul capable.”



Vision of Teresa,
by Lee James Pantas.
Mr. Pantas and his wife,
Elizabeth, are Third Order
Carmelites and were
friends of Sr. Michael Ann
Cladek, OCD, the first pri-
orress of the newly formed
Carmel of the Incarnation,
Beacon, NY. (Sr. Michael
Ann died on January 17,
2014.) Used with permis-
sion of the Beacon Carmel.

One of the more challenging transitions we face in our aging is the gradual inability to engage in active ministry or roles of responsibility in our communities. Teresa would assure us there is no lessening of the apostolic fruitfulness of our lives. In the final chapter of *The Interior Castle*, Teresa’s words could, in fact, be directly addressed to all who have given their lives in service to God, the Church and their religious communities. The heading for the fourth chapter of the seventh dwelling place reads: “... our Lord’s purpose in granting such great favors to the soul and how it is necessary that Martha and Mary join together.”

Certainly, the life of religious in their final years becomes less about doing and more about being. Because a person’s active service and ministry have changed, it is natural to feel one’s life is no longer fruitful. In fact, if we listen to Teresa’s writings, we find that we might be embarking on the most fruitful period in life. Life brings us to a place where God desires something other than our former achievements, accomplishments, roles and varied forms of service. God calls us to refocus our spiritual energies as the landscapes of our lives change in the later years. Consider how Teresa’s words draw our atten-

Aging in the Interior Castle of Teresa, continued

tion to the spiritual effectiveness of prayer. The Lord's favors bring "a deeper knowledge of God's mercy and grandeur." We can share this "deeper knowledge" by the witness of our lives expressed in gratitude, joy, praise, acceptance of God's will and greater charity; all hallmarks of transformation.

Spiritual Maturity

With the freedom that comes with spiritual maturity, elders can discover the grace and strength to tend to those places within that are wounded, fearful, and resistant. We are able to allow God to resolve the loose ends of our lives in unimaginable ways. There is no need to dwell on guilt or regret. Teresa comments, "The soul is not as tied down as it was before in things pertaining to the service of God, but has much more freedom. It loses servile fear here. This soul is left with great confidence that it will enjoy Him.... His Majesty well knows that I can boast only of His mercy, and since I cannot cease being what I have been, I have no other remedy than to approach His mercy and to trust...."

Such graces are essential, especially when we consider that most changes due to aging do not come on our own terms. Sudden illness, accidents, changes in ministry and living arrangements, loss of independence and gradual decline signal major losses. These personal losses are compounded by communal losses of ministries, beloved buildings and properties, lack of new vocations and personnel, and financial insecurity. In each instance, we are invited to recall that as religious, we have left all to follow Christ. In God's mercy, we can experience a deeper acceptance of God's will and the grace to let go of things that once tugged at our hearts. Teresa's words ring true: "Fix your eyes on the Crucified and everything will become small for you." Even when we do not understand what is happening and find God's ways difficult to accept, we soon discover peace of mind and

holy indifference. She writes, "They think everything His Majesty does is good. If he desires the soul to suffer, well and good; if not, it doesn't kill itself as it used to."

Virtues

Over and over again, Teresa reminds us of the importance of the virtues. No matter how advanced we may be in the spiritual life, we are called to discover new opportunities to partner with God in love and service to others.

Age does not inhibit our ability to offer a smile, a kind word, and thankful recognition of another's kindness. All witness to our experience of God. Teresa was wise in recognizing the importance of our everyday lives as well as the sublime mystical experience. She notes, "It is necessary that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarfs."

Restlessness for God

The restless "butterfly" of the fifth dwelling place is now busy about the Lord's work in less active and more peaceful ways. Pope Francis puts the question to religious women and men: "Has your heart preserved the restlessness of seeking? Do I retain the force of restlessness for God, for his Word that makes me 'step out' of myself towards others?" Teresa states it this way: "I hold that love, where present, cannot possibly be content with remaining always the same." Teresa makes



Aging in the Interior Castle of Teresa, continued

clear the duty that is ours: “Strive always to advance.... It is not possible that after having come so far, one will fail to grow. Love is never idle, and a failure to grow would be a very bad sign.”

Teresa knew human nature very well and understood the convenient excuses we make. She observes, “Sometimes the devil gives us great desires so that we will avoid setting ourselves to the task at hand, serving our Lord in possible things, and instead be content with having desired the impossible.” We can be encouraged with her assurance, “Even though our works are small they will have the value our love for Him would have merited had they been great.” In light of these insights, we need not be concerned that limitations due to illness and aging may hinder the spiritual fruitfulness of our lives. “By what you do in deed—that which you can—His Majesty will understand that you would do much more.”

God Alone Suffices

As I consider the life I have been gifted to share with my sisters, it is my experience that the gift of one’s religious profession blossoms with renewed motivation in the last years of life. In time that is often characterized by diminishment, pain and uncertainty, older religious now serve God and the Church

through lives of praise, gratitude, joy, and deeds of charity. It is as though, in Teresa’s words, “The soul is fortified by the strength it has from drinking wine in this wine cellar.” Having found the fount of the living water of God, mature religious exclaim with Teresa: “Who has God wants nothing. God alone suffices.” Teresa summarizes the service of older religious at the evening of life: “During the little while this life lasts - and perhaps it will last a shorter time than each one thinks - let us offer the Lord interiorly and exteriorly the sacrifice we can. His Majesty will join it with that which He offered on the cross to the Father for us.”

I conclude by quoting Teresa’s invitation in the Epilogue of *The Interior Castle*. There she encourages us to be more than casual visitors to the dwelling places: “It will be a consolation for you to delight in this interior castle.... You can enter and take a walk through it at any time... Once you get used to enjoying this castle, you will find rest in all things, even those involving much labor, for you will have the hope of returning to the castle which no one can take from you.”



The Carmelite sisters gather for prayer in their monastery in Beacon, NY. The Carmel of the Incarnation was founded in 2000 when the three Carmels of Beacon, NY, Saranac Lake, NY, and Barre, VT came together in Beacon. In 2013, facing again the challenges and invitations of change, the sisters began to consider ways to best utilize their space. Hearing the needs of six Redemptoristine nuns who had to relocate, the Carmelites invited them to share their facilities. The two contemplative communities remain autonomous, but are creatively working to share space and foster their shared values of prayer in the newly named Incarnation Monastery.

From the Offices of NRRO

Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education

Early in 2015 we will celebrate the fifth centenary of the birth of St. Teresa of Avila. The Carmelite family around the world has already starting celebrating this event. In this issue of *Engaging Aging* we join them in their celebration. Sister Marjorie Robinson, OCD, the Prioress of the Carmel of the Incarnation in Beacon, NY, reflects on St. Teresa's writings and what she might be saying about the aging process.



Information about St. Teresa and some of the events that have or will take place in the United States can be found on their official US website at: <http://www.teresa-5th-centenary.org>. One of the ways they have celebrated her anniversary is to form a virtual choir of Carmelites from around the world to record *Salve Regina*. The video of this can be found on YouTube.

As I write this article it is about two weeks before the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. This year marks the 27th anniversary of the collection and it continues to be extremely successful. This success is due to the generosity of the donors and the dedicated work of the religious sisters, brothers and priests whom this collection assists. Please continue to remember these donors in your prayers at Christmas and throughout the year.

We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace and joy to your life and to our world throughout the coming year.

Resources

BOOKS and ARTICLES

The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume 2 (K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, Trans.). ICS Publications.

The Interior Castle: Study Edition. (K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, Trans.). ICS Publications.

Pope Francis. *Rejoice! A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women* (2014). Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

WEBSITES

CarmelStream: the webpage of the Carmelite Institute of North America. Various articles, videos, and audio files are available. These include the Carmelite virtual choir video *Nada Te Turbe*; a video lecture by Georgetown professor Dr. Barbara Mujica, entitled *Teresa as Feminist*; and a calendar listing of Carmelite celebratory events for the fifth centenary of Teresa's birth scheduled throughout the country. <http://www.carmelstream.org/>

St. Teresa, 5th Centenary: Official website for the fifth centenary of the birth of St. Teresa of Jesus sponsored by the Discalced Carmelite Order in the United States. The Discalced Carmelite Friars of the Oklahoma Province present a beautiful collection of photographs of Avila. <http://www.teresa-5th-centenary.org/>

To the Holy Mountain: The Carmelite Sisters of Baltimore offer videos and podcasts on prayer in the contemplative Carmelite tradition, Each lesson is grounded in the writings of Teresa of Avila. <http://www.totheholymountain.org/>



From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

There's quite a stir happening in the field of genealogical research. Working collaboratively, the National Library of Ireland and the Catholic Church have recently made almost 400,000 images of parish records available online for free. Those searching for documentation of family trees can now view official registers that date from the early 1700's to 1880's. With a single genealogy website claiming to have 2.7 million paying subscribers, there seems to be an active audience for historical research. Perhaps, understanding where and who we came from helps us to have a clearer sense of our identity.

And so it must be with our spiritual roots! How can the men and women who marked our communities' foundations and deepening renewals speak to us now? How are they encouraging and inviting us to move forward?

For this final issue of 2014, we invited Sister Marjorie Robinson, OCD, to take a look back into her Carmelite heritage with a particular eye to gleanings related to the experience of aging. As it turns out, Marjorie's choice of Teresa of Avila, honoring the 5th Centenary celebrations of her birth, proved more challenging than first imagined. It seems that the aging issues we've come to consider as important were not exactly center stage 500 years ago. Suddenly, the project shifted to another level.

The outcome is a beautiful reflection on Teresa's *Interior Castle* that gently teases out for us new insights about aging. We are presented with a view that considers aging not only as a series of hurdles to overcome, but a depth experience facilitating our relationship with God and each other.

Calendar

January 2

- **Direct Care Assistance applications sent via hard copy and email**

January 27 - 29

- **NRRO Planning and Implementation workshop; San Antonio, TX (Filled)**

February 17

- **NRRO webinar on interacting with religious members with memory impairment - 1 PM ET**

March 31

- **Direct Care Assistance applications due**

As this season of Advent unfolds and the feast of Christmas draws near, I'd like to invite you to take the time to make the same contemplative journey that Sr. Marjorie did as she reflected on Teresa of Avila. Go back to the lives of those men and women who were - and continue to be - significant in your foundation. What messages cross the centuries to tweak your imaginings now? Is there something that stirs you to a new place of courage, inspiration, consolation, or energy?

Perhaps these words that I discovered on a Christmas card made by the Carmelites in Reno, NV, will encourage your efforts. "If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things... if we consider ourselves so unimportant that we fill every moment of our lives with action, when will we have the time to make the long slow journey across the desert as did the Magi? Or sit and watch the stars, as did the shepherds? Or brood over the coming of the child as did Mary? For each one of us, there is a desert to travel, a star to discover, and a being within ourselves to bring to life."

The NRRO Staff

Pictured back, from left: Ms. Monica Glover, Program Specialist; Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education; and Sister Janice Bader, CPPS, Executive Director

Front, from left: Brother Henry Sammon, FMS, JCL, Associate Director of Fund Distribution; and Ms. Tiffany Lezama, Administrative Assistant



Please join the staff of the National Religious Retirement Office as we give thanks this Christmas for the generosity of our many friends and benefactors.

We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace and joy to your life and to our world throughout the coming year.



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The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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