

FEAST OF SAINT TERESA 2009

P. Saverio Cannistrà, Fr. General OCD

This year the celebration of the feast of St Teresa has particular significance for us Carmelites. It is the year of the General Chapter, in which our religious family decided to begin preparing for the fifth centenary of the birth of Teresa. This preparation will consist mainly – according to chapter document – in “reading each year within the Order, from 15th October 2009 to 2014, whether personally or in community, a work of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus” (*Born for us*, n° 38). From today therefore, we Discalced Carmelite friars and nuns, individually and in community, undertake the task of devoting a little of our time and attention each day to reading the writings of Teresa. It is a moderate task, hidden yet essential. What can we expect from this “exercise of reading”? We are not to read Teresa simply to grow in our culture, to derive from her historical and doctrinal facts to study and to teach. We are to read her in order to enter into communication with her, to get to know the person who is talking to us and, from our familiarity with her, to know ourselves. My teacher of Romance Philology, Gianfranco Contini, one of the most penetrating language assistants I have ever known, defined the good reader as one “who is willing to let himself be invaded by the soul of another, through reading”. Here is what we are really looking for from our reading: that the spirit of Teresa invades our soul, the souls of us men and women in this time, who bear the problems, hopes and anguish of this generation.

Our souls are anxious, as are always the souls of those who are making pilgrimage through history, even if this anxiety takes on today the particular connotations, the characteristic traits of our civil society, of our Church, of our family and religious communities. We are thirsty as was the Samaritan woman who went to the well to draw water. But what kind of water could truly quench our thirst, not just for a moment, not just superficially, but in a definitive and total way? It is not the water that we can draw up by our own efforts from wells dug by our ancestors. It is the water that surges copiously from Jesus, who comes to meet us here and now, apparently by chance, but in reality he has known us from all eternity and reads into our depths, into the obscure recesses of our heart. Even Jesus is thirsty and is moved by that thirst. The Samaritan woman and the man Jesus met together around the well, drawn together by the search for water. Jesus, tired from journeying, at the hottest hour of the day, experienced the same thirst as the woman who came to the well; experienced the same hunger as the disciples who had gone into the city looking for food. Jesus has exactly the same humanity as we do, with its burdens and its frailty. But in all this and through all this, his is a humanity brought to its completion, “made perfect”, as says the letter to the Hebrews, which means it is brought back to where it came from, which is the heart of the Trinitarian relationships. It is the humanity of the Son which is nourished by the will of the Father and whose thirst is ever quenched and replaced by the living water of the Spirit. Jesus had made a long journey to arrive at the well where he met the Samaritan woman: it was not just a journey through the roads of Galilee and Samaria, but the journey which had carried him from the Father to far off mankind, lost and unfaithful. It is wonderful to observe how after meeting him, the Samaritan woman also set out on a journey which led to rediscovering herself and therefore of proclamation and witness: I found someone who knew me entirely, who made me discover my own truth and dignity as daughter, in the truth of the Father.

It is no wonder that Teresa remained always fascinated by that Gospel episode and recognised herself in the thirsty woman. Even she was tired of journeying, (“Well, my soul now was tired” she wrote in *Life* 9:1) and was thirsting for peace and light: “I knew I loved him, but I did not know what it meant to truly love God, as I should have done”. She remained in this darkness and distress until, by grace, she came to a halt before his presence she could not sidestep: He was there, in front of her, to tell her, with all his body covered in wounds, that he was for her and with her, always and everywhere. Now, Teresa began to understand that truly loving God meant, before anything else, to be aware of the truth of *his* love. It is *God’s* love which vanquished death in the resurrection of Jesus. Teresa met with the risen crucified One, and in his body saw and clearly read the power of this love, capable of overwhelming all resistance and demolishing every obstacle. Teresa totally abandoned herself to this love, freeing herself from all that held her back on a personal, social and ecclesial level. Her wounded heart is the heart of the new man, the heart of flesh (Ez 11:19), set free and raised up, as in Bernini’s representation of her uplifted glance, towards the love that attracts her to himself and makes her his own. His spouse, it has been and will continue to be said, but still more his friend and his collaborator. Exactly as the Samaritan woman is described as a friend speaking with Jesus and a disciple who speaks to others about Jesus, so was Teresa. To the passivity of being pardoned, received and loved by Jesus corresponds that activity of a friend and collaborator, who by now is no longer scared by her weakness or by material difficulties or the prejudice of people, even though they be influential ecclesiastics. Teresa start off on her journey and did not cease to journey until her death, which for her was the threshold over which she stepped to continue her walk towards Him, now truly her Spouse, gazed on with her own eyes.

In every page, in every line of her writings, Teresa invites us to follow her in her journey towards the risen, crucified One. She repeats to us the Jesus Christ is living, with a life that is offered and given to whomsoever wishes to receive it. What does it mean to follow her? What hinders us from having her own experience? Perhaps we can find the reply in a passage from the book of Wisdom, which is proclaimed in the first reading of her Mass: "I entreated, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me. I esteemed her more than sceptres and thrones; compared with her, I held riches as nothing" (7:8). Wisdom lets herself be found by those who commit themselves to her, those who devote their own freedom to her. Too many things worry us, things we have not freely chosen, but we have let our lives become filled with them. They do not nourish us, do not quench our thirst or give us warmth, yet we do not have the strength to free ourselves from them. We know that Teresa struggled for a long time to free herself from what she possessed, or, better still, from what possessed her. Therefore, we cannot think that for us it would be easier than for her, nor that it would be possible to reach a true transformation of ourselves without God's grace, to be sought tirelessly, and without a serious commitment on our part. It is a commitment that has a double spearhead: of emptying ourselves of so much junk, that slows us down and confuses us; and setting to work, responsibly carrying out the task entrusted to us. Basically, human beings are made in such a way that only action obedient to God's will can transform them. I say this well knowing how important it is that God's will, not ours, directs our will from within. May Teresa teach us to find once again our freedom in handing ourselves over to the One who want us to be truly free!