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Teresa of Avila (1515-2015): A Woman between the Roman Catholic Church's Crossfire and Exaltation

The debates on a woman's place and function were as passionate in 16th century Spain as they are in today's Church and civil society. These debates for or against women's freedom from male domination undergird Teresa's life and works. From a feminist perspective, her readers have always to bear in mind that she writes under the control of male authorities, even when she is writing to women. What is striking, however, is her twofold struggle. First she struggles for personal freedom which is expressed by her desire and will to found monasteries of the "Primitive Rule" of Carmel, and by the use of her many personal stratagems to reach this goal. Second she struggles for access to education and claims for her Sisters the freedom to communicate with the best theologians and confessors of their time.¹ Thus, Teresa prophetically anticipated 19th century history of female emancipation.

Simone de Beauvoir sees in Teresa's struggles a "manly dimension", and she did call her nuns to be like "strong men". This aspect softens de Beauvoir's judgment of female mystics that she thinks incapable of ever overcoming dependence created because of love. For de Beauvoir Teresa barely missed being counted among her female figures reaching authentic freedom by projecting it through action onto society.² As for the exclusive male Magisterium confronted with the second feminist wave of the 20th century, Teresa was the ideal first woman to be declared "doctor of the Church". From Pope Paul VI to Pope Benedict XVI she meets without doubt all requirements making a Catholic woman a really good Catholic in the eyes of Vatican officials.³

From a feminist viewpoint, a major critique of these Vatican discourses is a general tendency to present prayer and asceticism as primary solutions to all problems within the Roman Catholic Church. The exaltation of a female figure

¹ Way of Perfection, chapter 5.2. See also: François de Ribera, *Vie de Sainte Térèse*, traduite de l'espagnol par le P. Marcel Bouix SJ, Lecoffre Fils & Cie, Paris, 1868, pp. 47 and 108.

² Françoise Collin, *Le Livre et le Code: De Simone de Beauvoir à Thérèse d'Avila*, In : *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, Hors-Série N° 2, 1996, Ames fortes, Esprits libres, p. 9,

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/grif_0770-6081_1996_hos_2_1_1898

³ Paul VI, *Sainte Thérèse d'Avila, docteur de l'Eglise*, 1er juin 1970, http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2002-04/30-6/Ens_P6_70_02.htm#_Toc6567313; General audience by Pope Benedict XVI on February 2, 2011, Saint Teresa of Avila, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110202.html.

like Teresa, follows a typical gender line which attributes the preeminent role of prayer to women, while men remain on the forefront of decision making processes and leadership. Thus, according to a certain complementarian model, women appear as providers of prayer so that men—apparently not so in need of a prayer life—make the right decisions. Teresa herself seems to endorse these views when she attributes the little she can do in her limited female condition. But in reality she complains about the impossibility to serve the Lord in the way SHE wanted to. Her deep desire was to teach theology, to preach, and labor on the mission field of the Old and the New World in other kinds of ministry. She was overtaken by the deepest pain for not being free in order to accomplish great things for God⁴. Vatican documents usually underline Teresa's submission to all male theologians, confessors, and spiritual advisors.⁵ But they retrieve from Teresa's writings whatever fits their views on women. To reach this bias they interpret Teresa's writings mostly outside of their historical context. They carefully ignore whatever historical situation that pointed to a dysfunctional patriarchal Church system. Teresa's interpreters eventually merge Teresa and her teachings into a mold determined by them, but nevertheless presented as Teresa's work and will.

In this presentation my goal is threefold: first, to capture some of the subtle movements between Teresa's desire for full liberation as a woman and the situation of her ecclesiastical exaltation. Second, to retrieve some features of Teresa as she truly is in Christ. Teresa becomes neither an excellent copy of a male Christian hero, nor what to Church authorities is a charming female saint⁶. Third, to open some perspectives of a renewed reading of Teresa other than only through the lenses of the Counter-Reformation.

Part 1: Teresa in the context of the woman question in early modern Spain

1.1. Women caught between self-determination and honor codes

According to Theresa Ann Smith's analysis of the emerging female citizen in Spain, there existed a wide gap "between women's lived experience and the theory of women's submission and inequality"⁷. Spanish politics of geographical

⁴ Way of Perfection, chapter 1.2. See also De Ribera, pp. 447. 456-457.

⁵ See the impressive list including many personal statements of those who examined and approved Teresa, in : De Ribera, op. cit. p. 403-420

⁶ Teresa's « virility » is particularly exalted in the Proceedings of her Beatification and Canonization taking place in the context of Counter-Reformation Misogyny. See Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and Rhetoric of Femininity*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 17-18. The Dominican, Peter Hernandez, apostolic visitor appointed by Pope Pius V speaks of Teresa in the following terms to Fr. Banez : « I've been told she was a woman, but this is not true. She is a man and more manly as I've ever seen. » See. De Ribera, p. 225.

⁷ Theresa Ann Smith, *The emerging female citizen: Gender and Enlightenment in Spain*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 18.

expansion on the European and the American continents offered women opportunities to assume leadership, since many male citizens left for the New World or committed to the Spanish army. Women became heads of households and pursued commercial activities or even military ventures. Many of them knew about their legal rights and were capable of appealing to ecclesiastical and civil tribunals to defend their claims. When Teresa entered the stage of this world, Spanish society was still affected by marks left by Queen Isabel of Castile setting high standards of education for her own daughters, even appointing women scholars⁸. Women of the nobility acted as foundresses and patronesses of numbers of convents or religious institutions. Nuns and abbesses controlled and administered large estates. In the shadow of permeable “cloisters” these lay and religious women shaped centers of female education, fostered female autonomy, and exercised their influence on civil society and on international politics.

While Teresa was born into a century which provided important opportunities for women to forge their own destinies, a paramount obstacle barred the way to many female citizens eager to gain effective access to freedom. In the wake of the Spanish Reconquista, society ached under a restrictive and oppressive honor system driven by the social necessity of “purity of blood” or *limpieza de sangre*. The question of “blood purity” combined racial issues with the adherence to the Catholic Institution—a cocktail which proved to be highly explosive. Whoever was not in possession of a certificate of old Christian ascendance was excluded from access to Universities as well as public and church offices. It put families and women in particular under enormous pressure to guarantee such old Christian blood. Jews and Muslims who had converted to Christianity fell under special scrutiny on behalf of the Inquisition founded in 1478.

Juan Sanchez of Toledo, Teresa’s paternal grandfather, one of these converted Jews, experienced himself such humiliating troubles. In response, he abandoned his commercial activities, bought a property on which he tried to make his living in accordance with the noble Spanish life style, and bought a certificate of old Christian ascendance for his family⁹. His Jewish origins weighed heavily on Teresa’s family. Eager to demonstrate an indefectible belonging to pure and original Christianity, they took the road of an adamant adherence to the Catholic Institution and fully embraced Charles V’s and Philip II’s political views on the American continent.

1.2. Teresa’s reform: instrument of the Counter-Reformation

⁸ Women Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World, edited by Anne J. Cruz and Rosalie Hernandez, Ashgate, 2011, p. 5.

⁹ See Catherine Catherine Delamarre, Thérèse d’Avila (1515-1582), L’Oratoire et la Forteresse, Editions Salvator, Paris, 2014, p. 24.

Teresa navigated her world of opportunities with determination and anxiety, conscious of an omnipresent possibility of violent oppression, touching closely some of her own friends¹⁰. She benefited from a monastic system that for women was still permeable as she founded many of her convents with the support of women and men living in the world. Her own lifestyle as a woman traveling all over Spain, living even for years in the company of aristocratic ladies, meeting with a great variety of people, bargaining and presiding over financial transactions, transforming all kind of houses into convents, contrasts her writings where she insists on her desire for a “more enclosed monastery”¹¹.

The question has to be raised: what exactly lays behind Teresa’s desire for enclosure, especially as this regulation is alien to the Carmelite Rule of St. Albert as approved by Innocent IV in 1247, and this text became the spiritual and juridical starting point of Teresa’s reform¹². At what point is this desire for enclosure part of her survival strategy within a world particularly oppressive for women confronted with interests of blood purity? Is it impossible for her to imagine an authentic spiritual life style immersed within the secular world? Or is it a concession she makes to the exclusively male Church authorities she was dealing with?

Monastic female enclosure became a paramount issue at the Council of Trent which confirmed the traditional non access of outsiders to a monastic private space, but also pushed reform so far as to making nuns prisoners of their convents by stating:

“But for no nun, after her profession, shall it be lawful to go out of her convent, even for a brief period, under any pretext whatever, except for some lawful cause, which is to be approved of by the bishop” (Session 25, decree 7).

Undoubtedly, Teresa’s first intention was to found a monastery offering the possibility of living according to the “Primitive Rule”. However, as she founded St. Joseph’s in Avila, she also considered lifestyles implemented by other monasteries such as the discalced Franciscans at Valladolid, which may explain her great attraction to poverty¹³. Under the influence of theologians and confessors, in particular Fr. Dominic Banez OP, she finally adopted Tridentine

¹⁰ Two burnings at the stake occurred in 1559 in Valladolid and one in Seville ; one more in 1560 again in Valladolid. One of Teresa’s friends, Dona Ana Enriquez, daughter of the marquis of Alcanices, barely escaped her execution and was shut up in a monastery at the age of 24. Teresa and her friend Dona Guiomar de Ulloa were only spared on account of their multiple relationship with members of religious orders. See Catherine Catherine Delamarre, *Thérèse d’Avila (1515-1582)*, op.cit., p .119-122.

¹¹ Life, chapter 33.2.

¹² Book of Her Life, chapter 36. 26.

¹³ De Ribera, *Vie de Sainte Térèse*, op. cit. p.99 and 102.

views as she was encouraged “not to think she was in possession of a superior science than the one of the Council which was animated by the light of the Holy Spirit”¹⁴.

The very complex story of the Carmelite Constitutions bears witness to a terrible struggle Teresa faced¹⁵. She was visibly torn between two forces in action. The first was her desire to reform the Carmelite Order in the light of the “Primitive Rule”. This project would have allowed her to take the road of a more open monastic environment putting authentic spiritual life at the root of a healing process of the many broken relationships between women and men. Teresa’s strong commitment to extend her reform to male communities points into this direction. The second force was that of Church officials for whom Europe had become a battle field of opposing Catholics and Protestants. While Teresa set up her foundations, the Roman Catholic Church all over Europe was in full swing of a Reconquista which included many methods put successfully to the test by its Spanish forerunner, the Inquisition. Teresa’s implementation of the “Primitive Rule” is therefore inseparable from her own experience of the powerful Inquisition. She knew that this institution could accuse of witchcraft or heresy more or less socially non-submissive women and lead them to burn at the stake in a couple of days. In chapter one of her *Way of Perfection*, Teresa clearly embraces an attitude of full submission and belonging to the “right camp” when she reinterprets the “Primitive Rule” in the light of the Counter-Reformation.

Teresa insists in politically correct language the great harms undergone by her for not being in an enclosed monastery. She claims “that a monastery of women that allows freedom is a tremendous danger” without ever mentioning why the same would not be true for men¹⁶. Did she keep silent on this subject in view of her desire to have the female branch of the Discalced Carmelites put under the jurisdiction of the *Province* of the male branch of the Discalced instead of the ecclesiastical authority? Teresa was at pains to have her sisters not supervised by the Ancient Observance (unreformed) of the Carmelite Order. Following a vision, she finally submitted the monastery of St. Jose in Avila to the ecclesiastical authority, under Alvaro de Mendoza, bishop of Avila¹⁷. The question under whose jurisdiction the Discalced nuns should be, gave rise to a long struggle, which also involved the mitigated brothers and sisters of the Ancient Observance. It lasted beyond Teresa’s death and ended with the ecclesiastical authority presiding firmly over the destiny of the sisters at the

¹⁴ De Ribera, op. cit. p.110. De Ribera even goes as far as assuming the Lord himself ordered Teresa to adopt the advice of “these learned men, his faithful servants.”

¹⁵ For the story of the Constitutions see : The Teresian Constitutions. Theological and Spiritual Reflection Project for the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, by Secretariatus Generalis Pro Monialibus O.C.D., Romae, 2005. http://www.ocd.pcn.net/nuns/n4_en.htm.

¹⁶ *The Book of Her Life*, chapter 7.

¹⁷ De Ribera, p. 75.

expense of the brothers in the midst of enormous political and ecclesiastical tensions, created by the implementation of the Tridentine decisions¹⁸.

Feminine mystics were considered by the Church authorities as a driving factor to justify and promote Trent. To have certain ecclesiastical teachings supported and confirmed by mystical events and experiences, created curiosity and attraction for “revealed secrets” or supernatural phenomena. Last but not least it fostered a deep conviction of divine authenticity related to these teachings. The ecclesiastical institution would have never given up entire control over such a powerful instrument at the service of European Catholic renewal, repairing the damages caused by the Reformation. Thus, Teresa herself and her promoters exalt typical themes proper to the Counter-Reformation such as: her use of images, her attachment to the saints, the use of holy water, the rosary, sacraments and Church ceremonies, Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist, her heroic obedience to Church officials, her claim to be a “daughter of the Church”, her power of intercession leading people from purgatory to heaven, and her monastic foundations conceived as a weapon at the service of Catholic Reconquista against heretical Lutherans and her total dedication to the propagation of the Catholic faith¹⁹. Most interestingly one of Christ’s words to Teresa give a slightly different interpretation of these mystical experiences. Once she was wondering why her mystical experiences in public had ceased, And Christ said: “These things are not necessary any more, you have enough credit for what I desire; they are meant to support the weakness of those who judge badly the most perfect things”. Here, and in other occasions, Christ explains the necessity of manifesting to women as messengers and to extraordinary phenomena, because of the weakness and lack of faith of the Catholic leadership²⁰.

Teresa’s intention was to reform the Carmelite Order, and not to be the foundress of a new Order as Francis de Ribera and Teresa herself strongly affirm²¹. Male Church leaders on the other side insist on calling her “the foundress”, who envisions her “foundation” differently, providing with clear approbation from the male clergy, the “Primitive Rule” with a new goal and a new direction. On top of that she also established male communities, which was unheard of so far in Church history, so there was no other way than to have her act covered by male authorities. Teresa’s obedient reinterpretation in the light of

¹⁸ In 1604 this controversy reached a particular peak with the introduction of the first Discalced Carmelite sisters in France at the instigation of Jean of Bérulle, and Madame Acarie, his cousin, a French mystics, heading a spiriuel cerclle acting in favor of a Catholic renewal of France in the wake of the Counter-Reformation. See : Jean Sérouet, Jean Bretigny (1556-1634) A l’origine du Carmel de France, de Belgique et du Congo, Publications universitaires de Louvain, Louvain, 1974.

¹⁹ De Ribera, op. cit. pp. 410 and 438-440. 446 and 448. 460.

²⁰ Book of her Life, chapter De Ribera, p. 365. 384.396-397.

²¹ De Ribera, op.cit., p. 94. 488.

Trent was rewarded by an utmost approbation and exaltation on behalf of the ecclesiastical Institution. The female Carmelite Order obtained the highest rank among all the Orders open to women as it was established in “defense of the Church”. This “apostolic element” made it different from all the others²². Its rank was only superseded by the masculine Orders dedicated to teaching and preaching—according to the scale established by Thomas Aquinas, who subordinated the Orders dedicated to contemplation to those founded with the goal of teaching and preaching to which he belonged himself²³.

Teresa’s reinterpretation under the guidance of her male counselors fitted the misogynous context of the Tridentine reform in the wake of a number of ecclesiastical decisions keeping women from ordination and decision making positions since the High Middle Ages²⁴. In the 16th century, the Tridentine decrees have also to be understood in the larger political context, which created many opportunities for women to make major social, economic, and political contributions. In reaction to this trend, archaic male fears of female domination took over and were responded to by oppressive rules presented as eminently virtuous. Other writings than religious ones bear witness to this evolution²⁵. The more women became involved in secular decision making processes, the more writings multiplied which promoted and exalted restrictive female roles as well as male government.

Among the ways of promotion and exaltation of restrictive female roles one argument pertains particularly to Carmelite lifestyle. To keep female influence within politically acceptable limits, the argument was to exalt enclosure as the perfect secret place of influence, away from the traditional centers open to brutal political competition. Thus, married and religious women themselves became supportive of an oppressive system which exalted their consultative power and their privilege of enjoying a protected situation, bestowed on them by males. Such a system had deplorable downside effects: it enhanced biblical interpretations and theological justifications for excluding women from public life and supported a diseased culture of pulling the strings behind the scenes. Last but not least it ruined the physical, psychological, and spiritual health of

²² De Ribera, op. cit. 94-97.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Ila Ilae*, 188, 6.

²⁴ For the struggle in regard of barring women from ordination and leadership positions, see Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination. Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

²⁵ Two important works stand out. The first written written by Juan Luiz Vives, *The education of a Christian Woman, A Sixteenth Century Manuel*, edited and translated by Charles Fantazzi, University of Chicago Press, 2000. It was commissioned by Catherine of Aragon for her daughter, Mary Tudor, wife of King Henry VIII of England. Vives’ second volume *De los Deberes del Marido* is way much shorter, as he limits the duties of a husband to how to select and govern a good wife. The second work is written by Fray Luis de León and entitled *La Perfecta Casada*. It was largely diffused as it was considered as a perfect wedding gift. It retakes the traditional arguments based on Scripture, Church fathers and philosophers for why women only should be in charge of domestic responsibilities and limited to private enclosure.

numbers of women reducing them to project their gifts and desires for self-realization on male members of their environment. Unable to take their destinies into their own hands, they consumed their very often short lives in subordinate positions becoming not only destructive to themselves, but also to those they were in contact with.

This statement does not mean to deny the authentic and lasting fruits borne by the Roman Catholic Church in general and by the Carmelite Order in particular in the wake of the Council of Trent. However, in today's context tempted by a restoration of Tridentine Catholicism rather than turned towards a healthy *aggiornamento* in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, it is necessary to underline the downside effects of a rapid exaltation of the Tridentine period, as well as a mere "copy and paste" mentality by recalling more sobering realities. Teresa's authentic catholicity comes precisely to the fore as the huge worldview shifts undergone all over the globe since the 20th century allow reinterpretation of her life and her teachings in the new contexts of our time, one of which is precisely a renewed perception of marriage and the family.

Part 2: If any one saith ... that it is not better and more blessed to remain in celibacy, than to be united in matrimony; let him be anathema" (Tametsi, Canon X)

2.1. Roots for Teresa's choice of religious life

Teresa's struggle for self-determination emerged with an aversion she developed against married life. This fact speaks volumes to Christian marriage neglected by Church authorities and abandoned to cultural considerations, reaching back to the early Christian communities. Since the first centuries, Church authorities were faced with a crucial choice as baptism transformed women and men into a new creation making them one in Christ (Gal 3:28). Up to what point would Christians live out this revolutionary oneness and therefore equality in Christ? To live out gender equality meant to affirm social difference. Would Christians assume this social difference to the extent of being rejected, even killed, or would they adapt to the existing social structures as best as they could to survive as a group?

With the post-Pauline letters such as Colossians, Ephesians and the Epistles to Timothy, Church authorities started to make moves in the direction of the second option. These writings intertwined for the first time Christian ethics with household codes rooted in Aristotle, reinterpreted by Roman imperial marital legislations, contained in the *Lex Iulia and Papia*²⁶. The goal of such a

²⁶ Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament. Questions and Commentary*. Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 1998, 134-136.

development was social acceptability of Christians in search of survival and a peaceful life. This social peace, however, had a cost, and this cost was paid by women, children, and slaves, as they were advised and ordered to adopt culturally acceptable behaviors.

Pauline core teachings came to be developed and interpreted in a more “politically correct” perspective. The self-understanding of the Church made so far by various communities gave way to a Church understood as a Body, of which Christ is the head. Progressively, this metaphor close to a Roman understanding of the state, similar to a well-run household, was overtaken by, and applied to, the emerging Christian institution. Although Paul never calls the husband head of the household, but only head of his wife (Eph 5:21-33), the image of the *paterfamilias* fostered a hierarchical and male driven structure of the Church. The model of males concentrating all powers over submissive females, children, slaves, and peoples, reduced to “bodies”, was transformed into God-willed ways of living.

At the same time the Church promoted female and male celibate life styles. In the wake of a desire for asceticism, the celibate life style came to be exalted over marriage. Marriage matters concentrated on problems created by forced as well as clandestine marriages. These efforts certainly laid an important ground for preventing unwanted marriages, but they also reduced marriage matters to a question of consent, as well as to impediments of marriage.²⁷ The latter offered the only way out of an unwanted matrimonial union. Thus, Luther could write in the year Teresa reached the age of 10, the following sobering statement: “When I was a boy, the wicked and impure practice of celibacy had made marriage so disreputable that I believed I could not even think about the life of married people without sinning”²⁸.

2.2. Gender lines in the light of marriage and singleness

In regard to marriage, early Renaissance Spain followed the gender lines drawn since the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, molding women into submissive and obedient housewives. Teresa’s mother, Beatrice de Ahumada, met the criteria of such a good and respectable wife in male eyes: she was beautiful, pious, fertile, and rich, bestowing on her husband an important financial dowry and the property of Gotarrendura, where Teresa was born²⁹. Beatrice stayed at home and managed only domestic affairs until she died at the age of 33 giving

²⁷ Charles J. Reid Jr., *Power over the Body, Equality in the Family: Rights and Relations in Medieval Canon Law*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Great Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, 2004. Reid provides a careful analysis of the variations of opinion on the rights of women and men as well as of the canonists’ nuanced understandings of the various degrees of psychological pressure and their impact on women’s perception of their freedom to reject an imposed match.

²⁸ Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, 1525

²⁹ Catherine Delamarre, *Thérèse of Avila*, op.cit. p. 17 and 19.

birth to her eighth child. Teresa's mother was a product of the Spanish early modern honor system, which put heavy weight on women, insofar as a man's honor and reputation depended quite exclusively on female actions carried out by wives and daughters. Teresa herself admits her fear of losing her honor being stronger in her than the fear of committing a mortal sin or of abandoning God. Only her sense of honor gave her the strength not to completely lose her reputation³⁰. On the other side, a man's value was measured by the way he kept tight control over his female household members, which led many males to macho and autocratic behaviors. Nothing could put a male more to shame than to be ruled by a woman³¹. European law made adultery a civil crime for a woman, but not for a man. This disposition which could be backed up by biblical regulations, resulted in an ongoing scrutiny of female behavior on behalf of males³².

For a great majority of women marriage meant life in a more or less permeable enclosure just as for women living in a convent. In both cases enclosure determined and controlled by males, ensured a woman's protection, mostly equated with virginity and socially accepted virtues. However, women were still better off in a monastic enclosure where they escaped daily male domestic violence and supervision, pregnancies, and dangerous childbirth. Teresa reached the age of 13 at her mother's death, an age where the body, soul, and mind of a young woman starts to experience the power of natural attractions and prepared for married life. Reality and desire for romantic love clashed quite early in Teresa's existence, leaving her devastated. She rejected marriage and went for the only option open to her: life in a convent³³.

To the oppressive conditions in marriage, Beatrice de Ahumada had found one escape: the reading of fantasy literature by which domestic and social terror was tamed and counterbalanced by an imaginary identification with heroes and heroines, victorious over dangers and monsters. These specific readings, made possible by Guttenberg's highly revolutionary invention of printing, failed to gain approval by male authorities such as the humanist Juan Luis Vives and

³⁰ The Book of Her Life, chapter 2.3.

³¹ Women such as Isabel of Castille and Elizabeth I of England had both to struggle for having their rights to the throne publicly recognized. Isabel of Castille acted as an independent queen. She proclaimed herself as the rightful ruler, negotiated her own marriage with Ferdinand of Aragon, and concluded in 1475 the Concord of Segovia which defined the rights and powers of both reigns. With ability she managed to be perceived as the ideal mother who, similar to Mary, provided redemption to Castille and an undisputable male heir. As for Elizabeth I of England she proved to be a brilliant ruler who paved the way to making England a world power at the cost of never contracting a marriage. She chose to found her reign on the mythical dimension of virginity by remaining the « Virgin Queen ».

³² According to biblical patriarchy to marry is to take possession of, to own, to exercise dominion over. The Hebrew term *beulat ba'al* (Dt 22 :22) or married woman means « owned women » or woman who has become the exclusive domaine of a *ba'al* or husband. Only males married while females were given and taken in marriage ». Thus, in case of adultery, the only offended party was the male. A woman could never be offended by a male exercising his rights of possession or dominion over other women.

³³ The book of Her Life, chapter 1.8.

King Philip II of Spain. The powerful and learned men of Teresa's time ignored the therapeutic effects inherent to mythological literature, rediscovered by the various psychological schools in the wake of Freud, Jung, or Frankl in the 20th century. King Philip II had them prohibited in 1543 and 1555, as they were thought to abolish the frontiers between imagination and reality. Nevertheless, Beatrice de Ahumada was still successful in communicating her passion for chivalry literature to her children, hiding from her husband, dreaming of self-determined ways of living, and projecting onto her children life styles prohibited to her mostly on account of her sex.

Teresa had soaked up her mother's passion for always new books, although she turned this fact later into a politically correct perspective³⁴. At the time she was writing, male censure had not only hit the stories of imaginary Christian heroes, but the general Inquisitor, Fernando Valdés, ordered the Bible itself, translated in Castilian, to be put on the index as well as other spiritual writings in the vernacular language such as the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, the works of Erasmus, St. Francis of Borgia, even though he was the Duke of Gandia, and the lives of saints. More than 700 works were publicly burned at the order of Philip II, using the Inquisition as an instrument of political power in Spain as well as in the newly conquered colonies of the American continent. Thus, Teresa's desire for learning and education was put to ashes.

However, memories of her early childhood remained. To the experience of fragility and injustice inherent to the world, she responded by identifying with the physical and moral strength imbued with Christian virtues, met in the protagonists of her mother's favorite books. Teresa's works bear witness to numerous symbols typical for the world of chivalry such as citadels and castles, conquered by Christian heroes like the black Esplandian. With Esplandian she penetrated the various dwelling places discovering objects of incredible precious stones, met the fascinating world of hermits, or waged wars against all kind of monsters, antique role models for the devils of her time. With Calafia, queen of California, heading her amazons against the enemies, Teresa in the image of this invincible heroine walked first in line on the road of her monastic foundations, encouraging her sisters to never lose sight of the standard, instead to be ready to be put in pieces than to falter³⁵.

On November 2, Teresa threw herself on the battle field when knocking at the door of the Incarnation convent of Avila. She only stood at the beginning of a long and progressive clarification, leading her out of the shadows and symbols unto the truth as Cardinal Newman would put it. This aspect makes Teresa even

³⁴ The Book of Her Life, chapter 2.1.

³⁵ *Las Sergas de Esplandian* is the fifth volume of a series of chivalric romance novels written by Garcia Roderiguez di Montavlo, published in 1510 (See: Editorial Castalia, 2003). This volume mentions a fictive island called California, ruled by queen Calafia. When the Spanish explorers learned about a territory off western Mexico, they called it California, confusing the Californian peninsula with an island.

more familiar to us as we all start out with confusing pictures about Jesus—Christian hero, superstar, guru, magic healer, or perfect male image, source for all humankind. Her choice of celibacy over marriage did not abolish her humanity. It did not resolve quasi instantly whatever physical, psychological, and spiritual troubles she had and it did not result for her in a world where a celibate life style was superseding family ties. Such misinterpretations of the Tridentine Decree Tametsi, Canon X, simply fall short when confronted with grass roots reality. Even after the age of fifty, Teresa was attracted by men and remained a woman attractive to men, as well as fully immersed in family relationships³⁶.

The misunderstandings of the Tridentine statement exalting consecrated life over marriage, produced one of the greatest dramas undergone by Western Civilization. In the long run it plunged Western Catholic and Protestant Christianity alike, into an unprecedented secularization process. Understandable as an overreaction to the polemical controversy initiated by Luther, exalting marriage over celibacy and virginity, the Tridentine statement ended up fostering female and male alienation in the entrenched context of the Counter-Reformation. Interpreted alongside the traditional gender lines it was used to back up an idolatrous glorification and divinization of biological maleness, leading to an ambiguous exaltation of male virtues in women. Teresa herself gives way to such a masculinization process when she exalts virility in her nuns and upholds Christ as the one transforming them into males³⁷. This appropriation of male language applied to women is particularly pernicious. It created an expectation for women to become like males, while males out of fear of male-like women limited them to socially acceptable female roles, thus keeping control over them.

2.3. Teresa, daughter and sister: an ongoing reality

Right from the beginning of her religious life Teresa threw herself with juvenile passion into unhealthy practices of penance which left her as good as dead. Her torments were increased by the absence of news on behalf of her beloved brother, Roderigo, whom she was attached to in a fusional way. Roderigo was born on same day four years before Teresa; he was the one with whom she shared her passionate childhood dreams of heroic death in the land of the Moors, far away from their parents³⁸. This beloved brother had committed to the expedition led by Pedro of Mendoza with the order to conquer the lands of the Rio de la Plata and to find a land road leading to the Pacific. Teresa survived her self-destructive phase of penance with the support of her family, who pulled her temporarily out of the monastery. At the same moment the news of Roderigo's

³⁶ The Book of Her Life, chapter 37.4.

³⁷ Way of Perfection,

³⁸ The Book of Her Life, chapter 1.4.

death in unknown circumstances led her to a painful detachment from her brother. To overcome her pain she desperately equated Rodrigo to a Christian martyr although there was no evidence for that³⁹. Only her own fictive death delivered her definitely from such damaging attachments. There is no trace in Teresa's life of a rejection of her various family members in order to embrace a superior life style. But there is a very painful purification of spiritually unhealthy attachments to them. For this very reason Teresa may have never mentioned Rodrigo's death in any of her writings.

Teresa would not be Teresa without her family. Her encounter with Christ happened within her human existence as daughter of Alfonso de Cepeda and Beatrice of Ahumada. Human encounter with Christ is only made possible because of one's conception, birth, and growing up within a family, be it in good or in bad conditions. Christ does not save us from family, but he saves us as daughters and sons of particular women and men as well as family situations. Throughout her life Teresa never ceased to draw on relatives and family connections to realize her monastic foundations, among whom in particular are the Vela's and the Mendoza's. Five of Teresa's brothers waged war in the New World under the orders of Blasco Nunez Vela, first Vice-King of Peru, whose brother Francisco, was Teresa's godfather. In the tragic civil war which opposed the Spanish adventurer, Gonzalo Pizarro, eager to rule over Peru, to the legal representatives of the Spanish crown, Teresa's brothers embraced the party of the crown at the cost of bloody persecution. Lorenzo entrusted with the royal seal, kept it safe after the terrible defeat of his party at the battle of Inaquito in 1546 and returned it to La Gasca, the new royal representative⁴⁰. Teresa's own godfather, victim of Pizarro's rebellion, was falsely denounced as a betrayer; he died beheaded by a slave and his corpse was torn apart⁴¹.

To Teresa's brothers' utmost faithfulness to the crown in the New World brought support and recognition of her founding works in Spain. On top of this support stands King Philip II's late, but decisive intervention which ended the war between Discalced and Mitigated Carmelites. He officially asked Pope Gregory XIII to create a separate province for the Discalced, a request which was granted on June 22, 1580⁴². This intervention, however, was prepared by strong relationships between Teresa's family and that of the Mendoza's, who served at the Royal Court in various positions. Rodrigo, Teresa's brother, had departed to the New World under the command of Pedro de Mendoza, former house steward of Emperor Charles V. Pedro was also a cousin of Alvaro de Medoza, bishop of Avila, who received Teresa's first foundation, San Jose of Avila, under his wings and became one of her most fervent supporters. With the

³⁹ De Ribera, p. 12-13 ; see also : Catherine Delamarre, op. cit. p. 64-65.

⁴⁰ Catherine Delamarre, Thérèse d'Avila, op. cit. pp. 80.84.87.

⁴¹ Catherine Delamarre, Thérèse of Avila, op. cit. p. 86.

⁴² Catherine Delamarre, op. cit. p. 295.

years passing by, the Mendoza's acted as powerful protectors of Teresa's brothers and drew Teresa into the intimate circle of Spanish High Aristocracy. Andres Hurtado of Mendoza, third Vice King of Peru, bestowed on Teresa's brother, Lorenzo, large properties, which allowed Teresa's brother to finance San Jose's of Avila with money from the New World⁴³.

Throughout her life, Teresa did not put celibate life over marriage. On the contrary, she appealed to the example of married women, enduring all kind of hardships, serving as role models for nuns⁴⁴. She did not reject marriage on the argument of a higher calling or a higher estate of life. What she rejected were the unfair and inhuman conditions into which more women than men of her time were pushed by marriage. Given these unfair conditions, religious life made women better off—not because of a higher and better estate—but on account of a “better environment”⁴⁵. The utmost care and support Teresa provided for those brothers and their family members who managed to come back to Spain, bear witness to her adoption of an understanding of mutuality and communion between the two estates of life.

Nevertheless, to deal with relatives remained a source of tensions, even for her, marked by the temptation to meet such difficulties either by flight into solitude or by giving way to unhealthy attachments⁴⁶. Teresa identified and faced both alienations. Once plunged into remorse for having spent too much time with her brother, Lorenzo, and not keeping herself to the Carmelite Constitutions, Christ addresses her in the following way: “my daughter, your communities have only to observe my law”⁴⁷. Her answer to these temptations was to walk the costly road of conversion and union with Christ, supporting and encouraging all those she met to take this road with her, those of her time, or today, and tomorrow, be they married or single, female or male, noble or common, committed to evangelical vows or not.

Part 3: Francis de Ribera and his *Life of Teresa*

Francis de Ribera was a well renowned Jesuit, holder of a chair in Holy Scriptures at the University of Salamanca at Teresa's time (1537-1591). He was held in high esteem on account of his published biblical commentaries, his knowledge of Church history, and his holy life-style. He was put in charge of the redaction of the *ratio studiorum*, followed by all the religious of the Company of Jesus. De Ribera was one of Teresa's confessors, counselors, advisers, and friends. After her death in 1582, he spent long moments at her tomb, witnessed

⁴³ Catherine Delamarre, Thérèse d'Avila, op. cit. p. 136-137.

⁴⁴ Way of Perfection, chapter 11.3.

⁴⁵ Way of Perfection, chapter 12.5.

⁴⁶ The Book of Her Life, 24. 5-8.

⁴⁷ De Ribera, p.448.

all kinds of miracles, and seemed to have received at her tomb a supernatural calling and her approval to write a *Life of Teresa*⁴⁸.

3.1. Teresa and the Jesuits

At this point a question has to be raised. Why was it necessary to publish a *Life of Teresa* in 1590, eight years after her death since Teresa herself wrote an autobiography, the book of her Foundations and many other works? De Ribera himself provides an answer to this question stating: “As Mother Teresa omitted many things related to her life, and has written many other things which cannot be understood by everybody, my work will be of a twofold utility: to bridge the gaps left by the Saint in her writings and to explain her doctrine”⁴⁹. In other words de Ribera’s work is not only to complete what Teresa has not written or only written at the command of Church authorities, but most importantly to present an interpretation of her teachings, which were not made or which were esteemed not to be accessible to a large number. In particular Teresa’s extraordinary mystical life had to be presented in a way controlled by Church authorities. Father Marcel Bouix, SJ in his introduction to de Ribera’s work is certainly right when he points to the ultimate goal of de Ribera’s endeavor: it was meant to prepare her process of beatification and canonization.

This endeavor, however, was inseparable from another canonization, the one of Ignatius of Loyola himself. In fact, Teresa and Ignatius were both beatified by Paul V and canonized together by Pope Gregory XV on March 12, 1622. Throughout his work, de Ribera plays therefore with great ability on the deep connection between Teresa and the Jesuits. For de Ribera Teresa could only find in Jesuits what she was looking for as soon as she resolved to belong entirely to God at the view of a statue of Christ suffering at the column. He generously leaves it up to the Carmelites themselves to write on Teresa, justifying his personal endeavor by the fact that “it was the Company of Jesus who had made her walk on the road of perfection and had always granted her help and support throughout her life”⁵⁰. De Ribera finds himself all the more at ease with such affirmations as Teresa herself supports his sayings. She writes to Fr. Paul Hernandez, her confessor at Toledo while living with Dona Louisa de la Cerda: “I was raised to perfection by the Company of Jesus, through which were given to me being and life”; and to Don Cristobal Rodriguez de Moya, a wealthy widower undecided as to founding a Teresian Carmel or a Jesuit school, Teresa speaks of the religious of the Company of Jesus in the following way: “they are my fathers; it is to them that my soul is indebted, after Our Lord, for all the good it owns”⁵¹. It was under the influence of Fr. Balthasar Alvarez, one of her Jesuit

⁴⁸ See Introduction by Marcel Bouix SJ in Francis de Ribera, *Vie de Sainte Thérèse*, op. cit., p. XXV-XXVI.

⁴⁹ De Ribera, op. cit. p. 5.

⁵⁰ De Ribera, op. cit. 4-5.

⁵¹ De Ribera, op. cit. 642. See also p. 418 and her visions related to the Company of Jesus, p. 391.

confessors, that Teresa took a particular vow of accomplishing in all important matters throughout her life what she esteemed the most perfect and the most pleasing to God. She held this commitment as a starting point of her own road of perfection⁵².

The Jesuits in turn were in need of Teresa to demonstrate their effectiveness in Teresa's life and that of her Sisters they confessed and advised. This effectiveness was extended by de Ribera's book. Given the number of translations, since 1590, year of its first edition, thousands of Jesuits, priests, and bishops read his work, leading Fr. Bouix in the 19th century to call it "a monument more lasting than bronze" enduring throughout centuries and "the most precious treasure of Carmel" although it was written by a Jesuit⁵³.

3.2. A certain overcoming of gender lines

De Ribera's book, however, is not confined to exalting a mutual need between Teresa and the Jesuits. This need gives way to a mutual esteem and recognition, when Teresa's persevered with her rather harsh confessors and when the same confessors took seriously into account her questions and descriptions of her spiritual life. In some cases the relationship between Teresa and her confessors went as far as a mutual submission. From this point of view de Ribera's work bears witness to an overcoming of some of the traditional gender lines which usually make it clear that a male is always superior to a female.

Of all of Teresa's confessors the one who probably reached a high degree of such submission is Fr. Balthasar Alvarez. Resisting questions put by Teresa, he engaged in a deeper search of God's truth through study and a personal transformation process because of contact with Teresa. De Ribera writes: "Although Fr. Balthasar Alvarez had not only deep knowledge of spiritual things, but also a great experience of them, Mother Teresa nevertheless flew at such a high level that he was obliged to speed up in order to reach her. I will never forget a word he told me at Salamanca while speaking about all kinds of spiritual books and the use one can make out of each of them, he said to me: 'all these books, I had to read them to hear Mother Teresa's confession'"⁵⁴.

This attitude however did not go without pain as her confessors in the image of many males would not accept a woman wanting to teach them or to think she was wise⁵⁵. Teresa suffered in particular from Fr. Alvarez's lack of trust in himself⁵⁶, a difficulty many men struggle with in counterbalancing this inner

⁵² Book of Her Life, chapter 24. 5-7. See also de Ribera, p. 449.

⁵³ See Introduction by Marcel Bouix SJ in *op. cit.* p. XXVIII-XXIX. Father de Ribera's Life of Teresa continues to be regularly out of print and republished. Its last French reedition reaches back to January 16, 2012.

⁵⁴ De Ribera, *op. cit.* p. 47.

⁵⁵ Book of Her Life, chapter 28. 17.

⁵⁶ Book of Her Life, chapter 28. 14-16.

insecurity by reactions of overpowering. In addition, spirituality and holiness were often confused with self-flagellations and inflicting all kinds of torture to one's body. On her own road to holiness, Teresa underwent terrible crossfires on behalf of theologians, spiritual men, and confessors. Many of them imposed on her such mortifications, which were not pleasing to her⁵⁷, including Fr. Alvarez. For this reason Teresa called him "gracious evil" and was often tempted to leave him⁵⁸. What drove her mad were the numerous contradictions into which he plunged her for more than two years, encouraging and speaking up for her on the one hand, while on the other depriving her of taking communion or prohibiting her from taking time in solitude.

These contradictions were not only due to Fr. Alvarez spiritually flying lower than Teresa. They were also caused by the fact that he was himself dependent on his superior, a fact which pinpoints the problem of a Council made of only male members related to one another by hierarchical distinctions and conferring together over the authenticity, or not, of a female's spiritual experience. De Ribera reveals this patriarchal system as the origin of Fr. Alvarez not being in support of Teresa's project of a reformed Carmel because his superior opposed it. But even with the change of Fr. Alvarez' superior, replaced by Fr. Gaspar de Salazar, member of the Council of the Inquisition, who was in favor of Teresa, Fr. Alvarez would not follow his advice to let the Spirit of the Lord act freely in Teresa's soul⁵⁹.

The story which brings him to a turning point is very instructive for the perception and understanding of gender lines. Given the resistance to Teresa's project, Christ himself communicated her an order saying: "Tell your confessor to meditate tomorrow on the following verse: "How great are your works, Lord, how profound your thoughts (Ps 92:5)." What followed is best expressed by Fr. de Ribera himself who writes: "Father Alvarez submitted to the advice he received. ... meditating on this verse, he clearly saw that Teresa's project was God's will and that it was up to him to have [God's] works made known by the means of a woman"⁶⁰.

From a feminist perspective what is striking is Teresa who regularly refused to judge and impose her views based on visions⁶¹, while Fr. Alvarez was only convinced by an order of Christ himself, mediated by Teresa's mystical experience. In other words, Teresa for whom Jesus is always male, does not use his maleness for imposing herself on others. As for what moves Fr. Alvarez to graciously submit to Teresa's project is an order given by Christ that he can identify with as a male. Only at this point does he come to the conclusion that

⁵⁷ Book of Her Life, chapter 24. 2.

⁵⁸ Book of Her Life, chapter 26. 3. and De Ribera, op. cit. p. 47.

⁵⁹ De Ribera, p. 65-66.

⁶⁰ De Ribera, op. cit. p. 67.

⁶¹ De Ribera, p. 61-62.

Christ can speak and act authentically in a woman. Teresa herself seems destabilized by such a revelation as she meditates on the limitations imposed on women according to 1 Tim 2:11-12, verses which she had heard in opposition to her activities. Thinking she should perhaps adopt such a behavior, Christ himself intervened by saying: “Tell them not to focus only on one Scripture verse, but to consider also the other ones, and see if, by chance, they will be able to bind my hands”⁶².

The entire event raises the question of what is foundational in a man or in a woman for a capacity to represent Christ? Is it Christ’s biological maleness on the base of which men assume an immediate identification with Christ? Or is it Christ’s transforming word spoken to females and males? Teresa clings to what Jesus, she imagines as male, tells her, and communicates these words as Jesus’ words. By doing so she did not have to give up female power and did not have to usurp male power. As for Father Alvarez he remained in a power struggle with Teresa and with his new superior, power he only gave up at God’s work in him, mediated through Teresa. Teresa and Fr. Alvarez both surrendered to Christ’s words and by doing so represented Christ to one another. In this process, males struggle more with giving up power than females. As for females put in charge by Christ to communicate something to males on Christ’s behalf, they seem to exercise a certain power over men leading them to embrace Christ’s views, while for women such missions are more often related to hardships inflicted on them by males.

At Teresa’s contact clergy and laypersons alike could experience Christ’s uplifting and healing power. Many of her confessors would recognize her eminent gift of teaching and bear witness to Christ’s transforming power given to them through her mediation, among whom de Ribera counts himself. Two eminent Dominican theologians, Fr. Peter Ybanez and Fr. Vincent Baron, were led to such a high degree of holiness at her contact, that Teresa herself couldn’t believe it, if she hadn’t witnessed it ⁶³. Nevertheless, the church authorities would refuse to recognize the same transforming power given to a woman on an institutional and sacramental level. For males it is certainly easier to impose themselves in this world on a biological similarity with Jesus, than on Jesus’ powerful transforming word. It is certainly easier to decree that only males can represent or act in Christ’s name based on biological similarities, than to be challenged by women speaking on behalf of Christ on all levels of ecclesiastical life, calling them to give up some of their dysfunctional will-power. For women on the other hand, the temptation is to take dysfunctional male will-power for Christ’s power and copy an alienated male superiority.

⁶² De Ribera, p. 217.

⁶³ De Ribera, p. 401. 419. 459-460.

So, what exactly is at stake when men quite instinctively command women to be silent, exclude them from education, teaching, preaching, and administering the sacraments to people? What they seem to fear is not so much a woman taking a man's position, but the fact that the word of a woman can not only be as powerful as that of a man, but coincide with God's very word. What men fear is not so much women becoming like males, but women speaking and teaching in the name of God and Christ. Consequently, men protect themselves from a highly explosive mixture of female attraction and divine power, when they interpret biological sexuality as a "God-willed" reality to justify the primacy of males over females.

Conclusion

A reading of Teresa's life and teachings will look differently whether one holds or not, to the everlasting reality of the context of the Spanish Inquisition and that of the European Counter-Reformation. Teresa lived her spiritual journey in the context of her time, and this context affected her actions and writings. Nevertheless, Teresa's teachings can be perfectly lived out in other contexts, which makes her a truly Catholic and universal saint. Therefore, her lasting legacy is not the one expressed by her exalted image as a champion of the Counter-Reformation, shaped by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and presented at the Santa Maria della Vittoria Church in Rome. What makes her legacy truly lasting is who she really is in Christ-Jesus. The difficulty is to look at and discover Teresa living in Christ, present to his Church at whatever period of Church history, walking through crossfires and rejecting any other exaltation other than that of his death, resurrection and ascension.

It is in Christ that Teresa finds a freedom to be herself in spite of all the ecclesiastical crossfires she had to confront; a freedom which is neither alienated by whatever attempt to recuperate her life and teachings for the "good cause", nor affected by male controlled exaltation of a woman speaking to them on behalf of Christ. In Christ she finds a freedom Simone de Beauvoir cannot imagine, because de Beauvoir's conception of freedom remains a self-centered reality. The call to this kind of freedom pulled Teresa out of her father's house, had her overcome unhealthy attachments, spiritual snares, and ecclesiastical traps. It brought her to an accomplishment only reached within a universal mutuality and communion which overcomes time. Therefore, Teresa's life and teachings have transformative effects on women and men, single and married, black and white, gay, lesbian and straight, Jews, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants.

For Teresa, the solution to all of her physical, psychological and spiritual troubles has never been to leave the Roman Catholic Church. It is in the midst of a Church rocked by the Reformation, followed by a not less rocking Counter-Reformation that Teresa received her divine mission: to implement the original

Rule of the Carmelite Order. This mission and project gave meaning to her life. Her life finally equaled that of her brothers gone to conquer the New World. In Renaissance Spain Teresa also conquered her portion of “new land”, which is Carmelite spirituality. This new land longs to be explored by every new generation. It longs to be explored by each of us in the footsteps of Teresa and with Teresa rejoicing over every newly discovered area she was not able to attain given her historically limited conditions.