



MESSAGE OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL FOR THE 450th ANNIVERSARY OF THE TERESIAN REFORM

This year we celebrate an anniversary of particular significance: the 24th of August will see the completion of 450 years since the foundation of St. Joseph's in Avila, and therefore too, since the beginning of Teresa's reform. The Holy Father himself has expressed his joy and the joy of the whole Church concerning this anniversary by sending, on the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, a message that is rich in teresian spirituality and doctrine.

At the thought of our religious family completing 450 years of life, the first sentiment that fills our hearts is gratitude to the Lord for his fidelity and his love, together with wonder at the great things that he has done in us. Truly, if Teresa has given herself to Jesus, Jesus has given much more to Teresa and continues to give himself to her whole family. Let us mutually remind ourselves not to forget ("Remember, O Israel!") how great a grace he has given in calling us to be part of this history, to make ourselves capable of being able to witness to it in the present and making it grow into the future, on a journey of unending foundation, which, -as Teresa herself has taught us - should never be considered to have reached an end. None of us could have reached this point, or taken on this responsibility, were it not gifted to us by God, and if in this, his merciful love and his gratuitous initiative were not manifested.

Another point for reflection comes from the consideration of the more recent stage of our history. In 1962 the Order celebrated the fourth centenary of its reform, right at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, which in turn would have signaled in many ways the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the Church. These last 50 years are a stage of our journey which offers itself for our peaceful evaluation and spiritual discernment. We have changed a lot during these years, but the same call continues to vibrate in us and the same passion as sons and daughters of Teresa of Jesus. We are aware that not every change has expressed the creativity of the charism, nor every desire to preserve has been a manifestation of authentic fidelity. But we note especially that our reality, complex and at times contradictory, is today inhabited by new faces, by new generations born during these last fifty years, with new sensibilities and diverse experiences, coming from different parts of the world, wishing to express what they are and what they have, fragility and strength, poverty and richness, clarity and obscurity of vision, the enthusiasm of youth and the wisdom of mature age.

Teresa was 47 years of age when the first tolls of the bell of St. Joseph's were sounding. At an age, which at that time much more so than ours, could be considered rather advanced, she set out on a completely new adventure, which foreboded risks and the unknown. We know that two things helped her overcome every human and reasonable resistance: the power coming from her experience of God and from the strength of her passion for a Church and a world in the throes of an upheaval of epochal proportions. Today too, these are the powers that can animate and recommit us on our journey, or, open for us a way into a landscape which at times seems like an empty and trackless desert in which we feel dispersed, or alternatively, like a dense forest, in which it is impossible to find any way forward.

Teresa was not able to rely on the support of many powerful friends or great economic resources. Her very condition as a woman was a cause of innumerable difficulties and limitations. There were times when the project of a new foundation seemed simply unrealizable, and she complained to the Lord that he was asking impossible things of her (cf. Life 33, 11). The story of the first foundation is a tangle of labors, of doubts, of persecutions and of every kind of obstacle, but at the same time of consolations, of providential meetings, of unexpected help and especially of continually renewed interior certitude. Because of this, the account of it is transformed from an autobiographical narrative into a confession of lived faith, into an account of the history of salvation, the memory of which ought be handed on from generation to generation because we can continue to draw power and inspiration from it. Teresa gave Fr. García de Toledo, who was destined to receive the book of her Life, permission to change everything, except the account of the first foundation:

I beg your Reverence, for the love of God, if you think it well to tear up everything else that is written here, to preserve what concerns this monastery. Then, after my death, it should be given to the sisters here, for it will be a great encouragement in the service of God to those who come after us and will prevent this work that has been begun from falling to the ground and help it to prosper continually when it is seen what importance His Majesty must have attached to this house since He founded it through a creature as wicked and as base as I (Life, 36, 29).

It is with this spirit that we also, after 450 years, return to that founding experience, from which we are born. If the Lord has done so much for this work to be accomplished, he will continue to do so in order that it may not go to ruin, but rather progress ever more. Teresa would like to underline for us that if all of this has been possible, it is not because of the instrument that was used, an imperfect and poor woman such as herself, but by him who wished to use it. Far from being false humility, Teresa, as usual, speaks about "things which are very true" (Life 40, 3), especially in relation to something as important as the reform of Carmel. It is the work of the Lord, to whose service she is given, but not without doubts, anguish and opposition. But in the end, his grace is the stronger.

This work willed by God, this precious jewel with which he wished to adorn Teresa, and in her the whole Church (I refer to the famous vision narrated in her Life 33, 14), is now placed in our hands. What will we do with it? What will be our response to the appeal that reaches us from the autobiographical pages of our Holy Mother? We speak so much today about the crisis of religious life, about its difficulties – especially in the West – from the lack of vocations to the ageing of communities, but also and even more

about a general loss of motivation and a crisis of identity. I do not wish to minimize these problems which we experience daily, and which those called to the service of authority experience all the more. Without doubt, the crisis that we are living through is epochal and we will not be able to come out of it without new insights and profound changes.

But the question that to me seems essential is this: where can these new insights come from? Where can we get the strength to make the changes that the times require? I have observed during this period of economic crisis that a thought of Albert Einstein written in the aftermath of the great crisis of 1929 is winning a lot of followers. It is quoted in an innumerable number of web sites and blogs; it was also quoted in a letter sent to me by one of our sisters. Einstein wrote in 1935:

A crisis can be a real blessing to any person, to any nation, for all crises bring progress. Creativity is born from anguish, just like the day is born from the dark night. It's in crisis that invention is born, as well as discoveries, and big strategies. Who overcomes crisis, overcomes himself, without getting overcome. Who blames his failure to a crisis neglects his own talent, and is more respectful to problems than to solutions. Incompetence is the true crisis.

The greatest inconvenience of people and nations is the laziness with which they attempt to find the solutions to their problems. There's no challenge without a crisis. Without challenges, life becomes a routine, a slow agony. There's no merit without crisis. It's in the crisis where we can show the very best in us. Without crisis, any wind becomes a tender touch. To speak about a crisis is to promote it. Not to speak about it is to exalt conformism. Let us work hard instead. Let us stop, once and for all, the menacing crisis that represents the tragedy of not being willing to overcome it.

These are certainly stimulating and hopeful words that invite us to grow and give of our best, without allowing ourselves to be overcome by fear or discouragement. It is possible that for the economy and for politics these words find their mark and indicate the way out of the crisis. Notwithstanding all of this, it seems to me that we cannot say the same in regard to the crisis in religious life and in the spiritual life. It is good to make an appeal to the human will and intelligence, to request and elaborate efficacious projects and to develop a creativity that makes us capable of confronting the present challenges, all of which makes sense and is indisputably reasonable. However, we need to realize that our own projects are not going to save us. We need to drink from a fount of living water that wells up from a more profound vein, where the human person does not make anything happen but allows it to happen, does not choose but accepts being chosen, where one's own wisdom and power are not experienced but rather one's foolishness and weakness. The way out is not found in seeking to turn back to the situation that preceded the crisis, nor in propelling oneself forward, but by entering deeply into the present crisis, descending to its very roots, to that level where things can be seen differently, where agitation and fear are put to rest and the prayer of the poor begins to rise up, more pure, more humble and more true. From here we can take on again the journey.

This downward way that Teresa has traveled and continued to travel to the very last day of her life, the way of the Paschal Mystery, where one can enter only after experiencing that all the other ways are blind alleys or tracks that get lost in nothingness. It is a

journey that has prayer as a staff and forgetfulness of self as a knapsack, and thus resembles the journey of the disciples of Jesus, called to leave everything and follow him in whom they believe and from whom they hope for everything. It is a journey in which – as Bl. John Henry Newman wrote in his wonderful poem “The Pillar of the Cloud” – one does not wish to see the distant scene, but only that small step which we are called to take every day.

It is perhaps “the little that depends on us”, that Teresa chose to fulfill at the time she became aware of the gravity of the situation that the Church and the world were in and of the mission that the Lord was entrusting to her. I know that it may truly seem very little, but it is precisely from the small and the little, not to mention the nothing, that God creates everything. We have a duty to be witnesses to this, with Teresa and like Teresa to set out from that far distant, yet very near 24th August 1562.

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