

through the year with Saint Teresa of Avila

a little daily wisdom

through the year with Saint Teresa of Avila
a little daily wisdom

Saint Teresa of Avila

Compiled and modernized by
Bernard Bangley



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

A Little Daily Wisdom: Through the Year with St. Teresa of Avila

2011 First Printing

Copyright © 2011 by Bernard Bangley

ISBN 978-1-55725-697-3

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version*, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the *National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America*. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations designated TEV are from the Today's English Version, © 1966, 1971, 1976 by American Bible Society, and are used by permission.

Scripture quotations designated kjv are from the Authorized King James Version of the Holy Bible.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Teresa, of Avila, Saint, 1515-1582.

[Selections. English. 2011]

A little daily wisdom : through the year with Saint Teresa of Avila / compiled and modernized by Bernard Bangley.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-55725-697-3

1. Devotional calendars--Catholic Church. 2. Catholic Church--Prayers and devotions. I. Bangley, Bernard, 1935- II. Title.

BX2179.T3E5 2011

242'.2--dc22

2010040660

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

introduction

St. Teresa of Avila's life and writing destroy every notion that there are two kinds of religious personalities: active and contemplative. The story of Mary and Martha recorded in Luke 10:38–42, so beloved by generations of Christians, tends to make us think that the two patterns of behavior are clear opposites and mutually exclusive. The Christian is either a Martha, busy with the dishes, or a Mary, conversing with Jesus. Such a simple distinction is simply not true—not even for Mary and Martha. Most of us combine the characteristics of both, emphasizing one or the other as circumstances dictate or allow. Teresa is an outstanding example of a thorough blending of both.

Baptized in 1515 in Avila, Spain, as Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada, she was one of ten children in an affluent family. People considered Teresa a beautiful girl with a pleasant disposition. Her mother, Beatriz, died when Teresa was a teenager. Her father turned her care over to Augustinian nuns in 1531. At the age of twenty-one, without her father's approval, she fulfilled a personal dream and became a Carmelite nun in her hometown.

As a nun Teresa influenced the history and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in significant ways. She led her Carmelite

order toward a stricter observance and ultimately founded fourteen monasteries. Her spirit of reform reached out through the cooperation of her friend Juan de la Cruz, known to us as St. John of the Cross, to change the manner of living for male Carmelites. The reformers used the terms *calced* and *discalced* (with shoes or without, i.e., barefoot) to denote the difference of humility they had brought about in their religious communities, which followed Teresa's practice of poverty and renunciation.

Plagued with very poor health, Teresa somehow managed to attend to a multitude of administrative details. She directed the work of laborers the way a modern contractor hires and oversees employees. She dealt with royalty and with "city hall" diplomatically. She put in an exhausting day that began with worship at five in the morning and often kept her at her desk until well past midnight.

It is this same busy, creative, determined administrator who is also one of the greatest contemplative spirits in history. While signing contracts or confuting her critics, she was aware that she was living her life in the presence of God. Teresa would not have us understand that in a figurative sense. She had a personal experience of mystical union with God through a remarkable prayer life that dominated her existence. She died in 1582 at the age of sixty-seven. Pope Gregory XV canonized her in 1622, and in 1970

she became, with St. Catherine of Siena, the first female Doctor of the Church.

Teresa wrote enduring books on prayer and Christian living. Her work will always be in print in many languages, and new versions continue to appear. The present book is unique because it is the first attempt to give an interested reader a broad exposure to the vast expanse of Teresian literature. If all you read of Teresa are the several famous passages relating her mystical experiences, you will gain a distorted notion of her. By spending a few moments each day for a full year with this volume, you will gain a solid familiarity with every aspect of Teresa's life and thought. I have gently paraphrased selections from the entire collection of her work into contemporary English.

Sometimes Teresa's writing becomes difficult as she attempts to express the inexpressible. She knows *what* she wants to say, but she has trouble determining *how* to say it. She fills many pages with brief prayers and expressions of exasperation. Teresa says there are no words available to describe her rapturous experiences. She is correct, but she attempts it anyway. Paraphrasing these breathless passages into contemporary English presents a considerable challenge, with a risk of distorting her ideas. Using extreme care, in a few places I have compressed an entire page into a single sentence. But ultimately I hope that this volume will be a springboard for

you to discover the pleasure of reading one of the complete editions of Teresa's works.

Some of Teresa's terminology may seem strange to today's reader. I have often translated her use of a word into more familiar terms, but for accuracy a few examples of her specific terms remain. Five such words require explanation:

- **HIS MAJESTY:** This is one of Teresa's favorite nicknames for God. It reflects her reverent perception of the royalty and power of the divine. As closely as she lived with God, her manner of expression never became too familiar. She always exhibits the utmost courtesy and respect. She knows God rules and trusts him to get things done.
- **PERFECTION:** Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Scholars tell us the Greek word for perfection used here is in the future tense, implying the moral obligation of a correct attitude rather than perfect conduct of life. Perfection is integrity in our relationship with God. Moral perfection is not something we can attain here on earth. Teresa is not talking about legalism or an abstract ideal. Perfection, for her, is wholeheartedly serving God. The more we love God and neighbor, the more perfect we become.

- **RECOLLECTION:** In our time, this word refers to memory. When someone says, “I recollect,” it is a matter of recalling something almost forgotten. In classic Christian spirituality, recollection refers to a tranquil mind undisturbed by wandering thoughts. A prayer of recollection turns our vision inward, away from externalities. Teresa thinks of recollection as the entrance to the interior life and an indicator that one’s soul is prepared to receive.
- **VISITATOR:** This term refers to a representative of the pope who formally visited and inquired about conditions in a religious community. Personal interviews with superiors and members uncovered both joys and concerns, opening a way for support and correction.
- **WORLD:** Teresa exhibits a fondness for the natural world, often making strong points by mentioning birds, insects, flowers, springs, and the like. When she makes disparaging comments about the “world” she is not thinking of God’s creation. Her reference is to the secular as opposed to the religious. She is expressing a disdain for material possessions and the aggressive and immoral means people use to obtain them.

I have selected and arranged material from Teresa's writings with no attempt at chronological order. Her style of writing is naturally conversational. Please keep in mind throughout this book that the liveliness in these pages is not the result of my translation.

The works included are described below, with my abbreviated title that identifies the source of each individual entry.

- **AUTOBIOGRAPHY:** Teresa penned the story of her life under orders to do so, directed by her confessor, sometime before 1567. The task was an unwelcomed chore during the shaky times of the Spanish Inquisition. She understood that some of her comments could cause her trouble. She never sought this kind of exposure for her personal struggle with God and the world. Somehow, she managed to avoid the pitfalls while delivering a rare record of spiritual progress. In her attempt to preserve her anonymity, Teresa never referred to herself by name (she typically used other identifiers such as “someone I know”) and asked her confessor to respect her personal privacy if he decided to publish the work. Cited as *LIFE*.
- **THE WAY OF PERFECTION:** A practical guide to serious prayer by one who has practiced it, Teresa's most easily read book contains down-to-earth instruction for discovering a personal

experience of the divine. This book was also written before 1567. Cited as *WAY*.

- *THE INTERIOR CASTLE*: Teresa's classic masterpiece develops in an orderly manner through seven stages, or levels. This is the ultimate guidebook for a contemplative life, written in 1577. Because her sequence of thought is important, I have confined most of my selections from this work to the autumn months, with a sprinkling of her digressive comments scattered throughout the year. Cited as *CASTLE*.
- *THE BOOK OF FOUNDATIONS*, 1573: Written to enlarge the story Teresa reports in her autobiography, including the history of the monasteries she had founded. Rather than provide only dry details, she fills it with spiritual advice, anecdotes, and practical lessons. Cited as *FOUNDATIONS*.
- *THE CONSTITUTIONS*, 1563: Whereas Teresa's other writings reveal a remarkable ability to nurture spirituality in a world filled with distractions and conflict, this work is an example of her administrative skills. She understands human nature and knows how to make reasonable rules to govern life together. Cited as *CONSTITUTIONS*.

- **ON MAKING THE VISITATION, 1576:** A brief treatise instructing papal “visitors” how to turn a formal routine into something valuable for each religious community. As usual, Teresa displays common sense and profound insight into the dynamics of convent life. Cited as **VISITATION**.
- **LETTERS:** Teresa wrote thousands of letters, often staying up until the wee hours of the morning. Those who respected the value of her correspondence collected more than 400 letters and fragments. Some are simply business but most communicate with friends conversationally and many contain spiritual insight. Teresa had to be circumspect when preparing books for publication because she knew her superiors would need to review and approve them. She is far more relaxed in her correspondence. Many rarely seen examples of her one-on-one spiritual instruction are included in this book. In her letters we can also discover that Teresa was as subject to ecclesiastical politics and personal power struggles as are modern church leaders. Many of her contemporaries did not treat her as a saint. Cited as **LETTER TO [PERSON, YEAR]**.
- **POETRY:** Examples of Teresa’s poetry are also presented here. Although not as talented a poet as her spiritual partner, John

of the Cross, Teresa wrote charming poems to share with her friends and acquaintances. She even heard nuns set some of her lines to music. Cited as [TITLE OF POEM].

Teresa was a “people person,” with an unusually large number of friends, correspondents, and business acquaintances. Some of these individuals interacted dramatically with Teresa and with one another. The people most central to her life and correspondence are briefly described below.

- JUAN DE LA CRUZ, known more widely as St. John of the Cross: Author of *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, and *Spiritual Canticle*, a gifted Spanish poet, and the first male disalced Carmelite. Jailed and punished because of his efforts at religious reform, Juan worked closely with Teresa. Together they produced the apex of Spanish mystical literature.
- JERÓNIMO GRACIÁN: A disalced Carmelite friar considered by Teresa to be one of the best. Unusually well educated before becoming a priest, Gracián became acquainted with Teresa through her *Constitutions*. They met in 1575 and immediately became spiritual allies; she often addressed him

as “my padre.” Extremely helpful in Teresa’s work, he suffered with her through tough and dangerous times, spending two agonizing years chained in a dark dungeon.

- **LORENZO DE CEPEDA:** Teresa’s closest brother, who supported her financially and ultimately sought her spiritual direction. At nineteen he received serious wounds while fighting for Charles V in the Americas. In his final years he lived an almost monastic life on a farm near Avila.
- **JUANA DE AHUMADA:** Teresa’s youngest sister. When their father died, Teresa assumed care of Juana for nine years.
- **MARÍA BAUTISTA:** Teresa’s cousin and close friend who became the prioress of the monastery founded at Valladolid.
- **BALTASAR ALVAREZ:** Teresa’s confessor when he was a newly ordained young priest. Teresa was beginning to have mystical experiences that confused Alvarez. She clearly perceived his discomfort. He lacked political connections and offered little assistance with her church and community conflicts. Still, she considered him a dear friend.

- TEUTONIO DE BRAGANZA: A Jesuit priest who quit after a disagreement with the founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius of Loyola. The son of the Duke of Braganza, he printed Teresa's *Way of Perfection* at his own expense.
- ISABEL DE JESÚS: Younger sister of Jerónimo Gracián, who entered the convent at Toledo when she was seven years old and became a nun at the age of sixteen. Teresa spoke of her affectionately and often. Blind during the final eighteen years of her life, Isabel lived until she was seventy-one.

a little daily wisdom

*“We pray, not for our own pleasure and entertainment, but to
find the strength to serve God.”*

—ST. TERESA OF AVILA

january

1

•

At the beginning of the spiritual life it is a common temptation for us to want everyone else to be extremely spiritual. It is not wrong to want this, but it may not be right to try to make it happen. If we do, it is essential that we exercise discretion and give no impression that we are setting ourselves up as great teachers.

I discovered this for myself. When I attempted to induce others to pray, they would listen to what I had to say. When they then observed that I, the great practitioner of prayer, lacked certain virtues this would lead them astray. My actions were not compatible with my words. Across many years only three individuals have gained anything of value from what I have said to them.

We are also tempted to allow the sins and failings of others to distress us. We try to fix things. This excites us so much that it keeps us from praying. Worst of all,

we trick ourselves into believing we are doing the Lord's work.

Try to focus on the best in others and the worst in ourselves. This will blind us to their defects. Eventually, we may even think of them as better than ourselves.

—LIFE

january 2

This is my early method of prayer. In the beginning I could not reflect expansively with my mind. I tried to imagine Christ within me. I had many simple thoughts of this kind.

The scene of Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane brought me much comfort. I tried to be his companion there. I attempted to imagine his sweat and agony in that place. I wanted to wipe the sweat from his brow, but I never allowed myself to do it. My sins seemed so serious to me.

I stayed with Christ in the garden as long as I could, but many distractions tormented me.

—LIFE