

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

THE RELEVANCE OF ST. TERESA OF AVILA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Imagine a women's final four like no other. This is heaven's dream team - God's team. No one can ever outdo God. The selections would be easy. They would include Mary, the Mother of Jesus ([picture](#)), and the three women Doctors of the church – St. Teresa of Avila ([picture](#)), St. Therese ([picture](#)) and St. Catherine of Siena. If St. Teresa had a nickname, it would be the “Doctor of Prayer.”

Theology anthropologist Susan Zuger writes in her article, “*A Theology of Grace in St. Teresa of Avila's Castle,*” that St. Teresa lived as an only child in Spain in the sixteenth century. She lived at the time of Martin Luther's reformation. John Calvin was spreading his own flavor of Protestantism in France. Spain was on the verge becoming the richest nation in the world. The King and Queen of Spain had enormous unchecked power.

Today, our country is the richest and President George Bush's Republican Party will end control of both houses of Congress this year. They enjoyed little to no oversight for six years.

The Catholic Church was under attack then and now. Christianity now numbers two billion - one third of the total population. One half is Catholic and the other half various forms of Protestantism. There are sixty four million Catholics in the United States. Half are believed to be practicing.

Popular television evangelist and Baptist preacher Dr. Charles Stanley espouses thirty life principles. He publishes and uses a teaching Bible with this very theme. All thirty are relevant to St. Teresa's teachings and most certainly describe her work. One can only wonder if St. Teresa had any influence on Dr. Stanley. Space does not allow all thirty principles to be written here, but it is worth mentioning just a few: “Obey God and

leave all the consequences to Him; God does not require us to understand His will, just obey it, even if it seems unreasonable; Fight all your battles on your knees and you win every time; Trusting God means looking beyond what we can see to what God sees; Listening to God is essential to walking with God; We stand tallest and strongest on our knees; Prayer is life's greatest time saver."¹

"The successful re-energizing of Catholics in the Chicago Archdiocese this year has been accomplished by copying what the evangelicals are doing. A good percentage of the people in the mega churches are former Catholics. Their success is attained by linking scripture with everyday problems."² St. Teresa was four hundred years ahead of her time.

In 1970 Pope Paul VI named St. Teresa as the first woman Doctor of the Church – a rather special and unique saint. There are a total of thirty-four Doctors in the Church today. At the time of the announcement Vatican II was only six years old.

Pope Benedict XVI recently issued "a challenge of prime importance for the whole world." In his recent book, "*Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*," the Holy Father is "deeply concerned about the cultural consequences of the collapse of faith and reason." Benedict XVI has been trying to remind the world "that societies and cultures are only as great as their spiritual aspirations."³ Cultures and societies compress their essential values and convictions in ideal human models.⁴

St. Teresa was and is prayer. Her love of Christ may be unequalled. She believed that there were three necessary steps to succeed in prayer. The first was to love one another, the second was a detachment from all created things and the third was humility. Humility built upon the others.

St. Teresa persevered in seeking understanding. She called it self-knowledge. For Teresa, humility and self-knowledge were one and the same. She is one who has not only been taught by the church, but teaches the church. Her warnings are just as relevant today for people in dysfunctional situations: do not overwork and exhaust yourselves even in good causes; make sure you get sufficient rest; keep healthy, eat well and observe proper hygiene.⁵

St. Teresa felt that if you did not understand yourself, someone else was going to do it for you. She was very big on differentiating thoughts from understanding. How you understood was crucial to her. Today, the opposite is true. For most, it is the thought that counts. Advertisers help bombard each and every one of us with what new age experts estimate to be sixty-five thousand thoughts in an eighty-six thousand second day. This fact does not count sleep.

The St. Teresa invitation to discover a more authentic self is what has intrigued scholars of psychology for several decades now. They have been quick to appreciate Teresa for her capacity to express internal experiences with a clarity and profundity that convey deep appreciation for the complexities of human psyche.⁶

St. Teresa's system of thought would go as far as her experiences, but not a step farther. She entered into a deep union with God at age fifty-seven and would enjoy this spiritual intimacy with Him until she died ten years later.

St. Teresa was a prolific writer. She is recognized and studied partly because of what was said in three of her books. They were intended for the nuns of her convents. It can easily be argued that her confessors commanded her and she dutifully obeyed. Her autobiography, "*The Life of St. Teresa of Avila by Herself*," was written when she was

forty-seven years old. The second, *"The Way of Perfection"* describing prayer life, was written at age fifty-one. Eleven years later she would write *"The Interior Castle,"* in which St. Teresa described your soul where Jesus lived. It was written at the height of the Spanish Inquisition. *"Life"* had been confiscated. Spain wanted to rid itself of Protestantism and become totally Catholic. It might be compared to the McCarthy era, when Senator Joe McCarthy was trying to rid our country of communists in the 1950's.

Deepak Chopra wrote a landmark "new age" book called *"Quantum Healing"* in 1990. An Endocrinologist by training, he asked rhetorical questions such as, "If the liver regenerates entirely in six weeks, why do you die of liver cancer in six months?" He gave the "whys" but not the "how." In 1992 Brandon Bays, a top trainer for motivational speaker Tony Robbins, was diagnosed with a basketball-sized tumor on her ovaries. She taught natural healing. If she went the traditional medical route, she would have to renounce everything she taught. Over six weeks, she figured out Chopra's "how" and the tumor was gone. She traveled across the entire world to find her cure. She believed negative memories became repressed and attached onto internal body parts. These muted cells then died and regenerated as dead cells. She figured out a way to lift those memories. The body would then naturally remove them. Bays wrote a book about it and called it *"The Journey."* She is transforming people, prisons and schools in Australia, South Africa and Great Britain. She attracts audiences of five thousand in Great Britain. Nothing is ever mentioned about God. When one really studies what she did, it is forgive and be forgiven. In the Catholic Church, it is called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The confessional is usually not too far from home. Where are the lines?

The castle St. Teresa writes about is filled with imagery. The castle is your soul. Imagine it as a crystal cathedral. It is vast, spacious and plentiful. It can be called heaven, purgatory or hell. You and you alone have the power to choose. Jesus Christ lives deep, deep inside you. Jesus resides in all of us. It happens through Baptism. The Holy Spirit becomes indwelled in us. We are one body – one body in Christ. So deep, hardly anyone gets to see, feel, touch, sense or witness Him. Like any crystal, it is in constant need of cleaning. Within this castle are seven mansions. They have many rooms. They are up and down and all around. There are infinite amounts, all shapes and sizes, a prism of crystal. A diamond is another way she describes it. What would be a setting is the exterior - your outer body. Truth has been found to be an excellent cleaning agent. Prayer is the actual machine that does the cleaning. Jesus' light shines ever so brightly at the core. Because of all the grime, which is a lack of self-knowledge, hardly any of it radiates outward. The cleaning process is much like the windshield on your car. You think it is clean until the sun shines in. It is harder with crystal prisms. It is even harder because it is inside you and you cannot see it. It takes enormous faith. Belief is a start. Never before has anyone seen light like this on earth before. Yet it is inside you. The more you cleaned, the closer you got to Jesus. Washing it with dirty agents such as lying, cheating and stealing will not work.

St. Teresa teaches a model of prayer that reinforces the habit of introspection. We seldom consider the precious things that can be found in a soul, or who dwells within it. It is a human – divine relationship.⁷

Can she be on the verge of helping people understand themselves better through the power of prayer and therefore God?

“What Teresa has done so brilliantly is to describe precisely how a person can indeed contact God through prayer.”⁸ St. Teresa teaches and uses many types and forms of prayer. One way she relates these forms of prayers is where you are within the mansions of the Interior Castle. In “*The Way of Perfection*,” she breaks down the seven petitions of the “Our Father” and describes it in great detail. Her prayer can be divided into four categories: mental, vocal, meditative and contemplative prayer. Her attitude toward prayer is one filled with attentiveness, affectivity, Christ-centeredness, contemplation and the importance of humility. Methods include vocal, meditative reading, use of images to focus, reflection and intuition, affective prayer, resolutions, and active recollection.⁹

Saints are role models. “For five centuries women have looked to Teresa of Avila as a role model for strong, outspoken, independent females of passionate convictions and lofty ideals made manifest. Her love for her neighbor, especially her nuns, was legendary; she lived Christ’s teaching on the path of the heart. Men and women alike continue to be dazzled by her brilliance, their hearts broken open by her compassion.”¹⁰

The baby boom generation, those born between the years of 1945 and 1964, are in the same age range as St. Teresa was when she enjoyed a real conversion before God at age 39. It did not matter that she had been a nun for almost twenty years. Within two short years she started to experience things she had never achieved in her first nineteen years of adult life. St. Teresa would enjoy the fruits of her life through what is now the oldest of that generation - - sixty-two years old. St. Teresa would establish more than fifteen foundations (monasteries) for both nuns and friars. One of those friars was St. John of the Cross, a man she met and taught when she was age fifty-three. It is

interesting to compare her life before and after. Her achievements were almost entirely in the second half, when she turned to Christ. Teresa's love and understanding of Jesus grew so much during that twenty-year period. "Her waverings offers us hope and encouragement in our ambivalence and struggle to live the Christian life."¹¹

We are a nation of fractured families. One in two marriages end in divorce. We are a nation searching for answers. Tony Robbins wrote a best selling book in the early nineties that is still widely distributed entitled, "*Awaken the Giant Within*." But it was not about Jesus Christ residing inside of us. We are a nation of pride, not humility. Ego is worn like a badge of honor. The cosmetic counters are jammed with people trying the latest fad in order to look beautiful. We are fixated on the outside, not the inside.

St. Teresa wrote four hundred years ago to "strive yourself to practice with great perfection the virtue opposite the fault that appears in the other person."¹² Ann Naffziger writes in the "*Way of Perfection for Lay Communities*" how she was asked, "what part was she contributing to the difficulties of a relationship" she was having. This question can be asked in any relationship. It was suggested that "she stop focusing on her housemates' faults and look instead at her own faults that were exacerbating the situation." Further, she was asked, "what could I do to be accepting and at peace even if the person wasn't able to change in their ways."¹³

"*Think and Grow Rich*," is a book by Napoleon Hill written in 1920. It is recognized as one of the top selling books of all time. "*The Bible*" is the all-time best seller. John Rockefeller invited Hill to study his robber baron friends Andrew Carnegie, JP Morgan, Henry Ford, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and John Jacob Astor. He spent twenty years studying them and became very rich. He found seven common traits. The most

compelling was lying to your sub-conscious. The premise was that it is so dark and deep it does not know truth from lies. You could convince it of anything.

St. Teresa would have you look at it differently. “Repeated experiences convince the soul that God, through God’s loving activity, is somehow bound up in human relativity and can be known intimately. Enter into our hearts, as the seat of God in humanity, to seek the wisdom that is contained there. Cultivate, purify, and refine the desires of our hearts, allowing them to inform how we understand reality.”¹⁴

On the evening of Thanksgiving 2006 people were once again forming huge lines at way too many stores. They planned to take advantage of sales stores advertised using thick circulars stuffed in newspapers the day before. Stores were to open at 5:00AM the next morning. It did not matter that it rained all night. Advertisers had figured out a way to get large amounts of people to panic and buy goods they really did not need. People rushed doors. The previous week Sony Play Station unveiled their newest model. Advertisers have made people think standing in line is acceptable behavior. Only this time, it formed three days earlier. Tempers flared and violence occurred. Satan must have been quite pleased with himself.

St. Teresa advises that we “bear in mind continually how all is vanity and how quickly everything comes to an end.” Teresa’s belief was to “remove our attachment to trivia and center it on what will never end.”¹⁵ Cultivate a healthy detachment from the things of this world.¹⁶

Is Teresa relevant for the twenty-first century? A resounding yes!

¹ See Dr Charles Stanley, *Life Principles Bible*, (Nelson Bibles, Nov 2005)

² See Gretchen Ruethling, “Religion Journal; Billy Graham is the Role Model; Catholicism is the Creed,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2006

³ Talk given by George Weigel, senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC on 11/20/06 at UN Dag Hammarskjold Library Auditorium; See Mary Ann Poust, *Catholic New York*, 11/23/06, page 1

⁴ Joseph F Chorpenning, “Reading St Teresa of Avila’s Life Today,”
<http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/843631chorpenning.html>, Fall 1984, page 5

⁵ See Greg Burke, OCD, “A Homily for the Feast of St Teresa,”
<http://www.Carmelite.com/saints/teresa03.shtml>, October 15, 2002

⁶ Gillian T W Ahlgren, *Entering Teresa’s of Avila’s Interior Castle* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), page 127

⁷ Ibid, page 123

⁸ Peter Thomas Rohrbach, *Conversation With Christ: The Teaching of St Teresa of Avila about Personal Prayer* (Rockford, Ill: Tan Publishers, 1980), preface

⁹ Sam Anthony Morello, OCD, *Lectio Divina: and the Practice of Teresian Prayer* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications (pamphlet), 1995), page 19

¹⁰ See Mirabai Starr, “The Interior Castle: St Teresa of Avila,”
<http://mirabaistarr.com/interior.html>, no date, on website, extracted from introduction

¹¹ See note 8, page 9

¹² Inspired and taken from note 13, translation by Allison Peers, *The Interior Castle*, (New York, NY: An Image Book - Doubleday: 1964, 2004), Chapter 7, paragraph 7, page 54

¹³ Ann Naffziger, “The Way of Perfection for Lay Communities,” *LookSmart for Spiritual Life*
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3885/is_2005504/ai_n13498846, Spring
2005, page 2

¹⁴ See note 6, page 130

¹⁵ See note 12, Chapter 10, paragraph 2, page 66

¹⁶ See note 13, page 3

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<http://mirabaistarr.com/interiorlatimes.html>, Summer 2003

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Robert B. Reich, the widely respected and bestselling author of *The Next American Frontier* and *The Resurgent Liberal*, defines the real challenge facing the United States in the 21st century in this trail-blazing book. Original, readable, and vastly informed, *The Work of Nations* is certain to set a standard for the next generation of policy-makers. St. Teresa of Ávila suffered ill health for many years of her life. Despite her frailty, she made numerous exhausting journeys to establish and reform convents across Spain. She was fatally stricken en route to Ávila from Burgos at the age of 67. Her reform required utter withdrawal so that the nuns could meditate on divine law and, through a prayerful life of penance, exercise what she termed "our vocation of reparation" for the sins of humankind. In 1562, with Pope Pius IV's authorization, she opened the first convent (St. Joseph's) of the Carmelite Reform. A storm of hostility came from municipal and religious personages, especially because the convent existed without endowment, but she staunchly insisted on poverty and subsistence only through public alms.