

## **ST. TERESA, THE FIRST LEGISLATOR OF OUR CONSTITUTIONS**

*(by Sister Teresa Magdalene of the Passion, ocd)*

Good morning brothers and sisters in Christ,

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak a little on our Holy Mother St. Teresa, celebrating her 500th birthday this year. Doing what I am now doing here is not what I normally do best, but Fr. Dominic said obedience works miracles. And so, relying on God's help I hope this talk will be a good use of our time and stir us to a greater love and appreciation of our Holy Mother for all that she has done for us. I hope we can imitate her virtues to be true sons and daughters of the Church, especially in this day and age when there is so much confusion and so many challenges.

Our Holy Mother's contribution to the spiritual literature is well recognized. As a mother foundress, she also stands out for her practicality and talents in maintaining the highest degree of spiritual life in the midst of everyday conflicts. One of her accomplishments which reveal much of her virtues is in her talents and genius in her work as being the first legislator of her new Carmels.

There are three reasons why I chose this topic:

1. As a response to our Order's invitation to us all to spend the next 6 years in re-reading our Constitutions after having read her writings during the past 6 years, as a way to begin the walk which our Holy Mother invited us to make before she died.
2. Before our Holy Mother died, with great tenderness, she admonished her daughters to observe the Rule and Constitutions faithfully and that no miracle would be needed for them to be canonized.
3. In our Solemn Profession or Promises, we vow to live a life according to our Rule and Constitutions.

So what are these Constitutions that Teresa was referring to? How did they come about?

What are our Constitutions? Our Constitutions are a legal codex that complements our Rule to guide and govern our life in Carmel. Today each branch in our Order has its own Constitutions. But what were the first Constitutions like and who wrote them? The answer is that our Holy Mother herself wrote them.

### **I. Historical Facts**

Was our Holy Mother St. Teresa a reformer or a foundress? This has been a controversy for a very long time. Many recognize Teresa as a reformer of Carmel. In truth, she is both and she is more a foundress of our new religious order than as a reformer. She did not break away from the spirit and traditions of Carmel. Yet, the Holy Spirit gave her a creative spirit to found new Carmels with a new way of life. That is why it is more fitting for us to call ourselves Teresian Carmelites than Discalced, meaning "Reformed" Carmelites.

As the foundress, it was only proper that Teresa was the first legislator of our Constitutions.

In fact, the historical facts of how our Holy Mother became the first legislator are very interesting.

Having lived in the Monastery of the Incarnation for 27 years with over 180 nuns and no strict enclosure, Teresa knew that if she stayed where she was it would be impossible for her to realize her desire for a deeper intimacy with Christ. With her companions they desired to live a more penitential life imitating the first hermits on Mount Carmel. Meanwhile, in her mystical experiences, our Lord commanded her to make a foundation dedicated to St. Joseph.

Teresa sought the advice of her confessor and he gave her very practical advice; to appeal to the Holy See for the foundation of such a house. Without any reference to the Provincial or the Carmelite nuns, this simple request was made by Teresa's friend Dona Guiomar de Ulloa for she was going to pay for the new house on behalf of the nuns. So Teresa's friend made the application to the Holy See in her own name and the request was granted, and the Prioress-to-be was given the power to draw up their Constitutions. It was so amazing that this request was simply handled as part of the ordinary work of the congregation and yet it was destined to have such an unsuspected consequence.

When the Vatican's secret archive was opened, the actual document of her simple request and the Holy See's reply came to light. Teresa's friend wrote: "I, Dona Guiomar de Ulloa, and some good Christians, wish to provide for the foundation of a monastery of strict enclosure where the sisters may live according to their own vocation and I ask you for this permission."

Amazingly, the Holy See's response was a wide permission. It stated, "You have requested ... we answer everything according to your request .... And we hereby give the Prioress-to-be ... and the whole community, power to draw up their own Constitutions, provided that they are honest and not contrary to Canon Law, as well as giving the right to correct or abrogate them and to write new ones. And as nunc pro tunc (now for then), we approve them."

So with this pontifical brief dated February 7, 1562, Teresa was authorized to organize the community and make statutes that would rule it.

## **II. The Three Stages of Development**

Teresa's Constitutions can be seen as being developed in three stages: 1) when the first Carmel of St. Joseph was founded; 2) when the other sixteen Carmels were founded; and 3) when towards the end of her life Teresa submitted the final draft for the definitive Constitutions.

Basically the Teresa's Constitutions evolved as she matured in her spiritual life and gained more and more lived experiences in her new communities.

1) The First Stage - The Primitive Constitutions of St. Teresa of Jesus for the Discalced Nuns (1567-1568). The Constitutions for the first Carmel of St. Joseph were very short, not

much longer than the Primitive Rule. They were like a set of simple house statutes, like the horarium, giving an outline of a day in Carmel. She drew them up to help the nuns to observe the Rule with greater perfection. They were a juridical synthesis of her founding spirit expressing what she and her first daughters lived. In the preliminary form, even though not necessary, Teresa received the early approval of the Prior General in 1567. She continued to elaborate on them and they evolved over time as we shall see as she founded more new communities.

2) The Second Stage - After 1567, the spread of Teresa's monasteries and the decrees of the Council of Trent made it necessary for her to update and perfect her Constitutions.

Question: Why such a rapid spread and success of Teresa's charism? Where did she get all these nuns to fill up those new monasteries? I remember some nuns of our days asking this question during our Association meeting. The main reason why her new charism was so attractive was because it was different. It was a change from the religious life at her time that was overloaded with ceremonies and external practices that smothered the people's true spirituality. Her charism responded to a need for a spiritual life that placed more emphasis on inwardness. It was a more simple life in keeping with the Gospel and the Fathers of the Church. The new things she introduced in her Constitutions proved that she possessed a very rich formula for religious life. She succeeded in combining the quest for union with God and a life of prayer to the service of the Church with a profound humanity which proves to effectively lead souls to maturity and to true sanctity.

Another question. Why the need for updated and complete Constitutions with more foundations?

It is because –

- i. Her first foundation was made under the bishop but the rest of them were founded under the Order, so there was a need to have her Constitutions sanctioned by the Father General.
- ii. There were variations in the new communities in matters relating to income, poverty and observance. Teresa insisted on unity and consistency of life in all her Carmels.
- iii. Towards the end of 1569, two years after she began founding new communities, despite her vigilance, Apostolic Visitators already began to tamper with her Constitutions and commanded certain "acts" on the communities. These acts modified and overburdened their life. Teresa always preferred a more simple form of legislation which was more stable and moderate. She did not like the authoritarian type of intrusion from outsiders who did not understand the community life she meant to live.
- iv. Teresa also prescribed each Carmel to have a copy of the Constitutions. They should be read once a week. Each sister should know them by heart and have a copy of them in their cell. As such, with the increased in the number of copies, there were found more variations and even contradictory statements. These variations were either from the copyist's errors or per the prioress's decision to modify the Constitutions.

Hence, as the number of communities grew, Teresa was anxious to have a complete codification of her Constitutions so that everything would be fixed and were not to be tampered with.

These second Constitutions doubled the length of her former text. The most important part she added was the detailed description of the different offices in the community. They were important sketches of community life and the type of sisterly friendship Teresa desired for her new communities. The other major addition was a large section of penal code, copied word for word, from the old Constitutions as demanded by a jurist. Since the original Constitutions dealt mainly with community life, the added penal code broke the symmetry, moderation and simplicity of the original text.

Our Holy Mother received the official approval of these updated Constitutions from her Father Provincial and Father General. Teresa used this text for the foundation of the friars who copied and modified the language from feminine to masculine for the male branch. This was also the same text she gave to Fr. Gracian for the Chapter of Alcala. From it came the definitive Constitutions of Alcala, solemnly promulgated when the Teresian Carmelite Order was being erected.

3) The Third Stage - Constitutions of the Discalced Nuns of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, approved in 1581 at the Provincial Chapter of Alcala. It was in the first Provincial Chapter of our new Order in Alcala that Teresa's Constitutions were finally established. Over the 19 years after Teresa founded her first community, her Constitutions finally came to their final and mature state. How she had longed for this day to come!

After the great tribulations between the Calced and Discalced Carmelites, finally on June 22, 1580, the Papal Brief "Pie Considerationie" came and erected the separate Province for the new Carmels of St. Teresa. It allowed the Chapter of Alcala to make, change and rewrite whatever statutes and ordinances were necessary for the good of the Province. Teresa greatly desired that her Constitutions be given the official sanction in this Chapter, so that they would be authorized and fixed so that no one in the future would be able to meddle with them.

Teresa entrusted this task of revising and restructuring her Constitutions to Fr. Gracian. He knew well the law and the mind of the Mother Foundress and the life of the nuns. Months before the Chapter, there was frequent correspondence between them for the preparation of the final Constitutions. All the communities were asked to send their request to the Chapter and these requests were all reviewed and annotated by Mother Teresa before they were sent to Fr. Gracian. Up to the evening before the Chapter, she sent him a series of requirements and suggestions to explain, perfect and modify her Constitutions. Meanwhile she remained at a distance in the background.

The Chapter, in fact, spent very little time on both the friars' and the nuns' Constitutions. In only three days' time, both Constitutions were published. There was hardly enough time to prepare for the friars' Constitutions for they had to be drawn up almost in their entirety.

For the nuns' Constitutions, only a few small changes were made. Fr. Gracian incorporated nearly all the suggestions of Mother Teresa. He restructured the text and gave a new order to our

Holy Mother's spontaneous style. He also added indispensable points like the election of the Prioress.

This definitive text was solemnly promulgated on March 13, 1581 and was published at the end of the same year. It finally acquired the juridical formality but at the expense of the simplicity and freshness of the original Teresian text.

It is very interesting to note that these definitive Constitutions actually failed to mention our Mother Foundress' name and all her work on the early drafts. This was due to the juridical and anti-feminine mentality of her time and of those men who thought that it was too much to have a woman as their foundress and they thought that the nuns could only share in the perfection of the friars. To make matters worse, there was also a distortion of historical facts. In both the prologue and epilogue, authors other than Teresa were mentioned and totally excluded our Mother Teresa's authority. Fr. Gracian explicitly stated in the introductory letter of the Constitutions that he himself with Father General Rubeo and the Apostolic Visitor Pedro Hernandez were the authors of the Constitutions of Alcala. These errors however did not bother our Saint at all and she rejoiced over its approval. She asked Fr. Gracian to have them published as soon as possible, to avoid any other intervention and to assure their future after her death. How admirable was her humility and obedience to her Superiors!!!

It is worthy to note that all her life Teresa felt a great sense of responsibility with regard to the Constitutions of her Carmels. Yet, as the number of her communities grew, and the new Discalced Carmelite family was being constituted into a new religious Order, her legislative power continued to diminish. In great humility, she stayed in the background while yet remaining ever vigilant and active to the very end.

### **III. The Three References for Drafting the Teresian Constitutions**

We can identify three main references that Teresa used to draft her Constitutions: 1) the "old" Constitutions at the Monastery of Incarnation 2) her own religious life experience and 3) The Primitive Rule. Teresa also looked into the Constitutions of the other religious communities, like the Poor Clares, that were undergoing renewal.

1) The "old" Constitutions at the Incarnation - At the Incarnation, Teresa's formation included the study of the Primitive Rule, the Constitutions in effect at her time and all the traditions of Carmel regarding the spirit of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Elijah and those first hermits living in Mount Carmel. She loved the Carmelite traditions and had no desire to break away from them.

The "old" Constitutions that Teresa read and re-read with great interest were in fact a Spanish adaptation of the French Constitutions that were written by Blessed John Soreth. He was the Carmelite General from 1451 to 1471. He founded the female branch of the Carmelite Order in France in 1462. He adapted the friars' Constitutions for the nuns. In the monasteries he founded, they had a uniform legislation which revealed fully developed monastic structures. However he had little or no influence on the developments in Spain where the monasteries of nuns were of very diverse origins. Most of them started as communities of devout lay women, as was the case for the Monastery of the Incarnation where Teresa lived for 27 years. So in Spain there was no

uniform legislation and observance and the monasteries were ruled by statutes that came from the Provincial and by Constitutions adapted from the French Carmels.

Teresa basically used the “old” Constitutions as a point of reference. She did not adapt the old Constitutions to her new Carmels but preferred to write her own Constitutions from the beginning to the end. She deliberately abandoned the old way of life for a new way of life. The content of the two Constitutions was very different. Her Constitutions contained only the essentials, the norms that define and describe the new lifestyle. The old Constitutions were full of details and were four times the length of her new text. Teresa’s Constitutions were moderate and mild in tone but the old ones were very legalistic in nature.

2). Her Religious life experience in the Monastery of Incarnation - When our Holy Mother founded her first Carmel of St. Joseph, she had already reached the mature age of 47 and had 27 years of religious life experience at the Incarnation. Her heart had been enriched with a deep and abiding presence of God. She was eager to help others in their spiritual life. She had a creative plan of living which she believed would make it easy for anyone to reach that high degree of union with God which she herself reached after many years of searching and suffering.

Teresa rejected the idea of a large community, like at the Incarnation, with over 180 nuns. She preferred a small community of 13 to 20 nuns. It should be a small college of Christ as in a family setting. When deciding on the admission of a postulant, instead of having the required dowry, as per the custom of her day, she believed her personal quality was of greater importance. At Incarnation, the nuns were of different social classes. Teresa wanted all her sisters to be equal and have a familiar sisterly spirit among them. There was no strict enclosure at the Incarnation. In her new Carmels, Teresa was strong on strict enclosure to safeguard the contemplative life and to ensure union with God. Teresa was against the traditional role of the confessor who at times acted as Superior, intervening in the internal affairs of the community. She wanted the prioress to be solely responsible. Her new lifestyle was not so much a reform against abuses and reorganization, but one with a new apostolic sense, to serve the Church with prayer and sacrifice within the silence and solitude of the cloister. Her new Carmel was not only a reform, but a new creative work under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

3) The Primitive Rule - For the Rule of St. Albert, Teresa felt that it included all the fundamental elements of the Carmelite life. There was no need for anything to be added. But for her new form of life, to make those principles more easily understood and practiced, she clarified and codified certain aspects as guidance for the new lifestyle. In fact, Teresa re-interpreted the Rule in light of her new charism.

How did Teresa re-interpret our Rule in her Constitutions? Following the 12 main items of the Rule, we shall see how she did it.

i. Regarding the Prioress - Teresa stated that her duty is to take care of the spiritual and material needs of the sisters. She is their spiritual mother and teacher. She should be of service to the community in humility, setting a good example in everything, and make sure that all the sisters are treated equally. No one is to have any title of nobility.

- ii. The sisters are to maintain solitude and do their work in their cells.
- iii. Teresa laid down fasting, discipline and silence as the necessary conditions for genuine prayer. Self-indulgence and prayer are incompatible. However, she allowed a certain degree of flexibility between spiritual reading, meditation and mental prayer - the sisters can do whichever they find most helpful for recollection.
- iv. Teresa allowed visits in the parlour but stressed that they must not be a waste of time, and should be beneficial to both the sisters and the visitors. The visits should not interfere with their common life.
- v. For Eucharistic celebration - Teresa allowed time for thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion. For the Divine office, she recommended simple and natural style. For feasts, solemnities and Sundays, they can be celebrated with more solemnity.
- vi. Teresa was very keen on the Rule's prescriptions on poverty. In her book, *The Way of Perfection*, she enriched those requirements and she detailed them in her Constitutions. She specified that all should possess nothing except those whose duties require it. She saw the great importance of poverty and urged the prioress to be vigilant about it, and to prevent any attachment to anything, for the devil can gradually undermine poverty through little things. All are to be treated equal, except the elderly and those who have special needs. The community's livelihood should be dependent on alms.
- vii. Regarding the Rule's requirement of a weekly community meeting - Teresa wanted evangelical charity in correcting one another. She urged the sisters not to make excuses if they were accused even if they were innocent. Later, the ceremonial aspects of the Chapter of Faults, the penal code, from the old Constitutions were added.
- viii. Teresa preserved the austerity the Rule prescribed for food. However, she tempered it with a note of discretion and stressed the evangelical aspect of penance. She added details to teach her daughters to combine bodily penance to penance of the mind which is more beneficial.
- ix. On the Rule's prescription to seek perfection in charity, Teresa emphasized that in the community all should love one another as Jesus had commanded to imitate our Spouse who gave up His life for us. She stressed the importance of mutual love as opposed to particular friendships.
- x. Notwithstanding the long paragraph in our Rule on the universal law of work, Teresa added that these are of fundamental importance to her new lifestyle. The sisters are to live off alms and should avoid begging. They should live by the work of their hands and trust that the Lord would provide for their needs. The work should be done in solitude. There should be no common workroom as in the Incarnation, so that silence could be better observed. The work should not interfere with prayer and recollection. She said to let the body work, but let the soul and mind be at rest in the Lord.
- xi. Teresa kept the Rule's prescriptions on grand silence, the sanctification of the night which is an important element in the monastic tradition. However, she ordered it to be after the

Night Prayer so that the sisters could have recreation after supper. She abandoned the custom of reciting the Office of Readings at midnight, but kept it nocturnal, to be prayed before bedtime. She added two examinations of conscience, one at noon time and the other before Night Prayer.

xii. The Rule ends with an invitation to generosity and it assures one to be rewarded in the Lord's second coming. Teresa made this invitation her own but added that no one should take more discipline or other form of penance without permission.

Apart from these new interpretations to the Rule, Teresa also added:

1. A chapter on the reception of novices and the qualities of the candidates required of this new lifestyle. She stressed that those who are to be received should be prayerful, anxious to be perfect, despise the world, healthy and intelligent.

2. On the care of the sick, she said that they should be looked after with love, sweetness and devotion which our poverty permits. The sick should praise God if they were well taken care of, and not be desolate if they were not. She had the Prioress make sure that the sick have what they need, that they are visited, comforted and taken care of by a capable infirmarian. She also admonished the sick to be patient, not demanding, and obey the infirmarian.

3. Teresa gave great importance to the two periods of recreation each day, after the mid-day meal and supper. The sisters were to talk freely while working, with the behaviour of a good nun. No games were allowed for she believed God would enable some sisters to entertain them.

So these were the principles that Teresa used to effectively shape the lives of her first daughters, she herself being the living model. It was a harmonious synthesis of the Carmelite life, balancing time alone and with the community, time for prayer, work, rest and recreation. The novices very quickly assimilated to this new lifestyle and new communities spread at an amazing rate. It was recorded that it only took two weeks for new members to settle in community life.

#### **IV. The Subsequent Decline**

In spite of our Holy Mother's vigilance, it did not take long for her fears to become a reality. Her Constitutions soon suffered great alterations after her death. Within ten years following her death, three new editions were published.

1) The first one was the Anne of Jesus' edition. It was printed seven years after the Chapter at Alcala, in 1588. There was a great need for new printing because the copies of the Alcala Constitutions were not sufficient as the number of Carmels was growing. Anne of Jesus, Teresa's highly acclaimed daughter, received permission from the Father General Doria for the reprints. This first reprint left the text mostly intact. This was made possible only because all the convents petitioned the Chapter of Valladolid (1577) that the Teresian Constitutions be left intact. It even had an improvement that the new print included the solemn confirmation from the Papal Nuncio that Mother Teresa of Jesus, deceased, had composed the Constitutions under divine inspiration. As such the former silence on the Teresian origin of the text was to a large extent made good. It also stated that Teresa was the first legislator and foundress of our Order. It confirmed her text with authority to be binding in perpetuity and commanded the superiors of the Reform not to



change anything in any way but see to it that they be observed perfectly and inviolably. This edition was published in the same year as the completed works of St. Teresa.

2) The second edition came two years later in 1590. This time things changed completely. The Father General introduced changes to some major points, like the nuns' liberty in choosing their confessors and in the election of their Prioress. Rome conceded to his request and for the first time the Teresian Constitutions were seriously deformed. The Roman Commission revised her text and translated them into Latin to become the official text. The structure was changed and there were numerous small changes in the content. For example, on the topic of spiritual reading, the section was three times enlarged to include a long list of readings. Interestingly enough, the list did not even include the writings of our Holy Mother which was the best seller at that time!

3) The third edition came two years later in 1592. The Superior again wanted a revised edition. The Constitutions were reworked and again endorsed by the Holy See. From then on, the Teresian Constitutions were irreversibly different from their original text. This new edition took an extreme position to even deny that the Alcala Constitutions were originally from St. Teresa. They even rejected the Latin edition and completely remoulded them.

One may wonder if these alterations and the exclusion of our Holy Mother's role, authority and writings in these latter Constitutions, were due to the mentality of men in those days that our Holy Mother Teresa was merely one of the many reformers of Carmel, and not "the foundress" of our new Order.

Anyway, today we observe a set of Constitutions which have been approved by our Holy Mother Church, in whom is given the task of authentically interpreting the requirements of the Teresian charism. They have incorporated the laws set forth by St. Teresa in her Constitutions, except for modification made in accordance to the principles of the Second Vatican Council and the directives of Canon Law. The charism and lifestyle proposed by St. Teresa herself in her Constitutions and in her other writings remain unaltered in today's Constitutions.

It is interesting to note that though Teresa was a prolific writer her style in the Constitutions was simple. Among all her writings, her Constitutions were the first to be published. It was from Teresa's Constitutions for the nuns that the first friars adapted to make their own Constitutions, a change from the other religious orders that the nuns' constitutions were adapted from the male branch. Teresa's Constitutions contained her condensed experience which she progressively acquired during her religious and spiritual life. They were finally completed in 1581 when her experience was fully matured towards the end of her life. She summed up her evolution in a letter, "I am no longer the same in my way of governing: everything is being done with love." Teresa offered no commentary on the Rule and her Constitutions in any of her other writings.

To conclude, in this brief study of our Holy Mother's role as being the first legislator of our Constitutions, we see how conscious she was of their importance, and how with great care she worked on it. From her work in our Constitutions, we also see how great are her virtues as listed in the Apostolic Letter which Blessed Pope Paul VI issued to proclaim her as the first Woman Doctor of the Church. With great gratitude for all that she has done for us, we pray that she intercede for us to have her "prudence, evangelical simplicity, humility and perfect obedience to her superiors even in the most difficult things." We pray God that we shall be like her, with

“great eagerness for the spiritual good of others,” and how she “did not hesitate to sacrifice herself” while she “fully embraced the advice of the Church and was always in faithful and humble obedience to God’s ministers.” Our Holy Mother St. Teresa, pray for us!

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