

The Soul is the House of God - Teresa of Avila

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Abstract

'*Soul, you must seek yourself in Me*' is an unusual mystical poem by Teresa of Avila, through which she speaks to the soul from a divine perspective. God invites the soul to discover its true identity by taking a deep plunge into itself. Such soul-searching will reveal that we do not live out of ourselves, but out of God who gives us life and whose gaze brings us forth. We live entirely on grace. Our life comes forth from God's life. Our soul is the space where this realization can take place, so that we can enter into a relationship with the life that flows through us. Normally, we think that we find shelter within God. Teresa, however, turns this around and lets God say that we are his shelter. In the dynamic of love God expresses his deepest essence in us. The human being forms God's being!

Introduction

In 1577 Teresa of Avila (1515-1582, her Religious name was Teresa of Jesus) wrote one of her most beautiful poems.

*Soul, you must seek yourself in
Me And in yourself seek Me.*

*Alma, buscarte has en Mí,
Y a Mí buscarne has en ti.*

With such skill, soul,
Love could portray you in Me
That a painter well gifted
Could never show
So finely that image.

For love you were fashioned
Deep within me
Painted so beautiful, so fair;
If, my beloved, you should
lose yourself,
Soul, seek yourself in Me.

Well I know that you will
discover
Yourself portrayed in my
heart
So lifelike drawn
It will be a delight to behold
Yourself so well painted.

And should by chance you do
not know
Where to find Me,
Do not go here and there;
But if you wish to find Me,
In yourself seek Me.

Soul, since you are My room,
My house and dwelling,
If at any time,
Through your distracted
ways
I find the door tightly closed,

De tal suerte pudo amor,
Alma, en Mí te retratar,
Que ningún sabio pintor
Supiera con tal primor
Tal imagen estampar.

Fuiste por amor criada
Hermosa, bella, y así
En mis entrañas pintada,
Si te pierdes, mi amada,
Alma, buscarte has en Mí.

Que Yo sé que te hallarás
En mi pecho retratada
Y tan al vivo sacada,
Que si te ves te holgarás
Viéndote tan bien pintada.

Y si acaso no supieres
Donde me hallarás a Mí,
No andes de aquí para allí,
Sino, si hallarme quisieres
A Mí, buscarme has en ti.

Porque tú eres mi aposento,
Eres mi casa y morada,
Y así llamo en cualquier
tiempo,
Si hallo en tu pensamiento
Estar la puerta cerrada.

Outside yourself seek Me not,
To find Me it will be
Enough only to call Me
Then quickly will I come,
*And in yourself seek Me.*¹

Fuera de ti no hay
buscarme,
Porque para hallarme a Mí,
Bastará solo llamarme,
Que a ti iré sin tardarme
Y a Mí buscarme has en ti.

Like all mystical writers, Teresa wants to make us aware of the overwhelming love of God. Beatrice of Nazareth, for example, challenges us to let ourselves lost in Love (Minne) which is our origin and our final goal.¹ It is our deepest desire that leads us to who we truly are. We have a natural inclination to take the opposite path. In search of ourselves we buildup our 'ego'. We organize our own world and determine our own goals. In doing this, we are not aware that we are only scratching the surface of who we truly are. Teresa chooses an opposite perspective: we come not from ourselves, but from God. In order to discover who we truly are, we therefore have to turn our attention within. We mistakenly believe that we concur with our (success) story, our bank account and our fine house, but if we truly descend into ourselves we know that we are a mystery for ourselves. Only by listening to our soul will we discover our truth. We do not live out of ourselves, but out of God who gives us life and whose gaze brings us forth. We live entirely on grace. Our life comes forth from life or God's hand. Our soul is the space where this realization can take place, so that we can enter into a relationship with the life that flows through us. We are being gazed at from our being, but do we dare to let this gaze rest on us?

Teresa paints here a classic picture. We are created in God's image. That is our greatness. We do not owe this greatness to ourselves, but to God who gave us this nobility. His eyes are the nursery of our being. Nor were we created without reason, as Teresa immediately makes it clear. Love has imprinted our being in God. In his love God wants his being to come to light in us. That image is so beautiful, that all the images that we could try make of ourselves have nothing on it. In God we will come to discover who we truly are. There we let go of ourselves and can be formed by the love of God himself.

Although she does not mention the term explicitly here, the spiritual way that Teresa delineates in this poem is based on an awareness of

¹ Cf. J. Huls, *The Minne-Journey. Beatrice of Nazareth's "Seven Ways of Minne". Mystical Process and Mystagogical Implications*, Fiery Arrow 9, Leuven 2013.

'humility'. For the image of being created and portrayed by love leads us to the profound realization that we do not live of our own accord. We are not the source of our own life, this source is God himself who calls forth our 'image' from his being. He is the one who painted us and continues to paint us in his love, while we often presume ourselves to be the creator of our own life and try to take the paintbrush into our own hand.² However, when we do not proudly put ourselves in God's place, we can make contact with the source of our life. This is the true self-knowledge, which makes us humble regarding the love that created us. We were not created in our own image, but our true nobility rather lies in letting ourselves be transformed into God's image and likeness in our obedience to the image that is gazing at us from our being.

We were created out of love. Teresa lets God speak to us as someone who is in love. God is in love with his own image in us. He sees us and wants us to lose ourselves in Him, as He has lost himself in us. In this way Teresa wants to make us aware of our beauty in God. There are often situations where we can lose ourselves. We lose touch with the awareness of our beauty in God's sight. We all too easily place this outside ourselves and think that we have lost touch with God. We become trapped in ourselves, because we want to do everything ourselves and want to keep control. Often our fear seems well-founded. We no longer see a way out of the situation and think we have no choice but to try our utmost to keep our head above water. Until we discover once again that we are busy creating our own world where we are the one pulling the strings. At that moment, Teresa says, nothing is more important than to make contact with the divine source in ourselves. Only it can put us on the right track.

We are portrayed in God's heart, and we would be pleased if we saw ourselves in God. In other words: our being in God is not foreign to us. Our obedience to our soul is not obedience to a strange being. No, the discovery of our being is rather a kind of homecoming. We arrive at our unsuspected being, at the essence of who we are but could never imagine or quite believe in. It is a kind of way back to what we long knew, but did not dare to face. Here as well, the change of perspective is important. We do not make ourselves beautiful, but are made beautiful by God. This finding of oneself in God contrasts sharply with every form of self-perfection. We do not make ourselves beautiful. By losing ourselves in God, we are made beautiful by God. It is accordingly the eyes of the other that make us beautiful, that make us lose ourselves in the other and so form us into love.

2 Cf. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night I*, 10, 5. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, transl. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, ICS Washington 1979, p. 318

This is completely opposite to our conception of perfection, in which there is always an undertone of something we ourselves have to do or achieve. The perfection that Teresa has in view is far more biblically oriented and has to do with the term 'tam'. 'Tam' is often translated as 'perfect' but in fact its meaning lies more along the lines of 'whole' or 'sound'. It forms the background for Jesus' commandment to "be perfect (whole), as your heavenly Father is perfect (whole)" (Mt 5:48). This means as much as: be all of a piece, do not be divided but rather give yourself wholeheartedly. It is accordingly not a moral commandment, but an appeal to lose yourself in love. It is precisely in this self-abandon that we are born in love, and gaze with astonishment on the beauty that we are in this being-seen. We become perfect when we are all of a piece, when we coincide with ourselves and are in profound contact with the source of our being which lies in God.

But we can also lose ourselves and get lost in the constructions of an imaginary world. Before we know it, we have constructed a world for ourselves that we can understand and control. With our gaze focused outward, we suddenly discover that God is nowhere to be found. The theme of wandering here and there thus refers to a lack of orientation. We wander, when we lose contact with the source. In itself, this is a lovely paradox. We think that we are on course when we have well-defined goals, but for Teresa letting go of this goal is essential. Only when we let go of the goal that we chose for ourselves – and in this sense are adrift – do we find the gateway that leads within. There we are being gazed at by the Other who transforms us from within.

Normally, we think that we find shelter with God. Teresa, however, turns this around and lets God say that we are his shelter. A text that perhaps seems daring for a Doctor of the Church, and yet she says: God is at home with us. He takes up his abode in us. He forms our center and we are his house, or as she will say elsewhere: we are his palace, his pearl or diamond. This reversal causes Teresa to be convinced, that God is always in us. There is no imaginable situation in which God does not dwell in us. Even the greatest sins – as she will say in *Interior Castle* – cannot change this. In practice we can lose touch with God, but conversely God will always come knocking on our door. After all, his door is never closed. We, however, can pass by this Divine mystery – which we ourselves are – through a lack of awareness. Once again, this does not imply a moral judgment. It merely indicates the relationship is necessarily reciprocal. If we keep our door tightly closed, God does not get the chance to call forth the image of his own being in us with his gaze of love.

In closing Teresa once again emphasizes the unconditionality of God's call of love. Whatever may have happened, however far we may have wandered, God is never far away but is the immediate address in ourselves. He is at our beck and call, if only we will turn to Him and are willing to listen to his voice. God does not punish us for what we did in the past. He does not look askance at us, from a distance, as if we had to prove our good intentions. On the contrary, the person who truly comes into contact with his soul, knows of God's immediate activity. As in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), for God the joy that what was lost has been found again makes all else pale in comparison. The joy that God can be himself with us, that He can turn his loving gaze on us unhindered, is greater than any past.

A remarkable aspect of the poem is that it speaks from the perspective of God. Teresa lets God speak in the first person. He is the inviting party who addresses us from the depths of our heart. Teresa begins with *seeking yourself*. In our religious ideology we are perhaps more inclined to see ourselves as *seekers of God* first of all. Teresa turns this around and lets God say: *seek yourself* as an assignment. We also see this in the desert fathers, who went to the desert in search of themselves, and in the Cistercian tradition, where self-knowledge was held to be the beginning of knowledge of God. Self-knowledge is the basis of true humility, because it acknowledges our true relationship with our Creator. Putting the search for oneself or the love of oneself first is therefore essential, and contrasts sharply with every form of self-contempt. We are not contemptible, we are not bedraggled, but essentially beautiful, finely painted, exceptional; an image to fall in love with. God is the first one to fall in love with it, and not just a little, but passionately, overwhelmingly, foolishly. He is so crazy about us, because He thinks we are so good-looking. If God really looks at us in this way, why do we love ourselves so little? Why do we not dare to believe that we are so beautiful? Why do we keep thinking that so much about us has to be improved? Why do we think that we are not good enough as we are?

We only truly gain a realistic image of ourselves if we dare to lose ourselves in the eyes of the Other. We are then delivered from the eyes of countless others whom we hired out of self-pity to look at us disapprovingly and condemningly. We can then joyfully discover who we are in the eyes of the One who created us for love. Our deepest identity lies not in our self-organization but in God. We do not build ourselves up, but are built up by God as the most beautiful thing imaginable to Him. We do not coincide with ourselves. Our entire life

is a great voyage of discovery during which we are in search of God's Countenance and his gaze full of love. However intimately God is connected with us, we can only receive ourselves by listening to God or the foundation of our existence. In existence itself we are loved by God. In this being-loved, the Other so longs for us that He wants to let us become who we are in our essence.

The entire poem is built around a fundamental change of perspective. We are not our own maker, but are created by God. In order to discover who we are we do not have to construct a life for ourselves, but lose ourselves in God. Our beauty lies not in what we achieve, but in God's image that He paints in us. The pivoting point of the whole lies between the third and fourth stanzas, where the perspective shifts from seeking oneself in God, to seeking God in oneself. The discovery of who we truly are in God's eyes opens up a deeper level for us, where we gain the ability to lose ourselves in those eyes. In discovering our true being as image of God, we are set in motion towards these eyes in which our beauty lies, the eyes of our origin. For Teresa, to lose yourself in God means to lose yourself in the God who is the origin of your existence. It is the gaze of the other which loses itself in us, which makes it possible for us to lose ourselves in the other.

The image of God which we are in ourselves is not makeable. It cannot be reproduced. However much we do our best, we cannot make it. This already carries our absolute failure with it: we are powerless in this regard. Neither should we want to make it. What is at issue is not perfect virtuousness. The greatest piety can easily degenerate into self-deceit: as long as we perform this and that, we will manage. But surely we cannot paint ourselves! We can only go in search of the other who painted us. We can only come to see how we are being gazed into beauty from beyond and enter into a relationship with this. In this way we can become who we are in God's eyes! Our imagehood consists in being created *for love*. For this reason we live as long as we are in search of his Countenance. After all, our imagehood is not 'something' but the unremitting and dynamic process of losing ourselves in the gaze of his eyes. In this dynamic of love God expresses his deepest essence in us. The human being forms God's being!

Translated by Rebecca Braun o.s.c.

1 Translation adapted from: Kavanaugh/Rodriguez (transl.), *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, 1985, Vol. 3, p. 385.