**TERESIAN QUARTET**

**Roderick Strange**

‘What’s in a name?’ asks the popular saying. When Mother Teresa was canonized on 5 September last year, she joined three other women who share that name and who have been recognized as saints by the Catholic Church: Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who is often remembered as Edith Stein. What’s in a name?

 Then besides the name they shared, these four women, this Teresian Quartet, shared as well a vocation to religious life. The first three were all Carmelites, and when the fourth, the eighteen year old Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu, born in 1910, joined the Sisters of Loreto in 1928, she took the name Teresa out of devotion to the little saint of Lisieux who had been canonized just three years previously. Moreover between Teresa of Avila and Teresa Benedicta there is the bond of Jewish blood. Teresa’s grandfather was a *converso*, a Jew who had been baptized, which was one of the reasons why his granddaughter was often regarded with suspicion, and Teresa Benedicta who never abandoned nor wished to abandon her sense of Jewish identity, was deported to Auschwitz and died with her people in the gas chambers of Birkenau. These links between them can be identified.

 All the same, they were not carbon-copies of each other. They are famous in sharply distinctive ways, Teresa of Avila as a reformer and mystic, Thérèse of Lisieux for her hidden life, Teresa Benedicta as a philosopher and by the manner of her death, and Mother Teresa as a Missionary of Charity. Individually and cumulatively their witness is powerful.

*Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)*

Evidence indicates that Teresa was a beautiful, lively, high-spirited girl. She was flirtatious. When she was 16, however, she went to board in the Augustinian Convent of Santa Maria de Gracia and while there felt drawn gradually to religious life. For some years she suffered from various illnesses, but in 1536 she became a novice in the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation and was professed the year after. Ill-health forced her to leave in 1538, but in spite of serious sickness she returned in 1539 and recovered her health fully in 1542, a recovery she attributed to the intercession of St Joseph.

 With an increasing reputation for holiness and well-regarded by others, she was soon receiving many visitors whom she counselled. Indeed for a time Teresa was in danger of being carried away, so to speak, by her own spiritual success. Little by little, however, she became aware of her need for a more radically disciplined religious life. Years passed. Only in 1554, when she was almost 40, did she begin to have experiences that could be called mystical, visions of Christ which wonderfully she did not describe as physical, but rather as a sense of intimate presence. And it was not until 1558 that she began the reforms of the Carmelite Order for which she has become renowned. Her commitment to these reforms preoccupied her for the rest of her life. But they also aroused fierce opposition. Filippo Sega, the Papal Nuncio in Spain, described her unforgettably as ‘a restless, gadabout, disobedient and contumacious woman who invented wicked doctrines and called them devotion’. But she did not waver. She had founded yet another convent in 1582, the year of her death.

 It would be easy today to underestimate how formidable her achievement was. Her Jewish ancestry, her gender, her mystical experiences, and her work as a reformer made her an obvious target for those who were hostile to her. The idea that a woman could guide others in prayer was to many of her contemporaries outrageous. But now her writings are prized and she has been declared a Doctor of the Church.

 In one famous image she likens the spiritual life to a garden that needs to be watered. She explained that that can be done in different ways. Buckets can be drawn up from a well and the water scattered around, and that is hard work. It would be easier to erect a water-wheel when the buckets of water are drawn up by a windlass because that requires less effort and is more effective. Then again, streams can be diverted through the garden which will irrigate the ground even more efficiently. And finally there is the rain that falls without any human effort whatever.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 According to this process praying seems to become easier and easier. But Teresa makes it clear that that is not the case. The stages are not simply sequential. There can be ebb and flow. Indeed the earlier stages which require more effort may even be the more satisfying because those praying feel more involved. Rainfall, on the other hand, God’s action, when those who pray seem to themselves to do nothing, while it can bring great joy, may well be experienced simply as darkness. She was no stranger to that darkness.

*Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897)*

There is the well-known story of Thérèse on her sickbed. As she lay dying, she heard two nuns talking outside her window about the customary obituary that would have to be written after her death. ‘What will our Mother Prioress be able to write [about Sister Thérèse]?’ one asked. ‘She entered our convent, lived, and died – there really is no more to say.’ The well-known story prompts a smile. Thérèse’s influence has been incalculable.

 She was the youngest of nine children, four of whom died in infancy. Her family was close and she was a well-loved child, pampered even, loved not only by her parents, but also by her sisters. Both her brothers had died. She too was a pretty girl like the Avila Teresa, but she could also easily become tearful. When very young she longed to become a nun and she was still only fifteen when she entered the Carmel at Lisieux. Two of her sisters had entered before her and a third was to enter later. The family bond remained strong. Four blood sisters in the community, and in fact a cousin as well, was difficult for the other nuns at times, but Thérèse never took advantage of it.

 To understand Thérèse, however, it is helpful to be aware of the late nineteenth century French Catholicism that formed her as a child and which she did much to transform. French devotion at that time was still in part under the influence of Jansenism and so marked by a desire to gain spiritual credits. The young Thérèse and her sisters would keep an account of their good deeds and the little daily sacrifices they had made. All the same, what was remarkable about Thérèse was how she came to a vivid awareness of her own smallness, her utter dependence on God’s grace. She was ‘*convinced*’, her sister, Céline, was to declare, ‘that without the special aid of God she would not have been able to achieve her salvation.’[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, her desire for intimacy with God, her sense of her own inadequacy, and her remarkable simplicity led her to shed that earlier style of devotion, casting aside any desire to accumulate spiritual credits and relying instead exclusively on God. She recognized her own insignificance. She was small, little, a child. People commented that they did not see her practising virtue. They were right. Her way was hidden.

 Her clearest statement of that little way, according to Ida Görres in her outstanding biography, was the explanation Thérèse once gave Céline:

 We must do everything we are obliged to do: give without reckoning, practise virtue whenever opportunity offers, constantly overcome ourselves, prove our love by all the little acts of tenderness and consideration we can muster [*par toutes les délicatesses et toutes les tendresses*]. In a word, we must produce all the good works that lie within our strength – out of love for God. But it is in truth indispensable to place our whole trust in Him *who alone sanctifies our works and who can sanctify us without works* for He can even raise children to Abraham out of stones (cf. Matthew 3:9). Yes, it is needful, when we have done everything that we believe we have to do, to confess ourselves unprofitable servants (cf. Luke 17:10), *at the same time hoping that God out of grace will give us everything we need.* This is the little way of childhood.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Yet even this little way is not unique to her. Cardinal Pierre Bérulle (1575 – 1629), founder of the French Oratory, had written about ‘the spirit of childlikeness’,[[4]](#footnote-4) and another Oratorian cardinal, John Henry Newman, had composed ‘A Short Road to Perfection’ in 1856 which begins, ‘It is the saying of holy men that, if we wish to be perfect, we have nothing more to do than to perform the ordinary duties of the day well.’[[5]](#footnote-5) So her way may not have been unique, but its effect in many lives has been incomparable. When she died in 1897, she was only 24. She died from consumption and suffered greatly, especially in the final months, spiritually as well as physically. Jesus, she declared, had ‘allowed her soul to be enveloped in utter darkness’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

 Earlier she had longed to be a missionary, but that was never going to be possible. However, pondering later on how to fulfil what she felt to be her calling, she reflected famously on St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 12 she discovered there were many different vocations in the Church’s mystical body, apostles, prophets, and doctors, but still she could not recognize properly what might be her own. Then she found Paul encouraging a yet more excellent way, that of charity. Without love all the other gifts were worthless. The Church needed a heart on fire with love. At last she was at peace. She had found her vocation, to be love in the heart of the Church, in the heart of the Mystical Body.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (1891-1942)*

In an essay written in 1930 Edith Stein who was to enter the Carmel at Lindenthal in Cologne three years later and become Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, stated, ‘*Community is necessary; without community*, without social life and therefore the formation of individuals into a community, *the final end of the human being is not attainable*.’[[8]](#footnote-8) She too like Thérèse appreciated deeply the significance of the mystical body of Christ. For her ‘the image of the Body is not merely a metaphor but, rather, reveals an important truth’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

 Edith Stein who was born in 1891, was a German Jew. As an adult she was a secular, non-practising Jew, although her family and especially her mother were devout. That difference between them, however, and the tension it could sometimes cause, especially after she had become a Catholic, did not lessen the love that they felt for each other. Academically gifted, she became a noted philosopher. She was a pupil of Edmund Husserl’s, the father of phenomenology and one of the most influential philosophers of the last century, and later she worked with him.

 Edith was baptized on 1 January 1922. Various experiences led her to that step, but one was sitting up throughout one night the previous year, reading Teresa of Avila’s *Life*. When she had finished it, she closed the book and declared, ‘This is the truth.’ She did not, however, rush to enter Carmel. Others persuaded her that it was better for her to seek a post as a philosopher in a university. In the subsequent years she applied for several positions, but always without success. As a woman and a Jew she was unacceptable. The suspicion that loomed over Teresa of Avila cast an even darker shadow over her.

 When, in spite of her growing reputation, all hope of an academic career had been extinguished, she joined the Carmel at Lindenthal in Cologne in 1933. She was not trying to escape the Nazi threat. She realized that religious life would not make her immune from the storm that was threatening her people. However, in 1938, fearful that her presence would cause harm to her community, she transferred to the Carmel at Echt in the southern Netherlands. Her sister, Rosa, who had been baptized after the death of their mother in 1936 and who had joined her in the monastery, went with her.

 The end, when it came, was swift. On 26 July 1942 the Dutch bishops along with nine other Church leaders protested against the deportation of Jewish men, women, and children to the German Reich. The following day the SS ordered the deportation of all Catholics of Jewish descent by the end of the week. Edith and Rosa were arrested on 1 August, arrived in Auschwitz six days later, and were gassed two days after that, on 9 August.

 Honouring Teresa Benedicta has been controversial. Calling her a martyr has seemed to some a Christian way of appropriating the Shoah. That must never happen. There are rough edges here that cannot be made smooth. The Shoah is a defining symbolic moment for the Jewish people. So her words to Rosa, as they were arrested, ‘Come, we are going for our people,’ are not to be misunderstood. That ‘for’ is not condescending. It affirms a bond. Her sense of being Jewish made her identify with her people; her sense of being Christian shaped the way she accepted her death, for them in loving solidarity with them. She shared the darkness.

*Teresa of Kolkata (1910-1997)*

As a small girl Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu felt a call to religious life and by the time she was 12 she had discovered a desire to work with the poor in India. In 1928, when she was 18, she joined the Loreto Sisters (IBVM), taking the name Teresa after Thérèse of Lisieux, and went briefly to Ireland before beginning to work in Calcutta. She taught for virtually the next twenty years with real happiness, but her desire to work with the poorest of the poor intensified throughout that time, until in 1948 she was finally granted permission to leave the Loreto Sisters and set out on the work to which she felt particularly called and with which she is identified, her founding of the Missionaries of Charity.

 Her determination to love the poor was relentless. She raised funds and opened centres for them in many countries. Her love for them was inspired by her love for the Lord. Cynics and sceptics have criticized her. Why was the money she raised not put to better use, they ask, for example, by building better hospitals? Why were her Sisters not better trained in their care for those who were often so desperately ill? There may be some truth in these criticisms, but they also miss a crucial point. The Missionaries of Charity are precisely that, Missionaries of Charity, not Medical Missionaries. Their vocation, inspired by Mother Teresa, is to bring love to those who have been deprived of it. The number of those whom she found abandoned and homeless was overwhelming. Medical assistance is wonderful, but it is even more important, so far as might be possible, that no one should die unloved.

 Teresa herself once observed, ‘If I ever become a saint – I will surely be one of “darkness”.’ And when rumour of this darkness became known, there were those who could not understand it. Some even suggested that she had lost her faith decades ago and was a hypocrite. Yet all four members of this Teresian Quartet experienced the darkness which often accompanies those who seek intimacy with God. Mother Teresa’s experience is particularly telling.

 One day in 1991 Father Paul Murray, an Irish Dominican in Rome, was invited to visit her. On a whim the evening before he wrote out on a card some lines from the *Testament* of St Bernadette Soubirous and, when they met the following afternoon, he told her he had brought her a present. She was taken by surprise. ‘A present,’ she exclaimed. Then he gave it to her. And he has described her reading it:

 When I handed her the card, she began to read it slowly out loud. But her pace, I noticed, got slower and slower towards the end. She was clearly not just saying the words but praying the words. Her voice, when she began to read the last sentence in particular, was quieter than before, and she pronounced the words very distinctly and very slowly indeed. [The final sentence read, *‘For this soul that you have given me, for the desert of interior aridity, for your nights, for your flashes of lightning, for your silences, for your thunder-strokes, for everything, for you, absent or present, thank you, Jesus.’*] Then, when it was over, without another word, she closed her eyes and bent down her head. It was obvious she was praying. I waited. Moments passed. Finally, she lifted her head, and for a second I caught an expression in her eyes I find impossible to describe. Then, a moment later with deep feeling she said: “But … *how* He speaks to us.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Conclusion*

Thumbnail sketches of exceptional people can never do them justice. That is illustrated clearly by this Teresian Quartet, the reformer and mystic, the one who was hidden, the scholar and martyr, and the missionary. Whatever distinguished them, there was also much that they shared, not least, each in her own way, that darkness which has been described as ‘the intimate hidden radiance of God’s presence’.

1. See Teresa of Avila, *Life*, Ch.9, §7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in Ida Görres, *The Hidden Face: St Thérèse of Lisieux*, (London, 1959), p.278. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quoted in *The Hidden Face*, pp.281-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p.344. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. J. H. Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*, (London, 1893), p.381. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, ch.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. , Ibid., ch.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Quoted in Sarah Borden, *Edith Stein*, (London, 2003), p.46. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p.130 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Paul Murray, *I Loved Jesus in the Night: Teresa of Calcutta, a Secret Revealed*, (London, 2008), pp.23-5, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)