Sunday, December 15, 1974
WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING OUT! (No. 3 in a Series: St. Teresa)

In our country in the last few years a new interest in things of the spirit has been evident. People outside of churches and inside the church are trying meditation, yoga, and all sorts of other techniques in an effort to deepen their spiritual lives and in so doing find new meaning in their everyday life.

While many go gladly down the paths of Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, psychedelic explorations, or the charismatic movement, we who are Christians should also be aware that there is within our Christian tradition some long ignored resources of spiritual discipline from which we can learn.

To put it another way, there is within the Christian tradi-tion a central core of spiritual discipline. practiced and perfected by men and women of God, who for want of a better term we have labeled Saints, and to whose disciplined way of religious life we have assigned the word "mysticism."

In the first sermon in this series, I said that such per-sons are like the goldfish who has for a moment leaped out of the bowl in which he lives and suspended above the bowl for a moment becomes aware of a new and larger world that is beyond. the world in which he usually lives.

The saints and mystics are something like that. They have discovered that other world which is beyond our everyday common-sense world and know how to become part of that larger world through spiritual disciplines. As a result, they are persons who know how to live in two worlds at the same time and therefore have found answers to some of our deepest human needs and have also discovered a way of living that not only gives them a new kind of freedom but also a power which permeates all they do. They know from experience what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

St. Teresa of Avila was such a person. She was born in Spain on March 28, 1515. She is often regarded as the leading Spanish mystic and as one of the outstanding women in all Spanish history.

Teresa's story runs counter to that of many men and women who worked great changes in society. Her vocation seems unapparent in her youth. As a girl in the province of old Castile, she was pretty, cleverly, romantic, and lively but no more than that.

It is true that at age seven, she and her brother, Rodrigo, decided to run away to find martyrdom among the Moors in Africa. Carrying a stock of dried raisins (Teresa was always practical), they got as far as the open country outside Avila's walls before they were met by their Uncle Francisco and were brought back home. But such an escapade was rather like a modern child's running away to join a circus, a common romantic dream.

Otherwise, Teresa lived the ordinary life of a Spanish young lady of good family. She read novels, attended balls, and took pains with her dress. We know that she was at-tractive and was aware of the fact. At a party, a few days before she entered the Carmelita Convent, a young man was admiring her pretty feet in their dancing slippers. "Take a good look, sir," Teresa told him, "You won't be getting another chance."

The city of Avila in Spain, where Teresa grew up, was a place full of the spirit of chivalry and romance. Her mother died before she was 12, but she had a devoted father and a large number of brothers and sisters. She was one of a family of nine.

It was only at age 20 or a little later that she decided after much soul-searching to become a nun. It was then she caught fire — became indeed a conflagration which began to burn up the corruption of her day. For religion in particular was corrupt in that time. The inquisition had terrorized but not cleansed Spain. It was a time when the lives of people who cared about prayer and such things were rare. All great causes were on the verge of collapsing. It was in the midst of this that St. Teresa arose to bear witness to that power which supports and saves — the power of prayer.

The convent where Teresa went as a novice had once been strict, poor, and holy. Now it was like half the other establishments of its kind, a twittering bird cage of femininity with its rules relaxed and its practices tarnished. Girls came there not for the love of God, but to find a home, and they continued to be as worldly as if they still lived in society. It was Teresa's lifelong task to recover the ancient rule of the Carmelites and to bring not only her foundation but the whole of Spain back to pure practices of religion.

Physically, Teresa was delicate and troubled by poor health most of her life, and for almost 20 years after entering the convent, she remained an obscure nun. If she had died when she was 40, very little would be remembered about her. All of her famous books were written in the latter part of her life and all of these books deal with profound matters of the spiritual life.

At one time, in her twenties, she fell into a kind of trance which left her helpless and seemingly paralyzed for more than eight months. For years, the paralysis recurred intermittently. In her early forties, she began to hear interior voices, see visions, and experience what to her were from God.

As she looked back upon her life, she believed that during the first nearly 20 years of her monastic career, she had almost constant inner conflict and knew neither any joy in God nor any pleasure in the world. She thought of herself in some of those years as a great sinner, yet she spent any long hours each day learning to pray. Improvement came, but not all at once. She was helped by reading the confessions of St. Augustine. And she began gradually to find deep satisfaction in long and uninterrupted periods of communion with God and knew the prayer of quiet.

While in her mid-forties, Teresa came to believe that a stricter way of life was demanded than that practiced in her convent. The older rule was not being kept. Thus, with the bishop's permission, in 1562, she founded a branch of the Carmelite nuns. She began in a small way with four nuns, but in the early years of the new community, she had the most peaceful days of her life.

Then in 1567, with the consent of the head of her order, she began to travel up and down the land, inaugurating new houses of reform. She enlisted two monks, one of them best remembered as John of the Cross, and through them established Carmelite houses for men. The journeys entailed physical hardship of heat, springless carts, bad roads, worse inns, and unbridged rivers. As to be expected, her successful efforts at reform aroused opposition within the order.

She was as beleaguered and reviled as any suffragette of the 19th century and she was in the center of controversy and often got discouraged. Nuns and priests did not wish to change their ways and demonstrated violently against her. Avila, for a while, ostracized her. She was examined by the inquisition. An irate Papal Nuncio called her a restless gadabout and cried, “She is ambitions and teaches theology as though she were a Doctor of the Church.” The joke after some centuries is on him, for Teresa is now regarded, if unofficially, as a Doctor of the Church. She seems to have been as little afraid of Nuncios as she was of princes, prioresses, or the surly muleteers who carried her on her interminable journeys.

Merry and undaunted, she traipsed about Spain, reestablishing the unmitigated rule in convent after convent, reforming, exhorting, cand captivating the countryside.

With her eloquence and charm, she won over the Archbishop of Seville, who instead of permitting her to kneel to him, fell on his own knees in front of her. She successfully lectured the Pope at one point in her career.

Yet for all of her traveling and organizing, she found time to write the great books, as well as to take a lively interest in her many friends, to look out for the welfare of her beloved family and to bring up various little nieces sent to her from time to time in the casual Spanish fashion.

And besides being an inspired executive and a holy woman, she was also an enchanting companion.

Teresa died when she was 67 years old. Within her own lifetime she was already revered as a Saint. Her official canonization came only forty years after her death.

Looking at her life and what she was, there are two characteristics which stand out which are important for us today.

1. Teresa had a wonderful sense of humor and believed that as Christians, God calls us to laugh and not take ourselves too seriously. She believed that joy was quite as essential to sanctity as faith or good works. She used to leave her prayers in order to visit with her community when they begged for her company. She set the nuns dancing to castanets on feast days and encouraged laughter and music as heartily as she discouraged sullen faces and sin.

She was as irrepressible as a volcano, and unsinkable as balsa wood. Never could she be fitted into a pious straitjacket. St. Teresa is well known for her humorous and tart sayings. “From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, good Lord deliver us!” she protested.

She wrote letters endlessly, praising, admonishing, or encouraging, but always with humor. Teresa could not live with pomposity. Self-importance was a balloon she pricked whenever she saw it bobbing along. Once when a young nun came to her with tales of exaggerated temptation and boasted of being a great sinner, Teresa said deflatingly, “Now sister, remember none of us are perfect. Just make sure those sins of yours don’t turn into bad habits.”

“Good Lord, deliver us from Sullen Saints,” she would often say, and there was never one less long faced than she. There was nothing smug about Teresa. Once a visitor was scandalized to find her happily eating a partridge someone had sent her. A holy woman actually enjoying her food? What would people think? “Let them think what they please,” said Teresa, “There is a time for partridge and there is a time for prayer.”

2. In addition to her sense of humor and enjoyment of life and people, Teresa is a woman who can teach us much about prayer and the spiritual life.

She once said that it took her 18 years to really learn to pray and she liked to describe the mind of a person as an unbroken house that will go anywhere except where one wants it to go. And many of our minds are like that.

All of the mystics like St. Teresa, ha.ve underlined the importance of training the mind to do one thing at a time, to be able to focus, to concentrate, as part of the discipline of prayer.

The Greek Philosopher, Plato, wrote of the same kind of problem. He likened the mind of a human being to that of a ship on which the sailors had mutinied and locked the Captain and the Navigator below in the cabin. The sailors believe themselves to be perfectly free and steer the ship as they feel like at the moment. First one sailor steers for a while, and then another, and the ship travels in an erratic and random direction since the sailors can neither agree on a goal nor navigate the ship toward it if they could agree.

The task of a human being, wrote Plato, is to quell the mutiny, to release the Captain and the Navigator so that there can be the freedom to choose a goal and to steer or work consistently and coherently toward its attainment.

This is particularly true in the case of prayer and meditation. Persons like St. Teresa learned through long years of practice how to pray and to gain unique power through their prayers.

The life and work of St. Teresa reminds us not to be discouraged if our own prayer life seems inadequate. If we keep at it, and practice the focusing of our minds and spirits, our lives will be strengthened.

More than anything else in this Advent and Christmas season, St. Teresa shows us that we can be at the same time joyful and fun-loving people and people of prayer and holiness. The two are not mutually exclusive. Enjoy God’s world yet remember that this world is not all there is to life. We are all part of a larger creation which includes this world and this life, but which is much more. We live in this everyday world maybe 70, 80, or 90 years, but we live in God’s greater world forever. Amen.