

Saint Teresa of Avila

EXCERPT FROM THE LIFE OF
SAINT TERESA OF AVILA BY HERSELF, 1562-65

She treats of the difference between union and rapture, and explains what a rapture is. She also says something about the good that a soul derives from being, by the Lord's goodness, brought to it. She speaks of its effects:

I wish that I could explain, with God's help, the difference between union and rapture, or elevation, or flight of the spirit or transport-for they are all one. I mean that these are all different names for the same thing, which is also called ecstasy. It is much more beneficial than union, its results are much greater, and it has very many other effects as well. Union seems to be the same at the beginning, the middle, and the end, and is altogether inward. But the ends of rapture are of a much higher nature, and their effects are both inward and outward. As the Lord has explained things hitherto, let Him do so now. For if His Majesty had not shown me ways and means of saying something, I certainly should never have found any.

Let us now reflect that this last water of which I have spoken is so abundant that, if the ground did not refuse to receive it, we might suppose the cloud of His great Majesty to be with us here on earth. But when we are thanking Him for this great blessing, and drawing near to Him by means of such works as are in our power, the Lord catches up the soul just as one might say the clouds gather up the mists of the earth, and carries it right out of itself just as I have heard it said the clouds or the sun actually do catch up the mists. Then the cloud rises to heaven, taking the soul with it, and begins to show it the features of the kingdom He has prepared for it. I do not know whether this is an accurate comparison, but in point of fact that is how it happens.

In these raptures, the soul no longer seems to animate the body; its natural heat therefore is felt to diminish and it gradually gets cold, though with a feeling of very great joy and sweetness. Here there is no possibility of resisting, as there is in union, in which we are on our own ground. Against union, resistance is almost always possible though it costs pain and effort. But rapture is, as a rule, irresistible. Before you can be warned by a thought or help yourself in any way, it comes as a quick and violent shock; you see and feel this cloud, or this powerful eagle rising and bearing you up on its wings.

You realize, I repeat, and indeed see that you are being carried away you know not where. For although this is delightful, the weakness of our nature makes us afraid at first, and we need a much more determined and courageous spirit than for the previous stages of prayer. Come what may, we must risk everything and leave ourselves in God's hands. We have to go willingly wherever we are carried, for in fact, we are being born off whether we like it or not. In this emergency very often I should like to resist, and I exert all my strength to do so, especially at such times as I am in a public place, and very often when I am in private also, because I am afraid of delusions. Sometimes with a great struggle I have been able to do something against it. But it has been like fighting a great giant, and has left me utterly exhausted. At other times resistance has been impossible; my soul has been carried away, and usually my head as well, without my being able to prevent it; and sometimes it has affected my whole body, which has been lifted from the ground.

This has only happened rarely. Once, however, it took place when we were all together in the choir, and I was on my knees, about to take Communion. This distressed me very much, for it seemed a most extraordinary thing and likely to arouse considerable talk. So I ordered the nuns -- for it happened after I was made prioress--not to speak of it. On other occasions, when I felt that the Lord was about to enrapture me again, and once in particular during a sermon--it was our patron's feast and some great ladies were present--I lay on the ground and the sisters came to hold me down, but all the same the rapture was observed. Then I earnestly beseeched the Lord to grant me no more favours if they must have outward and visible signs. For worries on this score exhausted me, and whenever He gave me these raptures I was observed. It seems that, of His goodness, he has been pleased to hear me. For I have never had them since, although it is true that this was not long ago.

It seemed to me when I tried to resist that a great force, for which I can find no comparison, was lifting me up from beneath my feet. It came with greater violence than any other spiritual experience, and left me quite shattered. Resistance requires a great struggle, and is of little use in the end when the Lord wills otherwise, for there is no power that can resist His power. At other times He is graciously satisfied with our seeing that He desires to grant us this grace, and that it is not His Majesty that is withholding it. Then, when we resist out of humility, the same effects follow as if we had given a complete assent.

The effects of rapture are great. One is that the mighty power of the Lord is made manifest. We see that against His Majesty's will we can do nothing to control either the soul or the body. We are not the masters; whether we like it or not, we see that there is One mightier than we, that these favours are given by Him, and that,

of ourselves we can do absolutely nothing. This imprints a deep humility upon us. I confess that in me it aroused a great fear, at first a very great fear. One sees one's body being lifted from the ground; and though the spirit draws it up after itself, and does so most gently if it does not resist, one does not lose consciousness. At least I myself was sufficiently aware to realize that I was being lifted. The majesty of One who can do this is so manifest that one's hair stands on end, and a great fear comes over one of offending so great a God. But this fear is stifled by very great love, newly enkindled, for One who has, as we see, so great a love for so vile a worm, that He does not seem satisfied with actually raising the soul to Himself, but will have the body also, mortal though it is, and though its clay is befouled by all the sins we have committed.

Rapture leaves behind a certain strange detachment also, the real nature of which I shall never be able to describe. All that I can say is that it is somewhat different from that caused by purely spiritual graces. For although they produce a complete detachment of the spirit from all things, here the Lord seems to wish the body to be detached also. Thus a new estrangement from the world takes place, which makes life much more painful. It also leaves a distress behind, which we cannot bring about ourselves and which we can never remove, once it has come. I should very much like to explain this great distress, but I do not think I shall be able to. Still I will say something about it, if I can.

It must be noted that these events are much more recent than the visions and revelations of which I am now going to write, and which belong to the time when I was practising prayer and the Lord was giving me such great joys and favours. Although I still have these occasionally, this distress that I am going to describe is now a far more frequent and ordinary experience with me. Its intensity varies, but I will speak of it at its most severe. Later I shall describe the great shocks I used to suffer when the Lord chose to throw me into these transports, but they have, in my opinion, no more connexion with this distress of mine than has any completely physical experience with one that is entirely spiritual. I do not think that I am greatly exaggerating. For although the distress caused by these shocks is felt by the soul, it is also felt by the body. Both seem to share in it. It does not cause the extreme abandonment, however, that comes with this purely spiritual distress.

We play no part, as I have said, in bringing a rapture on. Very often there comes an unexpected desire-I do not know what impels it-and with that desire, which permeates the whole soul in a moment, it begins to become so weary that it rises far above itself and above all creation. God then so strips it of everything that, strive though it may, it can find no companion on earth. Nor, indeed does it wish for one; it would rather die in its solitude. It may be spoken to and make every possible effort to reply, but all to no avail. Whatever the spirit may do, it does not escape from its solitude; and although God seems at that moment very far from the soul, He sometimes reveals His grandeur to it in the strangest way imaginable. This way is indescribable; and I do not think that anyone could believe or understand it who has not already experienced it. It is a communication made not to comfort the soul, but to show it the reason why it is weary-which is because it is absent from that Good that contains all good things within itself.

In this communication the desire grows, and so does the extreme loneliness in which the soul finds itself, and with it there comes a distress so subtle and piercing that, placed as it is in this desert, the soul can, I think, say literally with the Royal Prophet: 'I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.'¹ It is possible that King David was experiencing this same loneliness when he wrote although, since he was a saint, the Lord may have granted him this experience in a higher measure. This verse comes to my mind at these times in such a way that it seems to be fulfilled in me. It is a comfort to me to know that others have felt these extremes of loneliness, and an even greater comfort that they have been people of such quality. The soul, then, seems to be not in itself but on a house-top or roof, raised above itself and all created things. I think it is far above even its own highest part.

At other times the soul seems to be in a state of destitution, and to be asking itself: 'Where is Thy God?'² It must be remembered that I did not know the Spanish meaning of this verse, and that later, when I found out, it used to comfort me to think that the Lord had brought them to my mind without any effort of mine. At other times I used to remember St Paul's saying that he was 'crucified unto the world.'³ I do not mean that this is true of me -I clearly see that it is not. But the soul seems to me to be in this state when no comfort comes to it from heaven and it is not there itself, and when it desires none from the earth and is not there either. Then it is as if crucified between heaven and earth, suffering and receiving no help from either.

The help that comes from heaven is, as I have said, a most wonderful knowledge of God, so far above anything that we can desire that it brings with it greater torment. For the desire then grows so intense that its extreme distress, as I see it, sometimes robs it of all consciousness. But such states last only a short time. One seems to be on the point of death; only the agony carries with it so great a joy that I do not know of any proper comparison. It is a harsh yet sweet martyrdom. If any earthly thing is then offered to the soul, even one that it usually finds most sweet, it will not accept it, but seems to throw it away at once. It clearly realizes that it wants nothing but God, but loves no particular one of His attributes. It wants Him entire, and has no knowledge of what it desires. I say that it has no knowledge because the imagination can picture nothing; and indeed, I think that during much of this time the faculties are in suspense. As joy suspends them in union and rapture, here they are

suspended by their distress.

O Jesus! How I wish that someone could really explain this to you, my Father, if only so that you could tell me what it means. For this is the habitual state of my soul, nowadays. Whenever I am not busy with something, it is plunged into these death-like yearnings; and I am afraid when I feel them coming on, because I know that I shall not die. But once I am in them, I long to suffer like this for the rest of my life, although the pain is so extreme as to be nearly unbearable. Sometimes my pulse almost ceases to beat at all, as I have been told by the sisters who sometimes see me in this state, and so understand better now. My bones are all disjointed and my hands are so rigid that sometimes I cannot clasp them together. Even next day I feel a pain in my wrists and over my whole body, as if my bones were still out of joint.

Sometimes I really think that if things continue as they are at present, it must be the Lord's will to end them by putting an end to my life. The pain seems to me enough to cause death; only, I do not deserve it. All my longing at these times is to die. I do not remember purgatory or the great sins that I have committed, for which I deserve hell. I forget everything in my longing to see God; and this abandonment and loneliness seems better than all the company in the world. If there can be any comfort for one in this condition, it is to talk with some person who has passed through the same torment. Then she finds that, despite her complaints, nobody seems to believe her.

The soul in this state is further tormented because its distress has now so increased that it no longer seeks solitude as it did before, or company, except of those to whom it can complain. It is like a person with a rope round his neck, who is strangling but tries to take breath. The desire for company seems to me the product of our weakness, for our distress puts us in peril of death. This I know for certain since, as I have said, I have several times been in this situation myself during the crises of my severe illnesses, and I think I can say that the peril is as great as any I have known. The desire for the body and soul not to be parted, therefore, is like a voice crying out for help to take breath. By speaking of its pain, and complaining and seeking distractions, the soul is endeavouring to live, though much against the will of the spirit, or of the higher part of the soul, which wishes never to come out of this distress.

I am not sure if I am correct in what I say, or if I am expressing it properly, but to the best of my belief things happen in that way. I ask your Reverence what rest I can have in this life, now that the relief I once had in prayer and solitude, in which the Lord used to comfort me, has turned to an habitual torment. Yet at the same time this pain is so sweet, and the soul is so conscious of its value, that it now desires this suffering more than all the gifts that it used to receive. It believes this to be the safer state, too, because it is the way of the Cross; and, in my opinion, it contains a joy of exceeding worth, because the body has no part in it but agony, whereas the soul, even while suffering, rejoices alone in the bliss and contentment that this suffering brings.

I do not know how this can be, but it is so. This grace comes from the Lord; and I do not think I would exchange this favour which the Lord bestows on me-for it is highly supernatural and comes from His hand and, as I have said, is in no way acquired by me for any of the favours of which I shall speak later on; I do not say for all of them at once, but for any one of them separately. It must not be forgotten that this state, in which the Lord is keeping me now has come after all the others described in this book; I mean that these transports have succeeded the favours that I received from the Lord and have written of already.

In the beginning I was afraid, as is almost always the case with me when the Lord grants me a new grace, until His Majesty reassures me as I proceed. He told me to have no fear, and to value this favour above all those that He had given me before, for the soul was purified by this pain; it was burnished or refined, like gold in the crucible, the better to take the enamel of His gifts, and the dross was being burnt away here instead of in purgatory. I had perfectly understood that this was a great favour, but I was much more certain of it now; and my confessor tells me that all is well. But though I was afraid because I was so wicked, I could never believe that it was anything bad. On the contrary, the supreme greatness of the blessing frightened me, when I remembered how little I deserved it. Blessed be the Lord who is so good! Amen.

I seem to have wandered from my subject. I began by speaking of raptures, and what I have been describing is something greater than a rapture, and so leaves behind the effects that I have recorded.

Now let us return to raptures, and to their most usual characteristics. Very often they seemed to leave my body as light as if it had lost all its weight, and sometimes so light that I hardly knew whether my feet were touching the ground. But during the rapture itself, the body is very often like a corpse, unable to do anything of itself. It remains all the time in whatever attitude it was in when the rapture came on it; seated, for example, and with the hands open or closed. The subject rarely loses consciousness; I have occasionally lost it entirely, but not very often and only for a short time. Generally the senses are disturbed; and though absolutely powerless to perform any outward action the subject still sees and hears things, though only dimly, as if from far away. I do not say that he can see and hear when the rapture is at its height; and by 'its height' I mean those times when the faculties are lost, because closely united with God. Then, in my opinion, it neither sees nor hears nor feels. But, as I said in describing the previous prayer of union, this complete transformation of the soul in God is of short duration. While it lasts, however, none of the senses perceives or knows what is taking place. We can have no

way of understanding this, while we are on earth at least-or rather God cannot wish us to, since we have not the capacity for such understanding. This I have learnt for myself.

You will ask me, Father, how it is that a rapture sometimes lasts for many hours. Very often my experience is as I have described it in relation to the previous stage of prayer, the rapture is discontinuous. And very often the soul is absorbed, or-to put it better-the Lord absorbs it into Himself. But after He has held it for a moment, the will alone remains in union. The two other faculties appear to be always moving, like the pointer on a sundial, which is never at rest, though if the Sun of Righteousness wishes, He can make them stand still.

What I am describing lasts only a moment. But as the surge and impulse of the spirit have been violent, the will remains absorbed, even when the other faculties begin to stir again, and remains mistress over all these workings in the body. For though the two restless faculties try to disturb it, it thinks that the fewer enemies it has the better, and so takes care that they shall not do so. Therefore it suspends them entirely, that being the Lord's wish. The eyes are generally closed, although we may not wish to close them, and if occasionally they remain open, the soul, as I have just said, does not perceive anything or pay attention to what it sees.

A person can do very little in this condition, and so will not be capable of doing much when the faculties come to themselves again. But let him to whom the Lord grants this favour not be discouraged when he finds himself in this state, with his body unable to move for many hours, and with his understanding and memory wandering at times. True, generally they are absorbed in the praise of God, or in an attempt to comprehend or understand what has happened to them. Yet even for this they are not sufficiently awake, but are like people who have slept and dreamed for a long time, and have not yet properly woken up.

I stress this point because I know that there are persons now, even in this place, to whom the Lord is granting these favours; and if their directors have no experience of this-more especially if they have no learning -- they may suppose that persons enraptured should be as if dead. It is a shame that such suffering should be caused by confessors who do not understand what I am saying. But, if I have spoken at all to the point, you will understand me, sir, since the Lord has already granted you this experience, though, as this happened only recently, perhaps you have not considered these matters as much as I have. So then, however hard I try, my body has not enough strength to move for quite a long time; the soul has taken it all away. But often a person who was previously very ill, and racked with severe pain, is left healthy at the end and stronger than before. For a very great gift is received in rapture, and the Lord sometimes wishes the body, as I have said, to enjoy it also, because at such times it is obedient to the will of the soul.

Our Lord was pleased that I should sometimes see a vision of this kind. Beside me, on the left hand, appeared an angel in bodily form, such as I am not in the habit of seeing except very rarely. Though I often have visions of angels, I do not see them. They come to me only after the manner of the first type of vision that I described. But it was our Lord's will that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire. They must be of the kind called cherubim, but they do not tell me their names. I know very well that there is a great difference between some angels and others, and between these and others still, but I could not possibly explain it. In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it-even a considerable share. So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God, in his goodness, to grant him some experience of it.

Throughout the days that this lasted I went about in a kind of stupor. I had no wish to look or to speak, only to embrace my pain, which was a greater bliss than all crested things could give me. On several occasions when I was in this state the Lord was pleased that I should experience raptures so deep that I could not resist them even though I was not alone. Greatly to my distress, therefore, my raptures began to be talked about. Since I have had them, I have ceased to feel this pain so much, though I still feel the pain that I spoke of in a previous chapter-I do not remember which. The latter is very different in many respects, and much more valuable. But when this pain of which I am now speaking begins, the Lord seems to transport the soul and throw it into an ecstasy. So there is no opportunity for it to feel its pain or suffering, for the enjoyment comes immediately. May He be blessed for ever, who has granted so many favours to one who has so ill repaid these great benefits.

NOTES

1. Psalm cii, 7. [Vulg. ci. 7]
2. Psalm xlii, 3. [Vulg. xli. 4]
3. Galatians vi, 14.