

## *International Spirituality Summit on St Teresa of Avila in Oxford, UK*

On 16th November 2020, around 105 people gathered, via Zoom, to participate in the Spirituality Summit *'Teresa of Avila: Teacher and Guide'* convened by the [Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality \(CACs\), Oxford, UK, \(oxcacs.org\)](http://oxcacs.org) to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Doctorate of Santa Teresa of Jesus. Bishop David Oakley OCDS offered welcoming remarks; Cardinal Anders Arborelius OCD and Sr. Jo Robson OCD gave keynote addresses and an expert panel (comprising: Fr. Matt Blake, Mark Courtney, Annette Goulden, Dr. Susan Muto, Sr. Jo Robson and Prof. Peter Tyler) considered what Teresa might offer us today. What follows gives a flavour of some of the discussions and reflections that unfolded in the context of the Summit.

### *Ordinariness*

At the heart of the Summit was an invitation (extended by Sr. Jo) to experience Teresa's generosity (and spiritual solidarity) in openly sharing with us her 'ordinariness' – namely, her flaws, struggles and sinfulness. We were encouraged to set aside our established tendencies to regard Teresa's self-deprecating characterisations of herself (for instance, as 'base', 'low', 'wretched', 'mean-spirited') either as false-modesty or else as self-effacing literary devices (deployed as she crafted her writings so as not to provoke the wrath of the Inquisition). Instead, we were invited to recognise how Teresa, through these self-characterisations, is purposefully reaching out to us.

Sr. Jo suggested that Teresa wants us to understand the commonalities and connections between Teresa's lived experiences and our own. For, it is by understanding that Teresa starts with the same frailties as us, we can be assured (though we may be 'a mess') that we can proceed with courage, and in humility - trusting that God will bring about our deepest desire for Union, which is our common destiny.

We were also encouraged to recognise that our ordinary, everyday lives are potent crucibles of transformation. Teresa asks us to engage with, what Sr. Jo characterised as: 'the radical ordinariness of it all' – the struggles in prayer, the challenges encountered in relationships and the experiences of living in community. Indeed, Sr. Jo reminded us, true mystical union 'looks' unremarkable - lying beyond locutions and ecstasies and entailing a quiet unshakeable awareness of Christ's continual presence, which powerfully shapes service in the world.

### *Right Here, Right Now*

Cardinal Anders' contribution also highlighted the importance of attentiveness to the seemingly mundane. He encouraged us to participate in the 'sacrament of the present moment' – opening up to God, and His glorious eternity, in the everyday and the here and now. He cautioned us regarding the perils of living outside our current reality (daydreaming and wishing for things to be other/different) and squandering the possibilities inherent in the preciousness of the present moment. Wistful 'If onlys...' do not serve us, Cardinal Anders noted, rather they detract us from: meeting God in his creation; encountering Him in each other and from finding the 'traces' of God that surround us. Thus in the midst of our complex lives the call is to simplicity - the repeated turning of our eyes to God such that a loving attentiveness to God becomes the atmosphere of our lives. Even a small uplifting of our heart is pleasing to God and we must make a chapel of our heart, right here and right now.

### *Wisdom For Today*

Through the panel discussion, participants in the Summit were invited to consider Teresa both as a Doctor of the Church and a physician of the soul. Through the reflections that unfolded we considered anew her genius – which is to teach from her own lived-experience, grounded in her formative knowledge of the human condition.

It became clear that this is why Teresa still speaks so powerfully to us today. Teresa understands the afflictions of the soul (and offers apposite guidance), challenging us to enter into the fullness of our own lives and humanity through prayer and in relationship. It is in the midst of such radical ordinariness we find that our souls are extraordinary palaces, in which dwells the divinity of God. Renewed in Teresa's presence, through the Summit, we must go and find Him.