

## **Letter from the Father General on the first centenary of the death of St. Teresa of the Andes (12<sup>th</sup> April, 2020)**

On 12<sup>th</sup> April, 2020 we will celebrate the first centenary of the death of St. Teresa of the Andes, a young Chilean Carmelite from Chile, who entered Carmel in the city of Los Andes on 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1919 and died on 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1920, at the age of twenty, having completed eleven months of religious life.

In a short space of time, she followed an admirable path of sanctity and bequeathed some beautiful writings to us, in which she narrates her experiences and her spiritual journey.

With this in mind, I want to offer the whole Order, Carmelite nuns, friars and seculars, a few points of reflection in the way of an invitation to imitate the life of this saint, known as the ‘little Teresa’ of Chile.

There are four points developed in my reflection, following the chronological order of her spiritual journey.

### *Life of witness: a few biographical details*

Although she is well known as Teresa of the Andes, her name in religion is Teresa of Jesus, like that of our Holy Mother, to whom she professed great devotion. Although the name seemed too great for her, she wanted to be called Teresa de Jesus, “so that Jesus could say to her that she is Jesus of Teresa”.

She was born on 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1900 in Santiago de Chile. Her parents were Miguel Fernández Jaraquemada and Lucía Solar Armstrong, of Spanish origins. On her baptismal certificate she received the name Juanita Enriqueta Josefina de los Sagrados Corazones Fernández Solar. She is known as Juanita and is the fourth of six brothers and sisters who adore her. She is the most beloved sister of them all.

Together with Rebecca, her youngest sister, who would follow her to the same Carmel of the Los Andes after her death, she receives an excellent formation in culture at the School of the Sacred Heart, one of the best schools in Santiago de Chile, where she is an outstanding student and is there till the age of eighteen. But she most especially receives a superb Christian formation in the heart of a very Catholic, comfortable family, since God “did not want her to be born poor”, although He would make her poor for Himself: “She only loves Jesus”

During the summer holidays, she spends long periods on the family ranch or estate in Chacabuco, near Los Andes. She spends long periods in front of the Blessed Sacrament, gives religious instruction to the children of families who work on the ranch, participates in the missions which are organized for these families, tends to the workers on the estate and comes to the aid of the poor who come to the door.

She also does sports and with her friends goes for long rides on horseback through the Andean Cordillera; she is a ‘consummate horse-rider’, but the ideal of Carmel, which she is thinking of embracing one day, is ever present on the horizon.

When she has finished her studies, she discloses to her sister Rebecca one of her best kept secrets: her desire to be a religious. She has to fight for it and to overcome many difficulties, amongst which is the opposition especially of her father, who idolized his most beloved daughter and the opposition of her brothers and sister who did not understand her vocation.

But she does not desist from her plan. On 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1917, she writes for the first time to the Carmel of Los Andes, expressing her desire to become a Carmelite. On 11<sup>th</sup> January, 1919, accompanied by her mother, Lucía, who never stops supporting her, she visits the Prioress of the Convent, Mother Angélica Teresa, and begins preparations for her entry, despite resistance from the family that this implies. She enters Carmel on 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1919.

On her journey to Carmel, she feels that she is being guided by her spiritual directors, but above all by the Teachers of Carmel, a beacon of light to her.

### *Her divine Teacher & the Teachers of Carmel*

It must be said that her Teacher par excellence is Christ himself, who instructs her interiorly, as she asserts repeatedly in her *Diary*:

“It was in 1906 when Jesus began to take my heart for Himself [...]. Jesus, from the first embrace (First Communion, 1910), did not let me go and took me for his own. Every day, I took Communion and talked with Jesus for long periods of time. But I was especially devoted to the Virgin. I told her everything. I felt her voice within me”.

Jesus is her Gospel and Mary the mirror in which He is reflected.

She also felt illuminated by the Teachers of Carmel. Teresa of the Andes drinks at their sources, the best of their spirituality, which sheds new lights on her journey to Carmel. They, without doubt, constitute a singular point of reference for the discovery of her vocation, her message and her mission in the Church. She sends us back to these sources: Teresa of Jesus, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity.

Juanita read the *Life and Way of Perfection* of St. Teresa of Jesus when she was very young and it made a profound impression on her. We can find various echoes in her writings, particularly about Teresian prayer and the four ways of watering the garden (cfr. *Book of the Life*, 11).

Later, a few months before her entry into Carmel, she read the *Summa Spiritual* by St. John of the Cross, published in Burgos in 1900. Reading it enkindled the flame of love which had already been ignited in her heart. In the light of what she read, she discovered many of the experiences which she had previously experienced.

As well as reading these books, she also read Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity: two figures who were much closer to her, almost contemporaries, whose influence has changed the nature of contemporary spirituality. Teresa of the Andes confessed that her life is very similar to the two that of the French Carmelite Saints. In fact, there are many similar expressions and resonances in her writings.

### *The legacy of her experience: Diary & Letters*

Teresa of the Andes is not a writer in the strict sense, nor does she write so that her work will one day be published; she writes simply to communicate her experiences and to share her feelings and interior movements to her interlocutors.

With this intention, in September, 1915, she begins to write her *Diary* while she is a pupil at boarding school and finishes it in Carmel. She describes the path her life takes, although with many interruptions. The pages are aglow with an extraordinary freshness, in which her whole life and experience is addressed.

She has also left us a beautiful legacy of 165 *Letters*, allocated as follows: 84 to her family; 37 to friends; 23 to her spiritual directors; 21 to the Prioress of Los Andes. They are letters written with a great deal of tenderness and transparency, which convey peace, happiness, consolation and hope, but above all, love; a love to all, who find their wellspring in God and in the contemplative prayer of Carmel.

They express her deepest feelings of love, affection, closeness; a reflection of her sensitivity and her human and spiritual maturity. In them, she threshes out her own experiences with an astounding simplicity and transparency.

The letters she wrote to her father asking for his permission to enter Carmel, deserve a special mention; in the same way, those she wrote to her brother Lucho, explaining the meaning of her vocation to him; there are also those she wrote to her sister Rebecca, her closest confidant and to whom she first revealed the secret of her vocation.

Her letters are very similar to those of Thérèse of Lisieux to her sisters, telling them the secret of her way of spiritual childhood; and similar to those written by Elizabeth of the Trinity to her sister, Marguerite, sharing with her her personal mission of praise of glory. In the same way, Teresa of the Andes wanted to share her experience of love with her family and friends.

### *A light on the hilltop: the ecclesial irradiation of her message*

The spirituality of Teresa of the Andes reaches its zenith in the ecclesial recognition of her sainthood, when she was beatified by St. John Paul II on his visit to Santiago de Chile (3<sup>rd</sup> April, 1987) and canonized by the same Pope in St. Peter's Basilica (21<sup>st</sup> March, 1993).

In his beatification homily, he suggested that she is a fount of *infinite joy* and a *model of evangelical life for young people*. In the same year as her beatification, the remains of the Blessed were transferred to the new Convent of Auco (11 kilometres from Los Andes) and placed in the crypt of the sanctuary, which was inaugurated the following year. There huge pilgrimages of young people and devotees come every year from every corner of Chile and other South American countries.

The sanctuary of Teresa of the Andes has become a focus for the radiance of the spirituality of this young, Chilean Carmelite, who reaches out to the whole Church and crosses the great Andean Cordillera, like a ray of light which illumines our modern, secular society, which is seeking new meaning of life.

As John Paul II stated on the day of her canonization in the Basilica of St. Peter:

“God made shine forth in her in an admirable way the light of his son, Jesus Christ, so that she could be a beacon and guide to a world which seems to be blind to the splendour of the divine. In a secularized society which turns its back on God, this Chilean Carmelite whom to my great joy I present as a model of the perennial youth of the Gospel, gives the shining witness of a life which proclaims to the men and women of our day that it is in loving, adoring and serving God that the human creature finds greatness and joy, freedom and fulfilment. The life of Blessed Teresa cries out continually from within her cloister: "God alone suffices!".

In the light of these reflections, which I wanted to present to the Order, evoking the figure of Teresa of the Andes, I would like us to feel that we are invited by this ever youthful, Chilean Carmelite, to follow her path of sainthood. Celebrating it has to be a stimulus too to go more deeply into her writings and to spread her message, which is very pertinent for today's world.

I will finish by pointing out that this celebration is happening at the moment when we are on the path of charismatic reflection which we are undertaking during this sexennium. Without doubt, it will be possible to find in Teresa of the Andes, inspirations which enrich our reflections and will help us to reinvigorate our charism.