

[Multiformis Sapientia Dei, 27 settembre 1970 | Paolo VI](#)

**APOSTOLIC LETTER**

**MULTIFORMIS SAPIENTIA DEI**

**SAINT TERESA OF JESUS, VIRGIN OF AVILA,  
IS PROCLAIMED DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH**

**PAUL VI  
IN PERPETUAL MEMORY**

The manifold Wisdom of God sometimes reveals itself more manifestly to certain beloved disciples of Christ and to them, by arcane design and singular liberality, it is granted to understand "*the breadth and the length, and height and the depth... knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge*" (Eph 3:18). In fact, "the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the people of God and enriches it with virtues, but, "allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills, (1 Cor 12:11) He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and greater expansion of the Church" (LG 12).

Teresa of Jesus, great and noble virgin, and also reformer of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, was enriched by profusion of this divine abundance of sacred charisms. A woman of simple customs and ignorant of literary culture, she excelled so much in words and writings that these words can be referred to her: "in the full assembly she opened her mouth" (Sir 15:5), and she was rightly proclaimed a saint by holy men and also was venerated as a very sure guide and teacher by doctors of sacred sciences. Although she was involved in a great deal of business related to her duties, it was nevertheless seen that she constantly aspired to a better homeland, that is to say, to a heavenly homeland; almost always suffering in her body and laden with tribulations, she fearlessly faced any undertaking for the glory of God and for the benefit of Christ's Church.

Therefore, since this servant of God always has been exalted, whether for the extraordinary facts of her life, the rare virtues of her soul, or for the acumen of her spirit, we consider with certainty this fact a just and noble reason wherefore, as our predecessor Gregory XV's decree bestowed upon her the honours of the saints so that all the faithful of Christ might understand with what abundance God had filled his servant with the Holy Spirit (cf. Lett. Decr. *Omnipotens sermo*), so should we proclaim her – we do not doubt – a Doctor of the Church, first among women, especially for her knowledge and doctrine of divine things. In fact, we have faith and trust that

Teresa of Jesus, declared by solemn decree a teacher of Christian life, strongly will encourage the men of our time as well to cultivate above all that which favours the soul's love towards contemplation and the attainment of heavenly things.

Teresa was born in Avila, Spain, on 28 March 1515. Even as a child she gave a glimpse of what she one day would become because she tried to lead a hidden life in the gardens of her house, as she was willing to observe until death that which she often read about the martyrs of the early Church. After her mother's death at a young age, she procured help and protection from the Mother of God herself. It was therefore natural for her that from her childhood she wanted to consecrate herself totally to God and that, at the age of twenty, she went to the Carmelite monastery. Although she applied herself assiduously, by many sure indications, to the exercise of the virtues, she nevertheless began to relax her soul's early fervour and to move away from her purpose. Fortunately, she then was drawn with intensity to the consideration of heavenly realities and to doing the most perfect and greatly accepted works for God, following the exhortations of Peter of Alcantara, Louis Bertrand, Francis Borgia, John of Avila, and other saints. And she cultivated and completed this decision with magnanimity, as witnessed both by her confessors and by those who were useful to her in her life and works.

She seemed, however, to be called upon to sustain extraordinary tasks, to which her ingenuity and a certain natural inclination of her will led her. In fact, she was motivated by the constant and resolute intention to ensure that the monastery of her Order was governed according to the more ancient rule, which had fallen into disuse; and, with the approval of the Holy See, she brought this to a successful conclusion at the age of 47, after having consulted learned men and saints. When difficulties arose on all sides, she overcame them so courageously and persisted so firmly along the way that in a few years she founded many more monasteries in Spain. In addition, in order to provide the reformed monasteries of the nuns in a more appropriate way and to help the growth of the Church with apostolic works, she decided to call male religious subject to the Order of Carmel to a higher discipline of life as well, and she carried out her plan with the support and help of Saint John of the Cross.

After having thus founded and increased the order, she dedicated herself to training the pious women in the method of a holy life, whom she had welcomed daily in greater numbers so that they might live hidden and alone with God, address to him assiduous prayers for the Church, mortify their bodies with frequent and voluntary sufferings, be united with each other by affectionate kindness and charity in order to obey the special commandment of Christ. She was also an excellent incitement and example in the exercise of all the virtues. In fact, she was distinguished by prudence and evangelical simplicity, humility of spirit, obedience to superiors even in difficult things, contempt for herself, and a particular inclination for the good of others and, in order to help them, she did not hesitate to sacrifice herself and her things. She also led an austere and hard life, patient in adverse events, very grateful to God in happy ones. She also shone with ardent piety towards God, intimately moved by his love. Filled, in turn, by God with countless graces, nevertheless, she fully embraced the Church's counsels, valuing much more faithful and humble obedience to God's ministers than visions, revelations, and ecstasies. Because

of this assiduous familiarity with God, it is said that something radiant seemed to shine on her face that caused wonder and joy in everyone.

It was necessary to add to this the human virtues, which Teresa is said to have cultivated, because she made a strong effort to tell the truth, to keep her word, to fulfill her promises, to have a manner of speech, even a familiar one, that was full of joy and kindness. She truly excelled in what she had to do or sustain, in her greatness of mind, as well as in her equal esteem and respect for everyone. It should not be forgotten that among her commitments and continuous efforts she also found the time and strength to write excellent works, which seemed totally to demand and occupy the entire existence of a very active person, an acute and penetrating seeker of profound questions concerning God and heavenly things.

At Alba, a brief, fatal illness finally struck her, who had exhausted herself for so long and so actively, and it forced her to desist from other initiatives. The magnanimous mother died piously on 4 October 1582, repeatedly testifying to her obsequy as a most loving daughter for Christ's Church.

She, who during her life had been praised everywhere for her singular virtues, came after her death to the fore and was venerated with greater splendour. And it was rightly so that she should be given the honours of the blessed who dwell in heaven by Paul V, and the honours of the saints by Gregory XV, and that she should be proposed as an example of Christian and religious life, to whom everyone could turn their eyes. If we are attracted to imitate the holiness of this servant of God, we are taken with great admiration by the excellence of her teaching. In fact, although she had repeatedly declared her inability to understand and teach, she was nevertheless able to understand, teach and write, inspired by God, on very profound subjects, considering Christ the only source of her doctrine and almost a living book. With regard to this, it is above all a marvellous thing that Saint Teresa should have penetrated the mystery of Christ and the knowledge of the human soul with such acuity and sagacity so that her doctrine clearly indicates the certain presence and strength of a singular charism of the Spirit. For in this doctrine excels a very deep sense of reality, an intimate understanding of the mystery of the living God, of Christ the Saviour and the Church, a living experience of grace, which raises and develops nature, adorned with so many gifts. Hence, the supreme effectiveness and perennial authority of her doctrine, which extends beyond the confines of the Catholic Church and reaches even those who do not believe.

### **The writings - The humanity of Christ - Prayer**

Her magisterium was important not only for the life of the faithful but also, and in an active way, for that chosen and highly valuable section of theological knowledge that today is called spiritual theology. In fact, Teresa's writings are an abundant source of manifold experience, witness, spiritual penetration, from which all the scholars of this theology have widely drawn. These writings, although they have been created for different reasons and circumstances or according to a pre-established method, nevertheless form a harmonious and compact body of spiritual

doctrine. Thus in the volume entitled *Libro de su vida*, Teresa narrates the complex of deeds that the merciful God accomplished in her, explains their meaning, and holds them up before the eyes of her readers as an admirable "story of salvation". On the other hand, in the book called *Camino de Perfección*, she exposes the ascetic foundations of the theological life, that is, the principal virtues, as well as the necessity and degrees of prayer, including contemplative prayer, with excellent educational ability. Furthermore, in the book *Castillo Interior*, she examines the full and perfect development of divine life in man, who can become a sharer in the mystery of the Trinity and of Christ to the highest degrees of mystical experience. In the work commonly called *Libro de las Fundaciones*, Teresa recounts her apostolic undertakings and the labours she endured for the reform of her Order in favour of Christ's Church. In addition to this, her Letters, full of humanity, show the versatility of her intellect and soul as she strives to live actively the contemplative life destined for her and at the same time to participate in the religious and earthly affairs of the people of her time. Finally, in the notebook called *Relaciones*, her holy desire to submit her divine gifts completely to the authority of the Church shines forth. Since the centre of Teresa's spiritual doctrine is Christ who reveals the Father, unites us to him, and associates us with himself, the best foundations of this doctrine are Christian prayer as a life of love, and the Church, through which the kingdom of God is realised in us. Our union with Christ prepares us for the table of the Word of God, in the unceasing meditation on the Gospel, and for the table of His Body and Blood, through the sacrificial feast of the Eucharist. At both of these tables the humanity of Christ intimately engages the man who entrusts himself entirely to him, in the mystery of his death, resurrection, and glorious life with the Father. This is why Christ's most sacred humanity includes all our good and salvation. Teresa expresses this doctrine in the Book of Her Life in these words: "it is God's will, if we are to please Him and He is to grant us great favours, that this should be done through His most sacred Humanity" (22:6). For man will reach perfection only then, when he can say with Paul: *My life is Christ* (cf. *Interior Castle*, VII, 2:5). On the other hand, the life of prayer which Teresa teaches in the same Book of Her Life (8:5), can be valued as a life of love, since prayer is that necessity of friendship, for which we speak at length alone with God by whom we know we are loved. God invites man and never ceases to urge him to embrace his friendship and have closer communion with him every day. Man strives to correspond to this friendship with the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and to be found worthy of it. Now, so much less does greatness of prayer and contemplation alienate mankind from as much as regards the kingdom of God and the Church, but rather impels him to it with greater sympathy and ardent desire. This is shown both by the wonderful life and works that Teresa accomplished for the good of the Church, driven precisely by the fullness of contemplation, and by the witness that she enunciated as the foundation of her doctrine and that, dying, she repeated with full truth and joy of heart: "I thank You, Lord, because I die a daughter of the Church".

Since these things are so, as early as 15 October 1967, we publicly declared our intention to include Saint Teresa of Jesus in the catalogue of the Doctors of the Church. And this intention was based not only on Our familiarity with the doctrine of this holy woman but also on the great esteem that our predecessors in the Roman Pontificate, who seemed to anticipate without doubt Our solemn proclamation, expressed with their words over and over again on the excellence of her doctrine. Among these is Gregory XV, who in the Bull of Canonisation gave the doctrine of Saint

Teresa this testimony: "The Almighty . . . filled her so much with the spirit of intelligence that . . . he irrigated her with the rain of heavenly wisdom". The comparison that Benedict XIII made in the Bull of Canonisation of Saint John of the Cross, between the same saint and Teresa is also very important: ". . . . in explaining with his writings the mysterious secrets of mystical theology, he was divinely instructed, not differing from Teresa"; with this comparison, one doctor approaches another doctor. Moreover, the declaration of Saint Pius X is very famous: "This woman was so great and so useful to the salutary education of Christians that she seems to be either not much or not at all inferior to those great fathers and doctors of the Church, whom we have remembered (i.e., Gregory the Great, John Chrysostom, Anselm of Aosta)". And the Supreme Pontiff himself, in his Apostolic Letter *Ex quo Nostrae* of 7 March 1914, did not hesitate to say: "Therefore, the Church is rightly accustomed to attribute to this virgin the honours proper to doctors". Benedict XV then, speaking to the Cardinals on 24 December 1921, said that Teresa had united to the crown of holiness the wreath of doctrine. Pius XI in the Apostolic Constitution *Summorum Pontificum* of 25 July 1922 called her "*sapientissimam matrem*" (mother most wise) and "*altissimam contemplationis magistra*" (supreme teacher of contemplation). Pius XII, in his speech on 23 November 1951, declared that the Holy Spirit had provided the whole Church with the treasury of a spiritual doctrine through the work of Saint Teresa. Finally, John XXIII, Our immediate predecessor, precisely in his Apostolic Letter of 16 July 1962, called her the singular light of the Church.

And the saints who, by the heavenly counsel of God's providence, had friendships with Teresa, never separated veneration of her holiness from her divinely inspired doctrine. And they were certainly men of great fame, such as Peter of Alcantara, Francis Borgia, John of the Cross, Juan de Ribera, John of Avila. All of them had her as a teacher of contemplation, enlightened by God, or to express ourselves more exactly, teacher of teachers of the spirit. Later there were saints who were Doctors of the Church who venerated her with equal esteem, such as Francis de Sales and Alphonsus de Liguori and other saints, such as Anthony Mary Claret, Charles of Sezze, Vincent Pallotti.

The thought that the Virgin of Avila could be esteemed a Doctor never ceased to exist in the Church. Suffice it to mention the opinion of the theologians of Salamanca who, since there was a controversy on the subject, wrote openly in 1657: "Now our blessed Mother Teresa has the halo of a doctor and the Church receives and approves her singular doctrine . . . as coming from heaven". So with the great desire that the holiness and doctrine of such a great woman may be of greater use to all, it seemed good to us that we can attribute to her the cult of doctor of the Church which until now has been attributed only to holy men. However, we have entrusted to the Sacred Congregation for Rites the task of discussing the matter with the greatest diligence. And [this Congregation] after having previously made use of the work and the opinion of the learned, in the ordinary assembly of 20 December 1967 proposed that the point on which it was undecided should be examined, whether the title and the cult of Doctor of the Church could be attributed not only to men but also to women who had contributed to the common good of the faithful for holiness and excellent doctrine, according to the norms and decrees of Pope Benedict XIV. On 21 March 1968, we ratified and confirmed the thought of the Cardinals, Prelates, and Officials present, who assured that this was possible. Since the beloved son Michelangelo of Saint Joseph,

General Superior of the Discalced Carmelite Order, expressing his own desire and that of his Order, had asked that we proclaim Teresa of Jesus Doctor of the Church and since many Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Superiors of Religious Orders, and of Secular Congregations and Institutes had also asked the same thing, and other very learned people from Universities and Higher Institutes, we sent these prayers and wishes to the Sacred Congregation of Rites to evaluate them, and it prepared the so-called special "positio", of great importance, which examined the whole matter with care and diligence. When the Cardinals in charge of the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, which had been established in the meantime, examined the matter with great care, they expressed their opinion in the Ordinary Assembly of the same Congregation held in the Vatican Basilica on 15 July 1969, after hearing both the report of our Venerable Brother Cardinal Arcadio Larraona, Promoter of this cause and the opinion of the Official Prelates; they all agreed that Saint Teresa of Jesus was certainly worthy of being inscribed in the catalogue of the Doctors of the Church. Finally, after having been informed on 21 July of last year and after having carefully examined everything, we approved and confirmed the deliberation of the same Congregation, establishing that it should be brought to completion with solemn rites.

And this happened today, with the help of God and with the approval of the whole Church. In fact, in Saint Peter's Basilica, with the participation of legions of faithful from all nations and above all from Spain, in the presence of many Cardinals and Sacred Prelates of the Roman Curia and of the Catholic Church, who ratify all the decrees, who adhere to the requests of the members of the Discalced Carmelite Order and who willingly and graciously hear the wishes of the other supplicants, during the divine sacrifice we pronounced these words: "WITH TRUE KNOWLEDGE AND THOUGHTFUL DECISION AND FOR THE FULLNESS OF OUR APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY WE DECLARE SAINT TERESA OF JESUS, VIRGIN OF AVILA, DOCTOR OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH".

After saying these words and thanking God together with those present, we gave a speech about the marvellous holiness and doctrine of this doctor of the Church, and we sacrificed the divine victim at the high altar of the basilica.

We now decide in this regard that Our Letter should be preserved devoutly and that it should have its full completion in the future, and that it should be judged and defined as such in the proper way and that it should be vain and without foundation that which is different surrounding this by anyone who might be involved, with whatever authority, consciously or out of ignorance. Given in Rome, at St. Peter's, under the ring of the Fisherman, on 27 September of the year of the Lord 1970, the eighth of our Pontificate.

**PAUL VI**