# *CARMELUS TOTUS NAZARENUS EST*

## *SAINT TERESA AND THE FAMILY OF NAZARETH*

### *I PARTE – V32, 11*[1]

*a la una puerta nos guardaría San José y Nuestra Señora*
*la otra, y Cristo andaría con nosotras*

*Santa Teresa de Jesus*

In this two-part article we aim to propose a reflexion on the Family of Nazareth's place in Saint Teresa of Avila. S. Castro, in his study *El fulgor de la palabra,* briefly expands on the idea that the «Carmel, as the Church, come from the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph»[2], taking Teresa as a prime example, amongst others.

She assumes in her Carmelite communities, for example, the poverty of the «manger in Bethlehem, where Christ was born» (*The Way of Perfection*[3] 2, 9). She also urges her sisters to have the same gratitude of Jesus and Mary with Joseph (*The Book of her Life*[4] 6, 8). She also sees them as the protectors of the Carmel (L32, 11) and her relationship with both of them is a pathway to receive God's salvation (L33, 14-15). In regard to this last dimension, it's worth mentioning how Teresa recognizes Mary and Joseph to be an *image*, an icon, which inspired her to love and which, for that very reason, 'saved' her: 'often, when I was completely lost[5], through her intercession God would restore me to health' (*Spiritual Relations*[6] 30).

It is true that the explicit references to the Family of Nazareth are few[7], but even tough they are few they make up for it in quality for they are profoundly meaningful. Of the five we have identified, we have singled out L32, 11 and L33, 14–15 as the most important for our discussion. In this first part, we intend to provide an introduction and examine L32, 11; in the second part, we will reflect on L33, 14–15 and conclude this study.

### *Teresa's Itinerary*

To provide the proper context for V32, 11, we feel it is appropriate to briefly outline Saint Teresa's journey leading up to the foundation of the Carmel of Saint Joseph. In this regard, by examining a series of key episodes in Teresa's life up to that point[8], we can see how various important aspects of her life are interwoven. We highlight her relationships with Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We do not have the space here for a more detailed analysis but feel it to be important to note her awakening to virtue, a «Marian memory»[9] according to T. Alvaréz, or Teresa's early orphanhood. Her

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[1] All the quotes, either it being of the completed works of Saint Teresa or of studies on her writings, are done by us from the original languages.

[2] Secundino Castro*, El fulgor de la palabra* (EDE: Madrid, 2012) 129

[3] Hereafter cited as "P".

[4] Hereafter cited as "L".

[5] The original spanish is more illustrative: *yendo perdida del todo..*

[6] Hereafter cited as "R".

[7] We have counted five such instances: L6, 8; L32, 11; L33, 14-15; P2, 9; R30.

[8] The awakening to virtue (c. 1521, L1); the flight to Moorish lands (1524, L1); premature orphanhood (1528, L1); entry into the Convent of the Incarnation (1535, L3); illness and healing (1539–42, L6); mediocrity and a return to prayer (1542–54, L7–8); her conversion (1554, L9); the experience of Christ, the living book (1559, L26); the vision of hell (1560, L32, 1–9); the first vision of Christ (June 1560, L27); the evening of a September sunset (September 1560, L32, 10); the vision of Mount Carmel as the House of Nazareth (Autumn 1560, L32, 11); the second vision of Christ (January 1561, L28); the vision of the Holy Family (August 1561, L33).

[9] T. Alvaréz, *El primer texto mariano de Santa Teresa* in Estudios Teresianos III (1996) 456

long experience of years of illness and paralysis, finally brought to an end through the intercession of Saint Joseph. Or, indeed, the various visions of Christ that guide Teresa, leading her to discover the *most sacred, resurrected humanity* of the Saviour. This introduces us to another dimension that is deeply formative in Teresa's journey: the desire for salvation, both her own and that of others.

Indeed, in *the Book of Her Life*, Teresa tells us *her* story, «but as a story of salvation, and she does so through an extensive "account" that is simultaneously authentic narrative theology»[10]. She effectively understands herself and her life through her experience of Christ, the Saviour; consequently, this dimension of her relationship with Christ can be seen as a key point capable of deciphering the experiences, decisions and episodes of her life. We understand *salvation* as «the state of an individual or a people living in an intimate relationship with God, which, in turn, permanently marks a new life destined to open up and develop»[11].

We believe that the passages already mentioned, relating to the origins of the Discalced Carmelites and the Family of Nazareth, bring together these four Teresian coordinates – Jesus, Mary, Joseph salvation.

### *Vision of Carmel as the House of Nazareth* (Autumn 1560, L32, 11)

«One September evening in that blessed year of 1560, after the usual group of friends had gathered in Doña Teresa's cell (...), they began to discuss the topic of the day: the situation of the religious orders, to whom the king turned in times of crisis. Attention focused on what directly concerned that monastery»[12]:

> «Whilst I was with a certain person, she asked me and the others whether we might not be inclined to become nuns in the manner of the Discalced! (...) As I was already with such desires, I began to look into the matter (…). On the other hand, I could not quite make up my mind because I felt very content in the monastery where I was (…). We decided, however, to entrust this matter wholeheartedly to God» (V32, 10).

E. Martínez points out that we must not reduce this difficulty experienced by Teresa to a mere whim; after all, it was at the Incarnation of Avila that she began her journey with Christ, and so the bond is only natural[13]. These are the normal growing pains felt when God asks more of us. It is within this context of difficulty and discernment that, in the autumn of 1560, Teresa will have the vision of the Carmel as the House of Nazareth (V32, 11)[14]:

> «One day, after having received Holy communion, His Majesty insistently ordered me to go forth [with the reform] with all my strength. And He made me great promises saying that the monastery would not be left undone and God would be greatly served through it. He ordered me to name it Saint Joseph, for one of the doors would be guarded by him, the other by Our Lady, and Christ would walk with us; the monastery would be a star that gives its light of great splendour by itself. In spite of the religious orders being in decline, I should not think that He was poorly served by them, for what would become of the world if there were no religious? He instructed me to tell all this to my confessor and that He would ask him not to oppose it or prevent me from doing it» (L32, 11).

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[10] T. Alvaréz, *Libro de la Vida* in Diccionário Teresiano, dir. T. Alvaréz, 2ª ed., vrs. *ebook* (Monte Carmelo: Burgos, 2000)
[11] Andre Brouillet, *Cartografía de la salvación - enseñanzas teresianas sobre soteriología* in Revista de Espiritualidad 76 (2017) 419
[12] Otger e Efrén de la Madre de Dios, *Tiempo y vida de Santa Teresa* n.º 557
[13] Cf. Emilio Martinez, oral quotation taken from a course taught at the Teresianum.
[14] Teresa does not date this vision, but according to T. Alvaréz (in the chronology in *Obras Completas*, Monte Carmelo: Burgos, 2017) we know that she went to speak to Father Pedro Ibañez (V32, 16) in the autumn of 1560 following this vision, from which it can be inferred that the vision must have taken place before that conversation.

The paragraph 11 of Chapter 32 of *Life* is titled by T. Álvarez as «the charism of foundress»[15] and he declares:

> «Teresa wished to make expressly clear the transcendent origin of her entire endeavour as a foundress, (…) [and, to this end], she also reiterates her inner aversion to the present "order", 'commission': 'I felt a great sorrow' (…). But the 'commission' proves irresistible to her. She devotes the core of the chapter to this theme. It is one of the most decisive passages in the entire book»[16].

This passage is also regarded by F. Léthel as the most important paragraph for the Teresian reform. He comments on it in the spiritual exercises he preached to the Roman Curia in 2011:

> «Another brief text, yet one of immense theological significance. It concerns, in fact, the Holy Family as the perfect ecclesiological icon. (...) Indeed, the essential reality of the Church – which is communion with Jesus in the Holy Spirit, that is, faith, hope and charity – has already been lived out in the most perfect, exemplary and unsurpassable way by Mary and Joseph»[17].

It is worth emphasising how F. Léthel develops the idea of bringing together the origins of the Church and of Carmel in Nazareth. Teresa seems to take as her model the way in which Mary and Joseph welcomed the humanity of Jesus into their home, using this to structure the Discalced Carmel. She will draw inspiration from other biblical images, such as the house in Bethany (CV 17, 5) or the school of Christ (CE 20,1), «but it will be Jesus who asks that, in the monastery of St Joseph of Ávila, the cradle of the Discalced Order, the life He lived in Nazareth be lived»[18], as M. del Pilar points out. In this sense, «this vision of the Church within the Holy Family, with Jesus in the middle, Jesus at the centre and under the protective watchful care of Mary and Joseph, has universal value for every person, man or woman, for every family, as well as for every community»[19].

With this in mind, we can now continue with the commentary on the paragraph. Firstly, the Eucharistic context of the vision should be emphasised: *having received Holy Communion*. It is from the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist that Teresa receives the strength to carry forward a project that was proving difficult for her. It is also from the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist that *His Majesty* assures her of the fruits of that project. *God would* be *greatly served* through it; that is to say, 1) Jesus would be greatly served and loved by the Carmelite sisters and by those whom they inspired with their fervour, and 2) God would make great use of the Carmelite Order to communicate His love, as we can see in the promise that it *would be a star that gives its light of great splendour by itself*. This second, implicit meaning is a consequence of the first, as indicated by the use of the expression 'to give of itself'. After all, how could the foundation of St Joseph 'give of itself' this love of God, this light of great splendour? Let us consider what Jesus tells Teresa immediately beforehand.

He has just said that He will be well served by the Sisters of the Carmel and commands that the Carmel be called "St Joseph", that it should have Him at one gate and Our Lady at the other, and that Christ – Himself, therefore – would walk between the two, with the sisters. Commenting on this passage, M. del Pilar notes that

> «the Lord places the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph on an equal footing; both must protect and assist, so that they may live in such a way that Jesus is pleased with them. (…) [And she continues:] placing the

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[15] T. Alvaréz, *Comentarios al Libro de la Vida* (Monte Carmelo: Burgos, 2009) 288
[16] T. Alvaréz, *Comentarios al Libro de la Vida* (2009) 288-89
[17] François-Marie Lethél, *La luce di Cristo nel Cuore della Chiesa* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Roma, 2011) 282
[18] María del Pilar, *Las Constituciones de los frailes realizan una buena condensación del carisma del Carmelo Teresiano* (2020) in https://carmeloteresajuan.wordpress.com/2020/07/12/las-constituciones-de-los-frailes-realizan-una-buena-condensacion-del-carisma-del-carmelo-teresiano (consulted in 24/07/2026)
[19] François-Marie Lethél, *La luce di Cristo nel Cuore della Chiesa* (2011) 282-83

> Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph on an equal footing constitutes a specific enrichment of the Teresian Carmel in the way in which, until then, the charism of the Carmelite Order had been lived»[20].

It is true that «Teresa contemplates Jesus in practically every aspect of public life, but she always does so in the light of Easter, just as the disciples contemplated Him (...): "for the most part, the Lord would appear to me Resurrected..."»[21] (L29, 4), «I'd see him in his glorified flesh» (L29, 4). Indeed, we shall see later, when we examine V 33, 14–15 in greater depth, that Teresa experiences this icon of the Holy Family, centred on the risen Christ.

Thus, yes, the Discalced Carmel is born of the Holy Family, though with certain nuances. In Teresa's experience, it is above all the risen Christ who stands at the centre, between Mary and Joseph. It is from this union with Him, through the intercession of Mary and Joseph – as we shall see in the second part – that the Carmel would radiate a light of great splendour: Christ, «in his glorified flesh» (L29, 4), is the light of the world!

We conclude this first part by noting the importance of the 1561 vision, recounted in L28, for Saint Teresa's understanding of the risen Christ. According to S. Castro, this second experience of Christ (the first is recounted in L27) was "a school of incarnation"[22]: Teresa finds herself immersed in the concrete life of Jesus. Whilst in the vision of V27 «the Humanity and the Person of Christ made themselves present, in a segmented manner, in Teresa's spirit (…) [in L28] the perception develops towards normal spheres and dimensions[,] incorporating into the feast the whole of Teresa's humanity, with her sensory perception and corporeality»[23]. He has hands, a face... in short, he has a body which is more than just a body: it is *a glorious, resurrected body*. Finally, the texts suggest that Christ focused Teresa's attention on His «glorified flesh» (V29, 4) because «the flesh is the axis of salvation»[24], as Tertullian teaches us. Let us bear this in mind as we move on to the second part of our study.

Frei Pedro da Sagrada Família

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[20] María del Pilar, *Las Constituciones de los frailes* (2020) in https://carmeloteresajuan.wordpress.com/2020/07/12/las-constituciones-de-los-frailes-realizan-una-buena-condensacion-del-carisma-del-carmelo-teresiano (consultado em 24/07/2026)

[21] C. García, *La experiencia de Dios en el Libro de la Vida de santa Teresa de Jesús* in Scripta Theologica 47 (2015) 432

[22] Oral quotation from S. Castro

[23] T. Alvaréz, *Jesucristo en la experiencia de Santa Teresa* in Estudios Teresianos vol. III (1996) 27

[24] Tertuliano, *De carnis resurrectione,* 8, 3