

# Coming to Terms with Disability and Suffering: The Personal Testimony of a Fifteenth Century Spanish Nun

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## **Introduction**

Teresa de Cartagena, a little-known nun of fifteenth century Spain, held strong views as to how disability and suffering could be interpreted and accepted. In particular, her concept of disability as a just punishment, or ultimately as a valued gift from God, occupied her intense attention and written legacy. Some six centuries later, where, according to the World Health Organization,<sup>1</sup> an estimated one billion people in the world live with some form of disability, the challenges faced by Teresa still find some parallel in contemporary society. Many people with a disability struggle to come to terms with their condition and, unfortunately, some also accept the suggestion that their disability is connected with sin and punishment. In this context, the views developed by Teresa invite re-examination and critical assessment.

How long Teresa lived, where she died or where she was buried is not known. That some record of Teresa's life and philosophy should be available to readers in the twenty-first century is remarkable in itself as a woman writer in the late medieval era.<sup>2</sup> Again, it is fortunate that her two short texts, *Grove of the Infirm* and *Wonder at the Works of God*, survived in manuscript form long enough to be copied by one Pero Lopez del Trigo sometime around 1481. The English translations referenced in this article

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation, *World Report On Disability* (2011), p. 11. Available online at [http://www.who.int/disabilities/world\\_report/2011/en/](http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/).

<sup>2</sup> For more on this genre, see Ronald Surtz, *Writing Women in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1995).

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were made by Dayle Seidensspinner-Nunez.<sup>3</sup> To further place this literary achievement in some perspective, a century would pass before that much better-known Spanish nun, Teresa de Avila (1515-82), would produce her spiritual masterpiece, the *Interior Castle*.

It is known that Teresa de Cartagena was a member of an influential family who had made a successful conversion from a Jewish background. As a *conversa* this was not without its challenges in late medieval Spain, but it is generally agreed that Teresa became a member of the Franciscan Order (possibly later Cistercian), probably living in a convent house in Burgos. At around the age of twenty Teresa became profoundly deaf and in addition was subject throughout her life to other unidentified causes of suffering. By her own description, Teresa was overcome by a sense of despair and rejection, feelings which were intense, personal, and were to be endured over a long period. In what was typically colourful, and sometimes rather exaggerated language, she likened her condition to having been banished to a desert island as an outcast:

A ... cloud of temporal and human sadness covered the borders of my life and with a thick whirlwind of anguished sufferings carried me off to an island ... where I have lived for many years—if life this can be called.<sup>4</sup>

In considering Teresa's disability, it is relevant to note that she was not born deaf and that this condition did not reach its full extent until her late teenage years. This transition from hearing to profound deafness would have compounded the impact of her disability. When eventually profoundly deaf, Teresa seemed unwilling to engage in any form of artificial communication such as signing or lip reading. In effect, Teresa retreated into a silent and isolated world of her own. In addition, and to further compound this condition of isolation, whether self-imposed or not, Teresa elected to refrain from speaking although she was perfectly able to do so. Quite simply, in the context of resigning to her disability she declared herself no longer interested in hearing or speaking to anyone who may have tried to communicate with her. As she explains:

when I find myself in the company of others, I am completely forsaken,  
for I cannot profit from the joy of companionship nor from the speech of

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<sup>3</sup> Dayle Seidensspinner-Nunez, *The Writings of Teresa de Cartagena* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998). Her translations of Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove of the Infirm*, appears on pp. 23-85 and *Wonder at the Works of God*, pp. 86-112.

<sup>4</sup> Seidensspinner-Nunez (trans.), *Grove of the Infirm*, p. 23 (hereafter *Grove*).

those around me nor from myself. My sense escapes me, for it is too busy feeling the inordinate pain that I feel when my reason abandons me with the reasonable torment it endures...And where hearing fails, what good is speech? One is left dead and completely isolated.<sup>5</sup>

This brief biographical record is indeed unrelentingly gloomy. The self-portrait is of a woman subject to profound deafness, suffering other unspecified illnesses, and, as later recounted in some detail, regarding herself as an object of humiliation and contempt, rejected by friends, and even it appears by her own family. As a general source of advice and support for others living with a disability, then or now, this perception is hardly helpful or encouraging. Further, and as a matter which is somewhat puzzling, Teresa gives no indication that she is writing in the context of a cloistered nun. At no time does she refer to her sister nuns, nor her Order, nor any reference to the Daily Offices or convent routine. For all intents and purposes, Teresa depicts herself as cut-off and suffering alone, withdrawn metaphorically to that island which she named “The Scorn of Mankind & Outcast of the People,” itself a clear reference to Psalm 22:6: “But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Teresa finds cathartic release through *The Grove of the Infirm***

It was, then, in this context that Teresa found comfort and personal spiritual direction in writing her short treatise, *Grove of the Infirm*. In turn, through her extended meditation, Teresa transforms her island of “exile and shadowy banishment” into “a good and healthful dwelling place.”<sup>7</sup> Her hitherto desperate loneliness and sense of social isolation becomes transformed, if not rationalised, as kind and comforting. The isolation on her desert island which had once been so oppressive is now welcomed.

When I look at my suffering in temporal terms, it seems very painful and anguished, but when I turn my thought from these concerns, drawing it to my breast, and see the solitude that my suffering imposes, separating me from worldly transactions, I call it a kind solitude, a blessed solitude, a solitude that isolates me from dangerous sins and surrounds me with pure

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<sup>5</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> While Teresa de Cartagena’s Biblical quotations were drawn from the Vulgate Bible, unless otherwise stated all quotations in this article are equivalent verses from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, pp. 23, 24.

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blessings, a solitude that removes me from things harmful and dangerous to both my body and soul.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout her treatise Teresa is clearly struggling with conflicting interpretations of disability and suffering as, on the one hand, a punishment for sin and the rightful object of derision and rejection, but on the other hand as a gift from God to divert her from sin. As a consequence of this struggle, Teresa is intent on rewriting her experience of disability and suffering as a change from what she once called her “crucifixion” to what she came to regard as her “resurrection.”<sup>9</sup> A welcome product of this process is to allow Teresa to confront and refute the proposition that her disability and suffering are a direct punishment from God for her sins. This disability-punishment link obviously exerts a strong claim. Early in the *Grove*, Teresa attests quite clearly “that this suffering is given to me by His hand,”<sup>10</sup> and that sin will be followed by punishment—in her case this has taken the form of her disability and attendant suffering. Furthermore, even if her disability takes the form of punishment for this Teresa is thankful, for with God’s help:

I am already cut off from human voices, for my ears cannot hear; my gossiping tongue is already silenced, since because of my deafness it cannot speak ... And I would have willingly endured this suffering from birth, so that no words that may have offended or disserved God could ever enter the cloisters of my ears.<sup>11</sup>

This theme of the acceptance of disability and suffering as God’s punishment for sin would have been well-known to Teresa. She frequently quotes from Job and would certainly have been familiar with, for example, the (rather unhelpful) advice from Job’s friend, Eliphaz the Temanite:

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. (Job 4:7-9)

Examples from the Bible of divine punishment inflicted upon sinners would have come readily to Teresa’s attention, with some struck blind (Genesis 19:11), rendered mad (Deuteronomy 28:28), inflicted with incurable disease (2 Chronicles 21:18-19) and so on. In a number of Gospel references, an assumed link between sin and disability is clearly evident.

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<sup>8</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 29.

Jesus' disciples assume that the man born blind from birth was rendered such as a result of his sins or perhaps those of his parents (John 9:2). While in this particular instance Jesus assured his disciples that this was not the case, elsewhere, however, his responses are open to a different interpretation. For example, after restoring a paralysed man who was being carried about by friends, Jesus said to him: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). Similarly, by the Sheep Gate pool in Jerusalem, Jesus commanded a paralysed man to stand up and walk, but was to subsequently speak to him: "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more so that nothing worse happens to you" (John 5:14). Thus, in this context, it is understandable that Teresa was influenced by the view that only those who deserve to do so will suffer pain and such suffering must surely come from a just God. Furthermore, according to this logic, the persistence of suffering and pain is a clear consequence of the sufferer's fault, for the longer one suffers the more this is an indication of that person's guilt.

Teresa would also have been open to the influence of prominent Church Fathers, none more so than Augustine of Hippo to whom she makes frequent references throughout the *Grove of the Infirm*, and also in its accompanying text, *Wonder at the Works of God*. For Augustine, all humans were born sinful as a consequence of the original Fall of Mankind ("Indeed I was born guilty, a sinner my mother conceived me" Psalm 51:5) and all calamity, disability and suffering was to be interpreted as the result of original sin drawing justifiable punishment from God. By way of example, Augustine, in his *Answer to the Pelagians II*, in a chapter on "The Miseries of the Flesh that Little Ones Suffer," argued that even being an innocent newborn did not remove one from the consequence of original sin. In a comment which Teresa would have found personally applicable, Augustine refers specifically to the disadvantage of being deaf:

Tell me, then, because of what wrong are such innocents sometimes born blind and other times deaf? This defect is even a hindrance to faith itself, as the apostle bears witness, when he says, Faith comes from hearing (Romans 10:17).<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in a chapter on "The Case of Certain Idiots and Simpletons," Augustine clearly links disability with prior sin: "Who would not affirm

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine of Hippo, 'Answer to the Pelagians', in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, part 1, vol. 24, ed. John Rotelle (New York: New York City Press, 1998), p. 344.

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that those who had sinned previous to this life with an especial amount of enormity, who deserve so to lose all mental light that they are born with faculties akin to brute animals.”<sup>13</sup>

Augustine would have, in turn, approved of Teresa’s reference to a God dispensing punishment as a just father in order to correct the faults of a sinful child. Her acceptance of her disability as the equivalent of a whipping from God is poignantly linked to her increasing deafness in late adolescence: “My whipping began in early childhood and continued into adolescence ... then my punishment was redoubled in my youth, for at this age my suffering increased.”<sup>14</sup> Embedded in Augustine’s concept of a just God is his conclusion that no suffering or disability could be undeserved for such is a justifiable consequence as a descendant of Adam. Indeed, Teresa and Augustine are one in her frequent assertions such as “if we start to sin, we will immediately suffer” and “only he who deserves pain suffers and only he who is worthy is free from suffering.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Teresa Redefines Disability from Punishment to Gift**

While the interpretation of disability as a punishment for sin clearly impacted on Teresa, in the process of her extended meditation she moves to significantly redefine God’s punishment as God’s gift. What may have seemed at one time to be a punishment for her sins is interpreted after all as a gift for her spiritual benefit. Her suffering, in fact, serves to combat her sinfulness and as such is welcomed as a gift from what must be a loving and caring God. As Teresa develops this theme her disability then ceases to be regarded as a punishment. Rather, with regard to her suffering: “I am coming to know its goodwill, for (suffering) labours not so much to make me suffer as to make me worthy. And if it makes me experience great pain, it does so desiring my salvation.”<sup>16</sup>

As the cornerstone of her treatise, Teresa adopts a quote from the Psalms: “Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit or bridle, else it will not stay near you”

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<sup>13</sup> Augustine of Hippo, ‘Saint Augustine Anti-Pelagian Writings’, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. V, ed. Phillip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 35.

(Psalm 32:9). Teresa observes that as a bit and bridle are necessary to manage the behaviour of dumb animals, so for mankind God has provided a “bit” and “bridle” to control their behaviour, in particular to avoid the tendency to sin.

We must consider that a bit and bridle are designed for dumb animals who lack reason so that with these bindings they may be brought almost by way of force to a place that suits them and pleases their master; thus they are guided by bit and constrained by their bridle. And, just as, for reasons (already) stated, this bit and bridle are placed in the mouth and on the neck of irrational animals, so for similar reasons another bit and bridle are provided for rational animals.<sup>17</sup>

Of direct relevance to appreciating Teresa’s interpretation of disability and suffering is her undertaking to explore how affliction and ailments constitute constraints on the tendency to sin and as such are accepted as a welcome bit and bridle: “I say and affirm that with bit and bridle my sovereign Lord constrained the jaws of my vanities to benefit my spiritual well-being ... A good and lasting ailment is a bridle to humble the proud neck and a bit to constrain desires dangerous and injurious to the soul.”<sup>18</sup> In this fashion Teresa argues that under the constraints of suffering a person will become more focussed on what is good for them and allot more time to issues of long-term importance.

She describes herself as undergoing a struggle between her own erring intentions and the influence of suffering which is to guide her towards that which is good: “My suffering’s intention is much better than mine.”<sup>19</sup> In expanding on this theme, Teresa’s arguments can be rather tenuous. She observes, for example, that someone who is sick and suffering dares not eat harmful foods and proceeds to the conclusion that since suffering curbs such physical acts then sinful acts will likewise be restrained:

if our discretion imposes rules on eating to preserve our temporal health, it is a greater discretion of more lasting benefit to impose rules on our deeds to safeguard our spiritual health. While it is true that it is fitting and healthy for everyone to adhere to a strict diet during a harmful meal of sins, there is no doubt that reason more openly influences the infirm than the healthy.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 34.

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In similar vein, Teresa argues that a sick and suffering person “who already has one foot in the grave,”<sup>21</sup> will be less likely to overlook spiritual matters and in this way benefits from his disability. Such unqualified assertions are then advanced and developed, culminating in an unreserved welcome to her disability and suffering:

I now recognize the great good in my misfortune and the mercy God has shown me in making me suffer for so long. To make amends I confess my guilt, I love my suffering, I praise His justice, and I am thankful for His mercy. I acknowledge that I suffer and am punished justly, wisely, mercifully.<sup>22</sup>

As if such self-admonition was not enough, Teresa pushes the argument to what she considers to be a most important conclusion, that is, that only by continuing to be afflicted by suffering will she be saved from sinning even more:

And passing over in silence many other innumerable blessings, I only wish to make mention for now of the most important and source of all others, and it is this: if I with my suffering continue to offend God so much and to be so inclined toward vices rather than virtues, what would I do if I were free of my suffering? Certainly now my sins are very great, but they would be even greater; and while now I offend God greatly, doubtlessly I would offend him much, much more.<sup>23</sup>

It would seem, then, that in the final analysis no respite is to be found in this life. Only in the afterlife will suffering cease: “And to this spiritual happiness I invite the infirm and I wish to be invited, so that, just as we are equal in our suffering, we may be equal in our resurrection where, it seems to me, temporal and human happiness have no place.”<sup>24</sup>

Surely this sense of self-flagellation had become something of a spiritual *cilice* or hairshirt and a matter of exaggerated rationalisation. At the same time, while this may have accorded some comfort to Teresa, for many others also subject to disability and suffering this conclusion could be interpreted as misdirected and quite unhelpful. To advise those who are blind that this reduced sensory capacity affords them a spiritual advantage; or to people subject to cerebral palsy or advancing Parkinson’s Disease that such conditions serve to direct their minds to matters eternal; or to regard profound intellectual disability as a gift from God which separates a person

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<sup>21</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 43.

from the activities and stresses of a wicked world, is to create a highly problematic relationship between God and humankind. If the Christian message is that all are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), then this image encompasses even those considered aberrant from the perceived 'norm'. In portraying people with a disability as set apart, and through their disability restrained from sin, Teresa is fragmenting the image accorded to all humans in the Christian worldview.

From her own record, it can be safely assumed that Teresa would have had ready access to contrary references celebrating the privileged status of humanity: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them; mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour" (Psalm 8:4-5). Nevertheless, as Teresa's argument unfolds, she resolutely promotes the conclusion that people with a disability are spiritually and morally differentiated from the rest of society. However, while Teresa obviously feels that she has grounds for her conclusion this view does her fellow sufferers a disservice. The overall message from the Gospels is that of a God of love, one who exhorts everyone to love their neighbour (Matthew 22:39), to love one another as God loves us (John 13:34) and, through Jesus, one who calls upon all who are weary and suffering to find comfort and rest in Him (Matthew 11:28). In the parable of the great banquet it is specifically those who have a disability and who are disadvantaged who are sought out as guests (Luke 14:21). Disability is a common state of humankind and it is incumbent on society in general to accommodate disability in a sense of comfortable equality, a notion repeatedly found in the New Testament, and in the writings of modern Christians. In his thoughtful text, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, Amos Yong offered a detailed assessment of the negative interpretations of biblical and theological images of people with a disability, concluding, that:

the Bible can help us view and embrace disability as a mysterious sign of God's providential creation, and that disability perspectives can open up new vistas to understand the nature of God, whose strength and wisdom are manifest through weakness and foolishness. Jesus has become the paradigm of the image of God, not only because of his suffering and death on the cross, but also because of his solidarity with the weak and the marks of impairment on his resurrected body.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 145.

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It is, indeed, difficult to interpret Teresa's thesis as other than a product of exaggerated rationalisation developed in a prolonged effort to align her personal sense of disadvantage and suffering with an overwhelming need to accept all experience as the deliberate action of a just God. Her treatise continues in what is a somewhat repetitious and prolonged exposition on this theme with her conclusions unremittingly bleak. People with a disability are despised and denied the blessings of this world:

And I do not know why we infirm should want anything from this world, for as much as we may wander, we shall never find anything in it that loves us well. Worldly pleasures despise us, health forsakes us, friends forget us, relatives get angry, and even one's own mother gets annoyed with her sickly daughter, and one's father despises the son who with chronic afflictions dwells in his home.<sup>26</sup>

Such advice does not change as she unfolds an increasingly complex line of discourse with concepts dividing and sub-dividing as she pursues her argument. Having encouraged those who suffer to look to their reward in the resurrection, Teresa embarks on an extended commentary on the sovereignty of patience in what she calls the Convent of the Suffering. This extended exposition, which constitutes most of the second half of the *Grove*, unfolds as an account of the nature and complex character of "this honourable prelate called Patience."<sup>27</sup> Writing almost in the form of an academic dissertation, Teresa demonstrates her capacity to construct a complex text, and while modestly referring to her unequal capacity as a women writer she at the same time draws attention to "the few years I was at the University of Salamanca."<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, Teresa dwells for an extended time on the effects of suffering and how this experience is beneficial for the sufferer.<sup>29</sup> In this relatively lengthy discourse she draws inspiration from the parable of the five talents (Matthew 25:14-30), with special attention to her nominated second 'talent' of affliction and physical suffering, which she particularly identifies as serving to counter sin.

Simply by way of example, Teresa explores how disability and suffering combats the sin of pride. Typical of her style of complex presentation, Teresa attributes pride as proceeding from six principal roots which she then takes each in turn as being countered by a state of disability.

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<sup>26</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, pp. 52-63.

In this example, Teresa first addresses one of these roots of pride, the glorification of ancestors and family. It is typical of Teresa's line of reasoning that she first sets up a painful scenario and then counters this with a rationale as to the positive effect of this experience. The result is not always convincing. For example, Teresa makes reference to disability prompting rejection, even from one's own family, then proceeds to link this with the argument that this prevents one in taking pride in family. In making this case, Teresa first takes the position, unchallenged, that families as a general rule will reject members who are disabled. That this may unfortunately reflect her own experience is hinted at in her choice of example which mirrors that of her own privileged family background:

Suffering combats the first root of pride – the glorification of great ancestors and family – in this manner: even if one is the son of a duke, an admiral, or a marquis, if he is inflicted with great suffering or an embarrassing wound, not only his friends and relatives hold him in contempt, but his own father and mother will dispatch him quickly from their house and put him where he can cause no detriment or disorder.<sup>30</sup>

Teresa, then, proceeds to argue that a person subject to such rejection and contempt could hardly take pride in oneself and in this way the disability itself is a blessing in disguise as it has resulted in that person overcoming the sin of pride. Teresa seems quite ardent in her account of what she apparently regards as the expected response of a family to a disabled relative. However, while Teresa may indeed have harboured some personal sense of hurt and rejection she has little theological ground for promoting this experience as a general rule.

Together with pride a litany of sins (for example, carnal desires, gluttony, sloth and so on) are appraised in similar vein with disability and suffering serving as a protective and helpful shield. After treating such matters at some length, Teresa reiterates her conclusion that people with a disability must expect to be the object of humiliation and contempt. Again, Teresa adopts the stance, unchallenged, that such humiliation and contempt constitutes a general response to disability. In the face of such contempt, Teresa's advice for a person with a disability is to voluntarily increase his sense of humiliation and to heap scorn upon himself. From her perspective this response will be to that person's ultimate benefit:

For the foundation of true humility, I believe, is for man to despise himself more and esteem and value himself less than his detractors do. Beyond the

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<sup>30</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 59.

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worthy spiritual benefits this allows, two great temporal advantages can ensue: one is that the contempt that others show us does not offend us or provoke us to anger, that the other advantage is that our suffering—our inward spiritual suffering, not our physical suffering—will be alleviated to a great extent.<sup>31</sup>

It is Teresa's rather tortuous argument that the antidote to sinful self-esteem is to employ disability and suffering as indicators of one's personal unworthiness to such an extent that one's self-esteem sinks so low that the views of others will have no effect. Again, this line of argument seems to reveal an unfortunate personal experience on Teresa's part in the light of which she has developed a rather questionable interpretation of suffering as a gift from God.

While Teresa's message may still find some echoes in the twenty-first century, it should more generally invite correction. Particularly since the middle of the twentieth century attitudes towards people with a disability have become increasingly positive and supportive. People with disabilities have been more readily absorbed into the mainstream of the general community and work environment. Significantly, Church leaders have issued statements and written papers of support and pastoral care, for example, by Catholic Bishops from the U.K. and U.S.<sup>32</sup> and the World Council of Churches.<sup>33</sup> International organisations such as L'Arche International founded by Jean Vanier have emerged as champions of people with a disability particularly in a context of Christian inclusiveness.<sup>34</sup> A steadily growing commentary, from people with and without a disability, has focussed on issues of inclusion, re-interpreting Bible references, and generally promoting a positive theological perspective on disability.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Teresa de Cartagena, *Grove*, p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Foley (ed.) *Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1981); The U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 'Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities' (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1995).

<sup>33</sup> World Council of Churches, 'Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network' (2017), <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/people-with-disabilities-edan>.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Challenge of L'Arche* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> See for example, Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*; Graeme Watts, 'Disability from a Christian Gospel Perspective', *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 109-121, and specialised journals such as the *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*.

However, while such positive indicators of a general acceptance of people with a disability are welcome and increasing, it would be fair to at least note that echoes of Teresa's observations persist into the present day. Certainly such views cannot simply be regarded as a curiosity of an unenlightened past. Nancy Lane, an Episcopal priest who was born with cerebral palsy, labels as victim theology comments made to her such as "whose sin is it that caused you to be born disabled?"<sup>36</sup> In a similar vein, Kathy Black, a Methodist minister subject to bouts of paralysis, still finds the need to directly address the challenge of being regarded as cursed by God, or that disability is a punishment for sin, or that through disability "God must be trying to teach you something."<sup>37</sup>

While perhaps not treated with the rejection and contempt to which Teresa refers, many people with a disability continue to be marginalized in one way or another. Quite basic issues, such as restricted access to buildings or to some forms of transport, remind people with a disability that they are different and that they must rely on society in general to provide them with special assistance. Admission to some vocations is sometimes denied on the grounds that a disability renders an applicant unsuitable or unable to meet the requirements of a position. In some communities, disability constitutes a cause for family embarrassment with persons with a disability removed from public contact. It is a matter for regret that some people with a disability may even today identify with the challenges seemingly faced by Teresa. However, while many issues do remain to be addressed, the general balance contemporary Christian attitudes toward disability is clearly weighted against interpreting disability and suffering as a matter for rejection, isolation, shame and punishment from God, nor is it readily linked with a divine gift aimed at correcting and improving the recipient.

## **Conclusion**

It was clearly Teresa's conviction that her disability was a divine gift as she interpreted her disability and suffering as distancing her from sin. However, while Teresa was obviously fully convinced as to this blessing, her

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<sup>36</sup> Nancy Lane, "Healing of Bodies and Victimization of Persons: Issues of Faith-Healing for Persons with Disabilities," *The Disability Rag Resource* (September-October, 1993), pp. 11-13.

<sup>37</sup> Kathy Black, 'Preface', *A Healing Homiletic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

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conclusions in this respect are not helpful for those faced with disability and suffering today. Her observations as to what constitutes a common experience of those with disabilities (pain, rejection, humiliation and so on) reveal a personal bleak side to coping with such situations. In particular, Teresa is wrongly pessimistic in accepting that her disability renders her physically and spiritually inferior to others. Her extended argument that disability and suffering direct one's mind away from a sinful life is not convincing but rather unfolds as a prolonged rationalisation. Teresa's reaction is also essentially inward looking with her choice of social isolation hardly a recommended response for people with a disability looking to be accorded a sense of social inclusiveness. Teresa can be admired for her capacity to absorb her perceived disadvantage and to accept her limitations as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth. There are, however, other paths to spiritual growth and divine acceptance rather than through anguish and suffering and people with a disability especially need encouragement to look beyond any suggestion that their condition is an expression of the will of God. Disability is an integral part of being human and to some extent is, or will be, an element in the life of every person.

There is no doubt that Teresa was earnest in her intent to reach a personally acceptable interpretation of her disability and suffering. That we have access to her thesis in the form of a written record is welcome and informative. We are fortunate, also, to benefit from Teresa's experience as it is instructive to accompany her on her spiritual journey for in her own manner Teresa is a model of personal strength and resource. She does not buckle under the stress of her disability and suffering but accepts the challenge that whatever becomes her lot she will interpret positively as due to her Lord. To face that challenge remains just as much an issue for people with a disability in society today as it has done throughout the ages. However, from a contemporary perspective, while it is instructive to note Teresa's conclusions, these are out of place in our own time. In the end, while commending Teresa for her personal fortitude, it is more socially and theologically appropriate to look beyond disability as neither punishment nor as a gift from God, but in essence to assert, even proclaim, that disability is part of a shared continuum in which all humanity reflects in its own and varied ways the image of God.