



Saint Teresa of Avila lived in an age with its own pressures and problems within religious life. What wisdom might this spiritual giant have for vocation ministers today?

The life and writings of Saint Teresa of Avila hold insights that can help vocation ministers unleash superpowers of their own.

Superhero to vocation ministers: Teresa of Avila

NOT ALL SPIRITUAL SUPERHEROES wear capes. But mine does! Teresa of Avila is a spiritual superhero for today, and she even has a cape courtesy of the Carmelite habit of 16th century Spain. But why is she a spiritual superhero? What makes her someone that Commissioner Gordon would run to the batphone and call for spiritual help? Teresa of Avila was many things—Carmelite nun, Doctor of the Church, saint, mystic, writer, reformer. Superhero is not traditionally among those labels. What does “superhero” even mean when talking about this medieval Spanish woman?

The gold standard for understanding superheroes is none other than the legendary Stan Lee—comic book creator, Marvel founder and superhero collaborator responsible for the likes of Spider Man, Black Widow, and Black Panther. Stan, as his public always referred to him, outlines some of the key characteristics of a superhero, and in doing so, gives us some clues as to why Teresa of Avila might just be the spiritual superhero vocation ministers and their supporters need today.

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Uniquely gifted with superpowers

In his essay entitled, “More Than Normal, But Believable,” published in the 2013 book *What is a Superhero?* Stan writes, “In order to be a superhero, you need a power that is more exceptional than any power a normal human being could possess.” Well, Teresa certainly fits that bill. It’s not every human being that can levitate mystically in the kitchen.

Levitation, intellectual and imaginative visions, and ecstatic experiences were all part of Teresa’s mystical experiences. These were indeed exceptional experiences, “powers” seemingly beyond any person’s capacity. Even so, they were not her ultimate superpower.

Teresa’s superpower was in fact something very ordinary, something that each of us has the capacity for without necessitating mythological parents, radioactive spiders, or a Wakandan plant. Teresa’s superpower? Prayer.

Prayer, as Teresa describes it, is “nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.” In *The Way of Perfection*, she says that when we have “a clear realization and full consciousness” that we are engaging with God—whether speaking aloud or reading or using our imagination—we are in fact praying.

Cultivating the superpower of prayer

But as we know with any superhero, superpowers aren’t one and done. They have to be cultivated. Imagine young Peter Parker days after being bit by a radioactive spider. Sure, he was given superpowers, but he had no understanding of them. He had to learn about them and to train, careful not to accidentally catch an innocent bystander in a wayward Spidey web.

Teresa was intent on better understanding her superpower so that she might grow closer to God and feel more fulfilled. But that’s not all. Teresa also knew that the superpower of praying wasn’t just for her. It was for everyone. We all have the capacity of being aware of God, of listening to and talking to God, of loving and being loved by God. It takes time to grow our capacity for prayer and to deepen our relationship with God. And so, Teresa paid close attention to and wrote about her own experience of prayer so that she might encourage others in their relationship with God. Teresa’s writings are like

an instruction manual on how to train ourselves to use our “superpower” of God dwelling within us.

We all want to grow in prayer, but we don’t always have time to read the instruction manual! If you are like me, you never even touch it unless something goes awry! Plus, who has the time? The demands of our ministry, our community life, our social outreach, our friends and family, our health—all these can make it feel like not only is there no time to read about prayer, but no time to pray, period!

Too often we set aside our superpower of prayer as Teresa described it, trusting that “prayer in action” is just as good. We sometimes skip the quiet time with God and instead dive right into our many responsibilities. And of course, prayer in action is good; it is a very powerful form of prayer. But it cannot replace that quiet space Teresa reminds us about.

The more we have to do, the more, in fact, we should give to prayer. Martin Luther once said in response to his plans for the day, “Work, work from early until late. In fact, I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” Three hours is not easy to come by! But Luther and Teresa are trying to remind us that we have everything we need already because God dwells with and within us. Never underestimate the superpower of the gift of simply being with God.

Passionate about the good

We all know that while superpowers are really cool, there’s more to them than that. Stan Lee writes, “You need to use that power to accomplish good deeds.” Looking at Teresa’s life, we can see how she was oriented to the good, even from an early age when she and her brother ran away from home, determined to become martyrs for the sake of the gospel. But even with her desire to do good, she was also tempted by the dark side. In her autobiography, she says she struggled often, “going from pastime to pastime, from vanity to vanity, from one occasion of sin to another.”

Teresa used her superpower of prayer to keep herself oriented toward the good, which for her was to be found in God alone. “Quien a Dios tiene nada le falta. Sólo Dios basta,” as it says in her own handwriting on a bookmark found in her prayerbook—“The one who has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices.” Teresa’s commitment to prayer, even when it was rough going, helped her grow in

her relationship with God and to find solace in “the One whom we know loves us.” The greater she aligned her life with her experience of God, the more she was able to experience the goodness in herself and in the world around her.

Teresa’s superpower of prayer did more than help her individually; it also has helped a whole world of people longing to draw close to God. As Teresa grew in her own life of prayer, she wanted to help her Carmelite sisters and brothers in their lives as well. She was asked to write about her life and her new Carmelite foundations and especially about how to grow in relationship to God and to understand the interior experience of God as well as God’s activity in the world.

Indeed, Teresa used her superpowers to accomplish good deeds that the world continues to benefit from, people she never imagined she would reach. Many times it can be like this in our own lives, especially in the field of vocations. We connect with many people wondering about and discerning their vocation, though only a handful may ever end up entering a religious community. Yet in each email, chat, or visit we bring the best of ourselves and our charism. Even if we never hear from a person again, we can’t know the impact of our experience with them. I still have a holy card of Saint Scholastica sent to me by the vocation director of St. Benedict’s Monastery in Manitoba, Canada. It has nourished me deeply for over 25 years.

We just don’t know all the places that God can take our humble work, but we can trust that God will see that the good flourishes in the way it is needed most.

Relatable and “relatively” normal

Now that we’ve covered superpowers, let’s look at a couple other aspects of the superhero model. Stan writes that the superhero must be “as believable and realistic as possible,” someone who lives in a realistic world that people can relate to. He says the superhero “has to have friends, enemies, people he’s in love with, people he doesn’t love—just like any human being.”

For as much as Teresa is known for her levitations and visions, she is equally known for being down-to-earth, lighthearted, and humble. Teresa tells it like it is. In one moment, she can be extolling the virtues of prayer and in the next moment be very practical about how to live in community. She knew that even with our superpowers, we still have the stuff of life to attend to. She conveys this well in one instruction to her sisters: “When obedience calls you to exterior employments (as, for ex-

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Like Teresa, we bring the best of our charism and ourselves to each ministry interaction, trusting God to use it for good. Here Brother Allen Pacuing, S.M. talks to a student at St. Mary's University.

ample, into kitchen, amidst the pots and dishes), remember that our Lord goes along with you, to help you both in your interior and exterior duties.”

She also shares regularly about her own humanity. Her writings are not just instruction manuals for prayer. Rather, they paint a portrait of the human being before God—with all our light and darkness, color, textures, bold strokes and rough edges. Teresa was definitely not a paragon of virtue, but she kept at it and allowed herself to be fully human at the same time that she strived for uniting fully with God.

We too need to keep it real and allow ourselves to be fully human even while we are serving others. Of course this is not to say that we don’t have healthy boundaries. It just means that we can be ourselves. I remember giving what I thought was an awesome vocation talk to a Theology on Tap group. It was well researched, clever and compelling. But it flopped. In the Q&A, I made some off-handed comment about playing the video game Zelda, and that’s when the attendees lit up. It’s not that we even talked about video games, it was that I had revealed something about me personally that they could relate to. It opened the door to a great conversation about vocation and life and God.

This ability to be very human and very much ourselves is important for our own selves but also for others who are trying to see if they too can be themselves and be a religious. They want to see how we’ve integrated—

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not abandoned—our personalities, quirks, and passions into every dimension of religious life: community, prayer, and ministry.

Wounded superheroes

I want to highlight one other thing about superheroes being relatable and relatively normal. By the way, I say “relatively” normal because in the superhero multiverse, “normal” involves a wide spectrum, including everything from human to demigod to mutant to alien to artificial intelligence and everything in between. Oddly enough, there is no one way to be “normal”! But I digress.

Stan doesn’t directly mention this characteristic in his essay, but it is something that many fans have noticed about Stan in his creation and development of superheroes. Father Jim McDermott, S.J., associate editor at *America* magazine, says it well in his article remembering Stan after he died in 2018:

The thing that Stan did that was truly revolutionary was not simply that he cut his characters from the everyday stuff of our lives, but that he specifically took qualities that society has often cast as shameful or embarrassing—being an orphan, being smart, being an adolescent, being handi-

capped or just not being white—and ascribed those qualities to his heroes.... Stan Lee showed us nerds (and Catholics) can be heroes.

Superman’s alter ego Clark Kent is socially inept and dons stereotypical nerd eyewear. Makkari, a member of the Eternals, is a deaf woman of color. Peter Parker is an awkward teen when he gets his Spidey powers.

Part of being a superhero means owning and even elevating those parts of us that have been hurt, rejected, shamed. Our ability to do this can lead to our own healing, and it can help us be more present to others who are in need as well.

For as grounded and strong as Teresa of Avila appears in her writing, she also was someone deeply wounded by others. You can see traces of this in her characteristic self-deprecating remarks throughout her writing. Some of this is a result of her humility and some was a way to subvert church inquisitors who did not like “uppity women.” Still, her words also bear the edges of suffering.

For example, Teresa writes in her autobiography, “Blessed be Thou, O my Lord, who, out of a pool so filthy as I am, bringest forth water so clean as to be meet for Thy table! Praised be Thou, O Joy of the Angels, who hast been thus pleased to exalt so vile a worm!” In today’s

world where copious amounts of self-empowerment quotes are on social media, these may be strange words to hear. Yet, Teresa is not putting herself down nor asking us to feel sorry for her. Rather, she wants to show us that God delights in us, lifts us up, sets us as an example even when we feel at our smallest—a lowly worm.

We have all felt that smallness. It might be wounds from our own history or our own feelings of inadequacy as others in our communities look to us to herald in the future of religious life. It may be that we don't feel spiritual enough, or young and relevant enough, or that we are socially awkward, or have been hurt by our own community, or have our own struggles about the unknown future of religious life.

What would happen if we saw our “smallness” or wounds as Stan Lee saw them? Or as Teresa of Avila? Or as Jesus the Christ? What would it be like to rise to our fullest potential as the wounded superheroes that we are?

Facing our adversaries

No discussion of superheroes would be complete without mentioning the superhero antithesis: the supervillain. Call it an archenemy, a nemesis, an evil overlord, a mad scientist, whatever. When there's a superhero, there's also going to be a Lex Luthor, a Harley Quinn, a Green Goblin, or a Dark Phoenix—and all their legions of minions (not the yellow kind). The supervillain keeps the superhero on her boot-clad—or discolored, as the case may be—feet. The supervillain can match the superhero move for move and perhaps even appear to be more powerful!

Now this is where our comparison to Teresa might be stretched a bit. But let's go with it. Teresa certainly did have the occasional adversary and, of course, she wrote regularly about the wiles of the devil. But her writings also reveal that her greatest nemesis was, in many ways, her own self.

She was self-aware enough to recognize how she often thwarted herself and got in the way of the good that both she and God were trying to accomplish! She worked at being herself thoroughly, and also she knew that she had to check her attitudes and behaviors when she wasn't at her best. Teresa's writings include a great vignette in which she shares how she was going to receive Communion, normally a beautiful experience for her, but she got rather judgmental when the priest gave her the tiniest piece of the host. She wondered: What's wrong with him? Is he trying to mortify me? But then she stopped herself from going down that rabbit hole,

reminding herself that God was “whole and entire in the smallest particle.” She continues, “His Majesty said to me: ‘Have no fear, My daughter; for no one will be able to separate thee from Me,’ giving me to understand that the size of the Host mattered not.”

Like Teresa, we too have adversaries and adversarial situations that we must face, willingly or not, exteriorly or interiorly. We must activate our superpowers most especially in these situations and trust that though the other powers may appear stronger, nothing can overpower the love of Christ. As Paul the Apostle writes to the Christian community in Rome: “Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? … No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:35, 37).

We are each invited to be the “more than” that Paul writes about. Our adversarial situations may seem small and innocuous like a wafer fragment, or they may be more formidable like a room full of Kryptonite. It won't be easy—it never is. Life is messy and uncomfortable and painful at times. But in the end we choose how we will be in the midst of it, not in spite of it.

But wait! What about the sequel?

As we near the end of our spiritual superhero saga with Teresa of Avila and a cast of characters from the multiverse, it seems important to return once again where we first started. Stan Lee gave us a good model of a superhero to work with. In the end, however, he says simply this:

Another definition of a hero is someone who is concerned about other people's well-being and will go out of his or her way to help them—even if there is no chance of a reward. That person who helps others simply because it should or must be done, and because it is the right thing to do, is indeed without a doubt, a real superhero.

The world is longing for this kind of “real superhero.” We see it in Teresa of Avila and in so many other spiritual superheroes past and present. Our invitation is not just to look to them for guidance, but to also take up the mantle ourselves. It's time to roll up our sleeves and don our own spiritual capes once again, equipped with good companions, insight, and passion for the world. It's also time to activate our superpowers on behalf of the next generation of religious to help them in their own journeys to become fully themselves and fully community.

The sequel is up to us. ■