

# St. Teresa of Jesus (St. Teresa of Ávila)

BORN 1515; DIED 1582  
VIRGIN, RELIGIOUS, AND DOCTOR  
OF THE CHURCH  
FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 15

**I**N TIMES OF GREAT CRISIS, God raises up great saints. The crisis of the Protestant revolt in the sixteenth century was one of the worst in the history of the Church, and fractured Christianity remains its legacy today. St. Teresa of Jesus not only responded to God's call to reform her own religious order, but by her life and writings also gave the Church some of her

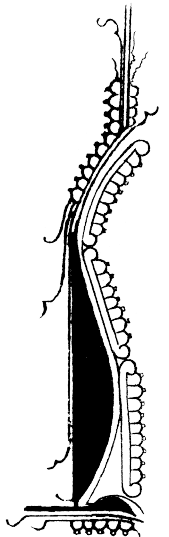
greatest treasures on the practice of contemplative prayer.

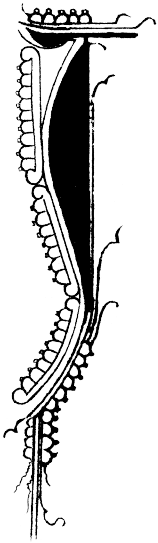
Teresa was born in Ávila, a city near the foot of a mountain range that separates it from Madrid, in the province of Castile. She was the third of nine children of the saintly Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda, and his pious second wife Beatriz Davila y Ahumada, and had three older half-siblings. She was an infectiously gay child in a happy and devout family. She was especially close to her brother Rodrigo, near to her in age. By seven, she loved reading the lives of the saints; the thought of eternity fascinated both the children. Desiring martyrdom by the Muslims as a "cheap path" to Heaven, the two children eloped and got as far as the river in the valley below Ávila before being brought home by an uncle. Following this debacle, the two decided to be hermits, piling stones in the garden as makeshift hermitages, although they never finished them. Teresa also often sought solitude in her room.

When Teresa was fourteen, her mother died. Around the same time, Teresa and Rodrigo began reading romances. Their influence on her was marked: she became less devout and more vain, wearing perfumes and fashionable clothing. Worried about her behavior, her father sent her the next year to be educated by Augustinian nuns in Ávila. A year and a half later, she came home sick, and as a result was never particularly well educated or learned. Toward the end of her teens, an uncle gave her the *Letters of St. Jerome* to read. By then already considering life as a nun, she asked her father's permission to enter the Carmelite convent in Ávila. Her father adamantly refused, so she secretly, and with much anguish, left home. Her father then gave up his opposition to her vocation. The next year, at twenty-one, Teresa took her first vows, but a year later again fell ill. Her father brought her home. The medical treatment to which she was subjected worsened her illness (probably malaria). She sank into a cataleptic state for



*St. Teresa of Ávila, from an early 20th century print*





several days and a grave was dug. However, she revived and recovered enough to return to the convent, although she remained paralyzed in her legs for three years and experienced many years of poor health.

Like many of the convents and monasteries of the period, Teresa's had relaxed its originally austere rule. Particularly notable were the daily visits to the convent by both women and men, which consumed much of the nuns' day. Charming, affectionate, imaginative, and with a lively and sweet-tempered wit, Teresa habitually spent much time visiting, giving less and less time to prayer. She rationalized that better nuns than she were doing the same thing, that she was ill much of the time, and that she was too humble to converse with God since she was not already living a life of prayer. This went on until, following her father's death, his confessor told her that she was in spiritual trouble. She then committed herself to prayer, but still did not experience a full conversion, always eager for the time allotted to prayer to be over and aware of how poorly she measured up. Eventually, she read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, which described his own reluctance to commit himself fully to God and his subsequent wholehearted conversion. She also began meditating on an image of the suffering Jesus during his Passion and prayed for help to St. Mary Magdalene, another saint who had undergone a great conversion. Finally, at forty, Teresa gave her heart completely to her Lord.

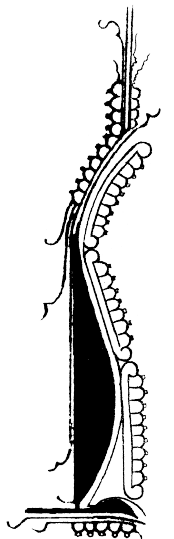
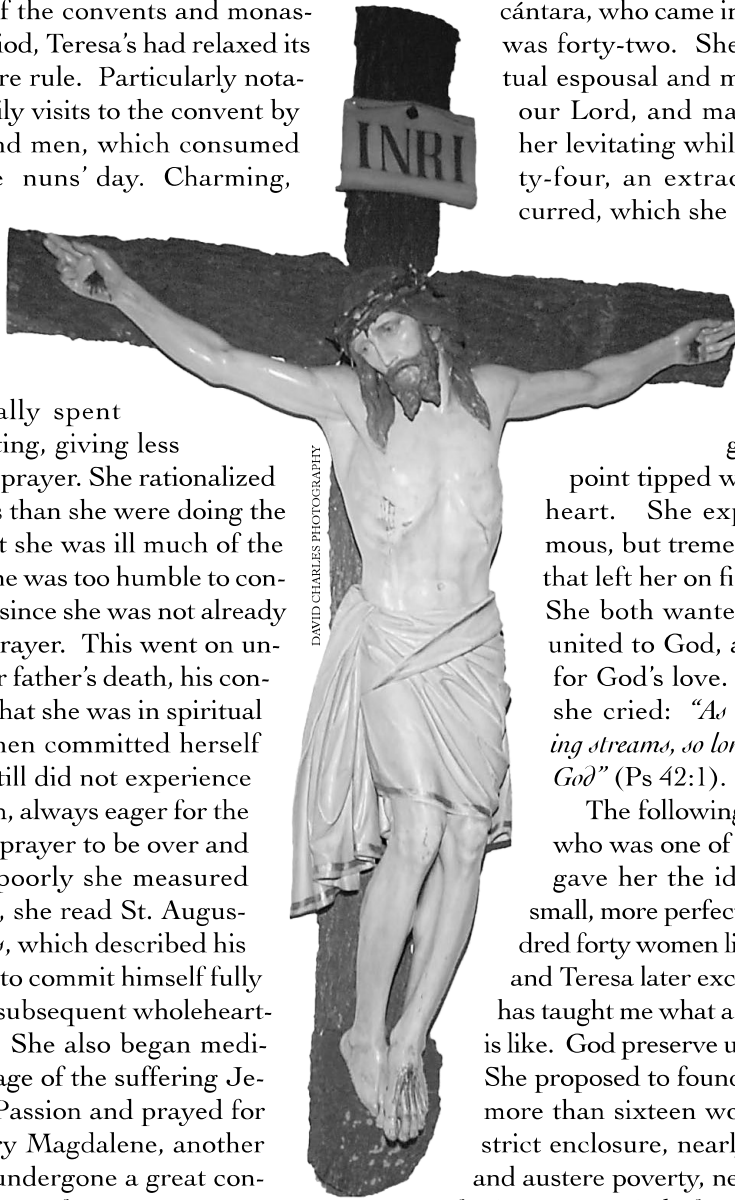
Teresa then entered into the period of her most rapid spiritual growth. As she dwelt in contemplative prayer, she experienced interior communications and visions. This frightened her, since the case of a woman whose "mystical experiences" had been exposed as the fraud of a Satan-worshipper had recently become widely known. She asked a number of people, in confidence, whether her experiences might be the product of an overwrought imagination or of

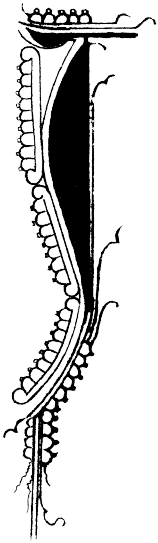
Satan, and was deeply mortified when her secret became public knowledge. Priests she consulted gave her opposite opinions as to the source of her experiences. Her best spiritual direction came from a Franciscan, St. Pedro de Alcántara, who came into her life when she was forty-two. She experienced spiritual espousal and mystical marriage to our Lord, and many nuns witnessed her levitating while at prayer. At forty-four, an extraordinary event occurred, which she called "transverberation of the heart."

An angel with a burning face appeared to her in bodily form and thrust a lance of gold with an iron

point tipped with fire through her heart. She experienced an enormous, but tremendously sweet, pain that left her on fire with love of God. She both wanted to die so as to be united to God, and to live to suffer for God's love. With the Psalmist, she cried: *"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God"* (Ps 42:1).

The following year, 1560, a niece who was one of Teresa's fellow nuns gave her the idea to found a new, small, more perfect convent. One hundred forty women lived in their convent, and Teresa later exclaimed, "Experience has taught me what a house full of women is like. God preserve us from such a state!" She proposed to found a community of no more than sixteen women who observed strict enclosure, nearly perpetual silence, and austere poverty, never eating meat and fasting more strictly from the middle of September through the conclusion of Lent. They were to wear coarse habits and sandals rather than shoes. Teresa obtained the needed approvals, but almost immediately there was an outcry not only from the nuns but also from many outside the convent, especially at the prospect of an unendowed convent that might become a public burden. The license from the Carmelite order was immediately withdrawn. However, several of her priest friends encouraged her, and one of her married sisters began building a house that





*She both wanted to die so as to be united to God,  
and to live to suffer for God's love.*

appeared to be for her own family. During the construction, one of Teresa's little nephews was crushed by a collapsed stone wall. Lifeless, he was taken to Teresa, who restored the living child to his mother. Approval for the new convent finally came from Rome, and it opened in her sister's "home" in 1562.

In 1567, Teresa received permission to found additional convents. Over the remaining fifteen years of her life, she founded sixteen more women's convents and two men's monasteries using the new rule, which came to be called "discalced" (unshod). They were all over Spain, some several hundreds of miles distant from Ávila. On one journey in the midst of a rainstorm, the wheel of her carriage broke, throwing her into the mud. She shook her fist skyward and famously exclaimed to God, "If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few." Altogether, forty new foundations were established for women and men in her lifetime, the remainder done under the guidance of her great collaborator St. John of the Cross, whom she met when he was twenty-five and she fifty-two. Like her, he was a mystic and great spiritual writer, and she became his spiritual director.

Teresa's energy, competent efficiency, and practical common sense speeded establishing the new convents. As superior, she was forthright, stern when necessary, always kind, tender when possible, and displayed great maturity of judgment and insight into the human heart. She selected new entrants for their good judgment, docility to instruction, ability to see their own faults, and willingness to accept guidance. She also looked for women with healthy, cheerful dispositions, and once remarked, "From sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us!" She admonished her nuns: "Habitually make many acts of love, for they set the soul on fire and make it gentle." And she was firmly down-to-earth: "God is present even among the pots and pans."

As Teresa's fame grew, Italian Carmelites began to oppose her reforms. In 1575, the order restricted her work. However, an appeal to the Pope by the king of Spain resulting in papal creation of a separate discalced province in 1580 (Discalced Carmelite Order or OCD; there are about four thousand Discalced Carmelites, men and women, today). The newness of her work also put her at risk of being brought before the Spanish Inquisition. Her obedience to her spiritual directors, to her superiors, and to the Church went a long way to alleviate concerns about her orthodoxy.

In 1560, when Teresa was forty-five, her spiritual director instructed her to write of her experiences. Ever practical, she was concerned that it took time from her spinning, but did so out of obedience. Five years later, her autobiography *The Life* appeared, a work comparable to St. Augustine's *Confessions* written at the end of the fourth century. In 1573 she wrote *The Way of Perfection* as spiritual guidance for her nuns, and in 1577 wrote the classic of mysticism *The Interior Castle*, a book that explained the path to high states of contemplation. She explained that the experience of God is a gift connected with fidelity to prayer, and described several degrees of prayer, culminating in the prayer of complete union with God. She wasn't impressed by the mystical phenomena that accompanied her prayer, and wrote that they do not define, but merely accompany, a life of prayer. On the other hand, purification of the soul is necessary, and will be experienced as dryness, loneliness, spiritual trials, and feelings that prayer seems worthless. Teresa's attainment of the heights of contemplative prayer is not mysterious: "Mental prayer is nothing else, in my opinion, but friendly conversation with Someone who loves us." She discovered the source of mystical life in love, and found that the expression of mystical life, too, is love.

