

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

### The Beginnings of Brilliance

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born on November 12, 1648, in San Miguel de Napantla, México. She was the daughter of a Creole mother, Isabel Ramirez de Santanilla, and a Spaniard father, Pedro Manual de Asbaje, who came to the New World from the Basque part of Spain. Although married to another woman, he had three daughters with Isabel Ramirez: Josefa, Juana Inés and María.

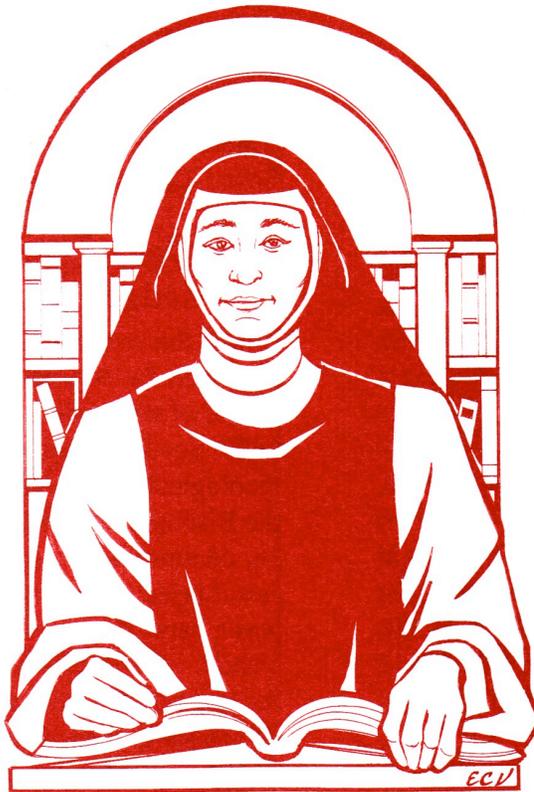
When Juana Inés was three, her father abandoned the family, leaving Isabel and her three daughters no choice but to return to the hacienda of Isabel's father, don Pedro Ramirez. Juana Inés' grandfather was a strong influence in her life and encouraged her extraordinary passion for knowledge. Don Pedro was a well-educated man who owned an extensive library. He recognized young Juana Inés' intellectual potential and taught her to read and write Latin and Spanish. She easily mastered the native languages of the indigenous servants who worked at her grandfather's hacienda.

Since the few schools that existed in the region accepted only male students -- and Juana Inés' mother refused her request to dress her as a boy so that she could attend -- Doña Isabel sent her oldest daughter, Josefa, and Juana Inés to the "amigas." These women teachers gave classes for girls in reading, writing and basic mathematics, as well as embroi-

dery. Juana Inés absorbed all the lessons given to her older sister and received classes on her own. When she was eight years old, Juana Inés won a book as her prize for writing and reciting her first poem, *Loa al Santísimo Sacramento*, in honor of the region's celebration of the Blessed Sacrament. This was the first glimmer of the brilliant literature Juana Inés would create later in life.

## SOR JUANA

### Defender of Women's Right to Knowledge



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

### Woman of Intellectual Prowess

When Juana Inés was eight, her grandfather died. Her mother, who had turned her attention to a new lover, sent the young girl to Mexico City to live with her maternal aunt, María Ramirez de Mata, wife of the wealthy Juan de Mata. Juan de Mata had a voluminous library with works by Calderón, Góngora, the history of the Indies, books in Latin, all of which Juana Inés devoured. Under his care, she took classes in Latin and began to build her own library of books on grammar, rhetoric, theology, physics, astronomy, mathematics, my-

thology, music, and Spanish, Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Hebrew and Portuguese literature. Juana Inés learned to read Basque, Portuguese and Náhuatl (indigenous to México) languages.

Juana Inés devotion to study was sometimes extreme. She refused to eat cheese thinking she would become stupid if she did, and when she failed to meet a learning expectation she cut her hair as a self-punishment. Juana Inés was unsettled in spirit and became depressed when she learned the circumstances of her illegitimate birth.

At the age of 15, her aunt and uncle introduced her to the newly arrived Viceroy, don Antonio Sebastián de Toledo, and the Marquise de Mancera, Doña Leonor Carreto de Toledo. This was a great opportunity for Juana Inés to receive protection and support and at the same time develop her gifts and talents.

She entered the ranks of ladies in waiting and moved into the palace. Here she wrote poetry, continued her studies and waited on the Marquise de Mancera, whom she called "Laura" in her poems. Juana Inés distinguished herself by her beauty, wit and learning. Nonetheless, life was not easy for her at court because she was both admired and resented for her intelligence and beauty.

Knowing that Juana Inés' life in court was not secure, Don Antonio Nuñez de Miranda, a Jesuit and Juana's confessor, convinced her to enter religious life. Juana Inés understood that the only options for a woman of her time were matrimony or the convent, and her illegitimate origin prevented a suitable marriage. Religious life would free her from submission to a spouse and enable her to dedicate herself completely to intellectual pursuits.

### **Nun, Poet, Woman of Genius**

At age nineteen, Juana Inés entered the convent of St. Joseph, the Discalced Carmelites, but left three months later because the rigorous ways of the order made her ill. Fifteen months later she entered the Convent of St. Jerome, taking the name Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Her new convent life was disciplined, but not austere, and very diverse. Sor Juana continued to expand her horizons by conversing with the intellectual elite. She cooked and created her own recipes, and served for nine years as the convent's accountant and archivist. She sang in the convent choir and wrote plays, songs and poetry for the nuns, as well as a secular audience.

From friends in Spain Sor Juana received musical instruments and scientific apparatus for her experiments. It was said that she hardly slept while doing her studies in astronomy. Her convent cell was a spacious suite, which included her vast personal

library of more than 4,000 volumes and collections of paintings, maps, and instruments that reflected the great variety of her interests.

In 1680, the Count de Paredes and the Marquise de Laguna, María Luisa, arrived from Spain to govern as the new viceroys. In their honor, a poetry contest was held, won by Sor Juana. A friendship developed between the nun and the Marquise, and María Luisa promised to have the poems, *Inundación Castálida*, published in Spain upon her return. This book of poetry was the first one published by Sor Juana in Madrid. Eventually, it was published in México. In time, Sor Juana became known as the "La Décima Musa," (The Tenth Muse), "Fénix de América," (The Phoenix of America), and the "Glorioso Desempeño de su Sexo," (The Glorious Achievement of her Sex).

### **Defender of Women's Right to Knowledge**

Life in the convent went well for Sor Juana until she wrote "a letter too many," says Octavio Paz, author of works on Sor Juana de la Cruz. Prior to 1690, Sor Juana had avoided writing publicly on theological topics. But one day a friend of hers, the Bishop of Puebla, asked her to put in writing her comments on a sermon given by a Portuguese Jesuit priest 40 years prior. Sor Juana's response was a harsh critical analysis of the sermon. The bishop, without Sor Juana's knowledge, published the letter under the assumed name of Sor Philothea de la Cruz and entitled it the *Athenagoric Letter*. This provoked a tremendous scandal among the clergy.

The times were such that the Archbishop of México and the Bishop of Puebla were in a struggle for power. The Archbishop was a renowned antifeminist, moralist and a great admirer of the Jesuit's work. Having the sermon critiqued by a woman and published under a woman's name was the last straw for the Archbishop. An intellectual woman was an affront to him. For years, the Archbishop had issued reprimands to Sor Juana via intermediaries and relatives, but the publication of

her letter was all he needed to attack her openly. In defense of her literary career, Sor Juana wrote an extraordinary reply entitled, *Response To The Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Philothea de la Cruz*. In it, Sor Juana supported women's biblical and theological rights to an education and promoted the advantages that educated women bring to society. She cited the Church Fathers on education for women. For example, Saint Jerome writing *To Leta, Upon the Education of Her Daughter*: "Accustom her tongue, still young, to the sweetness of the Psalms. Even the names through which little by little she will become accustomed to form

**"It is of service to the  
Church that women argue,  
tutor, learn, for He Who  
granted women reason  
would not have them  
uninformed."**

**Villancico VI from  
Santa Catarina**

her phrases should not be chosen by chance, but selected and repeated with care; the prophets must be included, of course, and the apostles, as well, and all the Patriarchs beginning with Adam and down to Matthew and Luke, so that as she practices other things she will be readying her memory for the future. Let your daily task be taken from the flower of the Scriptures."

Sor Juana praised a long list of biblical, as well as historical women in the fields of arts and sciences. "I see many and illustrious women; some blessed

with the gift of prophesy, like Abigail; others of persuasion, like Esther; others with piety, like Rahab; others with perseverance, like Anna, the mother of Samuel; and an infinite number of others with diverse gifts and virtues . . . I see adored as a goddess of the sciences a woman like Minerva, the daughter of the first Jupiter and mistress over all the wisdom of Athens . . . A Nicostrata, framer of Latin verses and erudite in Greek . . . Without mentioning an infinity of other women whose names fill books. I find the Egyptian Catherine, studying and influencing the wisdom of all the wise men of Egypt." Sor Juana strongly supported the education of women so that new generations of women could have teachers of their own sex.

### **Silenced by the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy**

Sor Juana was in trouble with the clerics not only for what she wrote, but because she was a woman writer. Support for the Archbishop's attempt to silence her grew among the priests. Unfortunately, the Viceroy's status was slipping and he was reluctant to defend Sor Juana against the powerful Archbishop. At the age of 44, under heavy pressure from the Church to repent from her secular writings, Sor Juana turned over all her possessions to the Archbishop to sell for the benefit of the poor. She wrote no more works for public readership. She was silenced by the ecclesiastical hierarchy and forced to relinquish her complete library.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz died on April 17, 1695, serving her sick sisters during the great plague, a typhoid epidemic. She is buried in the convent cemetery in México City.

This woman of the seventeenth century left the world a comprehensive library of plays, poetry, prose, works of art, ideas and accomplishments. She has been called "the first feminist of the Americas." Her poem, *Sátira Filosófica*, (Philosophical Satire) is an excellent example of Sor Juana's feminist views.

## Sor Juana References:

*Sor Juana, Her Life and Her World*, Octavio Paz, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988.

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*A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana de la Cruz*, Gabriel N. Seymour. (Photographer), Margaret Sayers Peden (translator), Lime Rock Press, Incorporated, March, 1982.

*Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Religion, Art, and Feminism*, Pamela Kirk, Continuum International Publishing Group, Incorporated, March 1999.

*Six Masters of the Spanish Sonnet*: Francisco de Quevedo, Sor Juana de la Cruz, Antonio Machado, Federico García Lorca, Jorge Luis Borges, Migue, Willis Barnstone, Southern Illinois University Press, August, 1992.

*Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Stephanie Merrim, Vanderbilt University Press, May, 1999.

*Foolish Men!: Sor Juana de la Cruz as Spiritual Protagonist*, Educational Prism, and Symbol for Women, Norma Salazar, LEPS Press, January, 1994.

*Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Poems, Protest, and A Dream*, selected writings published by Penguin Classics, translated with notes by Margaret Sayers Peden, introduction by Ian Stavans, 1997.

Film:  
"I, the Worst of All," directed by María Luisa Bamberg and starring Dominique Landa and Assumpta Serna, 1990.

Web sites:  
[www.dartmouth.edu/~sorjuana/](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~sorjuana/) The Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Project. The Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

[www.sappho.com/poetry/historical/j\\_ines.html](http://www.sappho.com/poetry/historical/j_ines.html) Las Mujeres Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

[www.writepage.com/others/sorjuana.htm](http://www.writepage.com/others/sorjuana.htm) a biography

This brochure was prepared by Alicia Alvarado, OP. She is the Director of the Office of Hispanic Ministry for the Diocese of Cleveland, OH.

The feast day for Sor Juana is celebrated on April 17. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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# Prayer Service Honoring Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

**Song:** *Pescador de (Pueblos)/Lord, You Have Come, #162* (songs are found in *Spirit and Song* book, published by Oregon Catholic Press, hymns in Spanish and English)

**Opening Prayer:** God of the Universe, you have blessed us with so many models of gifted women of faith and endurance, of love and compassion, of intelligence and wisdom. In Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, you gave us a woman of genius, of insatiable thirst for knowledge, a fascinating poet of the 17th century, a true feminist of her times. Grant we beseech you, that as we remember this remarkable woman and her great work, we may be inspired by her life to risk and change whatever needs changing in our society and our world for the sake of women everywhere. Amen.

## Psalm 113

**Antiphon 1: All:** "Oh, all the consideration, the tenderness I have seen: when love is placed in God, nothing else can intervene." (from poem, *Divine Love*)

**Side 1:** We your servants, praise you! Praise your holy name! Blessed be your name, O God, from now and forevermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting your name is to be praised!

**Side 2:** You are high above all nations, and your glory above the heavens! Who is like unto you, O God, who is seated upon the heights, who looks far down upon us, upon the heavens and the earth?

**Side 1:** You raise the poor from the dust, lift the needy from the ash heap, to set them in the company of rulers, with the rulers of your people. To the barren, you give a home, and gladden their hearts with children.

**Side 2:** Glory to you Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.

**Side 1:** As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

**Repeat Antiphon 1: All:** "Oh, all the consideration, the tenderness I have seen: when love is placed in God, nothing else can intervene." (from poem, *Divine Love*)

## Psalm 121

**Antiphon 2: All:** "It is of service to the Church that women argue, tutor, learn, for He who granted women reason would not have them uninformed." (*Villancico VI*, from "Santa Catarina, 1691. Villancico is a religious song)

**Reader 1:** I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence comes my help? My help comes from you, O God, who made heaven and earth. You will not let my foot stumble, you, who preserve me, will not sleep. Behold, you who keep Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. You, O God, are our keeper; you are our shade. The sun shall not smite us by day, nor the moon by night. You will guard us from all evil; you will preserve our lives. You will protect our goings and comings both now and forever. Glory to you Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.

**All:** As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

**Repeat Antiphon 2: All:** "It is of service to the Church that women argue, tutor, learn, for He Who granted women reason would not have them uninformed." (*Villancico VI*, from "Santa Catarina", 1691. Villancico is a religious song)

## Psalm 67

**Antiphon 3: All:** "Blessed are Thou, oh Lord, for Thou hast not chosen to place in the hands of others my judgment ...but Thou hast reserved me to Thy mercy, because Thou lovest me more than I can love myself." (*Response to the Illustrious Sor Filotea De La Cruz*)

**Reader 2:** O God, be gracious to us and bless us, and make your face shine upon us. That your ways be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations on earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. You, indeed, have blessed us; let all the earth revere you! Glory to you Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.

**All:** As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

**Repeat Antiphon 3: All:** “Blessed are Thou, oh Lord, for Thou hast not chosen to place in the hands of others my judgment ...but Thou hast reserved me to Thy mercy, because Thou lovest me more than I can love myself.”  
*(Response to the Illustrious Sor Filotea De La Cruz)*

**Reading for Reflection:** “I have never written of my own choice, but at the urging of others, to whom with reason I might say, You have compelled me. (II Corinthians 12:11) But one truth I shall not deny (first, because it is well-known to all, and second, because although it has not worked in my favor, God has granted me the mercy of loving truth above all else), which is that from the moment I was first illuminated by the light of reason, my inclination toward letters has been so vehement, so overpowering, that not even the admonitions of others--and I have suffered many--nor my own meditations--and they have not been few--have been sufficient to cause me to forswear this natural impulse that God placed in me: the Lord God knows why, and for what purpose.” *(From the Response to the Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Filotea De La Cruz)*

**Sharing of your own reflection and experience.**

**Intercessory Prayers**

**Response:** Bless us abundantly, oh God.

“We know nothing as full of integrity as our human intellect; and what God never violates, should I not honor and respect?” *(from her poems, Romances)*

That all persons from all walks of life and talents receive the respect and honor they deserve, we pray.

“Now if the wrong consists in the practice of verse by a woman, since so many have practiced it in a fashion so evidently praiseworthy, what can be so wrong about my being a poet?” *(Response to the Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Filote de La Cruz. Self-justification in reply to an admonishment)*

That all women may be treated with dignity and respect, we pray.

For what else shall we pray . . .

**Closing Prayer:** “Blessed are Thou, oh Lord, for Thou hast not chosen to place in the hands of others my judgment, nor yet in mine, but hast reserved that to Thy own, and freed me from myself, and from the necessity to sit in judgment on myself, which judgment, forced from my own intellect, could be no less than condemnation, but Thou hast reserved me to Thy mercy, because Thou lovest me more than I can love myself” *(Response to the Illustrious Sor Filotea De La Cruz)* Bless us Lord as we continue to live our lives in harmony with all of creation, judging not others but only loving them as you love us, and supporting each other’s gifts and talents for the common good. Amen.

**Closing Song:** *Somos El Cuerpo de Cristo* (Jaime Cortez and Bob Hurd songs are found in *Spirit and Song book*, published by Oregon Catholic Press, hymns in Spanish and English, <http://www.ocp.org>)

This prayer service was prepared by Sr. Alicia Alvarado, OP, Director of the Office of \Hispanic Ministry for the Diocese of Cleveland Ohio.

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*Sor Juana: Defender of Women's Right to Knowledge*

1. When and where did Sor Juana Ines live?
2. How old was she when she died?
3. Who were the “amigas” and what was significant about them in Sor Juana’s childhood?
4. How old was Juana Ines when she won her first award for poetry?
5. Who was the person who was most influential in convincing Juana to enter religious life?
6. What were the advantages of religious life for Sor Juana?
7. Name the three titles conferred upon Sor Juana for her talent in poetry. List them in Spanish and English.

Spanish	English
a.	
b.	
c.	

8. Name at least five of the talents, academic interests and hobbies that Sor Juana pursued during her lifetime.
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
  - e.

9. Why did the Archbishop of Mexico think that the *Athenagoric Letter* by Sor Juana was so scandalous?

10. Why is Sor Juana known as the “first feminist of the Americas?”
11. According to the article, Sor Juana was “silenced by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.”
- Who are members of the “ecclesiastical hierarchy?”
  - Why did they silence her?
  - How did they silence her?
12. What do Catholics of this century have to learn from the life and example of Sor Juana?
13. Choose one of the following:
- Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz was “both admired and resented for her intelligence and beauty.” Write a brief paragraph about someone famous or someone you know who shares this same dilemma.
  - Write a brief paragraph about how and why women might be “silenced” in our time and culture.
  - Use the websites listed on the reference page of the article to find out more about Sor Juana. Write a brief paragraph on the additional information you learned about this woman. Tell why she is a role model for women and men today.



*This worksheet was prepared by Janet Claussen as a part of FutureChurch's **Celebrating Women Witnesses Teacher's Edition**. To order the complete edition with 12 essays, prayer services and worksheets, go to [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org) or call 216-228-0869 X5.*