

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda was born in 1515 in Avila, Spain at a time when the world was emerging from the Middle Ages into the Modern Era. Spain was experiencing unprecedented expansion and wealth as it colonised the New World. Ferdinand and Isabella, the Roman Catholic monarchs, were charged with the duty of uniting both church and state. The strict authority of the Church to defend its unity through the establishment of the Inquisition was upheld by the state. Pride and superiority marked the Spanish attitude toward the rest of the world and an ideology of social relationships marginalized anyone who was not a “pure-blood Spaniard.” Women, considered biologically, intellectually and even spiritually inferior, were expected to uphold the family’s honor by living quiet lives devoted to their husbands.

One of twelve children, Teresa’s paternal grandfather was a Christianized Jew (converso) who bought his way into society with a certificate of nobility. This allowed Teresa’s father to eventually become one of the wealthiest men in Avila. Teresa was both member of this disadvantaged and suspect group, and yet privileged with papers establishing her in the upper echelon of society. It would seem that Teresa’s place in her culture was clear and well-defined.

However, Teresa’s extroverted and passionate nature pushed family and social limits. As a child, she instigated plans with her younger brother to become a martyr. When that failed, she turned to fantasies of being a hermit. Later in

her adolescence, Teresa reveled in romance novels, gossip and partying. Her father, fearing that she would dishonor the family name, placed her in a convent boarding school. Teresa soon resolved to enter the Order of Carmel in an effort to save her soul. For the first 18 years of her religious life, Teresa struggled with attachment to worldly loves. While faithful to the ‘letter of the law,’ that is, to the recitation of the Divine Office, and to the fasting and silence prescribed by the Rule, she continued to engage in trivial conversation and gossip which took place in the salon-like atmosphere in the parlor of the monastery.

Teresa of Avila

A Woman Embedded in Her Culture...and in God



How did this worldly young nun become an independent thinker, a

theologian of contemplative life, a reformer of the Carmelite Order, a Doctor of the Church? Deeply moved by reading the Confessions of St. Augustine, and later by a spiritual experience through which she became profoundly aware of Christ’s unfathomable and intimate love for her despite her sinfulness, Teresa underwent a penetrating conversion that set her on a spiritual course from which she would never deviate. As a result, her passionate nature became totally

focused on loving God. Out of her intensely intimate relationship with Christ, she initiated and carried out the reform of Carmel, founding over a dozen monasteries throughout Spain. She also became a prolific spiritual writer, not by her own desire, but in response to the requests of others. Her outgoing and winning personality was endearing even her potential adversaries while her humor and satire poked gentle fun at the ambiguities of her culture.

Teresa's writings on prayer and on the spiritual journey are bold and daring. She teaches that, while God is at the center of the social order, God is also at the center of the soul. This means that God's desire for us supercedes any presumed hierarchies based on status, power, or gender. Differences disappear in contemplative prayer where all are called to passionate and deep relationship with Christ.

Women's Advocate

While never intentionally setting out to examine the role assigned to women of her day, Teresa did explore values, models, and insights that are resonant with contemporary feminist thought. For example, Teresa says to the nuns of her reform,

They say that for a woman to be a good wife toward her husband she must be sad when he is sad, and joyful when he is joyful, even though she may not be so. See what subjection you have been freed from, Sisters! (Way of Perfection, 26.4)

Intensely relational in her approach to life, Teresa's vital relationship with the living Christ taught her about the mutuality of relationship even with the Divine. She found in relating to Christ that it was He who empathized with her needs, even adapting himself to her desires. This, she believed, was the way Christ longs to be with all who are intimate with him.

Teresa walked the fine line between accepting what her Church and society claimed to be her feminine weakness, while at the same time not assuming that these weaknesses were inherent in God's plan. In reflecting on the Scriptures, Teresa found Jesus to be open to women friends and

disciples who were deeply loving and faithful, often more so than his close male friends. Referring to these women, she writes,

And You found as much love and more faith in them than You did in men...Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us ... so that we may not do anything worthwhile for You in public or dare speak some truths that we lament over in secret, without Your also failing to hear so just a petition? I do not believe, Lord, that this could be true of Your goodness and justice, for You are a just judge and not like those of the world. (Way of Perfection 3.7)

Teresa learned that the friendship of Jesus extends to women regardless of their social status. Standing in the tension between the social expectations of women in her culture and her experience of Jesus in the Scriptures, Teresa adhered to what she learned from her relationship with Christ. She trusted and often acted upon her personal authority, while at the same time recognizing her limitations and her tendency to self-deception. Grounded in humility and discretion, she sought to be a participant in dialogue with the letrados, the learned theologians of her day, not resting until her questions and concerns found proper hearing, and truth was revealed.

Spiritual Teacher

Teresa's vibrant relationship with Christ empowered her to teach and to lead with personal authority. She wrote *The Book of Her Life*, at the request of her spiritual director and three other works on prayer and the spiritual life: *The Way of Perfection*, *The Book of Foundations*, and *The Interior Castle*. Three times she faced examination by the Inquisition, while courageously standing firm in her own truth. In response to others' fears that her writings would be condemned, Teresa wrote:

This amused me and made me laugh... And I said they shouldn't be afraid about these possible accusations; that it would be pretty bad for my soul if there were something in it of the sort that I should have to fear the Inquisition; that I thought if I did have something to fear I'd go myself to see

out the Inquisitors. (*The Book of Her Life*, 33.5)

When she was quoted the Pauline injunction that women should be silent and never presume to teach in the church (1 Tim. 2:11-14) Teresa countered with the words of Jesus which came to her in a locution: Tell them they shouldn't follow just one part of Scripture... and ask them if they can be any chance tie my hands. (*Spiritual Testimonies* 15).

Social Critic

I shall mention some things that are necessary... The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility.. in this house ...all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped.

(*Way of Perfection* 4. 3, 4, 7)

Teresa's intensely relational vision of community life was a radical concept in the culture of her day.

Always have courageous thoughts. As a result of them the Lord will give you grace for courageous deeds.

**Meditation on
The Song of Songs 2:17**

She dreamed of a Christian society, a religious community, that would manifest to the world a specific model of social relationship, a model centered on friendship, a community of equals. Although religious life in her time was limited to those of 'pure blood,' lineage meant nothing in Teresa's reform. Her monasteries were enclaves of faith standing for the Gospel of Christ in a Church being torn apart by the Protestant Reformation and the Church's Counter Reformation. Teresa described the 'interior castle' of the soul, a womb-like place, wherein dwells the Lord of all. Within the womb of the soul, within the womb of the cloister, her nuns effected the change necessary in society by their faithfulness to prayer and

to the Lord of Love who transforms them into Himself. While never intending to be a social reformer, Teresa did hold out a radical vision of Church, a community based on mutuality with Christ and one another. Accepting the fact of social inequality prevalent in her period of history, Teresa was critical of members of the aristocracy who neglected the needs of the poor, and she found fault with the status seeking and vanity of the clergy. While not actively working to transform the whole of her society, Teresa questioned whether existing forms of social status were natural or inevitable. Her questions were rooted in Scripture and in her experience of total mutuality with Christ.

Her Message Today

Love that loves me more than I can love myself or understand! (Soliloquy 17)

Teresa embodies the passionate longing for fullness of life in God. She was a woman, dauntless in the pursuit of Truth, willing to have her life turned upside-down by the God of her longing. She discovered a totally mutual God who taught her to see reality from a new perspective. As a result, she fired human souls to reach for God in new ways and five hundred years later, she continues to do so through her writing and counsel. Today, Teresa mentors and challenges us to live with depth, with passion, and with purpose so that every moment can be experienced in the center of the soul, God's own dwelling.

Teresa, woman, passionate lover of life and of God, courageous truth seeker, challenger of the status quo, loyal daughter of the Church, spiritual director and teacher, author and mother of many spiritual children, be with us as we navigate this time of monumental change in our world. Help us to stand firm with one foot in our tradition and the other in our experience. Help us to remember that both are avenues of God's revelation, and that both are subject to the movement of a God who is God-for-us, self-emptying and all embracing.



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**The feast day for Teresa of Avila is celebrated on October 15.
Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith
community on that date or at another appropriate time.**

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Prayer Service Honoring St. Teresa of Avila

A Prayer for Transformation of the Soul

(Invite everyone to turn to those around them and introduce themselves. When all have finished begin)

Opening Song: *Dwelling Place* [John Foley © 1976, John B. Foley, administered by New Dawn Music]

Greeting

Presider: In the name of God, Lover and Creator, and of the Christ our Holy Brother, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen

Presider: Grace and peace to you from God whose love is everlasting and from our brother Jesus Christ.

All: And also with you.

Opening Prayer

Presider: Let us pray. God, You are the Light at our Center. Give us complete trust in your love for us as we journey ever-closer to You. Strengthen us as we discover the many dwelling places within us, just as you gave strength to Teresa. Open us to Your holy Will for us, and to the transformation of our lives that loving you requires. We ask this in the name of your son and our brother, Jesus the Christ.

All: Amen

Liturgy of the Word: Reading: 2 Corinthians 5: 1-10

Psalm Response: *Psalm 16* [(text) Marty Haugen © 1969, ICEL; (music) Marty Haugen, adapted by Diana Kodner © 1988,1994, GIA Publications, Inc.]

Gospel Acclamation (*Sung*)

Gospel: John 15: 1-17

Reflection/Preaching: *Make some connections to Teresa's images of seven dwelling places (aspects of the soul) from The Interior Castle, and the journey that one goes through while moving closer to God. [See The Doctors of the Church by Bernard McGinn, p140,141(Crossroad, 1999).] As described by McGinn, the first three Dwelling Places are in the more active stages, in which we are called to make efforts to cooperate with God's invitation to move toward the light within. Stage 1 involves coming to the knowledge of our sinfulness, the need for humility, and the effort necessary at the first stage of prayer. In Stage 2, mortal sin is left behind. Stage 3 is the life of perseverance in prayer found in those who guard against sin. These active stages are met briefly as the focus of this service of prayer and repentance.*

Ritual Action: Stage 1: Examination of Conscience. Either silently or using a prepared text. See *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, Vol.1, ICEL (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Mn: 1990)

Stage 2: Confession of sins. *Sacramental confession would be the ideal. Central to Teresa's teaching is the relationship between prayer and the Church, so it makes sense that this be an action of the Church. Individual confessions can be done with confessors standing in the body of the church, at a slight distance from the assembly. The assembly then can witness and support the action, but not hear the confession itself. If sacramental confession is not possible, those assembled may write down a few words of confession and place them in a burner with incense. Play or sing St. Teresa's Prayer from John Michael Talbot's Heart of the Shepherd album during this time of quiet or of individual confession.*

Stage 3: The Lord's Prayer

Presider: Leading into the next stages on the journey toward the Light, Teresa imagines the soul as becoming more and more conformed to Christ, and so we pray in the words that were a gift from him. Our Father...

(Prayer with hands joined, as one communion.)

Closing prayer:

Presider: Let us pray. Holy God we ask only to be closer to you. Give us all that we need to live in the light. Hold us up when we fall. Feed us when we are hungry for Your presence, and help us to do the same to all the least of your children. Strengthen us in prayer and in the love of each other and of your holy Church. We ask this in Jesus' name.

All: Amen

Presider: May God bless us all, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Presider: Now, let us go from here to be signs of God's love in the world.

All: Thanks be to God.

Closing Song: *Nada Te Turbe / Nothing Can Trouble* (Taize ©1986,1991, GIA Publications, Inc) [Sing several times in place, and continue as ministers and assembly leave.]

Note: All music with the exception of Talbot's, can be found in Gather Comprehensive ©1994 GIA

This prayer service was prepared by Laurel Jurecki who has a Master's degree in Liturgy and is a Pastoral Minister in Cleveland, Ohio