



October 15

Commemoration: Teresa of Avila, teacher, renewer of the church, 1582

Saint Teresa of Ávila, also called Saint Teresa of Jesus, baptized as Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada, (March 28, 1515 – October 4, 1582) was a prominent Spanish mystic, Roman Catholic saint, Carmelite nun, and writer of the Counter Reformation, and theologian of contemplative life through mental prayer. She was a reformer of the Carmelite Order and is considered to be, along with John of the Cross, a founder of the Discalced Carmelites.

In 1622, forty years after her death, she was canonized by Pope Gregory XV, and in 1970 named a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI. Her books, which include her autobiography, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, and her seminal work, *El Castillo Interior* (The Interior Castle), are an integral part of the Spanish Renaissance literature as well as Christian mysticism and Christian meditation practices as she entails in her other important work *Camino de Perfección* (The Way of Perfection). She died in 1582.

Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada was born in 1515 in Gotarrendura, in the province of Ávila, Spain. Her paternal grandfather, Juan de Toledo, was a marrano (Jewish forced-convert to Christianity) and was condemned by the Spanish Inquisition for allegedly returning to the Jewish faith. Her father, Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda, bought knighthood and successfully assimilated into Christian society. Teresa's mother, Beatriz, was especially keen to raise her daughter as a pious Christian. Teresa was fascinated by accounts of the lives of the saints, and ran away from home at age seven with her brother Rodrigo to find martyrdom among the Moors. Her uncle stopped them as he was returning to the city, having spotted the two outside the city walls.

In the cloister, she suffered greatly from illness. Early in her sickness, she experienced periods of religious ecstasy through the use of the devotional book "*Tercecer abecedario espiritual*," translated as the *Third Spiritual Alphabet* (published in 1527 and written by Francisco de Osuna). This work, following the example of similar writings of medieval mystics, consisted of directions for examinations of conscience and for spiritual self-concentration and inner contemplation (known in mystical nomenclature as *oratio recollectionis* or *oratio mentalis*). She also employed other mystical ascetic works such as the *Tractatus de oratione et meditatione* of Saint Peter of Alcantara, and perhaps many of those upon which Saint Ignatius of Loyola based his *Spiritual Exercises* and possibly the *Spiritual Exercises* themselves.

She claimed that during her illness she rose from the lowest stage, "recollection", to the "devotions of silence" or even to the "devotions of ecstasy", which was one of perfect union with God. During this final stage, she said she frequently experienced a rich "blessing of tears." As the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sin became clear to her, she says she came to understand the awful terror of sin and the inherent nature of original sin. She also became conscious of her own natural impotence in confronting sin, and the necessity of absolute submission to God.

Around 1556, various friends suggested that her newfound knowledge was diabolical, not divine. She began to inflict various tortures and mortifications of the flesh upon herself. But her confessor, the Jesuit Saint Francis Borgia, reassured her of the divine inspiration of her thoughts. On St. Peter's Day in 1559, Teresa became firmly convinced that Jesus Christ presented himself to her in bodily form, though invisible. These visions lasted almost uninterrupted for more than two years. In another vision, a seraph drove the fiery point of a golden lance repeatedly through her heart, causing an ineffable spiritual-bodily pain.

*I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan;*

*and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it...*

This vision was the inspiration for one of Bernini's most famous works, the *Ecstasy of St Teresa* at Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.

The memory of this episode served as an inspiration throughout the rest of her life, and motivated her life-long imitation of the life and suffering of Jesus, epitomized in the motto usually associated with her: *Lord, either let me suffer or let me die.*