
Article 89: Teresa of Avila

1515 – 1582

By Amy Cogdell

Teresa of Avila was born to a family of Spanish nobility just two years before Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses. This placed her life in the heart of the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic response to the grievances of Protestant Reformers. In 1545 the Council of Trent convened to address doctrinal questions and the institutional problems of corrupt bishops and poorly educated priests. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit was moving on another front, raising up mighty leaders – preachers, teachers, missionaries and mystics – to call the Catholic Church back to her first love. Teresa was among these shining lights, and she remains one of greatest spiritual teachers in Judeo-Christian history.

Stories from the lives of saints captivated young Teresa. When she was only seven years old, she and her brother Rodrigo ran away to preach the gospel to the Moors. Her uncle found the two children outside the city wall and returned them to their parents.

Teresa left home again as a young woman to join a Carmelite convent. Almost immediately, she fell ill. Her sickness progressed to the point of partial paralysis, forcing her to leave the cloister for several years. During this time she read extensively and began to practice the silent “prayer of recollection.” She was blessed with a few mystical experiences, but her desire for approval and recognition held her back. Several of her friends and spiritual advisors believed her visions came from the devil and counseled her to renounce them. Their rejection caused Teresa anguish and doubt, but she persisted in prayer.

When she was thirty-nine years old, Teresa had an encounter with Christ that changed the course of her life. She saw a flame-tipped spear in a vision, and physically felt it pierce her heart repeatedly, lighting an internal fire which never waned.

After this experience Teresa began her apostolic ministry of reform. She founded several convents committed to the original, rigorous rule of the Carmelite order. She also worked to win the hearts of Spanish Jews who had forcibly been converted to Christianity. Her own paternal grandfather had been condemned by the Inquisition for returning to his Jewish practices.⁵²

Teresa also wrote. Her last book, *Interior Castle*, is a masterful study of the soul’s journey toward union with God. It has inspired both Catholics and Protestants for more than four centuries. Dallas Willard writes, “I first studied Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle* twenty or so years ago, after many years of efforts to understand, live, and communicate what the spiritual life portrayed in the Bible was meant to be. I had, by then, found many helpful companions on the Way, spread across time and space and from many ‘denominational distinctives.’ But this book and this author immediately announced themselves as a unique presence of God in my life. The book provided instruction on a living relationship with God that I had found nowhere else.”⁵³

Teresa’s writing reveals her exceptional intimacy with God. However, her intimacy never falls into familiarity. Rather, she speaks with a reverence and holy fear lacking in most modern Christian

⁵² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teresa_of_Ávila, May 30, 2010.

⁵³ *The Great Omission*, by Dallas Willard, p. 206.

literature. The following excerpt from the introduction to the *Interior Castle* captures the unique balance of confidence and awe characteristic of Teresa's life.

While I was beseeching Our Lord today that He would speak through me, a thought occurred to me which I will now set down, in order to have some foundation on which to build. I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle, made of a single diamond or of a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions. Now, if we think carefully over this, sisters, the soul of the righteous man is nothing but a paradise, in which, as God tells us, He takes His delight. For what do you think a room will be like which is the delight of a King so mighty, so wise, so pure, and so full of good? I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of a soul and its great capacity...

For though [the soul] is His creature, and there is therefore as much difference between it and God as between creature and Creator, the very fact that His Majesty says it is made in His image means that we can hardly form any conception of the soul's great dignity and beauty.

It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves or know who we are. Would it not be a sign of great ignorance, my daughters, if a person were asked who he was, and could not say, and had no idea who his father or his mother was, or from what country he came? Though that is great stupidity, our own is incomparably greater if we make no attempt to discover what we are...

As far as I can understand, the door of entry into this castle is prayer and meditation: I do not say mental prayer rather than vocal prayer, for, if it is prayer at all, it must be accompanied by meditation. If a person does not think Whom he is addressing, and what he is asking for, and who it is that is asking and of Whom he is asking, I do not consider that he is praying at all even though he be constantly moving his lips. True, it is sometimes possible to pray without paying heed to these things, but that is only when they have been thought about previously. If a man is in the habit of speaking to God's Majesty as he would speak to his slave, and never wonders if he is expressing himself properly....I do not call that prayer at all – and God grant that no Christian may ever speak to Him so!....

O souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ! Learn to understand yourselves and take pity on yourselves! Surely, if you understand your own natures, it is impossible that you will not strive to remove the pitch which blackens the crystal.