Biography St Teresa Avila



**St Teresa of Avila**

St Teresa of Avila (Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada) was born in Avila, Spain on 15th March 1515. Her parents were both pious Catholics and in some ways inspired their daughter to take up a life of prayer. As a young child Teresa showed signs of a deeply religious nature; she would often retreat into silence for prayer and would enjoy giving alms to the poor. She was very close to her Mother, who provided a warm counterbalance, to the strictness of her father. However in her teens, Teresa’s mother passed away, leaving the young Teresa distraught at the void she felt. The young St Teresa tells of her despair and how she turned instinctively to the Virgin Mary for comfort.

"*I threw myself down in despair before an image of the Mother of God. With many tears, I implored the Holy Virgin to become my mother now. Uttered with the simplicity of a child, this prayer was heard. From that hour on, I never prayed to the Virgin in vain.*" (1)

During her later teen years Avila lost some of her early piety and religious zeal. She recounted how she became interested in worldly matters and enjoyed the company of a wide circle of friends. She had a natural charm and found it easy to make friends. In return she enjoyed the compliments and friendships of others. However, she was not at peace, considering herself to be a miserable sinner; later she would look back in guilt at her early life. However this sense of being a “miserable sinner” was probably the result of a harsh self-judgement, encouraged by her fathers exacting religious standards. At the age of 16, her father decided to send Teresa to a convent school to be educated. This re ignited in Avila an interest in following a spiritual life and after some deliberation resolved to become a nun of the Carmellite Order. At the time the convent rules were not very strict; it was probably more relaxed than living with her father. At the time the convent accepted many people into the order, often for financial reasons. The convent became overcrowded and people were often judged not on the basis of spiritual intensity but on material possessions. In this climate Teresa struggled to find time for quite reflection; although she did start teaching people on the virtues of mental prayer.

Shortly after becoming a nun, Avila experienced a severe illness (malaria), which left her in great pain for a long period. At one point it was feared that her illness was so severe that she would not be able to recover. However during this period of intense physical pain, she began to increasingly experience divine visions and an inner sense of peace. These inner experiences of joy and peace seemed to transcend the intense physical pain of the body. She describes in her own words her state of mind during these trials and tribulations

*“I bore these sufferings with great composure, in fact with joy, except at first when the pain was too severe. What followed seemed to hurt less. I was completely surrendered to the will of God even if he intended to burden me like this forever..... The other sisters wondered at my God-given patience. Without him I truly could not have borne so much with so much joy.” (2)*

When she was a little better she resumed her prayers with renewed vigour. However on telling others of her visions and spiritual experiences she was dissuaded from persuading them. Certain clergy felt they were just delusions of the devil. As a result, for many years Teresa lost the confidence to pursue her prayers and her spiritual life was almost put on hold. However, when Teresa was 41, she met a Priest who convinced her to go back to her prayers and implore God to come back. Initially, she had some difficulty sitting through prayers. She wryly remarked the end of the hour’s prayer couldn’t come soon enough. However, in the course of time, she became absorbed in deep contemplation in which she felt an ever growing sense of oneness with God. At times she felt overwhelmed with divine love. The experiences were so transforming, she at times felt the illumining grace of God would wash her soul away. She was so filled with divine contemplation it is said at times her body would spontaneously levitate. Teresa, however was not keen on these public displays of “miracles”. When she felt it happening she would ask other nuns to sit on her to prevent her floating away.

Teresa was not a just a quiet, placid saint. She had an endearing, natural quality; her life energy attracted and inspired many who were close. They admired her for both her outer charm and inner serenity. But at the same time her religious ecstasies also caused jealousy and suspicions. Unfortunately she was born into the period of the Spanish inquisition, during this time any deviation from the orthodox religious experience came under the strict observation and scrutiny. On one occasion Teresa complained to God about her mistreatment from so many different people. God replied to her saying “That is how I always treat my friends” with good humour St Teresa replied “That must be why you have so few friends”. St Teresa struggled because there were few who could understand or appreciate her inner ecstasies. However on the one hand she felt these experiences to be more real than ordinary events.

At the age of 43 St Teresa decided she wanted to found a new order recommitting to the values of poverty and simplicity. She wanted to move away from her present convent which made a life of prayer more difficult. Initially her aims were greeted with widespread opposition from within the town of Avila. However, with the support of some Priests, the opposition waned and she was allowed to set up her first convent. St Teresa proved to be an influential leader and founder. She guided the nuns not just through strict disciplines, but also through the power of love, and common sense. Her way was not the way of rigid asceticism and self denial. Although she underwent many tribulations herself, to others she stressed the importance of experiencing God’s love. As she herself says:

“*You know, I no longer govern in the way I used to. Love does everything. I am not sure if that is because no one gives me cause to reprove her, or because I have discovered that things go better in that way*." [p.657] (3)

*“The important thing is not to think much but to love much and so do that which best stirs you to love. Love is not great delight but desire to please God in everything*." (1)

St Teresa devoted much of the rest of her life to travelling around Spain setting up new convents based along the ancient monastic traditions. Her travels and work were not always greeted with enthusiasm, many resented her reforms and the implied criticism of existing religious orders. She often met with criticism including the papal nuncio who used the rather descriptive phrase “a restless disobedient gadabout who has gone about teaching as though she were a professor" St Teresa also had to frequently contend with difficult living conditions and her frail health. However she never let these obstacles dissuade her from her life’s task. She eventually died on October 4 at the age of 67. A fellow sister describes the hours just before the death of St Teresa.

“*She remained in this position in prayer full of deep peace and great repose. Occasionally she gave some outward sign of surprise or amazement. But everything proceeded in great repose. It seemed as if she were hearing a voice which she answered. Her facial expression was so wondrously changed that it looked like a celestial body to us. Thus immersed in prayer, happy and smiling, she went out of this world into eternal life*.” (2)

St Teresa Avila was one of the great Christian mystics. Overcoming physical ailments, she became fully absorbed in her devoted to God. As Sri Chinmoy says:

*“In Spain, Teresa of Avila offered to the world something profoundly mystical. Her mystical experience is the most successful culmination of the divine marriage between the aspiring soul and the liberating Christ, and it is here that man’s helpless crying will and God’s omnipotent all-fulfilling Will embrace each other.*” (5)

**Works of Teresa of Avila**

In 1566 she wrote *Camino de perfeccion* (Way of perfection) in about 1566, to tell the nuns how to reach their goal;

In 1580 she wrote what is considered her greatest work; the *Castillo interior/ Las moradas* (Interior castle/ The mansions) this involved describing the various stages of spiritual evolution leading to full prayer; she wrote *Las Fundaciones* (Foundations) from 1573 to 1582, so they would remember the early history of their order.  
Her ways

**Poetry of St Teresa Avila**

St Teresa wrote several volumes of poetry her most popular (4) [p.33]

**"God alone is enough."**

Let nothing upset you,  
let nothing startle you.  
All things pass;  
God does not change.  
Patience wins  
all it seeks.  
Whoever has God  
lacks nothing:  
God alone is enough.

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**Footnotes**

[(1) St Teresa Avila](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=208)

[(2) Our Garden of Carmel - on St Teresa Avila](http://www.ourgardenofcarmel.org/lovforlov1.html)

[(3) The letters of Saint Teresa of Jesus](http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/teresa.html#anchor103929); translated and edited by E. Allison Peers from the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa. London, Burns, Oates & Washbourne [1950] (2 v.: xii, 1006 p.)

(4) The complete poetry of St. Teresa of Avila: a bilingual edition / Eric W. Vogt; foreword by Jaime L. Sin. New Orleans: University Press of the South, 1996

[(5) On Mysticism](http://www.srichinmoylibrary.com/eastern-light-western-mind/16.html) by Sri Chinmoy

**External References**

* + [Teresa Avila](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teresa_of_Avila) - wikipedia
  + [St Teresa Avila](http://www.karmel.at/eng/teresa.htm) The Teresian Carmel
  + [Teresa Avila links at](http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/teresa.html) Other Women's Voices
  + [Women who Changed the World](http://www.biographyonline.net/people/women-who-changed-world.html)
  + [Inspirational Christians](http://www.biographyonline.net/people/inspirational/christians.html)

**Christian Saints**

* + [Bernadette Soubirious](http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/bernadette-soubirious.html)
  + [St Teresa of Avila](http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/st_teresa_avila.html)
  + [St Therese of Lisieux](http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/st_therese_lisieux.html)
  + [Inspirational Christians](http://www.biographyonline.net/people/inspirational/christians.html)

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