Teresa of Ávila

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For other saints with similar names, see Saint Teresa (disambiguation).

The title of this article contains the character Á. Where it is unavailable or not desired, the name may be represented as Teresa of Avila.

Saint Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Ávila by Peter Paul Rubens

Virgin and Doctor of the Church

Born

March 28, 1515

Gotarrendura (Ávila), Old Castile, Kingdom of Spain

Died

October 4, 1582 (aged 67)[1]

Alba de Tormes, Salamanca, Kingdom of Spain

Honored in

Roman Catholic Church

Lutheran Church[2][3]

Anglican Communion

Beatified

April 24, 1614, Rome by Pope Paul V

Canonized

March 12, 1622, Rome by Pope Gregory XV

Major shrine

Convent of the Annunciation, Alba de Tormes, Spain

Feast

October 15

Attributes

habit of the Discalced Carmelites, Book and Quill, arrow-pierced heart

Patronage

bodily ills; headaches; lacemakers; laceworkers; loss of parents; people in need of grace; people in religious orders; people ridiculed for their piety; Pozega, Croatia; sick people; sickness; Spain

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.

Early life

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 "Tercer 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.

The Ecstasy of St Teresa by Bernini, basilica of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

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 subjection 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[4] 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.

Activities as reformer

The incentive to give outward practical expression to her inward motive was inspired in Teresa by the Franciscan priest Saint Peter of Alcantara who became acquainted with her as Founder early in 1560, and became her spiritual guide and counselor. She now resolved to found a reformed Carmelite convent, correcting the laxity which she had found in the Cloister of the Incarnation and others. Guimara de Ulloa, a woman of wealth and a friend, supplied the funds. Teresa worked for many years encouraging the forcibly converted Jews of Spain to follow Christianity.

The absolute poverty of the new monastery, established in 1562 and named St. Joseph's (San José), at first excited a scandal among the citizens and authorities of Ávila, and the little house with its chapel was in peril of suppression; but powerful patrons, including the bishop himself, as well as the impression of well-secured subsistence and prosperity, turned animosity into applause.

In March 1563, when Teresa moved to the new cloister, she received the papal sanction to her prime principle of absolute poverty and renunciation of property, which she proceeded to formulate into a "Constitution". Her plan was the revival of the earlier, stricter rules, supplemented by new regulations such as the three disciplines of ceremonial flagellation prescribed for the divine service every week, and the discalceation of the nun. For the first five years, Teresa remained in pious seclusion, engaged in writing.

Church window at the Convent of St Teresa.

In 1567, she received a patent from the Carmelite general, Rubeo de Ravenna, to establish new houses of her order, and in this effort and later visitations she made long journeys through nearly all the provinces of Spain. Of these she gives a description in her "Libro de las Fundaciones." Between 1567 and 1571, reform convents were established at Medina del Campo, Malagon, Valladolid, Toledo, Pastrana, Salamanca, and Alba de Tormes.

As part of her original patent, Teresa was given permission to set up two houses for men who wished to adopt the reforms; she convinced John of the Cross and Anthony of Jesus to help with this. They founded the first convent of Discalced Carmelite Brethren in November 1568 at Duruello. Another friend, Gerónimo Grecian, Carmelite visitator of the older observance of Andalusia and apostolic commissioner, and later provincial of the Teresian reforms, gave her powerful support in founding convents at Segovia (1571), Beas de Segura (1574), Seville (1575), and Caravaca de la Cruz (Murcia, 1576), while the deeply mystical John, by his power as teacher and preacher, promoted the inner life of the movement.

In 1576 a series of persecutions began on the part of the older observant Carmelite order against Teresa, her friends, and her reforms. Pursuant to a body of resolutions adopted at the general chapter at Piacenza, the "definitors" of the order forbade all further founding of convents. The general condemned her to voluntary retirement to one of her institutions. She obeyed and chose St. Joseph's at Toledo. Her friends and subordinates were subjected to greater trials.

Teresa of Ávila by François Gérard (1770−1837), a French painter

Finally, after several years her pleadings by letter with King Philip II of Spain secured relief. As a result, in 1579, the processes before the inquisition against her, Grecian, and others were dropped, which allowed the reform to continue. A brief of Pope Gregory XIII allowed a special provincial for the younger branch of the discalced nuns, and a royal rescript created a protective board of four assessors for the reform.

During the last three years of her life, Teresa founded convents at Villanueva de la Jara in northern Andalusia (1580), Palencia (1580), Soria (1581), Burgos, and Granada (1582). In total seventeen convents, all but one founded by her, and as many men's cloisters were due to her reform activity of twenty years.

Her final illness overtook her on one of her journeys from Burgos to Alba de Tormes. She died in 1582, just as Catholic nations were making the switch from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, which required the removal of October 5–14 from the calendar. She died either before midnight of October 4 or early in the morning of October 15, which is celebrated as her feast day. Her last words were: "My Lord, it is time to move on. Well then, may your will be done. O my Lord and my Spouse, the hour that I have longed for has come. It is time to meet one another."[5]

In 1622, forty years after her death, she was canonized by Pope Gregory XV. The Cortes exalted her to patroness of Spain in 1617, and the University of Salamanca previously conferred the title Doctor ecclesiae with a diploma. The title is Latin for Doctor of the Church, but is distinct from the papal honor of Doctor of the Church, which is always conferred posthumously and was finally bestowed upon her by Pope Paul VI in 1970 along with Saint Catherine of Siena making them the first women to be awarded the distinction. Teresa is revered as the Doctor of Prayer. The mysticism in her works exerted a formative influence upon many theologians of the following centuries, such as Francis of Sales, Fénelon, and the Port-Royalists.

Statue of St. Teresa of Avila

Mysticism

"It is love alone that gives worth to all things." - St. Teresa of Avila

The kernel of Teresa's mystical thought throughout all her writings is the ascent of the soul in four stages (The Autobiography Chs. 10-22):

The first, or "mental prayer", is that of devout contemplation or concentration, the withdrawal of the soul from without and specially the devout observance of the passion of Christ and penitence (Autobiography 11.20).

The second is the "prayer of quiet", in which at least the human will is lost in that of God by virtue of a charismatic, supernatural state given of God, while the other faculties, such as memory, reason, and imagination, are not yet secure from worldly distraction. While a partial distraction is due to outer performances such as repetition of prayers and writing down spiritual things, yet the prevailing state is one of quietude (Autobiography 14.1).

The "devotion of union" is not only a supernatural but an essentially ecstatic state. Here there is also an absorption of the reason in God, and only the memory and imagination are left to ramble. This state is characterized by a blissful peace, a sweet slumber of at least the higher soul faculties, a conscious rapture in the love of God.

The fourth is the "devotion of ecstasy or rapture," a passive state, in which the consciousness of being in the body disappears (2 Corinthians 12:2-3). Sense activity ceases; memory and imagination are also absorbed in God or intoxicated. Body and spirit are in the throes of a sweet, happy pain, alternating between a fearful fiery glow, a complete impotence and unconsciousness, and a spell of strangulation, intermitted sometimes by such an ecstatic flight that the body is literally lifted into space. This after half an hour is followed by a reactionary relaxation of a few hours in a swoon-like weakness, attended by a negation of all the faculties in the union with God. From this the subject awakens in tears; it is the climax of mystical experience, productive of the trance. (Indeed, she was said to have been observed levitating during Mass on more than one occasion (The Interior Castle St Teresa Of Avila translated by Mirabai Starr.)

Teresa is one of the foremost writers on mental prayer, and her position among writers on mystical theology is unique. In all her writings on this subject she deals with her personal experiences, which a deep insight and analytical gifts enabled her to explain clearly. Her definition was used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Contemplative prayer [oración mental] in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us."[6]

Throughout her writings, persistent metaphors provide a vivid illustration of the image of mystic prayer as watering a garden.

Writings

This is the one portrait of Teresa that is probably the most true to her appearance. It is a copy of an original painted of her in 1576 at the age of 61.

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19th century

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Maria Valtorta • Faustina Kowalska • Thomas Merton

Teresa's writings, produced for didactic purposes, stand among the most remarkable in the mystical literature of the Catholic Church:

The "Autobiography," written before 1567, under the direction of her confessor, Fr Pedro Ibáñez;[7]

" El Camino de Perfección", written also before 1567, at the direction of her confessor;[8]

"Meditations on Song of Songs", 1567, written nominally for her daughters at the convent of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

"El Castillo Interior", written in 1577;[9]

"Relaciones", an extension of the autobiography giving her inner and outer experiences in epistolary form.

Two smaller works are the "Conceptos del Amor" ("Concepts of Love") and "Exclamaciones". In addition, there are "Las Cartas" (Saragossa, 1671), or her correspondence, of which there are 342 extant letters and 87 fragments of others. St Teresa's prose is marked by an unaffected grace, an ornate neatness, and charming power of expression, together placing her in the front rank of Spanish prose writers; and her rare poems ("Todas las poesías", Munster, 1854) are distinguished for tenderness of feeling and rhythm of thought.

Excerpts

Let nothing disturb thee,

Nothing affright thee;

All thing are passing;

God never changeth;

Patient endurance

Attaineth to all things;

Who God possesseth

In nothing is wanting

Alone God sufficeth.

-Liturgy of the Hours

[10]

In Spanish, it is a song called "Nada te turbe" after the first line.

Saint Teresa, who reported visions of Jesus and Mary, was a strong believer in the power of holy water and wrote that she used it with success to repel evil and temptations.[11] She wrote:[12]

I know by frequent experience that there is nothing which puts the devils to flight like holy water.

Let nothing disturb you.

Let nothing make you afraid.

All things are passing.

God alone never changes.

Patience gains all things.

If you have God you will want for nothing.

God alone suffices.

~The bookmark of Teresa of Avila

[13]

Portrayals

"St. Teresa" was painted in 1819–20 by François Gérard, a French neoclassical painter.

Saint Teresa was the inspiration for one of Bernini's most famous works, The Ecstasy of St. Teresa in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.

Saint Teresa features prominently in Joan Osborne's song with the same name.

She is a principal character of the opera Four Saints in Three Acts by the composer Virgil Thomson with a libretto by Gertrude Stein.

She is mentioned prominently in Kathryn Harrison's novel Poison. The main character, Francisca De Luarca, is fascinated by her life.

R. A. Lafferty was strongly inspired by El Castillo Interior when he wrote his novel Fourth Mansions. Quotations from St. Teresa's work are frequently used as chapter headings.

Pierre Klossowski prominently features Saint Teresa of Ávila in his metaphysical novel Baphomet.

George Eliot compared Dorothea Brooke to St. Teresa in Middlemarch (1871–1872) and wrote briefly about the life and works of St. Teresa in the "Prelude" to the novel.

The contemporary poet Jorie Graham features Saint Teresa in the poem Breakdancing in her volume The End of Beauty.

Paz Vega stars as Teresa in Teresa, el cuerpo de Cristo, a 2007 Spanish biopic directed by Ray Loriga.

Barbara Mujica's novel Sister Teresa, while not strictly hagiographical, is based upon Teresa's life.

St. Teresa was the subject of a 1959 play, "La Madre"; she was portrayed by actress Kate Wilkinson.

Performance artist Linda Montano has cited Teresa of Ávila as one of the most important influences on her work and since her return to Catholicism in the 2000s has done performances of her life.