

7. Teresa of Avila: Theologian, Reformer, and Spiritual Guide

Theology and spirituality of the first half of the sixteenth century in Spain was marked by creative intellectual activity and spiritual innovation. In the last half of the century, this enthusiasm was curtailed as an atmosphere of fear and mistrust grew. The Spanish Inquisition and the Index of Prohibited Books were tools used to enforce narrow, orthodox practices. Teresa was caught in this transition from an open to a closed Church. Spanish politics, expansion to the Americas, and the Protestant Reformation all influenced Teresa's theology, spirituality, and her drive to reform the Carmelite Order and the Church.

I. Family and Early Life: In 1970, Teresa of Avila was the first woman to be named a Doctor of the Church - a notable departure from tradition. The Pope defended this choice of a non-ordained woman by noting that Teresa exercised the priesthood of all the faithful bestowed in the waters of Baptism.

In 1515 in Avila, Spain, Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada was born. Her parents were: Dona Beatriz a "gentle, intelligent woman" {Life, V.2) who came from a noble family. Don Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda a successful merchant whom Teresa describes as fond of reading books and averse to owning slaves - *The Book of Her Life*. Their home contained an extensive library of classic texts, including many theological and spiritual works. Teresa would have been taught to read and write at home.

II. Illness and the Carmelite Order: After a pious childhood, flirtatious behavior led her father to send Teresa to Our Lady of Grace, an Augustinian convent, for eighteen months.

An illness in 1532, the first of many, brought her home to recover, after which she decided to enter the Carmelite house of the Incarnation without her father's consent. She took the veil in 1536. The lax customs of the convent eventually led to Teresa's idea to reform Carmel.

Another illness in 1538 brought Teresa to her Uncle Pedro's to convalesce. While there, she read Francisco de Osuna's (ca. 1492-1540) spiritual classic, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* with great enthusiasm. Her spiritual life deepened and became more authentic. She began thinking of her relationship with God in terms of friendship and love. After returning to the convent, she went into a coma which resulted in partial paralysis for three years - everyone thought she was dying. She recovered and in 1543, Teresa nursed her father until his death in December.

III. Reforming Carmel: By 1560, with a group of like-minded women, Teresa began to act on her vision of a Carmelite reform. Teresa assumed leadership, but had to confront strong contrary forces within the Order, the town, and Rome - including lawsuits and the threat to withhold absolution for her sins. The first reformed convent, St. Joseph's, opened in 1562. She succeeded in enlisting John of the Cross (1567) and Jeronimo Gracian (1572) to help her reform the male side of the order. Teresa founded reformed convents in Medina del Campo, Malagon, Valladolid, Toledo, Salamanca, Seville, and other cities - seventeen in all.

Forces threatening Teresa's theological and spiritual vision grew. The Book of Her Life was submitted to the Inquisition in the 1570s and remained there until after her death. The papal nuncio called her, "a restless gadabout, a disobedient and contumacious woman who invented wicked doctrines.. .and taught others, against the commands of St. Paul, who had forbidden women to teach." *Reform and Conflict*

Like Catherine, Teresa was one of the first women to write in the vernacular. Her works include: The Book of Her Life; Spiritual Testimonies and Soliloquies; Constitutions; On Making the Visitation; The Way of Perfection; The Interior Castle- Written in 1577 at the height of her spiritual maturity; The Book of Her Foundations

IV. Teresa's Death, Ministry, and Sainthood

In 1582, Teresa left Avila for the last time to found a convent in Burgos. On the way home to Avila in September, her superior discerned that the Duchess of Alba's request for a "holy woman" to be present at the birth of her child should be honored and she ordered Teresa to go there. Two weeks later, Teresa died - on October 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi.

Six years after her death (1588), Fray Luis de Leon published her written corpus, confirming Teresa as a theologian. In the following year (1589), the Inquisition inaugurated a campaign to have her works banned. Women could not be allowed to function as teachers of prayer or spiritual doctrine to learned men.

In 1614 Teresa was beatified by Pope Paul V. Fireworks exploded in Madrid to celebrate and King Philip III attended the Mass. The image of Teresa displayed at this event portrayed her holding a palm leaf in one hand (virginity) and a golden pen in the other (eloquence). Teresa was canonized in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV.

V. Sixteenth Century Spain: A Divided Era - Seismic changes that took place in the decades prior to Teresa's birth affected her life in significant ways. The marriage and rule of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1469 included a vision of a united Spain based on ethnic and religious purity. For the previous 800 years in Spain (709-1614), Christians, Jews and Muslims lived on the same land in a multi-cultural mix that could be, in turn, peaceful, acrimonious, or violent. These diverse cultural gifts of art, architecture, language, literature, music, and religion brought Spanish civilization to new heights. The Muslim heritage is still on display in southern Spain in cities such as Granada and Cordoba.

Spain developed an obsession with "pure blood Christians" who were not tainted by Jewish or Moorish ancestry. Spaniards with "mixed blood" were denied certain civil rights, barred from key professions, and penalized financially. In 1492, Jews and Muslims who refused to convert to Christianity were expelled from Spain.

Only in the twentieth century did we discover evidence of Teresa's Jewish heritage. In 1946, Alonso Cortes discovered a document in the archives of Valladolid that had strangely disappeared in 1960, and then reappeared twenty-six years later. In this document her family protested their "pure blood" Christian status in order to avoid a new tax.

Sixteenth century Spain also witnessed significant cultural, intellectual and literary productivity. Influenced by the Italian Renaissance, Spain experienced what has come to be called "The Golden Age of Spanish Literature." Famous names include: The poet, Garcilaso de la Vega (1501-1536); Playwright, Lope de Vega; Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), author of Don Quixote.

A turn to Greek and Latin works by Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Plato, fueled a renewal visible in the humanism of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). Humanism advocated study of the Bible in its original languages as well as translations into the vernacular. New spiritual movements flourished.

Another major change involved the Protestant and Roman Catholic Reformations, which affected Teresa in direct ways. Spain was somewhat insulated from the direct repercussions of the Protestant Reformation, but gradually news of its theology, its innovations, and its criticisms of the Church led Spain to retrench.

VI. The Two Halves of the Sixteenth Century: To understand the historical dynamics of Teresa's life, it is important to note a marked contrast between the first and second halves of the sixteenth century. In the early years of the century,

spiritual renewal included women and laity. A leading promoter of new spiritual movements was the learned Cardinal Ximenez Cisneros (d. 1517). He was a champion of women visionaries and authorized translations into Spanish of many theological and spiritual works.

But this environment changed in the second half of the century. Spiritual unrest and challenges to ecclesial monopoly of access to God made the Church defensive. The growing number of Christians developing an interior spiritual life threatened to diminish dependence on institutional rituals such as sacraments and public prayer. Women who practiced mystical prayer were confined to ever smaller spheres of influence. The Spanish Inquisition, originally created to keep watch on lapsed Jews and Muslims, assumed the role of doctrinal watchdog. Vernacular Bibles and spiritual texts were burned and women were forbidden to interpret sacred texts or preach/teach in public.

Teresa's theology was born in this dangerous and uncertain theological climate of suspicion and fear (Interior Castle III. 1.2). The vernacular spiritual books with which Teresa grew up were banned. She was encouraged by her confessors to write her own books, so her nuns would not be left without spiritual guidance. Teresa wisely protested that she was not a "book theologian" (letrado) - which would have caught the attention of the Inquisition. Yet she did not deny her call to share her theological insights.

VII. Teresa's Legacy: Teresa's down-to-earth personality appeals to a wide range of people. She was chatty, earthy, at times inelegant and distracted. Her letters reveal a full, complex woman who could laugh and cry; suffer severe illness; expressed anger and frustration. She was a lover of God and an astute politician and strategist. German Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, sees Teresa of Avila as appealing to contemporary audiences: her penitential practices did not lessen her love of good roast partridge; her mysticism did not obscure her gifts as an adept organizer and diplomat.

In absorbing Teresa's theology, we cannot forget that she was a "displaced person," a member of a group perceived as not "good enough" for Spanish society. She was a woman, a Jewess, and a Christian whose mystical encounters with God and care for others led her to claim theological authority.

In the midst of these complexities and challenges - not the least being that she was a woman - Teresa created a theology of the human person that is compelling and uplifting. It invites readers to see and value themselves as God's image, reflecting

the divine beauty and glory of Christ. For Teresa, the soul has an infinite capacity for God and for service to others.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever felt like a social outsider? Does this experience help you understand Teresa of Avila's theology?
2. Can you identify a major obstacle to your spiritual growth? How do you respond to the challenge of dry or difficult times? In what ways is Teresa's perseverance a helpful model for you, or is it not?
3. What are your deepest desires for your relationship with God? Does it help to hear Teresa's encouragement to "go for the gold"?
4. What are the sources of your theological and spiritual authority?