

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

TERESA OF AVILA



BACKGROUND

When Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the church door in Wittenberg, it was not his intention to challenge the structure of the entire Catholic church. Rather, he was just following normal procedure among intellectuals wishing to debate an issue. Others had been campaigning for reform before this Augustinian monk, but circumstances made him the catalyst of the explosion of unhappiness over the abuses and corruption in the church.

It happened that Rome needed money again, this time to help pay for the rebuilding of St. Peter's. Selling indulgences promising a remission of punishment for sins to the faithful of Europe offered a practical solution. (According to church teachings, indulgences could lessen a soul's time spent in purgatory.)

Unfortunately for Rome, nationalistic feelings were by now particularly strong in Germany. Added to that, Germans had traditionally been opposed to seeing their money go off to Rome. When Luther made his protest against the sale of indulgences, a papal bull condemned his views and ordered him to appear for a hearing. He refused, perhaps afraid of being burned at the stake as a heretic. When Luther sought political support from German lords in the snowballing controversy, he got it. German rulers and the papacy were not new to confrontation. In 1521 Luther was excommunicated, even as his movement grew to include far more reform issues than the sale of indulgences.

In other countries, too, people were ready to revolt against papal authority. The English, for example, had long rebelled against Rome's interference in their internal politics. A dozen years after Luther's excommunication, Henry VIII became infatuated with a woman he thought capable of providing an heir to the throne; the papacy ruled against his remarriage and England set up its own church, free to make its own rules.

Spain, however, was in a different mood. With the conquest of Granada by Catholic forces in 1492, the whole of Spain returned to Christian rule, under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. That same year all Jews who refused to convert to Christianity were forcibly expelled. The Moors (Muslims from North Africa of Berber-Arab stock), who had occupied the Iberian Peninsula since the eighth century, were allowed to remain for a time, though always under suspicion and pressure to convert. They were finally expelled in the early 1600s. For the Spanish there was no question that the Catholic church was the sole answer to faith. The only question was: How exactly should that faith be lived?

AVILA, SPAIN, ALL SOULS' DAY, 1536

In the chill November dawn Teresa de Ahumada steals away from the family home, a younger brother accompanying her as far as

the gate of the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation beyond the city walls. After five years of indecision, the young woman has settled on becoming a nun. She is making the move without her father's consent, though, and that causes her great distress.

It is not as if religious dedication were the motivating factor behind her choice. Rather, an illness brought Teresa to the realization that life could be cut short; because of her frivolous ways, hell might be her fate. In her autobiography she later admits to being "afraid of marriage" (perhaps the result of observing her mother's steady decline in health after a number of pregnancies). But fun-loving Teresa also views the cloister as a kind of purgatory, though she concludes that purgatory is preferable to hell. As she says, "I saw that this was the best and safest state, and so, little by little, I determined to force myself to embrace it."¹

The convent accepts twenty-one-year-old Teresa, and the following year she professes vows. Life at Incarnation is not without its compensations. Typical of religious communities then, visitors to the parlor, even gentlemen callers, are frequent—almost interminable, Teresa will eventually say—for the convent houses at least 130 nuns. Though some sleep in the dormitory, those who are well provided for by their families in terms of dowry enjoy private rooms. Because Teresa's father shortly comes around to her choice of vocation, she falls into the latter category. Those who can afford them feast on delicacies sent in, wear jewelry and make extended outside visits to family or friends.

A year after her profession, Teresa goes through a long period of illness marked by fainting fits and heart problems. When none of the doctors' ministrations help, she is sent for treatment to a *curandera*, or female healer, about forty miles from Avila. Her condition worsens and, after a severe cataleptic fit that leaves her unconscious and unmoving for four days, a grave is even dug for her. (Catalepsy may be either neurological or psychological in

origin. If the latter, the consequent paralysis is sometimes attributed to hysteria. Some scholars speculate that Teresa's illness was psychological in nature, prompted by interior struggles over her spiritual life.) Through the intercession of Saint Joseph, as she believes, Teresa finally recovers sufficiently to return to the convent, though somewhat an invalid still. The effects of paralysis will stay with her for several years.

Beginning an attempt at serious prayer, she tries to find a confessor who will understand. Failing that, she turns for guidance to a book she read during the illness, Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. Osuna's words had made a strong impression upon her.

Although becoming increasingly aware of the shallowness of her interior life, Teresa remains torn between attempts at deeper prayer and the social distractions prevalent at the convent. She finds "neither any joy in God nor any pleasure in the world,"² she later reports. Her extroverted nature thrives on human company as well as its approval.

Her father's death in 1543 hits Teresa hard, for he was an important figure in her life, a source of both comfort and support. (Her mother had died when she was thirteen.)

For a dozen years after that, she continues on the "stormy sea," as she calls it. One day, chancing to look at a picture of the wounded Christ, Teresa is struck by the realization of all he had suffered and "how ill I had repaid him for those wounds that I felt as if my heart were breaking." In "floods of tears,"³ she begs Christ for the strength to change.

As the forty-year-old nun ponders how best to serve God, to make amends, the answer seems clear: Follow the vocation given her as perfectly as possible. But to fulfill that vow required a spiritually oriented environment. Unfortunately, the Convent of the Incarnation—like so many others—had drifted far from the origi-

nal contemplative ideal of the Carmelite Order.

Teresa's dream, which she and a few others discuss, revolves around the idea of a handful of nuns living apart, austere, with strict enclosure, according to the order's Primitive Rule.

Still, the idea never gets beyond the talk stage until one day after Communion when Teresa relates, "the Lord gave me the most explicit commands to work for this aim," coupled with the promise that the convent she founds will "be a star giving out the most brilliant light."⁴ (She has already begun to experience visions.)

When she broaches the subject with the local provincial of the order, he is in favor of the proposal at first. But once word of it leaks out, the fireworks start. With only a few exceptions, the sisters at Incarnation ridicule Teresa when they are not accusing her of insulting them by implying that their convent is not good enough. Some even suggest she be thrown into the convent prison cell. (Such cells were then a common way to deal with problem nuns in a religious community.) Teresa's friends fear far worse, for a rumor has begun circulating about the nun's having revelations. Should the dreaded Spanish Inquisition, always on the hunt for false mystics as well as for heretics, hear of this, it will likely investigate her. Punishment entails prison, torture and sometimes death. The Inquisition also seeks out *conversos*, Jews who ostensibly converted to Christianity but may continue in secret to practice their ancestral faith. Teresa's paternal grandfather had been a *converso*, and had moved his family (while Teresa's father was still a child) from Toledo to Avila to start a new life. Should this become known, Teresa would be receiving even more scrutiny.

The Carmelite nun's plan is denounced from the pulpits of Avila's churches. On one occasion, on an outing from the convent to visit her family, Teresa is in the congregation. Yet despite

such opposition, Teresa doggedly goes ahead with negotiations to purchase a small house for the envisaged new convent. The day before signing of the deed, however, the provincial withdraws his permission. He simply cannot deal with all the commotion.

Throughout the struggle to establish a reform convent, Teresa does get ongoing support from Peter of Alcantara, a Franciscan working to instill in his own order more contemplative and penitential practices. The two had first met when she was looking for guidance in understanding the intellectual visions she was beginning to receive. (As Teresa would explain this type of vision in subsequent writings, the person does not see the Lord with the eyes but “is conscious that Jesus Christ stands by her side.... [T]his brings with it a special knowledge of God; a most tender love for Him results from being constantly in His company, while the desire of devoting one’s whole being to His service is more fervent than any hitherto described.”⁵)

As troubles mount, Peter, having gone through it himself, tells her that opposition from good people is one of the worst trials in the world. And sure enough, she suffers the greatest pain when the confessor now assigned to her chastises her for causing scandal and orders no more talk or action regarding the project.

For the next five or six months, Teresa is in anguish—until an ecclesiastic new in authority proves to be on her side and directs the confessor to let the Spirit work through this crusading nun. To forestall the problems caused in the past by too much talk, it is agreed that henceforth the project must proceed in all secrecy.

Through her sister Juana arrangements are made to buy and furnish a house. Funds provided by several donors, including a well-to-do widow, are not quite sufficient to pay the workmen hired to make the modest house fit to live in. This time her brother Lorenzo comes to the rescue. (Throughout her life Teresa remains much involved in the welfare of her large family as they

do with her undertakings.)

The biggest worry now is that her provincial—one of those kept in the dark—will discover what’s going on and put a stop to it. On the advice of Peter of Alcantara and a few others, steps are taken by way of friends in high places in Rome to put the new convent directly under the protection of Avila’s bishop, who is an unwavering supporter of reform. Approval from Rome arrives in July 1562. The following month a handful of nuns sharing Teresa’s outlook move into St. Joseph’s, as it is named, and within days the sisters at Incarnation, along with all of Avila, hear the news. The prioress at Incarnation immediately sends for Teresa.

“I went in the belief that I should at once be put in prison,”⁶ she admits. The provincial makes an appearance at the interview too. After Teresa goes through a careful explanation of how she is only trying to strengthen the order, they begin to see things her way.

Next to be placated are city officials, for they feel Avila already has more than its share of poor religious houses dependent on local support. A report is forwarded to the Royal Council, and Teresa is forbidden to move to St. Joseph’s until the matter is settled legally. She cannot understand the commotion brought on by the thought of twelve poor women plus a superior in one little house. The nuns already in residence begin their life of contemplative prayer regardless of the uproar. Teresa’s choice of women, by the way, depends not at all on whether they have a dowry—one of the usual conditions for entry into religious life. It is their spirituality that counts.

In a complete turnaround, the people of Avila, seeing that the opposition has not been able to halt the convent’s opening, conclude it must be the work of God. Legal proceedings are forthwith dropped, and a wave of public generosity provides alms even

without any need for an appeal.

Teresa is now free to join her little community, which she likens to heaven. No class distinctions exist at St. Joseph's. All share in the chores—Teresa included, for she firmly believes in a rhythm of work and prayer. The nuns wear coarse brown habits and hempen sandals. (They are called Discalced—that is, “bare-footed”—Carmelites. Bare feet are a popular symbol of the day for the reform-minded, signifying poverty and simplicity.) But Teresa, who is always guided by good sense, makes sure her sisters have sandals.

Happier and healthier than ever before in the peacefulness of St. Joseph's, Teresa journeys to the heights of mystical prayer. Her superiors request that she write a spiritual autobiography, and after completing this, she begins work on an instructional book for prayer: *The Way of Perfection*.

In 1566 Teresa receives a promise from the Lord that soon she will “see great things.” In April of the following year the prior-general of the Carmelite Order arrives on visitation from Rome. In answer to the Protestant Reformation, bishops of the church have come up with reforms of their own in a series of meetings (the Council of Trent, 1543–1563). The Carmelite head has come to Spain to make sure they are implemented. He likes what he sees at St. Joseph's and asks Teresa to do more of the same, giving her permission (although no money) to found not only more convents but also several reform houses for friars. She never worries about lack of funds but dives into the busiest period of her life.

While on a mission to Medina later that year Teresa becomes acquainted with a brilliant, highly educated Carmelite friar known to history as John of the Cross. Despite the difference in age (she is fifty-two and he, twenty-five), their rapport is immediate. She enlists John's help in working with men in the order.

Their names will be forever linked as a result of their joint accomplishments. During the years of working closely together the two obviously inspire each other, for each composes a masterpiece of literature: Teresa's *The Interior Castle* and John's *Spiritual Canticle*.

Their writing styles show the differences in their temperaments. She is witty and forceful; he is gentle and extremely sweet-natured. Her style is conversational, reflecting a natural exuberance, while his celebration of the love of God soars poetically.

When Teresa is recalled to Incarnation, John goes along as her confessor. This time, however, she will serve six years as prioress there to reform the convent—a prospect that upsets some nuns at first. Even while in charge of her old community, the energetic nun manages to go on founding additional convents. And the pattern of establishing St. Joseph's keeps repeating itself: first, opposition; then, aided by Teresa's persistence as well as charm, people coming around to accepting the inevitable.

To keep up with all that's happening, she conducts a voluminous correspondence. By the light of an oil lamp, Teresa writes her books as well as letters late at night, her only free time, her quill pen flying over the paper. Among her correspondents is Philip II, king of Spain, who likes her no-nonsense way. In this, Spain's "Golden Age," he is considered the most powerful man in Europe.

By 1577 the Carmelite reformer has become a national figure. The king's support for her is well-known—she needs it when opponents report some of her writings to the Spanish Inquisition. An appeal to the king gets her out of trouble. John of the Cross is not so lucky. Friars twice kidnap and imprison him in Toledo, where they regularly flog him, before he manages to escape. Clergy and religious who resist change can be brutal as well as intolerant.

Teresa somehow keeps her famous sense of humor despite

having her every move watched by persons who hope to catch her in a misstep. When one, for example, acts scandalized at seeing this nun of reforming zeal sit down to enjoy a meal of roast partridge prepared by the host, Teresa, never eccentric about religious practices, replies matter-of-factly, "There is a time for partridge and a time for penance."⁷

Her extensive journeys to found convents continue to the very end. Sometimes the great distances of Spain are traversed by mule, more often in a covered mule-cart made without springs but with heavy wooden wheels for the rough, at times impassable, roads. Whether in summer heat or the ice, snow and floods of winter, she travels not only with sisters as companions but also with an escort of laymen plus two or three of the clergy because of the danger of brigands. The inns are squalid and crowded with adventurers.

On what is to be her final trip, Teresa, now sixty-eight, becomes seriously ill at Alba de Tormes in the north-central part of the country. As death approaches, a priest asks if she would like her body returned to Avila for burial. "What?" she asks, still irrepressible. "Will they not give me a little earth here?"⁸

AFTERWARD

The reawakening of religious fervor that Teresa set in motion in Spain spread soon after her death beyond Spain and across Christendom with profound results for the Catholic Reformation. Because her country was then at the height of its power and wealth, what happened there tended to influence the course of the church.

Teresa is regarded as one of the outstanding women in the history of Spain, and her books on the mystical life are valued as gems of Spanish literature as well as treasuries of spirituality.

Her spiritual friendship with John of the Cross is perhaps her most famous relationship, but she had a great capacity for friend-

ship with both men and women. Her circle of admirers ever widened the older she got.

Because women in Spain were so constricted by cultural norms, it is all the more remarkable how much she accomplished. (To be a woman at all, Teresa once remarked, was to feel your wings droop.)

A papal nuncio who referred to her as a “restless gadabout” complained, “She is ambitious and teaches theology as though she were a Doctor of the Church.”⁹ Teresa had the last word—not surprisingly—for she became the first woman in the church so designated. The honor came on September 27, 1970 (one week before Catherine of Siena was so named).



□ SACRED HEART OF JESUS,

LUKEWARMNESS IN PRAYER

WAS TERESA'S COMPLAINT.

TO OVERCOME IT, SHE STRUGGLED,

YEARS IN THE DOING.

THAT PERSEVERANCE GAVE US A SAINT.

HEARTFELT PRAYER IS AVAILABLE

TO ANY OF US.

I ASK MYSELF:

CAN I SPARE THE TIME?

AMEN.