

## **St. Teresa of Avila**

St. Teresa of Avila was a great reformer. Like today, Teresa was born in a time of turmoil (1515). Two years following her birth Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation (1517).

Teresa was born of wealthy parents in a part of town where there was comfort and ease. As a young lady, she was attractive and captivating. It is said that she cared only about boys, clothes, flirting, and rebelling.

When she was 16, her father thought she was out of control and sent her to a convent. She hated it at first, but eventually began to like it because she loved God and the convent was actually less strict than her father.

Eventually, she joined the Carmelite convent of the Incarnation in Avila where she began to practice mental prayer. However, she struggled with mental prayer off and on for about 18 years.

Unfortunately, during this time her convent was not the place of prayer we would assume. At the time, the nuns wore fine jewelry, could keep their own possessions, and had as much contact with the outside as they wanted. Furthermore, the parlor in their convent hosted a steady stream of visitors that included young men.

In this environment, Teresa, a charming young nun, found it all too easy to slip into a worldly life and ignore God. For years she hardly prayed at all. Eventually, however, at the urging of a priest, she began praying again. In time, she made great progress in contemplative prayer and had a number of mystical experiences from the Lord.

Moreover, she became determined to found a new convent that went back to the basics of the contemplative order. It is difficult to describe the level of resistance against her in doing so. Eventually, though, she succeeded in forming a convent dedicated to St. Joseph. At this time, she composed the famous poem:

Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing:  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things.  
He who has God lacks nothing;  
God alone suffices.

Teresa and the few nuns in this new convent lived according to the 12<sup>th</sup> century rule – rough habits, poor sandals, and living only by alms. Their days were dedicated to prayer. They spent much of the day in their cells. They could not go from room to room. They were to receive everything from God. The first five years she experienced a kind of heaven on earth in this environment.

Eventually, Teresa was asked to take the spirit of the new convent and reform others. For the next 15 years, she traveled up and down Spain visiting convents. At one point, she fell into a creek and pointing at the sky said, “If this is how you treat your friends, I see why you have so few of them.” Over time, she helped reform 17 convents of Carmelite women and 11 monasteries of men.

Most notably, during the last 15 years of her life, Teresa was asked to return to her original convent of the Incarnation. The convent had fallen into financial difficulty. Consequently, the provincial in Spain asked Teresa to reform the monastery. Completely rejected at first, Teresa eventually won them over by her charity, approachability, and deep life of prayer. By the end of the year, the entire convent was transformed.

Teresa once said that prayer is nothing else but an intimate sharing between friends. It means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. Without question, she is a beautiful example of how much God can accomplish through one person! Like Teresa, may you always be open to God and ask Him to transform you so that in turn, you can transform those around you. St. Teresa, pray for us!