

St Theresa of Avilla

October 15th 2021

She was born in 1515 and died in 1582. Avilla Spain was her home, where as a child she had a very literal faith. At 7 she and her brother left the walled City of Avilla to find some Moors, requesting of them they chop their heads off. For Theresa, and her brother reasoned, you have to be dead to see God, and there was nothing she more desired.

An uncle found them walking the fields and returned them home. As she continued to develop Theresa became interested in boys and the adolescent interests teenagers of every generation explore. However, at 16 her mother died, and Theresa's father didn't know how best to continue to raise his head-strong daughter, so off to the convent with her.

Now when you hear the word convent, and think of 16th century Spain, these were not houses of piety and devotion. Many guests, including men would be entertained with the confines of the community. The Carmelite order at the time of St. Theresa was very worldly. Teresa suffered the same problem that Francis of Assisi did -- she was too charming and so the social environment of the convent fed her charm. Everyone liked her and she liked to be liked. She found it too easy to slip into a worldly life and ignore God. The convent encouraged her to have visitors to whom she would teach mental prayer because their gifts helped the community economy. But Teresa got more involved in flattery, vanity and gossip than spiritual guidance.

Then Teresa fell ill with malaria. When she had a seizure, people were so sure she was dead that after she woke up four days later she learned they had dug a grave for her. Afterwards she was paralyzed for three years and was never completely well. Yet instead of helping her spiritually, her sickness became an excuse to stop her prayer completely. For years she hardly prayed at all "under the guise of humility." However she began to realize that turning away from prayer was like "a baby turning from its mother's breasts, what can be expected but death?"

When she was 41, a priest convinced her to go back to her prayer, but she still found it difficult. "I was more anxious for the hour of prayer to be over than I was to remain there. I don't know what heavy penance I would not have gladly undertaken rather than practice prayer." She was distracted often: "This intellect is so wild that it doesn't seem to be anything else than a frantic madman no one can tie down." Teresa sympathizes with those who have a difficult time in prayer: "All the trials we endure cannot be compared to these interior battles."

Yet her experience gives us wonderful descriptions of mental prayer: "For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us. 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."

As she started to pray again, God gave her spiritual delights: the prayer of quiet where God's presence overwhelmed her senses, raptures where God overcame her with glorious foolishness, prayer of union where she felt the sun of God melt her soul away. Sometimes her whole body was raised from the ground. If she felt God was going to levitate her body, she stretched out on the floor and called the nuns to sit on her and hold her down. Far from being excited about these events, she "begged God very much not to give me any more favors in public."

What we see in St Theresa of Avilla is one who came to experience that while we live in this very material world with all of its challenges within and without, we can pursue God and heaven. St Theresa has been called the Doctor of Ecstasy. She and St Catherine of Sienna were declared Doctors of the Church in 1970. She moved from spiritual apathy, through indifference, through to years of spiritual struggle, all the while dealing with chronic health conditions and held in great suspicion by the Inquisition because of her desire to bring true reform to the Carmelite Order.

She discovered what the Lord so simply stated in today's Gospel about the sparrows and our comparative greater value. St Theresa took the words of Jesus to heart: "Do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows". She restated Jesus' words this way:

"Let nothing perturb you, nothing frighten you. All things pass. God does not change. Patience achieves everything."