

E-QUALITY



A PUBLICATION OF CHRISTIANS FOR BIBLICAL EQUALITY
ISSN 1551 - 9325

TERESA OF AVILA: A WOMAN FOR THE AGES

By Myrna Grant

Christian women through the centuries have been inspired by the lives of other believing women. In the small villages of medieval Europe and Britain, they might have held close to their hearts the witness of mothers, grandmothers, or holy women in their own communities. They may have heard tales of women saints whose lives inspired them with their virtues and sacrifice.



The church has offered extraordinary and often miraculous stories of women saints and martyrs as encouragements to piety. For example, Saint Thecla, having spent three days and three nights listening to the preaching of the Apostle Paul in Iconium, was converted and persecuted for her faith. The fires of the stake could not burn her, nor did wild beasts attack her when she was thrown to them. In the end she fled to a gigantic rock that opened and hid her. Happier tales surround St. Brigid of medieval Ireland. She moved a river, raised the dead, and turned water into beer. Church legend is replete with stories of countless women whose experiences are, to modern sensibilities, unbelievable.

However, there are reliable records in the early church of heroic women who were martyrs, healers, ascetics, and reformers. Many of the more famous women came from educated strata of wealth and nobility and spoke for themselves through their own writings. Others, given to the church as children, were educated by nuns and monks. The writings of these fascinating nuns, martyrs, and saints open to us lives that are recognizable and inspiring in their vulnerability, joys, complexity, and humanity.

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Teresa: The Early Years

One of the most engaging medieval saints is Teresa of Avila. She was born in 1515 into a prosperous mercantile family during Spain's Golden Age. Columbus had sailed to America in 1492, opening for Spain the riches of the New World. New ideas were flourishing everywhere. When Teresa was two years old, far to the north in Germany, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, calling for sweeping reform in the Catholic Church. Avila, however, was a sleepy and contented place, with granite city walls that seemed to protect the Catholic community from the winds of change. But they could not protect Avila from Teresa.

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Teresa's father, following the tradition of the Spanish upper class, saw to it that she was taught to read and write as well as the womanly arts of sewing and spinning in preparation for her future role as a patrician Spanish matron and mother. From an early age, Teresa had a lively religious imagination. Once she convinced her older brother Roderigo to set off with her to Muslim lands where they could be martyred for Christ. An uncle found them in a nearby town and returned them to their parents who certainly were not amused. As Teresa entered adolescence, she is said to have been beautiful with dark curly hair, graceful hands, and large, expressive eyes. She loved pretty clothes and perfumes and had a personal charm that was irrepressible and winsome. Her lively spirit and sense of humor brought her many friends.

At sixteen, her romantic antics were so alarming to her father that he sent her away to a convent school for 2 years. She was happy in the convent and decided that she vastly preferred this life to a future of marriage and endless childbearing that brought so many women to early graves. Her father had other ideas, however, so to escape marriage plans, she secretly entered the Carmelite convent in Avila.

The tale is told that as Teresa was hurriedly leaving her home for the convent, a man appreciatively gazed at her ankles as she climbed into her carriage. "Take a good look," she called out to him, "that's the last one you'll get!"

Her father eventually relented and gave the convent her ample dowry. Teresa took her vows a year later as Sister Teresa of Jesus. Less than two years later, her story took a strange turn. She became gravely ill with a deathlike disorder that put her into a trance-like state. Eventually she recovered but for the rest of her life, her health remained frail.

The Awakening

Twenty years passed in which Teresa struggled greatly. When she was ill, she experienced devastating spiritual dryness. When she was well, she indulged in the easy social life of her wealthy convent. She had servants, ate very well, and freely entertained her many friends; all the while, she was tormented by guilt. When she was 39, she experienced a deep religious awakening accompanied by visions. Her prayer life was joyful and for the first time in her life, she had both peace and a great sense of love.

But as time passed, she became increasingly distressed by the worldly life of her convent. When the Carmelites had been founded, three hundred years earlier, the order had been characterized by poverty and prayer. Teresa decided that Carmelite nuns ought to be confined within the convent and have no communication with outsiders. Their days should be spent in solitude and prayer. Unsurprisingly, Teresa's sister nuns were startled, appalled, and resistant to reform.

Teresa decided to build a small Carmelite house of her own which would follow the original intentions of the order. A great outcry against her arose among the nuns, the local nobility, town officers, and townspeople who saw her determination to build a new convent as ambitious and prideful. Nevertheless she found generous benefactors and achieved her goal. Her nuns begged for food and labored for their simple needs. Teresa continued her reform movement and gained support from several bishops, wealthy donors, and friends, most famously joining with Saint John of the Cross to found fourteen monasteries for men.

A Spiritual Legacy

As her visions continued, her superiors urged her to write about them for the edification of the church. She produced a litany of excuses. It was for learned men to do the writing. There were more than enough books on prayer and other spiritual matters. She had neither the health nor the wit for writing. She had

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spinning to do. Thankfully for all subsequent Christian generations, she finally gave in to the admonishments of her superiors and began to write her first book, an autobiography called *The Life of Teresa*. Her next book was composed to give her nuns further instructions on prayer, and in 1565 she wrote her masterpiece, *Inner Castle*, which describes the inner spiritual struggles of the contemplative life. By the time she finished writing, she had produced twelve books and hundreds of letters, all of which were published after her death.

From the small beginning of establishing her own order of Carmelite nuns, Teresa ignited church reform in Spain. She had tremendous success in establishing and linking convents throughout Spain, traveling tirelessly in all weathers, and braving thieves and rat-infested inns. Yet her wit and humor remained intact. On one occasion an archbishop invited her to found a convent, but turned her away, even though she arrived in the middle of a rainstorm. Commenting on the debacle, Teresa said, "And the weather so delightful, too."

From small beginnings, Teresa ignited church reform in Spain.

Despite her frail health and the church's opposition to her reform, Teresa continued to travel and establish convents built upon her reform until she collapsed on a return journey to Avila and died at the age of 67. In 1970, Pope Paul V awarded her the title of Doctor of the Church for her timeless writings on prayer and her valuable leadership in church reform, one of only three women in the centuries of the church to be so honored.

Teresa's contemporaries saw a woman of iron determination, humility, and honor. "I just laughed at myself," she wrote, calling herself "incompetent and unprofitable." Her inner life with Jesus, however, as evidenced through her writings, was one of incomparable sweetness and intimacy, from which her energy and vision was forged.

"Who are you?" her Beloved asked her one afternoon.

"I am Teresa of Jesus," she had murmured, "and who are you?"

"I am Jesus—of Teresa," he answered.

Myrna Grant has her Ph.D. from Northwestern University. She is currently an ESL teacher for refugees at World Relief. Her most recent book is *Sacred Legacy*, and she is in the process of writing *Life Unscripted*, which tells the stories of the five women in Matthew 1. She has three children and twelve grandchildren.

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