



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

THE LIFE & PRAYER OF SAINT TERESA OF ÁVILA

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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Santa Teresa de Jesús

“May it please the Lord, ... that I may succeed in doing His will in all things. May He not allow this soul to be lost which He has, ... in so many ways and on so many occasions, rescued from hell and drawn to Himself. Amen.”

Teresa of Ávila, *Life* XL



Santa Teresa de Jesús

- ❖ The great Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila is revered as a religious reformer, spiritual writer, and doctor of the Church
- ❖ Her desire to reform the Carmelite Order led to the founding of the Discalced (“Barefoot”) Carmelites, and she was joined in her reform efforts by fellow mystic Saint John of the Cross
- ❖ Due to her extraordinary insights on contemplative prayer she is widely considered a spiritual master



Her Childhood

- ❖ Teresa was born in 1515, at a time of great turbulence, trial and religious renewal
- ❖ Just a quarter-century prior to her birth, at about the time that Christopher Columbus set foot in the New World, the Treaty of Granada was signed, bringing an end to the *Reconquista*, the centuries-long Christian reconquest of Spain from Muslim invaders
- ❖ This would give way to the infamous Spanish Inquisition, a reactionary and misguided effort to fortify the nation's Catholic identity



Her Childhood

- ❖ Two scant years after Teresa's birth, Martin Luther ignited the Protestant Revolt, cleaving Christendom down the middle
- ❖ The Saint began to enter into the mystical life and undertake the renewal of the Carmelites as the reforms of the Council of Trent were being implemented



Her Childhood

- ❖ She was born into a large family and her spirituality was formed by the devout example of her parents
- ❖ Her childhood was colored with acts of piety, the Rosary and the lives of the Saints
- ❖ On one memorable occasion she and her elder brother, Rodrigo, attempted to run away to “the land of the Moors” to be martyred for the faith!



Consecration to Mary

- ❖ At 13, devastated by the death of her mother, she took the Blessed Virgin Mary to be her spiritual Mother
- ❖ Her devotion to Mary would blossom to become a source of continual blessing throughout her lifetime



Purification Through Suffering

- ❖ In 1536, Teresa entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation
- ❖ She found the experience of leaving her father's house to be incredibly difficult, as she later recalled, writing, "the pain of death itself cannot be worse. Every bone in my body seemed to be wrenched asunder." *Life IV*



Purification Through Suffering

- ❖ Witnessing a fellow nun's heroic endurance in sickness the Saint began to sense the supernatural merit involved when one suffers in union with Christ
- ❖ “I only envied her her patience,” she wrote, “and prayed God to send me any sickness He pleased provided He sent me as much patience with it.” *Life V*



Purification Through Suffering

- ❖ Not long afterward Teresa, too, was stricken by a prolonged illness which left her incapacitated for days at a time
- ❖ On one occasion she was given the Last Rites and a grave was made ready for her
- ❖ In time she recovered, though, receiving a healing through the intercession of Saint Joseph



Purification Through Suffering

- ❖ In the midst of her suffering, her soul was fortified through the reading of holy books
- ❖ She also developed the practice of *mental prayer*, which she described as “simply a friendly intercourse and a friendly solitary conversation with Him who, as we know, loves us.” *Life VIII*



Personal and Communal Reform

- ❖ Teresa became increasingly burdened by the knowledge of her own sinfulness
- ❖ She was also scandalized by the laxities she witnessed in her fellow nuns, which she attributed to their living in an unenclosed convent



Personal and Communal Reform

- ❖ She persevered in prayer; and one day experienced a lasting conversion before an image of the suffering Christ
- ❖ “I had quite lost my trust in myself, and put all my confidence in God. I think I said to Him then that I would not rise up until He granted me my prayer. I believe that this benefited me, for from that time I have begun to greatly improve.” *Life IX*



Personal and Communal Reform

- ❖ Inspired to begin working for the renewal of the convent, Teresa came to lead a small group of like-minded nuns, who sought to more strictly observe the ancient Carmelite rule concerning enclosure, silence, and poverty
- ❖ This movement would lead to the founding of the Convent of Saint Joseph in 1562, the first house of the Reform



An Extraordinary Experience with God

- ❖ Entering more fully into the *contemplative life*, the Saint experienced extraordinary forms of ecstasy
- ❖ The mystical event for which she is most remembered is the *Transverberation* of her heart, in which a cherub came to her and pierced her heart with a golden spear



The Interior Castle

- ❖ In her spiritual masterpiece, *The Interior Castle*, Teresa describes the levels of spiritual progress and grades of prayer, starting with *vocal prayer* and ending with *transforming union*
- ❖ The first grades of prayer are *ascetical*, involving effort, and the last are *mystical*, which are received as a gift



The Interior Castle

- ❖ She imagines the soul as a crystalline fortress consisting of seven layers of rooms or “mansions,” with the presence of the Blessed Trinity radiating out from the center
- ❖ The goal is for one to journey through the mansions of the soul till the innermost mansion is reached and union with the divine is achieved



The Life of Prayer

- ❖ In teaching on the different stages of prayer, Teresa used her famous metaphor of various ways to water a garden, which she described in her autobiography
- ❖ The first way, which requires a great deal of effort on the individual's part, is like drawing water from a well
- ❖ At this beginning stage, the soul finds it difficult to keep its senses recollected in prayer



The Life of Prayer

- ❖ The second way, which requires less labor, is like drawing water by means of a waterwheel
- ❖ Because it is more effortless, the gardener “is able to take some rest instead of being continuously at work.”
Life XIV



The Life of Prayer

- ❖ The third way is like drawing water from a flowing spring
- ❖ “This irrigates [the garden] with far less trouble, though some effort is required to direct it into the right channel.” *Life XVI*



The Life of Prayer

- ❖ The fourth way is like having rain fall down from heaven
- ❖ It is impossible for one to receive this fourth water continuously in this lifetime, however
- ❖ Therefore, “we must always be looking out for one water when another fails.”
Life XVIII



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