The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus

**Date:** 1565  
**Author:** Teresa of Ávila  
**Genre:** Autobiography

**Summary Overview**  
*The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus* is the title customarily given to the autobiography of Teresa of Ávila. Begun around 1562 and revised a few years later at the urging of her confessors, as a way to examine her spiritual development and to spread the story of God’s work in her life, the book traces her religious experience from early childhood to the time of writing. As such it was both a defense of her orthodoxy and a testimony to the larger Catholic world. *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus* deals with some of the writer’s favorite themes, including the importance of strict observance in convents and monasteries and the value and satisfaction of mental prayer. She also records her own mystical experiences as well as the beginning of her reforming career. The book provides an excellent introduction to a study of this remarkable woman.

**Defining Moment**  
Teresa of Ávila wrote at a time of great change for the Catholic Church. The century in which she lived marked not only the Protestant Reformation but also the culmination of generations of struggle to achieve Catholic Reform (the Catholic equivalent of the Protestant Reformation). It was also a time of cultural and political upheaval, as governments in Europe began the shift from personal expressions of a monarch’s will to the larger, more powerful, and more intrusive bureaucracies associated with the modern world.

Within the Catholic Church, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) defined Catholic beliefs and codified a number of reforms, strengthening the church hierarchy to carry out further work. The movement to transform and strengthen the Catholic Church represented by Trent was led by a number of religious orders, some of them traditional institutions in the midst of reform and others entirely new organizations. The Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) represented one sixteenth-century attempt to transform a certain type of monasticism to meet the needs of the Catholic Church of the day. In contrast to the Jesuits, who sought to strengthen the Church by engaging the world, other religious orders, including Teresa’s Discalced Carmelites, participated in Catholic Reform by a return to rigorous discipline in monastery or convent. Teresa’s own life spanned the period during which the somewhat relaxed standards of traditional convents were brought into line with the more rigorous and demanding expectations of contemporary Catholicism.

The sixteenth century is often viewed as Spain’s golden age. Under the rule of the Hapsburg monarchs, particularly the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and his son King Philip II, Spain reached the apogee of its political power and influence. Spanish armies, bolstered by gold from the New World, controlled Spain and a vast empire in the Americas as well as the Low Countries and parts of Italy and frequently threatened France, while diplomacy and marriage extended the Spanish Hapsburg hegemony into other lands. Catholic Reform was furthered to a great extent by the efforts of various Spanish churchmen. Cardinal Ximénes de Cisneros, for instance, the adviser to the rulers Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, initiated a campaign of reform in the Spanish church that in many ways showed the way for the reforms of Trent. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, was also Spanish, as were many of his early followers. And, of course, the sixteenth century was the great age of Spanish literature, the time of Miguel de Cervantes, who wrote *Don Quixote*.

Teresa of Ávila, along with her associate and protégé Saint John of the Cross (Juan de Yepes Álverez), are truly representative figures of Spanish accomplishment in religious matters and the development of vernacular literature. John of the Cross, in particular, is considered one of the greatest Spanish poets, while his and Teresa’s prose accounts of their religious experience made important contributions to the growth of Spanish as a vehicle for literature. Their combined efforts to reform the Carmelite Order by founding the branch known as the Discalced Carmelites not only were representative of reform efforts but also helped show the way to a more disciplined and effective Catholic Church.

When Teresa’s confessors urged her to write an account of her spiritual pilgrimage, they may have been
This portrait of Teresa is a copy of an original painting of her in 1576 at the age of 61. By Fray Juan de la Miseria
primarily interested in helping her track her religious experience and growth. However, as the leading figure in attempts to reform the Carmelite Order, Teresa’s beliefs and program were of wide interest. Her autobiography could provide evidence of her religious orthodoxy to nervous superiors as well as explain the reasons behind the changes Teresa hoped to make.

**Author Biography**

The mystic and church reformer commonly known as Teresa of Ávila was born to a noble Castilian family in 1515 and given the name Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda Dávila y Ahumada. According to her own account, she was raised in a pious family, but her early attraction to religion disappeared during her teenage years when she was caught up in the normal interests of a girl of her time. It was a serious illness that finally drew her attention back to religion, and ultimately, despite some family opposition, she became a nun.

Teresa had been educated in a local Augustinian convent, but in following her vocation she chose to join the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in her native Ávila. Although the Carmelites were a contemplative order (focused on prayer), Teresa found their relaxed rules and the presence of frequent visitors a distraction. A second serious illness briefly spurred initial experiences of prayer, but eventually social life in the convent turned Teresa’s thoughts from the serious contemplation that in later life she came to expect of nuns. Guilt over her own lack of devotion made her reluctant to pray beyond participation in the mandatory oral prayers of the community. Reflecting on this part of her life in her autobiography, Teresa blamed her own sinful nature but also the lack of skill of confessors who should have guided her along the right path. It was also this experience that led to her later zeal for stricter standards to reform the Carmelite Order.

Teresa’s spiritual awakening occurred gradually. While she gave the primary credit to God’s work, she identified the assistance of several able confessors, the help of various spiritual books, and her own experiments in prayer as important contributors to her new devotion. The real change for Teresa was leaving behind the simple vocal prayers of the community and turning to mental prayer. This mental prayer, beginning with an imagining of Jesus or of stories from the Bible, led by a series of steps to a special state of prayer—acquired contemplation. Beyond this highest level of mental prayer, God might choose to draw a devout person to a supernatural state of mystical experience. Undergoing such an experience set Teresa permanently on her path of devotion.

A desire for a more austere environment to stir contemplation led Teresa to take steps toward establishing a new kind of Carmelite house, one with an emphasis on rigorous discipline. With financial support from a local widow and practical support from her bishop, Teresa founded a reformed Carmelite House in Ávila in 1562. The Convent of Saint Joseph, with its small population and strict rules, soon attracted popular admiration. The following year Teresa received papal approval for the standards of her new foundation. It was the requirement that the nuns go barefoot (“discalced”) that gave the name of Discalced Carmelites to reformed houses in the Order. In 1567 the head of the Carmelite order gave Teresa permission to establish a number of reformed convents.

At about the same time that Teresa received the official blessing to begin founding reformed houses, she met a Carmelite priest, John of the Cross. The young man was preparing to transfer to the much stricter Carthusian order; Teresa persuaded him to remain a Carmelite, and he became instrumental in helping her with her reforms. Theologically educated and a gifted writer (he is considered one of Spain’s greatest poets), John of the Cross busied himself with starting male houses for Discalced Carmelites. These male houses would produce the confessors necessary for the continued growth of Teresa’s convents.

Not everyone appreciated Teresa’s reforms. There were many Carmelites who felt that her houses were too strict, and in 1577 they launched a counter-attack against the reform movement. Teresa not only faced formal charges from her own order but was also investigated by the Inquisition (a tribunal established to maintain Catholic orthodoxy)—probably on the basis of complaints made by her detractors. Teresa obeyed a command to stop traveling and to remain at a single house. John of the Cross refused a similar order and was imprisoned under particularly harsh conditions. Fortunately for Teresa, she had powerful supporters in the Church and in Spain’s government who appreciated her reforming efforts. In 1579 all proceedings against Teresa and her reform efforts were dropped, and she returned to her active role until the time of her death in 1582.
For all her efforts in founding new religious houses, Teresa is remembered today as a mystic. She chronicled some of her experiences of God’s presence as well as advice about how to pray in such writings as *The Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*. Certainly her writings give evidence of her intelligence and something of her powerful personality, but they do not reflect the sense of humor for which she was known in her own day or her charm, which impressed many of her contemporaries. In 1614 Teresa was beatified by Pope Paul V, and in 1622 she was canonized by Pope Gregory XV. Today, Teresa’s reputation is as high as ever. Her devotional works are frequently reprinted and easily available. In 1970 she became the first female to be named officially a Doctor of the Church—a title given to those individuals recognized for their contribution to theology or doctrine.

### HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

**Chapter VII**


1. So, then, going on from pastime to pastime, from vanity to vanity, from one occasion of sin to another, I began to expose myself exceedingly to the very greatest dangers: my soul was so distracted by many vanities, that I was ashamed to draw near unto God in an act of such special friendship as that of prayer. As my sins multiplied, I began to lose the pleasure and comfort I had in virtuous things: and that loss contributed to the abandonment of prayer. I see now most clearly, O my Lord, that this comfort departed from me because I had departed from Thee.

2. It was the most fearful delusion into which Satan could plunge me—to give up prayer under the pretence of humility. I began to be afraid of giving myself to prayer, because I saw myself so lost. I thought it would be better for me, seeing that in my wickedness I was one of the most wicked, to live like the multitude—to say the prayers which I was bound to say, and that vocally: not to practise mental prayer nor commune with God so much; for I deserved to be with the devils, and was deceiving those who were about me, because I made an outward show of goodness; and therefore the community in which I dwelt is not to be blamed; for with my cunning I so managed matters, that all had a good opinion of me; and yet I did not seek this deliberately by simulating devotion; for in all that relates to hypocrisy and ostentation—glory be to God!—I do not remember that I ever offended Him, so far as I know. The very first movements herein gave me such pain, that the devil would depart from me with loss, and the gain remained with me; and thus, accordingly, he never tempted me much in this way. Perhaps, however, if God had permitted Satan to tempt me as sharply herein as he tempted me in other things, I should have fallen also into this; but His Majesty has preserved me until now. May He be blessed for evermore! It was rather a heavy affliction to me that I should be thought so well of; for I knew my own secret.

3. The reason why they thought I was not so wicked was this: they saw that I, who was so young, and exposed to so many occasions of sin, withdrew myself so often into solitude for prayer, read much, spoke of God, that I liked to have His image painted in many places, to have an oratory of my own, and furnish it with objects of devotion, that I spoke ill of no one, and other things of the same kind in me which have the appearance of virtue. Yet all the while—I was so vain—I knew how to procure respect for myself by doing those things which in the world are usually regarded with respect.

4. In consequence of this, they gave me as much liberty as they did to the oldest nuns, and even more, and had great confidence in me; for as to taking any liberty for myself, or doing anything without leave—such as conversing through the door, or in secret, or by night—I do not think I could have
brought myself to speak with anybody in the monastery in that way, and I never did it; for our Lord held me back. It seemed to me—for I considered many things carefully and of set purpose—that it would be a very evil deed on my part, wicked as I was, to risk the credit of so many nuns, who were all good—as if everything else I did was well done! In truth, the evil I did was not the result of deliberation, as this would have been, if I had done it, although it was too much so.

5. Therefore, I think that it did me much harm to be in a monastery not enclosed. The liberty which those who were good might have with advantage—they not being obliged to do more than they do, because they had not bound themselves to enclosure—would certainly have led me, who am wicked, straight to hell, if our Lord, by so many remedies and means of His most singular mercy, had not delivered me out of that danger—and it is, I believe, the very greatest danger—namely, a monastery of women unenclosed—yea, more, I think it is, for those who will be wicked at home, a road to hell, rather than a help to their weakness. This is not to be understood of my monastery; for there are so many there who in the utmost sincerity, and in great perfection, serve our Lord, so that His Majesty, according to His goodness, cannot but be gracious unto them; and I am speaking only of others which I have seen and known.

6. I am exceedingly sorry for these houses, because our Lord must of necessity send His special inspirations not merely once, but many times, if the nuns therein are to be saved, seeing that the honours and amusements of the world are allowed among them, and the obligations of their state are so ill-understood. God grant they may not count that to be virtue which is sin, as I did so often! It is very difficult to make people understand this; it is necessary our Lord Himself should take the matter seriously into His own hands.

7. If parents would take my advice, now that they are at no pains to place their daughters where they may walk in the way of salvation without incurring a greater risk than they would do if they were left in the world, let them look at least at that which concerns their good name. Let them marry them to persons of a much lower degree, rather than place them in monasteries of this kind, unless they be of extremely good inclinations, and God grant that these inclinations may come to good! or let them keep them at home. If they will be wicked at home, their evil life can be hidden only for a short time; but in monasteries it can be hidden long, and, in the end, it is our Lord that discovers it. They injure not only themselves, but all the nuns also. And all the while the poor things are not in fault; for they walk in the way that is shown them. Many of them are to be pitied; for they wished to withdraw from the world, and, thinking to escape from the dangers of it, and that they were going to serve our Lord, have found themselves in ten worlds at once, without knowing what to do, or how to help themselves. Youth and sensuality and the devil invite them and incline them to follow certain ways which are of the essence of worldliness. They see these ways, so to speak, considered as safe there.

8. Now, these seem to me to be in some degree like those wretched heretics who will make themselves blind, and who will consider that which they do to be good, and so believe, but without really believing; for they have within themselves something that tells them it is wrong.

9. Oh, what utter ruin! utter ruin of religious persons—I am not speaking now more of women than of men—where the rules of the Order are not kept; where the same monastery offers two roads: one of virtue and observance, the other of inobservance, and both equally frequented! I have spoken incorrectly: they are not equally frequented; for, on account of our sins, the way of the greatest imperfection is the most frequented; and because it is the broadest, it is also the most in favour. The way of religious observance is so little used, that the friar and the nun who would really begin to follow their vocation thoroughly have reason to fear the members of their commu-
nities more than all the devils together. They must be more cautious, and dissemble more, when they would speak of that friendship with God which they desire to have, than when they would speak of those friendships and affections which the devil arranges in monasteries. I know not why we are astonished that the Church is in so much trouble, when we see those, who ought to be an example of every virtue to others, so disfigure the work which the spirit of the Saints departed wrought in their Orders. May it please His Divine Majesty to apply a remedy to this, as He sees it to be needful! Amen.

10. So, then, when I began to indulge in these conversations, I did not think, seeing they were customary, that my soul must be injured and dispirited, as I afterwards found it must be, by such conversations. I thought that, as receiving visits was so common in many monasteries, no more harm would befall me thereby than befell others, whom I knew to be good. I did not observe that they were much better than I was, and that an act which was perilous for me was not so perilous for them; and yet I have no doubt there was some danger in it, were it nothing else but a waste of time.

11. I was once with a person—it was at the very beginning of my acquaintance with her when our Lord was pleased to show me that these friendships were not good for me: to warn me also, and in my blindness, which was so great, to give me light. Christ stood before me, stern and grave, giving me to understand what in my conduct was offensive to Him. I saw Him with the eyes of the soul more distinctly than I could have seen Him with the eyes of the body. The vision made such an impression upon me, that, though it is more than twenty-six years ago, I seem to see Him present even now. I was greatly astonished and disturbed, and I resolved not to see that person again.

12. It did me much harm that I did not then know it was possible to see anything otherwise than with the eyes of the body; so did Satan too, in that he helped me to think so: he made me understand it to be impossible, and suggested that I had imagined the vision—that it might be Satan himself—and other suppositions of that kind. For all this, the impression remained with me that the vision was from God, and not an imagination; but, as it was not to my liking, I forced myself to lie to myself; and as I did not dare to discuss the matter with any one, and as great importunity was used, I went back to my former conversation with the same person, and with others also, at different times; for I was assured that there was no harm in seeing such a person, and that I gained, instead of losing, reputation by doing so. I spent many years in this pestilent amusement; for it never appeared to me, when I was engaged in it, to be so bad as it really was, though at times I saw clearly it was not good. But no one caused me the same distraction which that person did of whom I am speaking; and that was because I had a great affection for her.

13. At another time, when I was with that person, we saw, both of us, and others who were present also saw, something like a great toad crawling towards us, more rapidly than such a creature is in the habit of crawling. I cannot understand how a reptile of that kind could, in the middle of the day, have come forth from that place; it never had done so before, but the impression it made on me was such, that I think it must have had a meaning; neither have I ever forgotten it. Oh, the greatness of God! with what care and tenderness didst Thou warn me in every way! and how little I profited by those warnings!

14. There was in that house a nun, who was related to me, now grown old, a great servant of God, and a strict observer of the rule. She too warned me from time to time; but I not only did not listen to her, but was even offended, thinking she was scandalized without cause. I have mentioned this in order that my wickedness and the great goodness of God might be understood, and to show how much I deserved hell for ingratitude so great, and, moreover, if it should be our Lord's will and pleasure that any nun at any time should read this, that she might take warning by me. I beseech
them all, for the love of our Lord, to flee from such recreations as these.

15. May His Majesty grant I may undeceive some one of the many I led astray when I told them there was no harm in these things, and assured them there was no such great danger therein. I did so because I was blind myself; for I would not deliberately lead them astray. By the bad example I set before them—I spoke of this before—I was the occasion of much evil, not thinking I was doing so much harm.

16. In those early days, when I was ill, and before I knew how to be of use to myself, I had a very strong desire to further the progress of others: a most common temptation of beginners. With me, however, it had good results. Loving my father so much, I longed to see him in the possession of that good which I seemed to derive myself from prayer. I thought that in this life there could not be a greater good than prayer; and by roundabout ways, as well as I could, I contrived make him enter upon it; I gave him books for that end. As he was so good—I said so before—this exercise took such a hold upon him, that in five or six years, I think it was, he made so great a progress that I used to praise our Lord for it. It was a very great consolation to me. He had most grievous trials of diverse kinds; and he bore them all with the greatest resignation. He came often to see me; for it was a comfort to him to speak of the things of God.

17. And now that I had become so dissipated, and had ceased to pray, and yet saw that he still thought I was what I used to be, I could not endure it, and so undeceived him. I had been a year and more without praying, thinking it an act of greater humility to abstain. This—I shall speak of it again—was the greatest temptation I ever had, because it very nearly wrought my utter ruin; for, when I used to pray, if I offended God one day, on the following days I would recollect myself, and withdraw farther from the occasions of sin.

18. When that blessed man, having that good opinion of me, came to visit me, it pained me to see him so deceived as to think that I used to pray to God as before. So I told him that I did not pray; but I did not tell him why. I put my infirmities forward as an excuse; for though I had recovered from that which was so troublesome, I have always been weak, even very much so; and though my infirmities are somewhat less troublesome now than they were, they still afflict me in many ways; specially, I have been suffering for twenty years from sickness every morning, so that I could not take any food till past mid-day, and even occasionally not till later; and now, since my Communions have become more frequent, it is at night, before I lie down to rest, that the sickness occurs, and with greater pain; for I have to bring it on with a feather, or other means. If I do not bring it on, I suffer more; and thus I am never, I believe, free from great pain, which is sometimes very acute, especially about the heart; though the fainting-fits are now but of rare occurrence. I am also, these eight years past, free from the paralysis, and from other infirmities of fever, which I had so often. These afflictions I now regard so lightly, that I am even glad of them, believing that our Lord in some degree takes His pleasure in them.

19. My father believed me when I gave him that for a reason, as he never told a lie himself; neither should I have done so, considering the relation we were in. I told him, in order to be the more easily believed, that it was much for me to be able to attend in choir, though I saw clearly that this was no excuse whatever; neither, however, was it a sufficient reason for giving up a practice which does not require, of necessity, bodily strength, but only love and a habit thereof; yet our Lord always furnishes an opportunity for it, if we but seek it. I say always; for though there may be times, as in illness, and from other causes, when we cannot be much alone, yet it never can be but there must be opportunities when our strength is sufficient for the purpose; and in sickness itself, and amidst other hindrances, true prayer consists, when the soul loves, in offering up its burden, and in thinking of Him for Whom it suffers, and in the resignation of the will, and in a thousand ways which then present themselves. It is under these
circumstances that love exerts itself for it is not necessarily prayer when we are alone; and neither is it not prayer when we are not.

20. With a little care, we may find great blessings on those occasions when our Lord, by means of afflictions, deprives us of time for prayer; and so I found it when I had a good conscience. But my father, having that opinion of me which he had, and because of the love he bore me, believed all I told him; moreover, he was sorry for me; and as he had now risen to great heights of prayer himself, he never remained with me long; for when he had seen me, he went his way, saying that he was wasting his time. As I was wasting it in other vanities, I cared little about this.

21. My father was not the only person whom I prevailed upon to practise prayer, though I was walking in vanity myself. When I saw persons fond of reciting their prayers, I showed them how to make a meditation, and helped them and gave them books; for from the time I began myself to pray, as I said before, I always had a desire that others should serve God. I thought, now that I did not myself serve our Lord according to the light I had, that the knowledge His Majesty had given me ought not to be lost, and that others should serve Him for me. I say this in order to explain the great blindness I was in: going to ruin myself, and labouring to save others.

22. At this time, that illness befell my father of which he died; it lasted some days. I went to nurse him, being more sick in spirit than he was in body, owing to my many vanities—though not, so far as I know, to the extent of being in mortal sin—through the whole of that wretched time of which I am speaking; for, if I knew myself to be in mortal sin, I would not have continued in it on any account. I suffered much myself during his illness. I believe I rendered him some service in return for what he had suffered in mine. Though I was very ill, I did violence to myself; and though in losing him I was to lose all the comfort and good of my life—he was all this to me—I was so courageous, that I never betrayed my sorrows, concealing them till he was dead, as if I felt none at all. It seemed as if my very soul were wrenched when I saw him at the point of death—my love for him was so deep.

23. It was a matter for which we ought to praise our Lord—the death that he died, and the desire he had to die; so also was the advice he gave us after the last anointing, how he charged us to recommend him to God, and to pray for mercy for him, how he bade us serve God always, and consider how all things come to an end. He told us with tears how sorry he was that he had not served Him himself; for he wished he was a friar—I mean, that he had been one in the Strictest Order that is. I have a most assured conviction that our Lord, some fifteen days before, had revealed to him he was not to live; for up to that time, though very ill, he did not think so; but now, though he was somewhat better, and the physicians said so, he gave no heed to them, but employed himself in the ordering of his soul.

24. His chief suffering consisted in a most acute pain of the shoulders, which never left him: it was so sharp at times, that it put him into great torture. I said to him, that as he had so great a devotion to our Lord carrying His cross on His shoulders, he should now think that His Majesty wished him to feel somewhat of that pain which He then suffered Himself. This so comforted him, that I do not think I heard him complain afterwards.

25. He remained three days without consciousness; but on the day he died, our Lord restored him so completely, that we were astonished: he preserved his understanding to the last; for in the middle of the creed, which he repeated himself, he died. He lay there like an angel—such he seemed to me, if I may say so, both in soul and disposition: he was very good.

26. I know not why I have said this, unless it be for the purpose of showing how much the more I am to be blamed for my wickedness; for after seeing such a death, and knowing what his life had been, I, in order to be in any wise like unto such
a father, ought to have grown better. His confessor, a most learned Dominican, used to say that he had no doubt he went straight to heaven. He had heard his confession for some years, and spoke with praise of the purity of his conscience.

27. This Dominican father, who was a very good man, fearing God, did me a very great service; for I confessed to him. He took upon himself the task of helping my soul in earnest, and of making me see the perilous state I was in. He sent me to Communion once a fortnight; and I, by degrees beginning to speak to him, told him about my prayer. He charged me never to omit it: that, anyhow, it could not do me anything but good. I began to return to it—though I did not cut off the occasions of sin—and never afterwards gave it up. My life became most wretched, because I learned in prayer more and more of my faults. On one side, God was calling me; on the other, I was following the world. All the things of God gave me great pleasure; and I was a prisoner to the things of the world. It seemed as if I wished to reconcile two contradictions, so much at variance one with another as are the life of the spirit and the joys and pleasures and amusements of sense.

28. I suffered much in prayer; for the spirit was slave, and not master; and so I was not able to shut myself up within myself—that was my whole method of prayer—without shutting up with me a thousand vanities at the same time. I spent many years in this way; and I am now astonished that any one could have borne it without abandoning either the one or the other. I know well that it was not in my power then to give up prayer, because He held me in His hand Who sought me that He might show me greater mercies.

29. O Lord of my soul! how shall I be able to magnify the graces which Thou, in those years, didst bestow upon me? Oh, how, at the very time that I offended Thee most, Thou didst prepare me in a moment, by a most profound compunction, to taste of the sweetness of Thy consolations and mercies! In truth, O my King, Thou didst administer to me the most delicate and painful chastisement it was possible for me to bear; for Thou knewest well what would have given me the most pain. Thou didst chastise my sins with great consolations. I do not believe I am saying foolish things, though it may well be that I am beside myself whenever I call to mind my ingratitude and my wickedness.

30. It was more painful for me, in the state I was in, to receive graces, when I had fallen into grievous faults, than it would have been to receive chastisement; for one of those faults, I am sure, used to bring me low, shame and distress me, more than many diseases, together with many heavy trials, could have done. For, as to the latter, I saw that I deserved them; and it seemed to me that by them I was making some reparation for my sins, though it was but slight, for my sins are so many. But when I see myself receive graces anew, after being so ungrateful for those already received, that is to me—and, I believe, to all who have any knowledge or love of God—a fearful kind of torment. We may see how true this is by considering what a virtuous mind must be. Hence my tears and vexation when I reflected on what I felt, seeing myself in a condition to fall at every moment,
though my resolutions and desires then—I am speaking of that time—were strong.

32. It is a great evil for a soul to be alone in the midst of such great dangers; it seems to me that if I had had any one with whom I could have spoken of all this, it might have helped me not to fall. I might, at least, have been ashamed before him—and yet I was not ashamed before God.

33. For this reason, I would advise those who give themselves to prayer, particularly at first, to form friendships; and converse familiarly, with others who are doing the same thing. It is a matter of the last importance, even if it lead only to helping one another by prayer: how much more, seeing that it has led to much greater gain! Now, if in their intercourse one with another, and in the indulgence of human affections even not of the best kind, men seek friends with whom they may refresh themselves, and for the purpose of having greater satisfaction in speaking of their empty joys, I know no reason why it should not be lawful for him who is beginning to love and serve God in earnest to confide to another his joys and sorrows; for they who are given to prayer are thoroughly accustomed to both.

34. For if that friendship with God which he desires be real, let him not be afraid of vain-glory; and if the first movements thereof assail him, he will escape from it with merit; and I believe that he who will discuss the matter with this intention will profit both himself and those who hear him, and thus will derive more light for his own understanding, as well as for the instruction of his friends. He who in discussing his method of prayer falls into vain-glory will do so also when he hears Mass devoutly, if he is seen of men, and in doing other good works, which must be done under pain of being no Christian; and yet these things must not be omitted through fear of vain-glory.

35. Moreover, it is a most important matter for those souls who are not strong in virtue; for they have so many people, enemies as well as friends, to urge them the wrong way, that I do not see how this point is capable of exaggeration. It seems to me that Satan has employed this artifice—and it is of the greatest service to him—namely, that men who really wish to love and please God should hide the fact, while others, at his suggestion, make open show of their malicious dispositions; and this is so common, that it seems a matter of boasting now, and the offences committed against God are thus published abroad.

36. I do not know whether the things I am saying are foolish or not. If they be so, your reverence will strike them out. I entreat you to help my simplicity by adding a good deal to this, because the things that relate to the service of God are so feebly managed, that it is necessary for those who would serve Him to join shoulder to shoulder, if they are to advance at all; for it is considered safe to live amidst the vanities and pleasures of the world, and few there be who regard them with unfavourable eyes. But if any one begins to give himself up to the service of God, there are so many to find fault with him, that it becomes necessary for him to seek companions, in order that he may find protection among them till he grows strong enough not to feel what he may be made to suffer. If he does not, he will find himself in great straits.

37. This, I believe, must have been the reason why some of the Saints withdrew into the desert. And it is a kind of humility in man not to trust to himself, but to believe that God will help him in his relations with those with whom he converses; and charity grows by being diffused; and there are a thousand blessings herein which I would not dare to speak of, if I had not known by experience the great importance of it. It is very true that I am the most wicked and the basest of all who are born of women; but I believe that he who, humbling himself, though strong, yet trusteth not in himself, and believeth another who in this matter has had experience, will lose nothing. Of myself I may say
that, if our Lord had not revealed to me this truth, and given me the opportunity of speaking very frequently to persons given to prayer, I should have gone on falling and rising till I tumbled into hell. I had many friends to help me to fall; but as to rising again, I was so much left to myself, that I wonder now I was not always on the ground. I praise God for His mercy; for it was He only Who stretched out His hand to me. May He be blessed for ever! Amen.

GLOSSARY

Communion: the sacrament of the Eucharist, based on the belief that the consecrated bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ

Dominican: a member of an order of poor friars founded in thirteenth-century France

vanity: something that is empty or without value

Document Analysis

Teresa’s autobiography tells the story of her life from her birth to the beginning of her career as a reformer of the Carmelite Order. It includes a description of her childhood, her vocation as a nun, years that she judged as spiritually wasted, her increasing experience of God’s presence in prayer, and her desire to enact stricter discipline in her convent in order to facilitate spirituality. The section represented here tells of Teresa’s early days as a nun, when various temptations kept her from full devotion to God. It was this experience that drove her to push for high standards in convents.

My Soul Was So Distracted by Many Vanities, That I Was Ashamed to Draw Near unto God

Teresa had previously related how she became a nun not out of a love for God but from fear of damnation. After a serious illness, a miraculous healing, and a profound spiritual experience, she drifted through many years in the convent, caught up in trivial sins and without any real devotion. At one time private, personal prayer had been an important part of her spiritual experience. Now, ashamed to approach God because of her attachment to various frivolous distractions, she gave up such prayers, limiting her communication with God to the vocal prayers required of every nun.

The distinction between vocal and mental prayer is very important in Teresa’s thought. Vocal prayer—simply speaking a prayer aloud to God, the type of prayer used in religious services—represented to her only the bottom rung of a ladder leading to increasingly vital communication with God. Mental prayer meant fully setting one’s mind on God, an exercise that could be accomplished in conjunction with verbal prayer. In fact, Teresa believed that combining the two disciplines was often the most effective way to achieve full contemplation of God, the goal of prayer, and a source of great joy.

They Gave Me as Much Liberty as They Did to the Oldest Nuns…and Had Great Confidence in Me

Teresa’s comments about lax religious houses are very typical of her written work and her public career. Examining her own life, she believed she would have avoided many occasions for sin if the rules at the Convent of the Incarnation had been stricter. She recognized that for those who were truly good, the relaxed rules did little harm. However, for those not inclined to the good (like herself), stricter regulations were of great value. The particular regulation Teresa advocated was “enclosure”—limitations on visitors to religious houses (and limitations on the ability of members of houses to leave on personal business). According to Teresa, God had to do extra work to keep nuns in lax houses on the right track. She is careful to note here that the lack of strict
enclosure had not led to serious public sins in her own house, a comment meant to avoid offending her superiors or fellow nuns.

But even after making the concession that laxity did not harm her own house, Teresa returns to her main theme, that of the great danger posed by weak standards in convents. She suggests that if parents are not concerned enough about their daughters’ spiritual condition to keep them out of lax convents, they at least ought to consider potential scandals. A woman would be better off making a disadvantageous marriage or living unmarried at home (and possibly getting into trouble) than going to a lax convent, where she might fall into sin. This criticism would have been far more biting to Teresa’s contemporaries than to modern readers, since in Teresa’s time nuns were believed to be spiritually superior to married women, and it was considered a disgrace for a woman to marry “beneath” her station. For Teresa to proclaim that a bad marriage was spiritually superior to life in a convent was a telling indictment of lax houses. Teresa makes clear that the common failings she identifies are not the fault of individual women, who learn only what they are taught, but instead a systemic failure that leads to so much corruption. In a final rhetorical jab at lax houses, she compares their teaching to that of Protestant heretics, who reverse good and bad.

This was not a problem restricted to nuns. Lax male houses face the same pitfalls. She describes a religious house without strict rules as a place where two roads run in opposite directions, one leading to God and the other to destruction—where the downward path is often the most crowded. According to Teresa, monks or nuns in lax houses who are serious about their vocation must often hide their devotion from their fellows in order to escape persecution. This corruption of the important institution of monasticism is diagnosed as one of the serious faults leading to contemporary turmoil in the Catholic Church.

The term friar is the technical name for a male member of certain religious orders such as the Carmelites. A monk is a member of an enclosed order, devoting his life to prayer or service within a monastery. A friar is a member of a nonenclosed order (called mendicant orders), taking similar monastic vows but devoting his life to service in the world (preaching, teaching, or serving a parish, for example). Although Teresa believed that Carmelite convents should be enclosed so as to encourage the nuns in their lives of devotion, she did not see a lack of enclosure as a threat to the mission of mendicant friars, such as Dominicans, Jesuits, or Carmelites. She personally benefited greatly from the spiritual guidance of mendicants from different orders. Carmelite friars would play an important role in Teresa’s reforms by supplying confessors and spiritual directors for her reformed convents.

When I Began to Indulge in These Conversations, I Did Not Think...That My Soul Must Be Injured

Teresa then returns to her own story. The social life she found to be such a source of spiritual distraction does, in fact, seem very ordinary and not obviously wicked when viewed from the outside, and so it is easy to overlook as an occasion for sin. She concedes that possibly it would not have been a problem for a better person.

Teresa began to question her mode of life in the convent after she experienced a vision of Jesus. Initially she was disturbed by what she had seen and made a few superficial changes. Before long, however, she began to question the experience. Unsure whether it was a genuine vision, she wondered if it had been her imagination or worse—a deception. In retrospect, Teresa believes she knew at some level that it was a genuine message from God but was unwilling to accept what God required of her, and so she carried on according to her custom. Not long afterward she had a second vision, this time of a loathsome creature, a vision shared by several other nuns.

Teresa also records words of warning and advice she received from an older nun, a woman who happened to be a relative. Looking back, Teresa laments her own bad example in the past and hopes her words now promote positive change. By presenting the image of the elderly nun, described as a “strict observer of the rule,” Teresa is putting herself in the context of traditional Carmelite practice. Other Carmelite nuns had promoted strict regulations and warned against laxity as well; Teresa here is doing nothing more than other good members of the order had done in the past.

I Had a Very Strong Desire to Further the Progress of Others: A Most Common Temptation

Teresa continues her spiritual autobiography in a lengthy discussion that tells of her interaction with her father and then of his death. Her father’s seriousness about his own spiritual life is contrasted with Teresa’s lack of dedication. The married (though widowed) layman is more devoted to pious observance than the nun...
in the convent. The mention of the book Teresa shared with her father underscores a common theme in her writing. She valued the impact that religious texts made on her life and felt they were good for others also. This may point to one of Teresa’s many motives for writing her autobiography—the desire to help others as she had been helped.

Although Teresa identifies several sins in her conduct at the time, her great fault was giving up prayer, a mistake that led to other sins, because when she prayed she sometimes recognized her faults and repented of them. By avoiding prayer, she avoided this accountability. Teresa recognized many barriers to prayer but urged devout people to overcome them and continue in their efforts. Recognizing her own feeble excuses as mistakes, the author concludes (and urges) that there is no valid excuse not to pray.

In an aside on her sickness, Teresa indicates that in later years she induced vomiting to relieve stomach ailments. Modern people, familiar with anorexia and bulimia, have questioned whether some mystics in the past had what would today be diagnosed as eating disorders. The recognized authority in the field, Caroline Walker Bynum, who studies women in a slightly earlier period than Teresa of Ávila, cautions against a too-easy identification of past practices and modern disease—body image had nothing to do with their practices, for instance. In Teresa’s case, along with other grounds to discount a diagnosis of bulimia, the self-induced vomiting appears to have been a remedy for a medical problem.

One of the great changes within Catholicism during Teresa’s time was a tremendous transformation in attitudes toward the appropriate frequency of receiving Communion. During the Middle Ages, laypeople ordinarily received the Eucharist only once a year, the so-called Easter duty. It was during the era of Catholic Reform that Church authorities began to promote the value of more frequent reception. Teresa, obviously a devout woman, speaks of being counseled to receive once every two weeks.

The “choir” Teresa mentions is not a singing group in the modern sense but the responsibility to join her fellow nuns at religious services in the church. The choir (or quire) was generally the space between where laypeople would sit in a church and the sanctuary (the site of the altar). In a convent, nuns would sit in the choir and sing their parts of the service. The association with singing led, of course, to the contemporary meaning of choir. Modern church designs differ, but in some churches the choir is still situated in the area that gave the singing group its name.

My Father Was Not the Only Person Whom I Prevailed upon to Practise Prayer

Teresa continues to develop some of the same themes, intermingling stories of her father with her thoughts on prayer. Catholic theology differentiates between two kinds of sin—mortal and venial. Mortal sins are serious sins that can send a person to hell without the intervention of forgiveness applied through the sacraments of the Church. Venial sins are trivial failings that cannot damn a soul to hell but which do impair spiritual growth. Although the sacraments cause Christ’s redemptive suffering to wipe away the stain of sin, freeing the soul from the danger of hell, sins still must have consequences. The Catholic Church teaches that satisfaction for sins can be made either in this life (through suffering and good works or in other ways) or after death in purgatory. Teresa’s analysis of the seriousness of sins (mortal versus venial) is typical of a document intended for a confessor, where spiritual guidance depended on a very accurate understanding of the subject’s spiritual state.

The concept of redemptive suffering was important to Teresa, as to most mystics and to all Catholics of Teresa’s time. A previous mention of the Lord’s taking pleasure in her suffering was not an indication that she believed in a sadistic deity but that her attitude toward her infirmities was making them redemptive. Suffering itself was not a spiritual blessing—suffering could be an opportunity to receive blessing by accepting it with the right attitude. Teresa here speaks of physical pain as a blessing. Particularly, she points out to her father that the pain in his shoulder is reminiscent of Christ’s pain in carrying the cross. Armed with this image, he could identify with Jesus and accept the pain, allowing it to become a blessing. Teresa cites a priest who believed that her father had so purified himself in life that he went straight to heaven, not needing the suffering of purgatory to prepare himself.

This Dominican Father...Did Me a Very Great Service; for I Confessed to Him

One of the spiritual turning points in Teresa’s life was meeting her Dominican confessor. Teresa had already lamented the lack of spiritual guidance she had received from other confessors. Now, at last, she came into contact with a priest who had the training and insight to
give her the spiritual direction she needed. This direction included the command to receive the Eucharist more frequently and to persevere in prayer. Teresa did return to her habits of prayer but did not immediately cease other sinful behaviors. This led to a long period of ambivalence and discomfort; still, having gone back to praying, Teresa never again abandoned the practice.

The quality of the experience in the confessional was one of the major features of Catholic Reform. Medieval Catholics had recognized the value of spiritual guidance by priests during confessions, but the general lack of preparation and education for clergy meant that most people in confessions simply listed their sins and received penances and absolution. It was during the sixteenth century that real progress began to be made in training priests to use the confessional to assist people in spiritual growth. Jesuits, in particular, were known for their skill in helping those in confession discover the underlying motives and causes of sin and for assisting people in moving forward in their religious lives. Teresa’s concern with finding skilled confessors was very typical of her age.

O My God! If I Might, I Would Speak of the Occasions from Which God Delivered Me

As Teresa takes stock once again of this era of her life toward the end of the chapter, she is particularly grateful that God allowed her to escape some of the trouble her sins deserved. If her fellow nuns had realized how baren her devotional life had been at a time when she was well respected in her convent, it would have prevented her from being a leader in reform later. In fact, she identifies God’s method of working in her life as giving her blessings in response to her sins—the continual gifts of “consolation” were far more effective at working on her conscience than any punishment would have been. This apostrophe to God is typical of this sort of autobiographical literature, following the model of Saint Augustine’s Confessions. Although Teresa would have read many similar passages in other works, she knew and appreciated Augustine’s classic spiritual work first hand.

It Is a Great Evil for a Soul to Be Alone in the Midst of Such Great Dangers

In calling for enclosed convents and strict rules and in citing the distraction of social demands in the convent, Teresa was not advocating a limit to human contact in religious houses. Teresa believed that good companions could only help in the life of prayer, particularly through offering accountability and advice. Previously she had described how devout friars and nuns were pressured into laxity by their communities and forced to hide their commitment to prayer and contemplation. Teresa envisions houses where, in contrast, those serious about their vocations would be able to speak out and encourage others. This, in essence, was the goal of Teresa’s reforms. The stricter rules she championed were simply a means to create an environment where nuns (or friars) were free to encourage each other to greater devotion.

Teresa closes the chapter with an address to her confessor (and, by extension, her superiors), humbly asking for guidance and correction. Such a statement is conventional for this sort of document, which was written in part so that the spiritual director could guide the writer.

Essential Themes

The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus satisfied those in authority over the author. Since this endorsement allowed her to continue her career as a reformer, it was an important success. However, more significant was the way in which the eventual reception of the book by a larger audience helped establish and maintain Teresa’s reputation. Finally, the Spanish-language Life and her other vernacular writings were early contributions to the growth of Spanish literature. In modern times, twentieth-century Catholic historians, using the writings of Teresa and John of the Cross, have frequently made their form of mysticism the standard by which other Catholic mystics are judged. As a result, the spiritual experience of Teresa has, through her writing, become almost normative as a guide for Catholic devotion. Such judgments are subjective and unofficial. Officially, however, the naming of Teresa as a Doctor of the Church gives all her writing substantial authority within the Catholic Church.

An autobiography like The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus is always intended for more than one audience. The first audience is the author and his or her confessor. It allows the writer to contemplate experiences of sin and grace in a new and deeper way and provides opportunities for a confessor to understand the person he is guiding. Second, such an autobiography is frequently intended to be evaluated by ecclesiastical authorities as a proof of orthodoxy. In this instance, one of the original copies was forwarded to spiritual superiors, who, having read it, were able to endorse Teresa’s ministry. Later, when she was investigated for heresy, the Inquisition
studied a copy of her manuscript. It is not known if her autobiography helped exonerate her, but the fact that the Spanish church allowed the work to circulate shows that the authorities found nothing offensive in it. Finally, spiritual autobiographies were always written with at least a possible view toward a popular audience. Teresa herself found religious books to be an extremely important part of her growth in devotion, and she singled out Augustine’s *Confessions* as particularly vital for her own spiritual development. Even though the initial purpose of writing was to satisfy a confessor and spiritual superiors, Teresa certainly wrote with the hope that one day her words could help others as others’ words had helped her.

—Raymond A. Powell, PhD

Bibliography and Additional Reading