

A STUDY OF “THE SAINTS THROUGH THE CENTURIES”

By Richard Thornton

SAINT TERESA OF AVILA (1515-1582) – SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Saint Teresa lived in an age of exploration as well as political, social, and religious upheaval. It was the sixteenth century, a time of turmoil and reform.

At a young age Saint Teresa became completely fascinated by stories of the Christian Saints and Martyrs, as well as her brother, who was near her own age and her partner in youthful adventures. Once when Teresa was seven they made plans to run away to Africa, where they might achieve martyrdom for Christ. They set out secretly, planning to beg their way like the poor friars, but they gone only a short distance from home when they were met by an uncle and brought back to their anxious mother, who had sent people out to search for them. She and her brother then thought they would like to become praying hermits, and tried to build themselves little huts from stones they found on their land. We see that religious thoughts and influences dominated the thinking of this future saint.

Her Father placed Teresa in a convent of Augustine nuns to help protect her and educate her, but she fell sick after a year and was recalled home. During her convalescence, she read and studied Saint Jerome’s letters. Inspired by these readings she decided to become a nun. Saint Teresa began to grow in faith. She took St. Mary Magdalene as her patron and an image of the Suffering Christ as her meditative inspiration.

Saint Teresa was a woman “for God”, a woman of prayer, discipline and compassion. Her heart belonged to God. Her ongoing conversion was a lifelong struggle involving ongoing purification and suffering. She was misunderstood, misjudged, apposed at her efforts at reform, yet she struggled on, courageous and faithful; she struggled with her own mediocrity, her illness, her opposition and in the midst of all this she clung to God in life and prayer.

After twenty-five years as a Carmelite, Saint Teresa was inspired to found a new, reformed order, the Discalced (barefoot) Carmelites. In 1562 she and 13 other nuns took up residence in a house in Avila, vowing themselves to poverty, strict enclosure, and prayer. As a Carmelite nun, Saint Teresa was personally responsible for founding 17 monasteries and introducing reforms to make the monastic life a truly spiritual refuge. In the midst of her struggle to establish her order, Teresa was a prolific writer. She composed "The Way of Perfection", a book of instruction for her nuns. She composed her autobiography, and later, "The Interior Castle". These books chronicle the varieties of prayer she experienced, guide readers toward greater union with God, and present Teresa's account of her own life. These writings have helped generations of believers.

The following was found on a bookmark in Saint Teresa's prayer book:

GOD ALONE IS ENOUGH

LET NOTHING DISTURB YOU

LET NOTHING CAUSE YOU FEAR

ALL THINGS PASS.

GOD IS UNCHANGING,

PATIENCE OBTAINS ALL:

WHOEVER HAS GOD NEEDS NOTHING ELSE

GOD ALONE IS ENOUGH.

Saint Teresa died in 1585 and was canonized in 1622. In 1970. Pope Paul VI declared her the first woman Dr. of the Church.