

St. Teresa of Avila

Feastday: October 15

Patron: of Headache sufferers, Spanish Catholic Writers

Birth: March 28, 1515

Death: October 4, 1582

Beatified: April 24th 1614, Rome by Pope Paul V

Canonized: March 12th 1622, Rome by Pope Gregory XV

Teresa of Avila was born Teresa Ali Fatim Corella Sanchez de Capeda y Ahumada in Avila, Spain. Less than twenty years before Teresa was born in 1515, Columbus opened up the Western Hemisphere to European colonization. Two years after she was born, Luther started the Protestant Reformation. Out of all of this change came Teresa pointing the way from outer turmoil to inner peace.

Teresa's father was rigidly honest and pious, but he may have carried his strictness to extremes. Teresa's mother loved romance novels but because her husband objected to these fanciful books, she hid the books from him. This put Teresa in the middle -- especially since she liked the romances too. Her father told her never to lie but her mother told her not to tell her father. Later she said she was always afraid that no matter what she did she was going to do everything wrong.

When she was seven-years-old, she convinced her older brother that they should "go off to the land of the Moors and beg them, out of love of God, to cut off our heads there."

They got as far as the road from the city before an uncle found them and brought them back. Some people have used this story as an early example of sanctity, but this author think it's better used as an early example of her ability to stir up trouble.

After this incident she led a fairly ordinary life, though she was convinced that she was a horrible sinner. As a teenager, she cared only about boys, clothes, flirting, and rebelling. When she was 16, her father decided she was out of control and sent her to a convent. At first she hated it but eventually she began to enjoy it -- partly because of her growing love for God, and partly because the convent was a lot less strict than her father.

Still, when the time came for her to choose between marriage and religious life, she had a tough time making the decision. She'd watched a difficult marriage ruin her mother. On the other hand being a nun didn't seem like much fun. When she finally chose religious life, she did so because she thought that it was the only safe place for someone as prone to sin as she was.

Once installed at the Carmelite convent permanently, she started to learn and practice mental prayer, in which she "tried as hard as I could to keep Jesus Christ present within me....My imagination is so dull that I had no talent for imagining or coming up with great theological thoughts." Teresa prayed this way off and on for eighteen years without

feeling that she was getting results. Part of the [reason](#) for her trouble was that the [convent](#) was not the safe place she assumed it would be.

Many women who had no place else to go wound up at the convent, whether they had [vocations](#) or not. They were encouraged to stay away from the convents for long period of [time](#) to cut down on expenses. [Nuns](#) would arrange their veils attractively and wear jewellery. Prestige depended not on piety but on money. There was a steady stream of visitors in the parlour and parties that included young men. What spiritual [life](#) there was involved hysteria, weeping, exaggerated penance, nosebleeds, and self-induced visions.

Teresa suffered the same problem that Francis of [Assisi](#) did -- she was too charming. 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. These weren't great sins perhaps but they kept her from God.

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: she couldn't be alone enough, she wasn't healthy enough, and so forth. Later she would say, "Prayer is an act of love, words are not needed. Even if sickness distracts from thoughts, all that is needed is the [will](#) to love."

For years she hardly prayed at all "under the guise of humility." She thought as a wicked sinner she didn't deserve to get favours from God. But 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 sympathises 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 favours in public."

In her books, she analysed and dissects mystical experiences the way a scientist would. She never saw these gifts as rewards from God but the way he "chastised" her. The more love she felt the harder it was to offend God. She says, "The memory of the favour God has granted does more to bring such a person back to God than all the infernal punishments imaginable."

Her biggest fault was her friendships. Though she wasn't sinning, she was very attached to her friends until God told her "No longer do I want you to converse with human beings but with angels." In an instant he gave her the freedom that she had been unable to achieve through years of effort. After that God always came first in her life.

Some friends, however, did not like what was happening to her and got together to discuss some "remedy" for her. Concluding that she had been deluded by the devil, they sent a Jesuit to analyse her. The Jesuit reassured her that her experiences were from God but soon everyone knew about her and was making fun of her.

One confessor was so sure that the visions were from the devil that he told her to make an obscene gesture called the fig every time she had a vision of Jesus. She cringed but did as she was ordered, all the time apologizing to Jesus. Fortunately, Jesus didn't seem upset but told her that she was right to obey her confessor. In her autobiography she would say, "I am more afraid of those who are terrified of the devil than I am of the devil himself." The devil was not to be feared but fought by talking more about God. Teresa felt that the best evidence that her delights came from God was that the experiences gave her peace, inspiration, and encouragement. "If these effects are not present I would greatly doubt that the raptures come from God; on the contrary I would fear lest they be caused by rabies."

Sometimes, however, she couldn't avoid complaining to her closest Friend about the hostility and gossip that surrounded her. When Jesus told her, "Teresa, that's how I treat my friends" Teresa responded, "No wonder you have so few friends." But since Christ has so few friends, she felt they should be good ones. And that's why she decided to reform her Carmelite order.

At the age of 43, she became determined to found a new convent that went back to the basics of a contemplative order: a simple life of poverty devoted to prayer. This doesn't sound like a big deal, right? Wrong.

When plans leaked out about her first convent, St. Joseph's, she was denounced from the pulpit, told by her sisters she should raise money for the convent she was already in, and threatened with the Inquisition. The town started legal proceedings against her. All because she wanted to try a simple life of prayer. In the face of this open war, she went ahead calmly, as if nothing was wrong, trusting in God.

"May [God](#) protect me from gloomy saints," Teresa said, and that's how she ran her convent. To her, spiritual [life](#) was an attitude of love, not a rule. Although she proclaimed poverty, she believed in work, not in begging. She believed in [obedience](#) to [God](#) more than penance. If you do something wrong, don't punish yourself -- change. When someone felt depressed, her advice was that she go some place where she could see the sky and take a walk. When someone was shocked that she was going to eat well, she answered, "There's a [time](#) for partridge and a [time](#) for penance." To her brother's wish to meditate on hell, she answered, "Don't."

Once she had her own convent, she could lead a [life](#) of peace, right? Wrong again. Teresa believed that the most powerful and acceptable [prayer](#) was that [prayer](#) that leads to action. [Good](#) effects were better than pious sensations that only make the [person](#) praying feel good.

At St. Joseph's, she spent much of her [time](#) writing her Life. She wrote this book not for fun but because she was ordered to. Many people questioned her experiences and this book would clear her or condemn her. Because of this, she used a [lot](#) of camouflage in the book, following a profound thought with the statement, "But what do I know. I'm just a wretched woman." The [Inquisition](#) liked what they read and cleared her.

At 51, she felt it was [time](#) to spread her reform movement. She braved burning sun, ice and snow, thieves, and rat-infested inns to found more convents. But those obstacles were easy compared to what she faced from her brothers and sisters in religious life. She was called "a restless disobedient gadabout who has gone about teaching as though she were a professor" by the papal nuncio. When her former [convent](#) voted her in as prioress, the leader of the Carmelite order excommunicated the nuns. A [vicar](#) general stationed an officer of the [law](#) outside the door to keep her out. The other religious orders opposed her wherever she went. She often had to enter a town secretly in the middle of the night to avoid causing a riot.

And the help they received was sometimes worse than the hostility. A princess ordered Teresa to found a [convent](#) and then showed up at the door with luggage and maids. When Teresa refused to order her [nuns](#) to wait on the princess on their knees, the princess denounced Teresa to the Inquisition.

In another town, they arrived at their new house in the middle of the night, only to wake up the next morning to find that one wall of the building was missing.

Why was everyone so upset? Teresa said, "Truly it seems that now there are no more of those considered mad for being true lovers of Christ." No one in religious orders or in the world wanted Teresa reminding them of the way [God](#) said they should live.

Teresa looked on these difficulties as [good](#) publicity. Soon she had postulants clamouring to get into her reform convents. Many people thought about what she said and wanted to learn about [prayer](#) from her. Soon her ideas about [prayer](#) swept not only through [Spain](#) but all of Europe.

In 1582, she was invited to found a convent by an Archbishop but when she arrived in the middle of the pouring rain, he ordered her to leave. "And the weather so delightful too" was Teresa's comment. Though very ill, she was commanded to attend a noblewoman giving birth. By the time they got there, the baby had already arrived so, as Teresa said, "The saint won't be needed after all." Too ill to leave, she died on October 4 at the age of 67.

She is the founder of the Discalced Carmelites. In 1970 she was declared a Doctor of the Church for her writing and teaching on prayer, one of two women to be honoured in this way.

St. Teresa is the patron saint of Headache sufferers. Her symbol is a heart, an arrow, and a book. She was canonized in 1622.