



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
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[\[Video\]](#)

Saint Teresa of Avila

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the course of the Catecheses that I have chosen to dedicate to the Fathers of the Church and to great theologians and women of the Middle Ages I have also had the opportunity to reflect on certain Saints proclaimed Doctors of the Church on account of the eminence of their teaching.

Today I would like to begin a brief series of meetings to complete the presentation on the Doctors of the Church and I am beginning with a Saint who is one of the peaks of Christian spirituality of all time — St Teresa of Avila [also known as St Teresa of Jesus].

St Teresa, whose name was Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, was born in Avila, Spain, in 1515. In her autobiography she mentions some details of her childhood: she was born into a large family, her “father and mother, who were devout and feared God”, into a large family. She had three sisters and nine brothers.

While she was still a child and not yet nine years old she had the opportunity to read the lives of several Martyrs which inspired in her such a longing for martyrdom that she briefly ran away from home in order to die a Martyr’s death and to go to Heaven (*cf. Vida, [Life], 1, 4*); “I want to see God”, the little girl told her parents.

A few years later Teresa was to speak of her childhood reading and to state that she had discovered in it the way of truth which she sums up in two fundamental principles.

On the one hand was the fact that “all things of this world will pass away” while on the other God alone is “for ever, ever, ever”, a topic that recurs in her best known poem: “Let nothing disturb you, Let nothing frighten you, All things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices”. She was about 12 years old when her mother died and she implored the Virgin Most Holy to be her mother (*cf. Vida*, I, 7).

If in her adolescence the reading of profane books had led to the distractions of a worldly life, her experience as a pupil of the Augustinian nuns of Santa María de las Gracias de Avila and her reading of spiritual books, especially the classics of Franciscan spirituality, introduced her to recollection and prayer.

When she was 20 she entered the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation, also in Avila. In her religious life she took the name “Teresa of Jesus”. Three years later she fell seriously ill, so ill that she remained in a coma for four days, looking as if she were dead (*cf. Vida*, 5, 9).

In the fight against her own illnesses too the Saint saw the combat against weaknesses and the resistance to God’s call: “I wished to live”, she wrote, “but I saw clearly that I was not living, but rather wrestling with the shadow of death; there was no one to give me life, and I was not able to take it. He who could have given it to me had good reasons for not coming to my aid, seeing that he had brought me back to himself so many times, and I as often had left him” (*Vida*, 7, 8).

In 1543 she lost the closeness of her relatives; her father died and all her siblings, one after another, emigrated to America. In Lent 1554, when she was 39 years old, Teresa reached the climax of her struggle against her own weaknesses. The fortuitous discovery of the statue of “a Christ most grievously wounded”, left a deep mark on her life (*cf. Vida*, 9).

The Saint, who in that period felt deeply in tune with the St Augustine of the *Confessions*, thus describes the decisive day of her mystical experience: “and... a feeling of the presence of God would come over me unexpectedly, so that I could in no wise doubt either that he was within me, or that I was wholly absorbed in him” (*Vida*, 10, 1).

Parallel to her inner development, the Saint began in practice to realize her ideal of the reform of the Carmelite Order: in 1562 she founded the first reformed Carmel in Avila, with the support of the city’s Bishop, Don Alvaro de Mendoza, and shortly afterwards also received the approval of John Baptist Rossi, the Order’s Superior General.

In the years that followed, she continued her foundations of new Carmelite convents, 17 in all. Her meeting with St John of the Cross was fundamental. With him, in 1568, she set up the first convent

of Discalced Carmelites in Duruelo, not far from Avila.

In 1580 she obtained from Rome the authorization for her reformed Carmels as a separate, autonomous Province. This was the starting point for the Discalced Carmelite Order.

Indeed, Teresa's earthly life ended while she was in the middle of her founding activities. She died on the night of 15 October 1582 in Alba de Tormes, after setting up the Carmelite Convent in Burgos, while on her way back to Avila. Her last humble words were: "After all I die as a child of the Church", and "O my Lord and my Spouse, the hour that I have longed for has come. It is time to meet one another".

Teresa spent her entire life for the whole Church although she spent it in Spain. She was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1614 and canonized by Gregory XV in 1622. The Servant of God Paul VI proclaimed her a "Doctor of the Church" in 1970.

Teresa of Jesus had no academic education but always set great store by the teachings of theologians, men of letters and spiritual teachers. As a writer, she always adhered to what she had lived personally through or had seen in the experience of others (*cf. Prologue to The Way of Perfection*), in other words basing herself on her own first-hand knowledge.

Teresa had the opportunity to build up relations of spiritual friendship with many Saints and with St John of the Cross in particular. At the same time she nourished herself by reading the Fathers of the Church, St Jerome, St Gregory the Great and St Augustine.

Among her most important works we should mention first of all her autobiography, *El libro de la vida* (the book of life), which she called *Libro de las misericordias del Señor* [book of the Lord's mercies].

Written in the Carmelite Convent at Avila in 1565, she describes the biographical and spiritual journey, as she herself says, to submit her soul to the discernment of the "Master of things spiritual", St John of Avila. Her purpose was to highlight the presence and action of the merciful God in her life. For this reason the work often cites her dialogue in prayer with the Lord. It makes fascinating reading because not only does the Saint recount that she is reliving the profound experience of her relationship with God but also demonstrates it.

In 1566, Teresa wrote *El Camino de Perfección* [The Way of Perfection]. She called it *Advertencias y consejos que da Teresa de Jesús a sus hermanas* [recommendations and advice that Teresa of Jesus offers to her sisters]. It was composed for the 12 novices of the Carmel of St Joseph in Avila. Teresa proposes to them an intense programme of contemplative life at the service of the Church, at the root of which are the evangelical virtues and prayer.

Among the most precious passages is her commentary on the *Our Father*, as a model for prayer. St Teresa's most famous mystical work is *El Castillo interior* [The Interior Castle]. She wrote it in 1577 when she was in her prime. It is a reinterpretation of her own spiritual journey and, at the same time, a codification of the possible development of Christian life towards its fullness, holiness, under the action of the Holy Spirit.

Teresa refers to the structure of a castle with seven rooms as an image of human interiority. She simultaneously introduces the symbol of the silk worm reborn as a butterfly, in order to express the passage from the natural to the supernatural.

The Saint draws inspiration from Sacred Scripture, particularly the Song of Songs, for the final symbol of the "Bride and Bridegroom" which enables her to describe, in the seventh room, the four crowning aspects of Christian life: the Trinitarian, the Christological, the anthropological and the ecclesial.

St Teresa devoted the *Libro de la fundaciones* [book of the foundations], which she wrote between 1573 and 1582, to her activity as Foundress of the reformed Carmels. In this book she speaks of the life of the nascent religious group. This account, like her autobiography, was written above all in order to give prominence to God's action in the work of founding new monasteries.

It is far from easy to sum up in a few words Teresa's profound and articulate spirituality. I would like to mention a few essential points. In the first place St Teresa proposes the evangelical virtues as the basis of all Christian and human life and in particular, detachment from possessions, that is, evangelical poverty, and this concerns all of us; love for one another as an essential element of community and social life; humility as love for the truth; determination as a fruit of Christian daring; theological hope, which she describes as the thirst for living water. Then we should not forget the human virtues: affability, truthfulness, modesty, courtesy, cheerfulness, culture.

Secondly, St Teresa proposes a profound harmony with the great biblical figures and eager listening to the word of God. She feels above all closely in tune with the Bride in the Song of Songs and with the Apostle Paul, as well as with Christ in the Passion and with Jesus in the Eucharist. The Saint then stresses how essential prayer is. Praying, she says, "means being on terms of friendship with God frequently conversing in secret with him who, we know, loves us" (*Vida* 8, 5). St Teresa's idea coincides with Thomas Aquinas' definition of theological charity as "amicitia quaedam hominis ad Deum", a type of human friendship with God, who offered humanity his friendship first; it is from God that the initiative comes (*cf. Summa Theologiae* II-II, 23, 1).

Prayer is life and develops gradually, in pace with the growth of Christian life: it begins with vocal prayer, passes through interiorization by means of meditation and recollection, until it attains the union of love with Christ and with the Holy Trinity. Obviously, in the development of prayer climbing to the highest steps does not mean abandoning the previous type of prayer. Rather, it is a

gradual deepening of the relationship with God that envelops the whole of life.

Rather than a pedagogy Teresa's is a true "mystagogy" of prayer: she teaches those who read her works how to pray by praying with them. Indeed, she often interrupts her account or exposition with a prayerful outburst.

Another subject dear to the Saint is the centrality of Christ's humanity. For Teresa, in fact, Christian life is the personal relationship with Jesus that culminates in union with him through grace, love and imitation. Hence the importance she attaches to meditation on the Passion and on the Eucharist as the presence of Christ in the Church for the life of every believer, and as the heart of the Liturgy. St Teresa lives out unconditional love for the Church: she shows a lively "*sensus Ecclesiae*", in the face of the episodes of division and conflict in the Church of her time.

She reformed the Carmelite Order with the intention of serving and defending the "Holy Roman Catholic Church", and was willing to give her life for the Church (*cf. Vida*, 33,5).

A final essential aspect of Teresian doctrine which I would like to emphasize is perfection, as the aspiration of the whole of Christian life and as its ultimate goal. The Saint has a very clear idea of the "fullness" of Christ, relived by the Christian. At the end of the route through *The Interior Castle*, in the last "room", Teresa describes this fullness, achieved in the indwelling of the Trinity, in union with Christ through the mystery of his humanity.

Dear brothers and sisters, St Teresa of Jesus is a true teacher of Christian life for the faithful of every time. In our society, which all too often lacks spiritual values, St Teresa teaches us to be unflinching witnesses of God, of his presence and of his action. She teaches us truly to feel this thirst for God that exists in the depths of our hearts, this desire to see God, to seek God, to be in conversation with him and to be his friends.

This is the friendship we all need that we must seek anew, day after day. May the example of this Saint, profoundly contemplative and effectively active, spur us too every day to dedicate the right time to prayer, to this openness to God, to this journey, in order to seek God, to see him, to discover his friendship and so to find true life; indeed many of us should truly say: "I am not alive, I am not truly alive because I do not live the essence of my life".

Therefore time devoted to prayer is not time wasted, it is time in which the path of life unfolds, the path unfolds to learning from God an ardent love for him, for his Church, and practical charity for our brothers and sisters. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I am pleased to greet the groups who have come from England, Norway, Nigeria and the United States of America. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience I cordially invoke God's abundant Blessings.

Lastly, I address the *young* people, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The day before yesterday we celebrated the liturgical Memorial of St John Bosco, priest and educator. Look to him, dear *young people*, as to an authentic teacher of life and holiness. Dear *sick people*, learn from his spiritual experience to trust in the Crucified Christ in every circumstance. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, have recourse to his intercession so that he may help you to take on generously your mission as spouses.

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