

## Episodes in the Life of Teresa

### Slides 1-4

#### Format of these Sessions

The origin of the Discalced Carmel is to be found in St. Teresa of Jesus. Her writings, The Way of Perfection and The Interior Castle, are a vital part of our formation.

**Sessions:** These sessions will present some **episodes in her life:** not as a complete narrative but in sequence.

#### About the Images:

Some are authentic representations, others are indicative of the period in which Teresa lived, included for illustration.

#### Sources include among others:

-**The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila;** ICS, particularly: The Book of Her Life from Volume 1 and The Book of Her Foundations from Volume 3

-**A Life of Prayer:** From the Work of St. Teresa of Avila, edited by Dr. James Houston

-**Teresa of Avila** by Maria-Milagros Rivera Garretas

-**The Life of Saint Teresa** by Father Crisogono de Jesus

**Purpose:** Our **purpose** in these sessions is to **know** Teresa better as a person, to **walk** with her on her **spiritual journey** through her growing awareness of her Catholic faith, her vocation to Carmel, and her way of perfection.

Our journey with Saint Teresa will **enrich our own spiritual growth;** in her life experiences we will see echoes of our own. As we know her better, we will better understand our own journey and be strengthened on our path to unity with God.

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### Slides 5

#### Session One: Through the teenage years

### Slides 6

The 28th of March in 1515 in Avila, a cold snow-covered morning in the city of two thousand parapets. There's a big house close to the southern wall: a house built of granite; above the door there is a stone coat of arms, stripes and circles, crossed spades and rampant lions. It's the house of Mr. Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda and Mrs. Beatriz de Ahumada. It is a noble Castilian home, with many large spacious rooms adorned with knight's spurs, crossbows, leather and wooden shields, golden sashes and glittering war helmets. There are Dutch sheets, long shirts of gold, tunics from Valencia and coats of mail from Damascus. On the shelves are books on history and literature, devotional books, lives of saints, the works of Cicero and of Seneca, poetry of Virgil, the Gospels and on the table, there is a chess set with ivory figures, gold crosses and silver chains, and blest candles.

### Slide 7

Alonso and Beatriz, together with five children and some relatives are celebrating: **a baby girl has been born.**

### Slides 8

A few days later, the 4th of April, the bells are pealing on St. John's Church and a group of people make their way towards the parish church. Mr. Francisco Nunez Vela, dressed as a knight with cape and sword, and Mrs. Maria del Aguila, daughter of the Governor of the city, are leading the group. They are carrying the daughter of Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda wrapped in white laced garments. She is going to be baptized. Next to the font, in that wide-open nave, the name of Teresa is publicly declared for the first time. When the joyful procession leaves the church and heads back to the palace of Francisco Nunez, the soft sound of a convent bell is

heard: the convent of the Incarnation is being inaugurated, the one that will be the future home of this baby. Founded inside the town's walls in 1478, as a Carmelite convent it was moved outside the town, being built on land that had previously been a Jewish cemetery. On this very day, the date on which the saint was baptized, the unfinished monastery was opened with four naves enclosing a central courtyard and a cloister with two levels. Teresa will immortalize it. The small bell was already calling her, greeting her from its high bricked tower.

### Slides 9

Teresa's mother, Doña Beatriz Dávila Ahumada y de las Cuevas, known as Beatriz de Ahumada, was from a rich and illustrious Castilian family. She was her husband's second wife, was 17 years old when they married on May 14, 1509, in Gotarrendura where her family owned a grand palace. She was born in 1492, was 21 years younger than her husband. Beatriz was 23 when her third child, her first girl, was born. She named the baby Teresa, after her own mother. Doña Beatriz and Alonso de Cepeda had 10 children. Hernando, Rodrigo, Teresa, Juan de Ahumada, Lorenzo, Antonio, Pedro, Jerónimo, Agustín and Juana. She was a loving mother, a devout Catholic who raised her children in the faith. **Beatriz died** in 1528, after 19 years of marriage.

Teresa's father, Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda, was a successful wool merchant and one of the wealthiest men in Ávila, a prosperous city and district. He was born there and baptized on February 10, 1471. He died there, at the age of seventy-two, in December 1543. He married twice: first in Ávila with Doña Catalina del Peso and Henao. They had three children before she died: Juan, María and Pedro. Later he married Beatriz, a distant cousin of Catalina. Alonso, a devout, observant and strict Catholic, had bought a knighthood through a

lawsuit of nobility and was a very successful man of business who lived an honorable life in Spanish high society.

### Slides 10

Alonso's father was Jewish. His name was Juan Sánchez. He was a Jewish-convert merchant living in Toledo, who was condemned by the Inquisition in 1485 for having apostatized and Judaized. Many of Spain's Jews converted to Christianity because of the pogroms in 1391. To make sure that these conversos were true to their new faith, the Spanish Inquisition was established in 1478. All openly practicing **Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492.** However, many remaining practicing Jews chose to become conversos rather than face exile. Conversos who did not fully or genuinely embrace Catholicism, but continued to practice their faith in secrecy, were called Judaizers. Teresa's grandfather, her father's father, **"on the 22nd day of the month of June, in the year 1485 gave, presented and swore to a confession before the then Lord Inquisitors, in which he said and confessed that he had done and committed many serious crimes and offences of heresy and apostasy against our holy Catholic faith"**.

### Slides 11

Juan Sanchez was later able to assume a Catholic identity, but only after taking part in a degrading ceremony. Teresa's grandfather, in procession with other "reconciled ones", walked through the streets of Toledo from church to church facing public ridicule for seven Fridays in succession. While on this march of shame, jeered and mocked by the crowds who came to see, Juan Sanchez and the others were forced to wear the **sanbenitillo**, the strange garment of humiliation showing that they were tried and condemned by the Inquisition. The Sanbenitillo was a penitential garment that for penitent heretics

featured either yellow or red X-shaped crosses, whose wearer was only to do penance. Ironically, it looks like a scapular. This took place when Alonzo, Teresa's father, was four years old. How the memory of it must have burned into his brain, seeing or hearing about the treatment of his father. How the shame, the disgrace must have haunted Alonzo. How great a part this played in developing his scrupulous approach to religion matters, no one knows. How great a part this experience played in the upbringing of Teresa, we can only speculate.

#### **Slides 12**

Now, the wealthy noble devout Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda and his illustrious wife Mrs. Beatriz de Ahumada are prosperous, established pillars of society, living an honorable life, intent on raising honorable Catholic children.

#### **Slides 13**

Teresa is seven years old. The rooms in their big house are lit by oil-lamps so that Mr. Alonso can go over his daily accounts and Mrs. Beatriz can see to sew. Teresa and her brother Rodrigo are reading the yellowed pages of a book about the lives of saints. The first is an anchorite, a monk who lives in solitude for many years with wild animals who serve him. Then there is a virgin with a very innocent expression and a white garment which makes her seemingly float above the ground. Then there is a martyr: a tyrant condemns him for confessing his faith in Christ; some executioners cut his head off, and he flies straight to heaven, surrounded by angels, palms and crowns. Teresa's eyes glow with enthusiasm: "Glory forever and ever and ever". The children repeat this over and over and are absorbed thinking about it.

#### **Slides 14**

The next day neither Teresa nor Rodrigo are found in the house. They look for them in

the garden; in the palace of their godfather Nunez Vela, who lives so close; and they look in the streets of the city. All their efforts seem useless: the children cannot be found anywhere. There is a very uneasy feeling in the house, as their parents are terribly worried about the whereabouts of the two children. Maybe they left the city while playing and they got lost; maybe some house servant or some vagrant...

#### **Slides 15**

After several hours of anxiety, the brother of Mr. Alonso, Francisco de Cepeda, knocks at the door. He has arrived on his horse carrying Teresa in front and Rodrigo behind him. He found them far from the city walls, towards the north-east, past the bridge which crosses the River Adaja, and close to a monument of four granite columns. According to them, they were on journey to "the land of the moors" so that they would be decapitated by them as martyrs, and go straight to heaven like them, in the midst of angels, crowns and canticles. They both return sadly. Their uncle made their fabulous dream wither away so close - as the two children thought- to "the land of the moors", where the martyrs gain their glory at the easy price of martyrdom.

#### **Slides 16**

But Teresa isn't discouraged. One dream withers away and another crops up much stronger. If they can't be martyrs, they'll be hermits, like those of which they had read in the lives of the saints. And so they put themselves to work. Every day, holding hands firmly, Terri and Rod go out to the garden of stone walls behind their house. And they play; they play in the midst of songs and dust. Rod looks throughout the garden for small rocks, odd pieces of brick, and he takes them to Terri who, sitting on the ground, tries hard to construct some walls, trying to give them windows. It's a hermitage. They're playing "hermits". They

recite their devotions, their readings, they have their prayer time with their small hands together on their chest and their eyes looking toward heaven. And they start to dream: if the little animals would come to rest humbly before them as they had read in the lives of the hermits. With great enthusiasm, the next day they go again to the garden to continue their practices next to their little hermitage. But, what a shame. A wind had blown during the night and pushed the mud and rocks to the ground. It has collapsed. The two little children look silently and disappointedly at the ruins of the small house they had made the day before.

### **Slides 17**

Teresa is thirteen years old. In these years, Spain was full of a desire for adventure and conquest particularly in Avila, land of castles, knights and crusaders. Through its streets the sound of the spurs and swords of the warriors heading to Flanders or to the recently discovered America could be heard continuously. And the popular literature reflects this. In the evenings in the palaces and the noble houses, alternating with books of piety, they read the history of battles, stories of fantastic adventures and the narration of the heroic deeds of the knights. In the Cepeda house, Mrs. Beatriz enjoys reading them and looks at them as an innocent entertainment and a distraction from her worries.

One day those books fall into the hands of Teresa and Rodrigo. They come with pictures on plates of battles, of walking knights, of gallants and of ladies finely dressed and perfumed.

### **Slides 18**

Teresa gets dazzled by it all. It seems so attractive to be able to give a pleasant appearance and to feel loved by others like those fiction ladies. And she starts to imitate

them. She no longer goes to the garden to play with Rodrigo the hermit game; she no longer looks to heaven repeating "forever, and ever, and ever!" She likes to look at herself in the mirror, to take care of her hair curls, to pamper her fine hands, to put perfume on... If before she dreamed about being a hermit or about dying for Christ in the hands of the moors, now she is concerned about being looked at and admired by the dressy gallants when they pass below the entrance gate of Alcazar. And at home, she no longer talks about the martyrdoms or of the life of penitents; now her discourse is on hobbies, dressing up, and gallants.

### **Slides 19**

A young and "worldly" relative of hers, begins initiating her in the most frivolous feminine ways. They pass a lot of time together chatting and whispering behind the back of her mother, who isn't happy with the friendships of her daughter. Teresa finds herself in a world of ideas, desires and fantasies very different from those of her first years. Her cousins have led her there by the hand.

But it's not only her young relative that has made Teresa interest herself in that brilliant world of lights, fashions and perfumes: it has also been a son of her uncle Mr. Francisco de Cepeda. The house in which he lives is so close that there is only a wall between them, and the wall has a small door that opens up to a passageway between the two houses. So they go from one house to the other whenever they please. They play and make jokes together in the garden and in the living rooms. The cousin doesn't separate himself from Teresa, so intelligent and pleasant to be with, who knows how to give life to their conversations and games, and so, there comes a day in which the friendship of the cousin grows into something more. Teresa is full of charm, life and elegance. They talk alone in the

shadows of the family living room, dimly lit by the oil-lamp, and perhaps they even plan, for later on, their happy matrimonial union at the foot of the altar of the parish church.

### **Slides 20**

Mrs. Beatriz de Ahumada passed away in the last few days of 1528, she was 36 years old, the mother of 10 children. When this sad news reaches the Cepeda house from Gotarrendura, the small town in which she had died on the northwest of Avila, 14 miles from the city, it produces a painful shock in the household. Teresa cries inconsolably while embracing her older brothers who unsuccessfully try to stay strong before this terrible blow. It is the first strong pain that visits them, and they all grieve profoundly. They have lost their mother, still young and beautiful, so good, so affectionate. The next day, a funeral procession slowly advances from Gotarrendura towards Avila. A heavy cart carries the coffin with the body of Mrs. Beatriz de Ahumada. Behind them, right next to the bodily remains of his wife, Mr. Alonso follows, sad and downcast, but serene. On each side, there are relatives, friends and household servants who pray in silence for the deceased. The procession advances along difficult and winding roads; some going up and others going down. They travel on the snow which covers all that rough land full of peaked rocks like a shroud. And they finally arrive at Avila; in silence they cross the Roman bridge over the river; and they enter the western entrance of the city wall. When Teresa and her brothers see the funeral procession while peeking from the windows, and they see the coffin in which their Mother is being carried, they break out into tears and sobs as a sad farewell of the children to their good mother who leaves them forever.

### **Slides 21**

A little while later, Teresa leaves the house alone, silently crossing the streets to go to

the eastern part of the city. She goes down through the suburb of the Jews, crying; she goes out through the city wall and enters into the chapel of Saint Lawrence on the right side of the river. She prostrates herself at the foot of the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Grace. Before her, sobbing and weeping, she pours out all the pain of her broken heart. She feels as though she had a great weight on her chest. Everything seems gloomy for her: with her dead mother, it was as though they had buried her enthusiasm and her joy of living. Her heart feels empty and broken, as though it had a big hollow in it, wide and profound, as a pit left by a tree torn out, roots and all. And she asks Our Lady to help and comfort her. She alone can make the flowers and the lilies on the road of her life flourish again, now that she offers herself to her; feeling so tired, sad and wearisome.

### **Slides 22-3**

Teresa grows in grace and beauty as well as in age. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old. The days and months that have passed by, have dimmed the pain of losing her mother, and Mr. Alonso's lovely daughter keeps in contact with her cousin, she keeps taking care of her gentle hands, perfuming her hair and dresses, walking through the streets and plazas with her beauty and elegance, provoking admiration and affection towards her wherever she goes.

Her father pays careful attention to the sort of friendships that his daughter has and is not pleased with the relationship with the young relative that visits their home. He advises Teresa against those long conversations with her cousin. Teresa responds with silence. Her father must warn her again, but it's worthless. Mr. Alonso decides to break, once and for all, the occasion and the danger.

### **Slides 24**

It's the 13<sup>th</sup> of July of 1531. At the Cepeda home there are emotional farewells and goodbye kisses. Teresa leaves with Mr. Alonso; they walk the short distance to a poor convent of nuns, the "Augustinians of Grace". Mr. Alonso wants Teresa to go there as a boarder student, isolated from the outside, without any visits of friends or correspondence with relatives, and above all, from that cousin who loves her and pursues her. Mr. Alonso says goodbye to his daughter, who is left inside the convent and the door closes behind her. The noble Castilian gentleman, with a firm and steady pace, climbs the small incline next to the city wall, and slowly returns to the family home.

The Convent of Our Lady of Grace, run by cloistered Augustinian nuns, had been founded in 1508, and was known for its austerity and observance. In this, it was quite unlike the German houses of that Order, which were being impacted at that very time by the teachings of another Augustinian, Friar Martin Luther. Teresa was sad at first in her new life as an internal boarder, but bit by bit starts to change her attitude and even gets to be happy in the nun's college. The joy and life of the other young boarders, the classes, the new order for each hour of the day, make the nostalgia of the family home fade away. The cousin tries hard to communicate by sending messages and letters through the turn. But these don't always reach Teresa. With the passing of time, and with new experiences, the memory of him and those other dreams, dim away.

### **Slides 25-6**

One day, Mary Briceno, Mistress of the young boarder girls, talks to them about the calling to life in the cloister. This Augustinian nun used to receive Holy Communion every morning, a great rarity in

those days, she would go to some other church, at great inconvenience, if there happened to be no Mass in the convent. One Holy Thursday, when she had been unable to receive, and the Host was already reserved in the tabernacle for Good Friday, she wept in great dejection. After some minutes she saw two hands approaching her, holding the Sacred Host, which was placed on her tongue; so Saint Thomas of Villanova reported, adding that she had not volunteered the information, but told him when ordered to do so under her vow of obedience. It is recorded also in the annals of the convent that shortly after Teresa went to board there, a light appeared in the presence of all the community, and took the form of a star, which, after floating around the choir, paused over Sister María, and then disappeared into her heart. Sister Maria was a Castilian lady to her finger tips, from one of the illustrious families of Ávila, and so evidently capable of enjoying life that Teresa wondered how she ever renounced the world and all its diversions for an existence of hard work and penance. One day Sister María explained, telling the story of how she herself felt Gods calling. It came after an incidental reading she had made. Her eyes fell on a book with the following Gospel passage: "Many are called, but few are chosen", and this was the beam of light she needed to make her realize the vanity of life and the dangers of the world.

It had not occurred to the young Teresa that nuns do not choose to be nuns but are chosen by Christ for that particular life. They are free to accept or refuse. If they accept, they must literally give up everything, wealth, friends, liberty, everything that is most dear to the people of the world. Christ had made it easy for those who loved Him to do this by giving the example: and those who took Him at His word discovered presently something of the

divine paradox of Christianity. They saw that whereas the people of the world, who sought their own gratification, had the discontented and unhappy faces of those who had not found what they sought, the others who asked nothing had received a positive and radiant joy which sustained them even in poverty and pain, and was unlike anything that the fleshpots of the world could offer — to say nothing of the perfect and everlasting joy of the next world which was promised to those who followed Christ. Teresa, who follows attentively the vocation story, feels as though the ideals and interests of her childhood, that had been lying dormant within her, were now being reborn with the good readings and spiritual talks. But she hadn't yet discovered her religious vocation. She was a declared enemy of the idea of being a nun.

### **Slides 27**

#### **For Reflection and Discussion**

- Why do you think Teresa wanted to be a Christian martyr as a child?
- Did her beauty make her self-conscious?  
In what way?
- How did her family assist Teresa's spiritual development?
- How did Sister Maria assist her spiritually?
- What insight did Teresa receive about vocations?
- Did Teresa's father do the right thing by making her become a boarder at a convent?
- If you had a teenage daughter who behaved as Teresa did, would you send her to a convent?