

Episodes in the Life of Teresa

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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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Session 2: To the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation

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As we closed session 1, Teresa, was in the Augustinian Convent of St. Mary of Grace, Avila, as a Boarder, she met Sister Maria Briceno, influential nun, Teresa realized that being a religious was a vocation, a calling, not a choice. She was there for about eighteen months, she became ill, and went back home, to the grand house in Avila, in the region of Castile, in Spain, home to her father, the noble Don Alonzo, her siblings, trying to pick up where she left off, joining the noble social scene

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There's a great event in Avila in May 1534. Before the entrance gate are waving flags and pennants. The nobles of the city and gentlemen on their horses ride beneath the big stone arch: saddles of gold, spurs of silver, shining helmets, sparkling swords, and finely dressed girls, radiating enthusiasm and beauty. Drums and horns are sounding. Announcing the arrival of the Emperor.

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1500–1558

Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, the most powerful monarch of his day, ruling over an empire that included Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, parts of Italy and central Europe, and large areas in the Americas. His father was Archduke Philip I of Austria, son of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. His mother, Joanna of Castile, where Teresa was born, was the daughter of Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. Avila, below a canopy of gold Charles V appears mounted on his horse. There is a moment of silence and expectation. The young Catholic monarch puts his right hand on the Gospels, he swears aloud that he will uphold the privileges and exemptions belonging to the ancient and noble Castilian city.

The Governor of the fortress offers him the keys to the city on a silver plate. There is an artillery salute, the Emperor goes through the stone arch to the inner city while the people cheer enthusiastically. Then there is bullfighting, and the playing of typical festive games and parties. For days, all of Avila celebrates the imperial visit. Among the beautiful young noble people of Avila is the nineteen year old Teresa de Ahumada.

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But beneath all of this, she is going through a kind of interior spiritual battle, fighting the resistance she felt toward the idea of being a nun. It's a fight between a religious vocation and a life in the world. She already knows what the life of a nun is like, from what she saw in the College of Grace, and she also knows what life in the world is like. The religious life seems to her a giving up of pleasures, comforts, the potential of her youth. Staying in the world offers the very opposite: the loving care of relatives, fortune and privilege, praises from men, parties with bullfights, tournaments and games. But, what happens when all of this comes to an end...? At the end of life in the cloister, comes heaven, and at the end of the pleasures and fun-times that the world promises, maybe it's hell. And inside of Teresa, those words, which had made such an impact on her when she was small and that she had repeated so often with her little brother Rodrigo in the home garden when they read the lives of the saints, came back to her mind: "forever! and ever! and ever...!"

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Something else happens to show Teresa more of the vanity of life: the departure of Rodrigo in autumn of 1535. Her partner in games, zeal, and childhood pranks leaves her, possibly forever. He is going to America. When Teresa sees him leave for Seville and the new world, she feels as though her heart is breaking.

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It seems as if all that she holds dear is to be taken from her. First it was her mother, who was taken to the grave; then it was her sister Maria, who left the family home to get married; now Rodrigo, who is leaving to never return. Things of the world are fleeting.

At the same time, her appreciation of the eternal grows within in her. At home, she spends hours reading the epistles of St. Jerome, about the spiritual life and benefits of the religious vocation. This impresses the young and beautiful daughter of Mr. Alonso, who, bit by bit, begins detaching herself from the lovely dresses and other vanities. She no longer likes to walk near the arch of Alcazar to flaunt her beauty, where the youth socialize and laugh happily among silk garments and perfume. She prefers to pass hours in the church, to nurture her spiritual needs with the theologians of the College of St. Tomas, to visit nun's convents.

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Some time ago, a friend of hers, Juana Juarez, took the Carmelite habit in the Convent of the Incarnation. At that time, Teresa was dismayed by her friend entering the cloister. But now, it didn't seem so strange to her, and she even starts to visit her frequently. Many days, she leaves the city walls through the Carmen gate; going down the hill northward; crossing the small stone bridge and entering into the parlor of the Incarnation. She is wearing an orange dress with black velvet borders. A little while later, the nun comes to the grill, and there, Juana Juarez on the inside, Teresa on the outside, they spend a lot of time talking, sometimes chit-chat, but mostly on spiritual and mystical topics.

When she returns home, everyone notices that she is more recollected, that she seems more reserved and concerned. The conversations in the parlor of the Incarnation with Juana Juarez, and the reading of the letters of St. Jerome, are going round inside her

head. She finds herself between two paths, the convent or the world. In favor and against; conveniences and inconveniences; pros and cons; in the end she becomes convinced, and makes an unbreakable decision, that no one will be able to bend. She will be a nun. God wants it so. It is also the way to secure her salvation.

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The biggest obstacle now is her father. Mr. Alonso, now quite elderly, stands between Teresa and the convent. He is not willing to separate himself from his most precious daughter, the joy of his heart. But Teresa knows that God calls her, and she'll even have to overcome the pain of her dear father. He that calls her will have to provide the consolation for the person that she loves most on earth. On her behalf, she will save him from the pain of the farewell. Before he knows, she is already in the convent, and she is confident that he won't try to get her out by force. She plans it, and she puts it into action.

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It is November 2 1535. All-souls day, the commemoration of All the Faithful Departed is a holiday of prayer and memorial for the souls of those who have died, to remember and pray for those souls suffering in purgatory.

Several hours before dawn Teresa is moving stealthily along the corridors; without making any noise; she dresses and fixes up her room. Then she opens the outside door, and steps into the silent and cold street. With small and speedy footsteps she takes the corner between the St. Scholastica and St. Dominic's Parish Church, and she follows the road towards the northern part of the city. She leaves the city walls, goes down the hill, leaving on her right the narrow St. Martin's tower, and passing over the small river bridge, to the doors of the Convent of the Incarnation, the convent of the Carmelites.

The Incarnation, with a church and convent, forms a simple and spacious building, with a central patio

with a small well, and rose bushes; it has a spacious garden with trees; it has cloisters with stone arches, and in the midst of all of this, there are nearly two hundred nuns wearing white capes.

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The second of November, 1536

In the Incarnation, the nuns are busy and excited. The church and the choir are decorated with flowers, and the little convent bell rings out in the tower of three arches, the same bell that first rang on the day of Teresa's baptism. There is a small group coming down the hill from the city, Mr. Alonso, his relatives, his friends and some young people. They are coming to Teresa's ceremony of the taking of the Carmelite habit. They sit in the church next to the grill. The small curtain is opened, and there in the inside of the cloisters, at first at a distance, then closer, the voices of the nuns is heard. A little while later, they enter into the choir two by two. They enter with their white capes and the veil over their faces. At the end of the procession, Teresa enters accompanied by the Prioress and the Mistress of novices. She is all in white, like a wedding dress. She prostrates herself before the Mother Prioress (a distant relative, Dona Mencia Cimbron) and the vesting of the habit goes ahead, adorning her with the white cape of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Perhaps Mr. Alonzo wishes that her mother, who loved her so much, were still alive. Teresa is happy in her new life. She has a spacious and well-lit cell, with views of the city: she can see the walls, the parapets, the towers, the bell towers; and with splendid views of the mountainous countryside and of the river; she has religious nuns that appreciate her very much, like her friend Juana Juarez; she receives frequent visits from relatives and friends, who come to see her in the Incarnation and keep her amused in the parlor. Teresa will make her vows a year later, November 3 1537.

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Another year later, it is Autumn of 1538

At the cloister door, Mr. Alonso is waiting for her. He is worried. The doctors and surgeons are there, the nuns are moving backwards and forwards through the cloisters and corridors carrying white cloths, bandages and medicines. Teresa is gravely ill. She is stretched out on the bed of her cell unconscious, as though she no longer lived: rigid hands, eyes closed a wax color on her face. When the doctors leave, her father, who was waiting for the result of the visit and of the examination, hears the medical diagnosis: his daughter has suffered a heart attack, and she needs a treatment that cannot be given in the convent. It will be necessary to take her out.

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Maybe a folk healer, famous in the province, who lives in a small village town in the mountains, will find a solution to this terrible sickness. Mr. Alonso, alarmed, doesn't think twice, and decides to put his daughter into the hands of the folk healer. He doesn't care about the cost or the difficulties. No expense is too great to save the life of his daughter Teresa.

It's the beginning of winter. In Avila, it snows during the day and freezing winds blow throughout the night. The streets and roads are hard and slippery because of the ice. Warmly dressed up, and mounted on good horses, a small group crosses the bridge over the river and heads west to Becedas, where the healer lives. There are six or seven of them: Teresa and her father, Sister Juana Juarez and some of the household servants. They go looking for the famous healer. Teresa is weak and with a fever, very sick from the last heart attacks that she has suffered. And they travel along the winding and narrow roads wrapped up to protect as best they can from the freezing wind. On the way, the little group stays at Hortigosa with Teresa's uncle, Don Pedro de Cepeda, who gives her a copy of Osuna's Third Spiritual Alphabet.

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After that they complete the journey of 40 miles to Castellanos de la Canada, a small town of twelve houses, there are two people waiting for them: Mrs. Maria de Cepeda, Teresa's eldest sister, and her husband, Mr. Martin Guzman Barrientos. Teresa arrives exhausted, with feverish shivers and devastated by weakness. Only another 20 miles to Becedas but there's a problem. The folk healer won't be able to start the treatment until the cold weather has passed, and they're still at the beginning of winter. But while she waits, Teresa is cared for, and she makes the best of her time, in the pain of her illness, reading spiritual books and dedicating herself to prayer.

The winter cold has now past. The time has come in which the folk healer of Becedas works her charms. Mr. Alonso, Teresa, Juana Juarez and the servants, leave Castellanos de la Canada to find the woman healer. Becedas where the famous healer lives is in the mountain range of Avila and Salamanca, a beautiful village with six streets, two plazas and four fountains. Mr. Alonso looks for the healer expecting to find the complete solution to all their worries. That woman, they told him, is the only person that can save his daughter.

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The treatment begins: first come the daily purges; then the mysterious potions; always medications without measure that the healer prepares with herbs and ground roots in her poor mud-brick house. And Teresa gets sicker and sicker. Her temperature rises, the heart attacks continue and are becoming stronger each time, and the lack of appetite increases with each potion that the woman healer makes her take.

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Three months go by, and the fabulous treatment is destroying Teresa. Instead of curing her heart problem, it damages her lungs.

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Mr. Alonso, who came with so much faith and enthusiasm, in the end loses his trust in the mysterious healer and decides to return with his daughter to Avila. In this way, at least she will die in her father's house.

And in the month of June, around Easter 1540 they leave Becedas and they return, sad and disappointed, to their walled city.

In the cloister of the Incarnation, there is an open grave.

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The nuns have prepared black altar cloths, and the platform for the coffin is ready in the church surrounded by large funeral candles. It is all waiting for the body of Teresa de Ahumada, who has already been unconscious for four days in her father's house. She had a strong heart attack, and they haven't been able to make her come round. Relatives, friends and nuns from the Incarnation watch over her. Even the wax from the big candles which glow around her bed has fallen on her eyelids, but she still hasn't responded.

They are all quite sure that she is dead: everyone except her father, who repeats in the funeral atmosphere of the bedroom a last cry of hope: "This daughter isn't to be buried!" Inexplicably the gravely ill Teresa recovered – she did not die.

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One day she entrusted her sickness to Saint Joseph, and she has seen the protection of the saint in the easing of her pains.

Winter 1541.

Mr. Alonso is the first parlor of the Incarnation, seated on the other side of the grill, waiting silently. He hears a door opening on the inside and he smiles. He sees his daughter coming with two religious who support her, one on each side, because Teresa has been left crippled since the last terrible attack that almost killed her. They sit her on

a seat, and the nursing nuns leave them alone. Mr. Alonso smiles as Teresa tells him about the slow recovery from her illness that she is experiencing. Then they talk about the spiritual life, about prayer, about recollection, about God. Teresa, whose virtues have grown a lot during these last two years of physical suffering, initiates her father in the practice of mental prayer. She has learned it from the Third Alphabet of Osuna. She speaks to him of the benefits of the practice of it, the graces God gives in it, the strength it gives to the soul, and the help it provides in the practice of the virtues. He listens enchanted by his daughter as though he were listening to an angel from heaven who was revealing to him mysteries from another world, and he promises her that he will dedicate himself to the practice that Teresa describes in such an extraordinary way. When he leaves the Incarnation and climbs the little hill that leads to the entrance of Carmen of the city walls, he carries some books with him: his daughter has given them to him through the tum so that they may help him in his mental prayer.

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Teresa improves. Now she can walk along the cloisters and go to the parlor without the help of other nuns. Throughout the convent her contagious laugh is heard again. She returns to her role of inspiring enthusiasm and happiness among the nuns, who laugh along with the daughter of Mr. Alonso. The pains and the premature exhaustion have disappeared, and even her heart, almost torn apart by the terrible attacks, has regained its youthful energy and passion. She feels a certain need for affection. She spends hours and hours in the parlor telling funny and wonderful things in exciting conversations that seem to last forever. Stuck to the grill, her eyes sparkle with interest. And that is why a young nobleman of Avila, enchanted by her, starts to come down from the city to visit and spend a lot of time talking to the delightful nun, gazing at the attractive

face, with its three beauty spots, of Teresa de Ahumada, maybe with the intention of gaining her heart so as to make her leave the voluntary enclosure that she is in.

Life seems to smile on her again; the memories of her youthful adventures return; human affection comes back to look for a small sunlit corner in the heart of the beautiful daughter of Mr. Alonso.

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But a sad happening is going to freeze the smile on her lips, and is going to put tears in her eyes. It is the 26th of December, 1544, a Christmas without joy in the Cepeda house. While in the streets, drums and Christmas carols are heard, Mr. Alonso now 73 years old dictates his last will and testament from his bedroom. His brother Mr. Lorenzo de Cepeda, and the priest from Villanueva, his son-in-law Martin Guzman Barrientos and his sons are there, next to his bed. Teresa, who is 29, has come from the Incarnation, wears her Carmelite habit. Mr. Alonso breathes with difficulty. But he struggles and talks with tears in his eyes: "Everything comes to an end" - he says - "only one thing remains: having served Our Lord". There is silence in the room; the sobs and sighs are contained. The sick man makes another effort to talk: he begins to pray the creed "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth..." He is unable to go on. His voice dies away, and a wax color slowly extends throughout his face and his hands, that have been left on top of the bed. He has died. Everyone falls to their knees offering prayers of petition and of tears, which accompany the immortal spirit in its ascension to glory.

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For Reflection and Discussion

What were some events and people during this stage of her life that opened Teresa's soul to her vocation, and strengthened her resolve?

What events and people in your life have led you to a deeper experience of prayer? Did any of these events follow a time of sadness or suffering? Is suffering an essential part of spiritual development?