

Episodes in the Life of Teresa

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 Three: Life & Experiences at the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation

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Phases in Teresa's Life:

Teresa born in 1515, died in 1582. Her life of 67 years can be considered as having **three distinct phases:**

First 21 years: First Phase, childhood and young adult until she entered the Monastery of the Incarnation in 1536;

Next 27 years, Second Phase, as a Carmelite nun in the Monastery of the Incarnation until 1563, when she is 48 years old;

Next 19 years, Third Phase as Carmelite Mother Teresa and Foundress, until she dies age 67.

These **Three Phases** remind us of the **Classic Three Stages of Spiritual Progress:**

The **Purgative;** the **Illuminative** and the **Unitive.** Also known as the stages of **Beginners, Proficient** and **Perfect.**

Fundamental characteristics:

Beginners: avoiding sin

Proficient: doing what God wants

Perfect: being with God

We can see these **stages** in her life

First 21 years: as a Beginner, learning to avoid sin and the occasion of sin

Next 27 years: as a Proficient, learning what God wants her to do, and beginning to do it

Next 19 years: as a Perfect, being with God

These stages are not fixed, do not follow seamlessly one after the other. We see this in Teresa's life.

We see it in our life, in our spiritual growth.

Successful spiritual development is a trend from our beginnings through proficiency to perfection; from avoiding sin, to learning what God wants of us, to being with Him. A trend with many reverses, many detours, many cycles, in our lives as in Teresa's.

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As we closed session 2, Teresa, is a Carmelite nun in the monastery of the Incarnation in Avila. She recovered from a near-fatal illness and will suffer from a wide variety of illnesses for the rest of her life

The Monastery of the Incarnation was started in Avila in 1478, just 26 years after Blessed John Soreth founded the order of Carmelite nuns. This is important, because the way of life of nuns in this young movement was not firmly established. It was not as we imagine a Carmelite convent today: life was not as strict and there were great social differences between the nuns. It was moved outside the city and a new monastery was built on land that had been a Jewish cemetery, opened on 4 April 1515, the date on which the saint was baptized. When Teresa de Cepeda entered the Incarnation it was one of eleven Carmelite monasteries for nuns in Spain.

Some two hundred persons, including 180 nuns, servants and nuns' relatives, were living together at the Incarnation in Teresa's days there. Its way of life was between the **sanctimoniales**, those with the obligation to **choir office**, and that of the **beaterios**, a group of seculars living together.

Some of the nuns were choir nuns who prayed all hours of the Divine Office but were not enclosure, there is not a strict separation from the world and its affairs. They did no outside service. They were generally from wealthy or noble families. Others were beatas, originally lay women, rich or poor, who were linked to Carmel by inclination, practice or vocation, who lived together in community, and entered the convent when it became possible. This only became possible in 1452.

At the Carmelite convent, nuns could keep their property; some of the sisters were quite wealthy. When a woman joined a convent, she brought a dowry that was less than a marriage dowry, so noble families sent women to the convents to keep their money. These nuns kept servants and lapdogs, wore jewelry and perfume, received visitors, and went to the city whenever they wanted.

The religious dowry was an expense that not all families could afford. Women from families who brought none or very little dowries were described as lay sisters, employed in the household duties and other manual work. Less well educated, if at all, they took vows and were truly religious, often

attended at Office and would recite prayers in Spanish.

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These poor sisters lived in dormitories. Teresa comes to believe the convent was too large, too wealthy, and not spiritual enough. There was a routine to Religious life at the Incarnation. There was Mass, days set aside for fasting and abstinence; silence to encourage prayer. The Divine Office was chanted with many kinds of detailed, minute rubrics. Novices received instructions about the Carmelite order, its origins, its devotion to the Blessed Virgin and to the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

No time, in the horarium, the established routine, for mental prayer. Teresa says that until reading Osuna's Third Spiritual Alphabet she didn't know how to go about praying or being recollected. The spiritual books she mentions are by Franciscan not Carmelite authors, and she says nothing about receiving instruction about mental prayer during her novitiate. Until about 1555, Teresa spent more time meeting with lay people of the village and less time in mental prayer. At the age of 39, she began having visions and hearing inner voices.

Teresa begins to have unfamiliar experiences, and she was afraid. 1558. Experiences her first **rapture** after 27 years as a nun.

One day, having spent a long time in prayer and begging the Lord to help me please Him in all things, a rapture came upon me so suddenly that it almost carried me out of myself. It was something I could not doubt, because it was very obvious. It was the first time the Lord granted me this favor of rapture. I heard these words: "No longer do I want you to converse with men but with angels." This experience terrified me because the movement of the soul was powerful and these words were spoken to me deep within the spirit; so it frightened me -- although on the other hand I felt great consolation when the fear that, I think, was caused by the novelty of the experience left me.

Sometimes it happened -- when the Lord desired -- that these raptures were so great that even though I was among people I couldn't resist these raptures; to my deep affliction they began to be made public.

Teresa feels a new fear. **"His Majesty began to give me the prayer of quiet very habitually -- and often, of union -- which lasted a long while. Since at that time other women had fallen into serious illusions and deceptions caused by the devil, I began to be afraid"**

Teresa is afraid, so are her confessors, why? Because of the times. Spain Castile, Aragon, and Catalonia, are in upheaval, not only politically but also spiritually. Responding to Luther of 10 years or so before, major Catholic movements erupted in Spain. above all Franciscans, focusing on the interior life and mental prayer. Francisco de Osuna, who died when Teresa was 25, expresses it in his Third Spiritual Alphabet. The establishment of an Inquisition throughout Spain is a convenient means to further the cause of Spanish unity, deepening the sense of common national purpose. Accepted by the rulers of the new nation and by the Church.

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The Inquisition was meant to find and punish heresy. The result was mistrust and mutual suspicion. Though Teresa fears that she might be deceived by her experiences and lose her Lord, the Inquisition does not frighten her. When others warned her about it, she writes: **"This amused me and made me laugh ... And I said they shouldn't be afraid about these possible accusations; that it would be pretty bad for my soul if there were something in it of the sort that I should have to fear the Inquisition; that I thought if I did have something to fear I'd go myself to seek out the Inquisitors"**. Teresa sees it as a way to submit to the judgment of the Church. Though later accused at different times before the Inquisition, she was never found guilty.

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Another widespread dread in Teresa's time is fear of the devil, fear of his powers, his forces and deceptions. The news of diabolical influences and happenings spread like wildfire and the Inquisitors feel they are battling supernatural evil.

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Perhaps in response, there is a craze, an obsession with supernatural visions, seen as signs of holiness

and gifts from heaven, those having them become famous, like rock stars. For example, one visionary, Magdalena de la Cruz, a Poor Clare, is known as a living saint, a wonderworker: she is holy, has the stigmata, she eats nothing but the consecrated Host. She is prioress, praised and famous, is consulted by the highest in the land, including the Queen herself.

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In 1543, while Teresa is at the Incarnation: Magdalena de la Cruz is desperately ill, believes she is dying. Sensationally, she confesses to be a secret devil worshiper. Inspired and assisted by two demons, she has deceived and betrayed. She recants and lives out her life in her convent near Cordoba. By fooling crowds, showing even bishops and kings to be gullible, she showed how easy it was to pretend to receive spiritual gifts, to pretend to be holy, to be a prophet, to be gifted, to be a supernatural healer. Once bitten, twice shy. She brought the fear of being deceived to all of Spain, fear of being deceived by nuns having visions, ecstasies and intense prayer practices. Women like Teresa of Jesus, the holy nun of Avila.

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More Experiences.

There is distrust of mental prayer, especially that practiced by nuns or foolish women, suspicion of spiritual books, and hostility toward mysticism. Teresa feels doubts and... **"this fear increased in such a way that it made me diligently seek out spiritual persons to consult"**. The safest thing is to hide nothing, so she tells her confessors simply and humbly about the favors she received. The first two say her supernatural experiences are from the devil. She is directed to resist the favors, yet when she tries they increase. Told not to remain alone, she is never in a room by herself during the daytime. Once, while terrified that the devil will deceive her and not knowing what to do, she heard the Lord speak to her. **"I was given calm together with fortitude, courage, security, quietude, and light so that in one moment I saw my soul become another"**. This frees her from doubts and fears. As for devils: **"I pay no more attention to them than to flies" "I don't understand these fears, 'The devil! The devil!', when we can say 'God! God!' and make the devil tremble". "I fear those who have such great fear of the devil more than I do**

the devil himself, for he can't do anything to me. Whereas these others, especially if they are confessors, cause severe disturbance".

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In 1559, Teresa is 44.

Fernando Valdés, a leader in the Inquisition, puts out an index of forbidden books among which are cherished books on prayer, many of Teresa's favorites like Francis Borgia, John of Avila, Francisco Osuna, Denis the Carthusian. Because there are no local language editions, Teresa does not have a Bible she can read. She gets Scripture passages from spiritual books, which are full of quotations. These are now forbidden, she is overcome, she wonders what to do. The Lord speaks to her telling her not to be sad but that He would become for her a living book. Afterwards she begins to receive mystical understanding of many truths and has almost no need for books. Because others like us need books and out of obedience, later she writes her own books to explain the path to union with God.

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For many years at the Incarnation, Teresa has great difficulty with prayer. She writes: "**And very often, for some years, I was more anxious that the hour I had determined to spend in prayer be over than I was to remain there... and so unbearable was the sadness I felt on entering the oratory, that I had to muster up all my courage".** Her difficulties are due to distractions, a mind that wanders, and an imagination that roams free.

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Intense Experiences

These difficulties with prayer went on for about eighteen years until what she describes as a second conversion. **It happened to me that one day entering the oratory I saw a statue they had borrowed for a certain feast to be celebrated in the house. It represented the much wounded Christ and was very devotional so that beholding it I was utterly distressed in seeing Him that way, for it well represented what He suffered for us. I felt so keenly aware of how poorly I thanked Him for those wounds that, it seems to me, my heart broke. Beseeking Him to strengthen me once and for all that I might not offend Him, I**

threw myself down before Him with the greatest outpouring of tears.

Again while reading from the Confessions of St. Augustine

It seemed to me I saw myself in them. When I came to the passage where he speaks about his conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it only seemed to me, according to what I felt in my heart, that it was I the Lord called. I remained for a long time totally dissolved in tears and feeling within myself utter distress and weariness. May God be praised who gave me the life to rise up from a death so deadly.

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Teresa is devoted to Jesus; and sees his humanity as a way to contemplation. In her devotions, she uses simple means such as paintings and images of Christ.

While I was at Mass, this most sacred humanity in its risen form was represented to me completely, as it is in paintings, with such wonderful beauty and majesty; one cannot describe this vision without ruining it. If there were nothing else to provide delight in heaven than the exalted beauty of glorified bodies, this vision would be very great glory, especially the vision of the humanity of Jesus Christ, our Lord. If I should have spent many years trying to imagine something so beautiful, I couldn't have; it surpasses everything imaginable here on earth, even in just its whiteness and splendor. I have clearly experienced this.

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Another Experience, A vision of Hell

While I was in prayer one day, I suddenly found that I had been put in hell to see the place the devils had prepared there for me and which I merited because of my sins. This experience took place within the shortest space of time, but even were I to live for many years I think it would be impossible for me to forget it. The entrance was a very long and narrow alleyway, like an oven, low and dark and confined; the floor was dirty, muddy water emitting a foul stench and swarming with putrid vermin. At the end of the

alleyway a hole was hollowed out in the wall; there I was placed in a cramped condition. I experienced a fire in the soul that I don't know how I could describe. The bodily pains were so unbearable that though I had suffered excruciating ones in this life these were all nothing in comparison with the ones I experienced there. I saw furthermore that they would go on without end and without ever ceasing. This, however, was nothing next to the soul's agonizing: a constriction, a suffocation, an affliction so keenly felt and with such a despairing and tormenting unhappiness that I don't know how to word it. Here it is the soul itself that tears itself in pieces. I don't know how to describe that interior fire and that despair, coming in addition to such extreme torments and pains. Those walls, which were terrifying to see, closed in on themselves and suffocated everything. There was no light, but all was enveloped in the blackest darkness.

Being burned here on earth is very little when compared to being burned by the fire that is there. I was left terrified, and still am now almost six years later. I well understood that it was a great favor and that the Lord desired me to see with my own eyes the place His mercy had freed me from. Thus I recall no time of trial or suffering in which it doesn't seem to me that everything that can be suffered here on earth is nothing. I repeat that this experience was one of the greatest favors the Lord granted me because it helped me very much to lose fear of the tribulations and contradictions of this life as well as to grow strong enough to suffer them and give thanks to the Lord who freed me from such everlasting and terrible evils.

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Another spiritual experience: Transverberation of her heart, August 26 1560, at the house of Doña Guiomar de Ulloa, is now a feast day in the Church's calendar, images from the masterpiece of Bernini, the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, in the church Santa Maria della Vittoria dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Rome.

I saw close to me toward my left side an angel in bodily form. I don't usually see angels in bodily form. This time, though, the Lord desired that I

see the vision in the following way: the angel was not large but small; he was very beautiful, and his face was so aflame that he seemed to be one of those very sublime angels that appear to be all afire. I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire.

It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal. On the days this lasted I went about as though stupefied.

While this was primarily a spiritual experience of ecstasy, it seems her heart is also physically pierced. Nine months after St. Teresa died in 1582, she was exhumed, and her body was found to be incorrupt. Later, her heart was removed, enclosed in a crystal vessel and placed in a jeweled silver reliquary. It can still be seen at the Carmelite Monastery of Alba de Tormes in Spain. And visible is a puncture wound, perhaps from the angel's dart.

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Teresa learns from her experiences at the Incarnation. Despite the Inquisition and the index, Teresa, the Carmelite nun, has no doubt about the central place prayer must take. She views prayer as the source of the good things God worked in her. Turning away from prayer would be like shutting the door on God who longs to share His life intimately with us. She perseveres in prayer, in humility, in love for her brothers and sisters, for the Carmelite Order, for the Church.

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She dreams of a life according to the Carmelite Rule of St. Albert. The Lord kindles in her soul another charism. Teresa is to be a cloistered nun, a teacher of prayer and even more – a foundress, to establish monasteries and convents for nuns and friars. We'll look at how that begins next month, with Teresa. Amen

