

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
- Book of Her Foundations** (Collected Work, Volume 3)
- The Divine Adventure**

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 Six: Teresa's Last Adventures

The Holy Spirit Inspires her writings

It is 1576, **Teresa is 61 years old.** She is living in Toledo, in a pleasant cell overlooking the River Tajo; without the distractions of visits and business matters; with her daughters; **dedicated to prayer, to her writings and her sewing, she feels revitalized in body and soul.**

She writes at night time, seated at the table of her small cell, with paper and her feather nib pen in hand, writing incredibly quickly, what will be the book **The Interior Castle.** Sometimes the nuns see her covered in a gleaming light. Other times, a lovely white dove comes to rest on her left shoulder. And what marvelous writings come to the yellow paper. The castle of diamonds, with its rooms illuminated by the sun that shines in the center; the small fountain that overflows pure water; the silkworm, that converts itself into a white butterfly

A Thunderstorm Opposes Her Reform

Meanwhile, in Castille and in Andalucía, a **storm rages** against her Reform. Her sons are being persecuted; her daughters are being lied about and threatened; some want to abolish all the foundations that had been built with so many prayers, sacrifices and tears. Now and again bad news reaches Teresa in Toledo: the accusations against **Father Gracian** and the **nuns in Seville;** wanting the **Discalced Reform** to be controlled by "Calced" Carmelites; the nuncio Sega, who calls her an **unsettled and wandering female;** terrible allegations made against the most important Discalced friars before the Royal Court.

July 1577 **Teresa is 62.** She returns to her first convent of **St. Joseph in Avila.** She writes to *Phillip II*, asking him for protection. **Fearless, strong and firm,** she explains the holiness of her sons to the King; she assures him of the innocence of the Discalced Superiors. She also writes to the Royal Council, to the General of the Order, and to all her benefactors and friends.

And there are other things this year: Nov. 29, Teresa finishes **The Interior Castle.** On December 3, **John of the Cross is taken prisoner by the Calced Friars,** and escapes eight months later, on 15 August 1578.

Dec. 24, she **falls down the stairs at St. Joseph's and breaks her left arm,** which is never set properly and

leaves her unable to even dress herself for the rest of her life, becoming dependent on her nurse and companion Ana of St. Bartholomew.

She trusts in God. But she knows that she must try everything she can to **stop the collapse of her work**. One day comes the news that Phillip II will help the Reform; that the antagonism against the Discalced has been defeated, and that a **Brief from the Pope** is on its way. Teresa is filled with joy. Her work has been saved. She can now return to the visitation of her frightened convents and make more foundations.

Teresa makes more Foundations

In 1579 **Teresa is 64**: In June, after **three years of enclosure** Teresa begins traveling once more... the sweet nuns with their white capes are inside carriages with awns, with a small bell and sand clock to keep the hours and regular observance as though they were in a **mobile convent**, lifting up the dust in the summer time and sinking into the mud in winter time.

On Nov. 24, she arrives in **Malagón** and on Dec. 8, **feast of the Immaculate Conception**, the nuns move to the new monastery, the only one constructed from its foundations according to Teresa's specifications.

Palencia greets Teresa with joy... this is where she is best received. Everybody helps her. On the day of the inauguration, December 29 1580 long lines of the faithful with lighted torches accompany the nuns on the way to the new convent. Teresa presides, with the Bishop on her right, behind her are the nuns, between the secular and regular priests; the Government Council, with its Chief Magistrate and aldermen, and a great mass of people. Teresa is filled with holy joy; grateful for the people of **Palencia**, and because of some news that makes her heart jump. The **Brief from Rome** has finally arrived, which gives **independence to the Discalced friars**. Her sons will no longer be subject to those who persecuted them and tried to eliminate them.

Happily she leaves Palencia on her way to **Soria**. The people of the villages on the way hear that Teresa is going to pass by, they come out to **bless her as a saint**, ask her to make it rain on their fields, drought-stricken for several months. And it does rain, and the harvest is wonderful.

In Soria, the Bishop welcomes them from the balcony of the palace, and from there he blesses Teresa, who is

on her knees within the carriage, with the curtains opened and the veil over her face. **On June 30 1581 the foundation in Soria is complete.**

Teresa's Final Stay at St. Joseph's of Avila

And straight away, she travels again, this time through **Segovia to Avila**, where on September 10 she is **elected prioress**. At **66**, the Mother Foundress is tired. She has lived many episodes, gone through many difficulties, and suffered many illnesses. Her body weakens, but Her spirit is still strong, and they still call for her in many places.

November 28, 1581. One morning, while the nuns of St. Joseph are making final preparations for Teresa to go to **Burgos**, the bell sounds. "**It's Father John of the Cross! Father John of the Cross!**" Teresa and John meet again. So many years have passed since the last time, and so many things have happened. Now the two reformers talk about their mishaps, and hardships: and how the Reform has flourished so magnificently.

But Father John hasn't come simply to reminisce. He has come to take her to **Andalucía**, to the foundation they are to make in **Granada**. **He has all that is necessary for the journey: wagons, money and patents**. Teresa can no longer make such a long journey. Besides that, Father John has arrived too late. **The superior of Castile** has ordered her to make the foundation in **Burgos** and they are all ready for the journey to go the next day. Teresa can't get out of the commitment to go to Burgos. But she gives all her blessings to the small house that will flourish below the shadow of the Arab Palace, La Alhambra. **They say goodbye**. They have the premonition that they will never see each other again in this world... **1582, Jan. 2, Teresa leaves Avila for the last time on the way to Burgos**. Jan. 20, the foundation in **Granada** is made by **St. John of the Cross and Ana de Jesús**.

Burgos is flooded. It's **nighttime**. A group of nuns, friars and other travelers slosh through the water that covers the roads to enter the city gates. Sometimes they get **stuck in the mud**; other times they slip with the wagons, that sink into the mud up to the axles. They arrive, soaked, at the house of **Lady Catalina** and sit next to the fire to dry themselves. The next day, Teresa finds that the **Archbishop**, who had given his **permission for the foundation by word, bluntly refuses to admit it**. In the end, after many trips up and

down those muddy streets, she manages to found the convent. It is the **19th of April of 1582. It will be her final foundation.**

On July 26, she leaves **Burgos**, stops in **Palencia**, in **Valladolid**, a few days in **Medina** then on September 19 starts the **last leg of her last journey on earth.**

It is the rainy season in Castille. Teresa travels the road from Medina del Campo to Alba de Tormes. She is 67, weary, fatigued and sick with fever. At one stage, she turns to her nurse: "Daughter", she says with a feeble voice, "give me something to eat. I'm going to faint". They have only a few dry figs, that Teresa, with her swollen throat, can't swallow. Ana of St. Bartholomew, her faithful nurse, is heartbroken and weeps. "Don't cry, my daughter", Teresa says, "this is what Our Lord wants now". And they go on, through the pouring rain, inside the carriage that sinks into potholes and leaks water.

At sunset on the 20th of September, they reach **Alba de Tormes**. The nuns are shocked to see her in such a bad state of health. "**Help me Lord, as I'm so tired**", she says. **And she has to lie down, exhausted with fatigue and illness.**

Her cell faces the **Tabernacle**. From her poor bed (wooden boards with a mattress made of straw and rough blankets), she follows the **Divine Office**. It reminds her of her first convent, **St. Joseph of Avila**, where she would like to **die**, and she asks Ana of St. Bartholomew: "**Daughter, please do me a favor: as soon as you see that I am a little better, find me a common kind of carriage, lift me up and let's go to Avila**".

On September 29, **Teresa goes to bed never to get up again.** The sickness is worsening. She has frequent collapses that leave her without speech, with **irregular rhythm of the heart**. They call the doctor; they give her medicines, they apply suction pads to extract blood. But she is sure that she is going to die. "**Daughter**", she says to her Ana, "**the hour of my death has come**". And she asks for the Viaticum. It is the 3rd of October, three o'clock in the afternoon. The nuns who surround her bed as she prepares to die, are weeping. And in this small cell Teresa says in a voice that is becoming weaker: "**My daughters, for love of God, I ask you to be very careful in observance of the Rule and the Constitutions, and be assured that if they are kept with the exactness with which they should be, no**

other miracle will be necessary to canonize you. Don't take any notice of the bad example that this bad nun has given and forgive me". The nuns are kneeling, and the last words of Teresa have produced an echo of sobs and tears. Father Anthony of Jesus, who has absolved her and administrated the Viaticum, reads the recommendation of the soul. Ana holds her in her arms. The duchess of Alba fixes up the bed clothes and offers the medicines. And then, looking towards heaven, with an accent of sweet hope, Teresa exclaims, "**My Lord, it is time to move on. Well then, may your will be done. O my Lord and my Spouse, the hour that I have longed for has come. It is time to meet one another. At last, Lord, I am a daughter of the Church**" She will speak no more.

She closes her eyes, **becoming transfigured** in prayer. Her face is becoming ever more **smooth and shiny**; the **color most gentle and transparent**; the expression of her face, **sweeter and beatified**. She is at **peace**. Three gentle sighs directed to the image of Christ that she holds in her hands; she lets her head fall into the arms of her nurse, and she dies.

It is the night of the **4th of October of 1582**. The nuns **see and hear heavenly sights and sounds, the singing of hymns and the fluttering of angels who carry the soul of their Mother. The smell of white lilies fills the small cell and runs throughout the cloister, perfuming the convent.** On the roof, right above her cell, they see a **shining light**, marking the way for **Teresa's spirit that goes up, towards glory.**

She was buried at the Convent of the Annunciation in Alba de Tormes. Nine months after, the nuns tell of a heavenly perfume surrounding her tomb. Father Gracian, gives permission for an exhumation of the body and he tells this: "**The coffin lid was smashed, half rotten and full of mildew, the smell of damp was very pungent . . . the clothes had fallen to pieces . . . The whole body was covered with the earth which had penetrated into the coffin and so it was all damp too, but as fresh and whole as if it had only been buried the day before.**" Teresa's body is washed and re-clothed, and Father Gracian writes" . . . there spread through the whole house a **wonderful penetrating fragrance which lasted some days . . .**" Before the body was re-interred **one of her hands is cut off, wrapped in a scarf and sent to Ávila.** Father Gracian **cuts the little finger off** and keeps it with him. It will be taken by the occupying Ottoman Turks, and he will

redeem it with a few rings and 20 reales.

Teresa's body is **exhumed again on 25 November 1585 to be moved to Ávila**. It is thoroughly examined by two doctors in the presence of the community and the bishop. The doctors say the condition of the body is miraculous . . . **for after three years, without being embalmed, the entire body is in a perfect state of preservation, and a wonderful odor comes from it**. At the nuns' request to make up for losing Teresa **an arm is removed** and left behind while the rest of her **body is reburied in Ávila**. However, this was done without the approval of the **Duke of Alba de Tormes and he exerts his authority and in 1586 brings the body back**, and **Pope Sixtus V orders that it remain in Alba de Tormes** on pain of excommunication. A fancier tomb was erected in 1598 and she was moved to a new chapel in 1616 where she rests in the **Church of the Annunciation**. Teresa's **incorrupt left arm and heart are displayed there (transverberation) and some say they can see the puncture of the spear in her heart**.

In **1622**, forty years after her death, she was **canonized** by Pope Gregory XV. **Parts of her body** have been taken elsewhere as **religious relics**, all entrusted to the Discalced Carmelites. In Rome, **her right foot** is in the church of Santa Maria della Scala. The Church of Our Lady of Loreto, Paris, and Church of Sanlúcar in Cádiz Spain each possess **one finger**. The **hand** of St. Teresa is in the Church Our Lady de la Merced in Lisbon. It was stolen from the convent in 1937, and General Franco, who ruled over Spain from 1939 to 1975 as a dictator, took it, kept it with him at all times, and slept with it beside his bedside until his death. This precious relic is now back in its rightful home, housed in a darkened, locked room, set inside a silver glove that's covered in precious stones.

The entire body of St. Teresa remains incorrupt.

AMEN

For Discussion and Reflection: the legacy of St. Teresa of Jesus

1. Teresa lived a life lived for the glory of God, a life of joy and sorrow, of dedication, of obstacles and opposition, a life of faith and commitment to the Lord.

How is her life an example and inspiration for you?

2. Teresa led a reform that that led eventually to the establishment of the Discalced Carmelites, our Order. Without Teresa's charism as foundress, this community may never have existed.

How important is that to you?

3. Teresa wrote marvelous wondrous works, about her life and about prayer. In 1622, forty years after her death, she was canonized. She was recognized as a Doctor of the Church, by Pope Paul VI on 27 September 1970, being revered as the Doctor of Prayer.

How important are her writings and teachings to you?