

From *The Life of St. Theresa of Avila*, trans. by E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), pp. 192-93.

## Saint Theresa of Avila, *Life*: "Completely Afire with a Great Love for God," 1562

The Counter Reformation was often marked by the banning of heretical books, by church control of education, and by the suppression of Protestant doctrines, worship, and congregations. However, the Counter Reformation was also characterized by the reawakening of spiritual fervor.

One of the great forces of the Counter Reformation was the Spanish nun Theresa of Avila (1515-1582). Born in Avila, Spain, Theresa exhibited fervent piety in her early life. As a child she was found by her uncle at the outskirts of Avila. Her intention had been to journey to southern Spain, where she planned to evangelize the Moors and where she anticipated that she would meet with martyrdom. As a teenager she entered a Carmelite monastery<sup>1</sup>, where she adopted a regimen of silence, seclusion, abstinence, and austerity.

Shortly after she received the Carmelite habit, Theresa began to have transitory mystical visions. At the age of thirty-nine she had a deeply moving experience of the nearness of Christ, which she considered to be the moment of her true spiritual conversion. Thereafter she embarked upon a program of spiritual reform within the Catholic Church. She began to found monasteries in Europe that aimed at restoring the austerity and contemplative character of early Carmelite life, and she directed missions outside Europe in distant areas, including Persia, the Congo, and the Middle East. Members of Theresa's reformed communities were known as the Discalced, or Barefooted, Carmelites, because they wore sandals in place of shoes and stockings.

Theresa initially faced suspicion within the church about the genuineness of her visions. Opponents whispered that her visions were the work of the devil. In order to describe her spiritual state for her confessor,<sup>2</sup> Theresa wrote her autobiography, *Life* (1562). The book, which was later enlarged in scope for public audiences, reveals the capacity for ecstatic worship.

In *Life*, Theresa describes the trances and visions that she experienced during and after her conversion. She also devotes much of her attention to a discussion of prayer. Theresa depicts the different stages of the life of prayer in metaphorical terms, taken from the manner of securing water to irrigate a garden. A selection from Theresa's *Life*, "Completely Afire with a Great Love for God," is presented here.

Theresa was proclaimed Patroness of Spain by the Spanish parliament in 1617 and was canonized—that is, declared a saint—by Pope Gregory XV (lived 1554-1623; pope 1621-23) in 1622. The sculptor Bernini (1598-1680) created a dramatic representation of Saint Theresa transported by her spiritual joy, *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (1645-52), for the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. In this sculpture, the saint is represented in the sandals that she and the members of her reformed communities adopted. Her influence was felt not only in Spain but throughout Europe and in much of the non-European world.

I spent some days, though only a few, with [a] vision continually in my mind, and it did me so much good that I remained in prayer unceasingly and contrived that everything I did should be such as not to displease Him Who, as I clearly perceived, was a witness of it. ...One day, when I was at prayer, the Lord was pleased to reveal to



Gianlorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1645-52

me nothing but His hands, the beauty of which was so great as to be indescribable. ...A few days later I also saw that Divine face, which seemed to leave me completely absorbed....

Your Reverence may suppose that it would have needed no great effort to behold those hands and that beautiful face. But there is such beauty about glorified bodies that the glory which illumines them throws all who look upon such supernatural loveliness into confusion....

It is not a radiance that dazzles, but a soft whiteness and an infused radiance that, without wearying the eyes, causes them the greatest delight; nor are they wearied by the brightness that they see in seeing this Divine beauty....

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form—a type of vision which I am not in the habit of seeing, except very rarely. Though I often see representations of angels, my visions of them are of the type which I first mentioned. It pleased the Lord that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. They must be those who are called cherubim:<sup>3</sup> they do not tell me their names but I am well aware that there is a great difference between certain angels and others, and between these and others still, of a kind that I could not possibly explain. In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—indeed, a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love that pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same experience. During the days that this continued, I went about as if in a stupor. I had no wish to see or speak with anyone but only to hug my pain, which caused me greater bliss than any that can come from the whole of creation. I was like this on several occasions, when the Lord was pleased to send me these raptures, and so deep were they that, even when I was with other people, I could not resist them. ...When this pain of which I am now speaking begins, the Lord seems to transport the soul and to send it into an ecstasy, so that it cannot possibly suffer or have any pain because it immediately begins to experience fruition. May He be blessed forever, Who bestows so many favors on one who so ill requites such great benefits.

<sup>1</sup> The Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is a religious order founded by Saint Berthold in Palestine in 1154. The Order of Carmelite Sisters was founded in 1452. The primitive rule stressed poverty, vegetarianism, and solitude.

<sup>2</sup> A person authorized to hear confessions.

<sup>3</sup> A celestial being considered to be a member of the second order of angels, often represented as a winged child.