

**TERESA OF AVILA: A WOMAN AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH**  
**by Megan Don**

*“Give up these fears: never pay attention in like matters  
to the opinion of the crowd. Behold, these are not the  
times to believe everyone.”*

- Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), the great Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun is a woman who we, in the twenty-first century, can look to for guidance and inspiration. Her last words before she died were, “I am a daughter of the Church.” Yet, this same Church sought to obstruct her divine mission, and her writings were presented to the inquisition for fear of their heretical content. Teresa remained steadfast in her vision however, and continued to work within the framework of the Church. For women who are struggling today to find their place in this mystical body of Christ, Teresa is a shining light and her life is a reminder to remain true to our inner selves and direction.

It was common practice in Teresa’s time for the nuns to divulge their prayer life to a confessor or priest. Teresa had been gifted with a deep intimate relationship with God, and for many confessors this was not only unknown, but also considered to be dangerous. She was ordered to ignore the divine revelations and was told she must cease entertaining such fanciful thoughts. Her passion and emotions were understood to be the cause of such flights of fantasy as they allowed the devil to enter.

Teresa was in great fear as to the very condition of her soul, as she initially believed what the confessors were telling her. Fortunately, she was introduced to a priest who understood the nature of the divine communication occurring; this enabled her to accept and understand the workings of her own soul. She then further developed confidence in trusting in God’s communications, and became an expert, both

psychologically and spiritually in the different states of being. There are many voices, wrote Teresa, and we must come to know them all and the truth of their origin. We must know when it is our God speaking, or when it is the mind or our pride trying to convince us to walk a different path. The spiritual maturity that Teresa teaches us cultivates this discernment, and the ability to act on what we know to be true.

Teresa was divinely guided to reform both the female and male Carmelite Order. She encountered frequent obstacles and was constantly questioned and ridiculed as to the authenticity of her direction and motives. In times of despair, when everything and everyone seemed to be against her, she fell into incredible self-doubt, and feared the truth of the accusations regarding her stability. It was only due to her total surrender to God that she was able to move through such times and emerge stronger and victorious in believing in her divine direction.

She was also very wise in how she implemented the directions she was given. She chose her confidantes and assistants carefully, making full use of their natural talents and abilities. For instance, Father Jerome Gracian was consulted in all administrative matters as this was where he excelled. St. John of the Cross became her spiritual companion as he understood the nature of surrender and the great love of God. Blessed Ana de San Bartoleme, a young nun, was her personal assistant and constant companion in the last five years of her life. Teresa was also very close to a number of other nuns who supported her emotionally and/or spiritually and physically as was required.

Gender was of no concern to Teresa. She sought help from those who were most suitable to support her. She also openly encouraged the friendship of priests and nuns, realizing that the balance between the male and female was an important aspect to

spiritual growth. And perhaps we can learn from this today. Our priests need support in many different ways, and we as women have much to offer the Church, both through our wisdom and our practical skills. We are all here to help one another on our spiritual journey. It is no longer a path of leader and follower, but rather a journey that we are all taking together, with everybody being able to contribute in some way.

Like Teresa, perhaps we can open the doors a little wider and support the Church in growing into wholeness. Jesus did not begin a movement of exclusivity, but a way of truth and love that all people can enter into. As with all movements that become institutions, change becomes a very slow process, and not all individuals are appreciated for the work and divine words they bring. Teresa's master work, *The Interior Castle* is considered to be one of the most celebrated works of mystical theology today. In 1971 she was the first woman to be made a Doctor of the Church. In her own time many dismissed her as merely an emotionally unstable woman.

This title, I know, would have little relevance to Teresa; her concern was for the state of our souls. Her question was, "are we willing to give our freedom to God?" If we are willing, then we may find ourselves in positions that we ordinarily would not choose. We may be called to wait for the right moment to speak, or for the right time and place to share our work. We may, like Teresa, be faced with enormous obstacles, but also be given the grace to emerge with a greater strength and love.

I think it is important that we, as women, do not abandon the Church, but rather seek to find ways where our wisdom and grace can be offered to nourish all. The risen Christ first appeared to the women and they believed. Let us believe in our selves and our mission in serving God – let us listen for the divine call and follow where it leads us.

I think it is also equally important that our priests do not abandon the women. The apostles did not believe the women when they spoke of the risen Christ. Let us learn from their lack of faith and belief. Let hearts and minds be opened to receive the feminine grace and wisdom bestowed by God. Our priesthood is in decline – those remaining need to be supported and nourished. Duties can be given according to each person's gifts – this is the divine right and mission of each soul, regardless of gender. Who are we to stop God's gifts from being manifested in the world?

God's grace is alive in every soul. Jesus said, "there are many rooms in my Father's House." Let us grant each person the right to live in their own room, and for us to live peaceably in our own, bringing the light of love wherever we are called to go.