

Convent: Thursday 15 October 2015

Saint Teresa of Ávila, Virgin, Doctor (1515 - 1582)

Saint Teresa was born in Ávila in Spain and entered the Carmelite convent there at the age of 20, not because of any great attraction to the religious life but because it seemed the most sensible thing to do. With time, and despite ill-health, she made great progress in contemplative prayer and had a number of mystical experiences, which she treated with great suspicion since she felt that she was not nearly holy enough to be accorded them by God.

Teresa's prayer life led her to seek a more perfect life, and in 1562, in the face of much opposition, she founded a convent of Discalced Carmelite nuns in Ávila.

"Discalced" ("shoeless") signified their devotion to poverty. The rest of her life is a story of the establishment of more and more Discalced Carmelite convents in the face of intense opposition from the unreformed Carmelites. At length, in 1580, and with the support of King Philip II, the Discalced Carmelites were made independent and St Teresa was able to found more than 30 new convents. She died, worn out by her efforts, on 15 October 1582.

St Teresa is an outstanding example of how the contemplative life can well up and overflow into action. In addition to all this, she wrote much on the subject of contemplative prayer and her writings are still standard works today. She was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

A favourite story about St Teresa illustrates the intimate relationship that she had with God. When she was on one of her innumerable journeys across Spain, her horse threw her as she was crossing a river. Soaked to the skin she looked up to heaven and said, "If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them!" We should bring everything to God in our prayers, even our reproaches. For a reproach, in the end, is simply our way of offering up to God our incomprehension of what he is giving us, or doing to us.

Archbishop Rowan Williams said: "Teresa is chiefly concerned to develop a model of the Christian life as friendship with God, a God who abandons status and dignity for the sake of us human beings".