

The Autobiography of St Teresa of Avila was one of the books I read before going to seminary and I have had a great admiration and appreciation for the Carmelites ever since. St Teresa's memorial was last week (Oct 15). This article will present a small synopsis of this saint. She is one of only 38 Doctors of the Church; for many years there were only 33 but recent popes (Pope Benedict and Pope Francis) added 5 more. 'Doctor of the Church' means that the Church recognizes the saint as contributing significantly to theology, to the Church's understanding of Revelation; it means the saint's teachings are of the highest caliber.

St Teresa of Avila, a Spanish saint, was born in 1515. Avila is the city in Spain where she was born and raised. St Teresa of Avila is probably how she is most commonly known today, but she is also called St Teresa of Jesus, which is the name she eventually took as a religious Sister. She is so widely known as St Teresa of Avila, however, that this article will just stick with that name. It might be necessary or helpful to distinguish St Teresa of Avila from St. Therese of Lisieux, since St. Therese of Lisieux has become very popular and well-known amongst faithful and devoted Catholics today. St. Therese of Lisieux was also a Carmelite nun and a Doctor of the Church but she lived in the late 1800's, about 350 years after St Teresa of Avila. Therese of Lisieux was also French rather than Spanish. As I recall, St. Therese of Lisieux took her name from St Teresa of Avila. My mom and grandma both had a great devotion to St Therese of Lisieux so if I ever said anything about "St Teresa," I always had to make that distinction. But since my grandma was not really prone to listening, much less once she had something fixed in her mind, I don't think it made any difference in her case!

The first wife of Teresa's dad Alfonso, died at a young age and so he remarried. He had 3 children from his first marriage and 9 from his second marriage. Alfonso's second wife was the mother of Teresa. It was a very pious and devoted family, with good Catholic reading material around the house. Teresa and her brother Roderigo were close in age and as kids they read the lives of a number of saints and were fascinated by them. When Teresa was only 7, they decided they would run away to Africa so they could become martyrs for our Lord. They had also read about the Franciscans and decided they would be like them and beg for what they needed to get there. They set out in secret but had gotten only a short distance when they ran into one of their uncles, who brought them back home to a frantic mother! Having failed in their plan to become martyrs, they figured they could at least live like the saintly hermits and so they gathered up stones to build themselves a little hermitage. I don't know for sure the final outcome of that project, but at only 7 years of age it's a safe bet they still had to sleep in the house! We might look (fondly, of course) at these attempts to imitate the saints as just little games of little kids. But in actuality it reflects the seeds of an early and earnest love of our Lord. As we will come to see, that love will get stretched, perhaps even cooled, in Teresa but it comes back like an interior fire. Our Lord got them at a young age and it never entirely left Teresa. What opened the door for them was the piety of their family – i.e., God was the most important "thing" in that family – and the reading materials about the faith and the saints that they had in the house. Make sure your family has the same opportunities.

Overall, one gets the impression of a devout, happy, loving, Catholic family. Good things in this life and this world, however, are always challenged; vigilance is needed right up to the moment of death. Good mentors can help with this, as we will see with Teresa. When Teresa was only 14 years old, her mom died. This was a great loss for the whole family, including, of course, Teresa. After the death of her mother, one of Teresa's girl cousins began to visit the house frequently. Her cousin had an enthusiasm for the more frivolous things of the world and she began to lead young Teresa in this direction. Teresa herself would later say that they read tales of chivalry and romantic stories, so much so that she wasn't satisfied unless she had one of these in her hands – kind of like phones today. She became very concerned about her appearance, clothes, jewelry and so on. Her dad noticed this rather sudden turnaround in his daughter and decided to send her to school with some nearby Augustinian nuns. It was here that Teresa began to realize how much the frivolous pursuits she had engaged in had pulled her away from God – they "did not fail to cool my good desires and were the cause of my falling insensibly into other defects," she would later say.

What should we say about this stage in Teresa's life, this turn she made towards worldly things? Her mom had died; she found a friend and some solace in her cousin, they were just following some girlish pursuits, having

fun, she's young, they're just kids, and so on – and besides, I tend to do the same thing, one might say; I go to Church on Sundays so what's the big deal? On the one hand, we do have to say that kids have to be allowed to play and so on; you can't expect kids to be adults. The question is: what is the primary direction I'm going, what is first and foremost? Teresa, as perceived by her good father, was not just playing as kids play, she was changing paths, changing direction. She moved from wanting to serve the Lord first and foremost, from Him being first and foremost, to trivial vanities, worldly things, being first and foremost. Yes, she still "went to Church" but without being on the path. This is a common problem, not to be underestimated. Recall as well how happy she was before with the lives of the saints and wanting to serve the Lord, even at a young age. In other words, she was not deprived of even childish happiness while being on the path of the Lord. Spend some time thinking about this. Following the 1st commandment is more than just showing up to Church on Sundays.

At one point, while she was still with the Augustinian nuns, Teresa became very ill and was brought home. After her recovery, she read the letters of St Jerome (Father and Doctor of the Church) and it was then that she realized her own vocation to religious life. She told this to her dad but he opposed, telling her to wait until after he died; as a family man, he liked having his family close by. But the call from God was strong and persistent and one night she decided to just go and she went to a nearby Carmelite convent. Leaving her dad and his wishes behind, she said, was one of the hardest things she ever did; it caused her great pain, but she went.

Teresa made full profession with the Carmelites but her old illness came back and she was taken back home. During her convalescence, a devout uncle gave her a book with "prayers of recollection and quiet." Teresa began to use this and had real made progress towards at least brief periods of contemplation (contemplation is a state where the person is not really making an effort any more but is simply in the presence of God). Notice again how much the saints and reading good Catholic materials contributed to Teresa's progression to the Lord. Why is it that this is so readily and widely ignored by so many Catholics?

Of course, Teresa eventually returned to the Carmelite convent. At that time, the Carmelites had become rather lax and even worldly in their way of life. It was common, for example, to spend hours with visitors in the parlor, just gabbing away about trivial things. Teresa was intelligent and had a warm and charming personality and became the favorite of many and she fell into the common practices of the day as well. She gave up mental prayer, making excuses of bodily weakness, everybody's doing it, and so on. As a result, she lost much of the progress she had made towards union with God. Take note: we are neither saved nor condemned (with finality) until we take our last breath. No matter how much progress a person has actually made towards our Lord, it can be lost; and no matter how low we have sunk, we can always pull back out.

Now obviously St Teresa did not end her life in this way, otherwise she would not be *Saint* Teresa. So what pulled her out, how did she come to turn back around? Teresa said that she went along with this laxity for (as I recall from her writings) the better part of 20 years, *twenty* years. But during this time, Teresa knew that she was not really following the Lord, even as a Carmelite Sister, that He was not first and foremost. And, this did trouble her in the depths of her mind and heart. She said during times when she became acutely aware of her unworthiness (a grace from God) that she would think especially of those 2 great penitents – St Augustine and St Mary Magdalene. Reading the Confessions of St Augustine, she said, helped her greatly. But perhaps most of all, when she was once kneeling before an image of our Lord, she felt a strong urge to do penance and, she said, she felt St Mary Magdalene come to her assistance. There is a reason Mary Magdalene is our patron.

St Teresa Avila, along with St John of the Cross, went on to become a great reformer of the Carmelite order, which led to a new branch of the Carmelites – The Order of Carmelites, Discalced (OCD). She suffered much and endured many obstacles and much opposition in bringing about this reform; it would have gone nowhere had our Lord Himself not willed it. Towards the end of her life, Teresa said the following: "The possession of virtuous parents who lived in the fear of God, together with those favors which I received from his Divine Majesty, might have made me good, if I had not been so very wicked." The Lord had buried her in that most basic of all virtues, humility, so as to raise her to the eternal glory of Heaven.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn