

Teresa of Avila
Homily by Margaret Brennan, IHM
October 15, 2010

“To be a woman in the Church is enough to make my wings fall off...” so wrote the Carmelite nun Teresa of Avila, Teresa of Jesus, the Carmelite during the aftermath of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Church officials in Spain in the attempts to enforce the teachings of the Council, and to stem the tide of the Protestant Reformation, forbade the reading of any spiritual books by current authors who advocated and taught the prayer of recollection ... especially to women. The Index of 1559 also banned from them, all vernacular translations of the Scriptures *“Let them stick to their spinning ... lest they be deceived.”* *“Never mind,”* retorted Teresa, *“Hold fast daughters, they cannot take the Our Father and the Hail Mary away from us...”*

In this misogynist climate of reform, Teresa Ahumada de Cepeda, now Teresa of Jesus, the reformer of the Carmelite Order, set out not only to restore the original fervor of the nuns, open new foundations of monasteries of men as well as women throughout the whole of Spain, but to encourage her sisters and the friars as well to seek the full heights of prayer, lead simple lives of joy in community, and above all, to pray for the Church which for her was the living Body of the Risen Christ.

And so it was that, while always walking in the shadow of the Inquisition, she wrote some of the most important spiritual literature in the Catholic Church. *The Interior Castle*, her masterpiece written during the time that she was confined by the Apostolic Delegate to remain in a single monastery, to make no new foundations and described her in his words as

“... a restless gadabout, a disobedient and contumacious woman who invented wicked doctrines and devotions, and ... leaving her cloister against the mandate of the Council of Trent has gone about to teach others as though she were a “maestra” in contradiction to the teaching of St. Paul who had forbidden women to teach”

Teresa’s often quoted phrase, *“I am a daughter of the Church,”* rather than a statement of pride and even presumption were actually her dying words. Still

under the shadow of the Inquisition but still not condemned, they were, in a way, a sigh of relief. *“In the end, I am (still) a daughter of the Church.”*

On October 14, 1614, Teresa the woman, became Teresa the beatified – the first step toward sanctification – 35 years after she had been the object of examination and scrutiny, and only 17 years after some theologians had recommended that all her writings be burned.

As IHM Sisters, devotion to Teresa came to us through our Redemptorist heritage and in particular through the written testimony of Saint Alphonsus whose first publication was a novena to Saint Teresa and who never tired of saying that she was his first and best teacher of prayer ... and who he quotes more than any other Saint in his writings.

At the beginning of Redemptorist documents and all the letters of Alphonsus were the initials JMJT – Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Teresa. And for many, many years how often all IHMs wrote these same initials at the beginnings of letters, both personal and professional, only adding that of Alphonsus.
JMJAT

From these two doctors of the Church, teachers of the spiritual life, may we continue to draw a love for the Church even in and perhaps all the more in its hours of challenge. St. Alphonsus was a great champion against the false doctrine and excessive rigor of Jansenism, a spiritual director of gentleness and compassion in the practice of the love of Jesus Christ committed to the poor and to the simple people of his time as well as today. Patron of Spiritual Directors.

Teresa, daughter of the Church, stern critic and ardent lover of its life and mission, offers us both inspiration and courage as we face scrutiny even as she did... and above all encourages us to trust our lives to God, to take seriously and to reverence the authority of the Church, but not always so seriously those who exercise it...

The texts of the liturgy on this, her feast, offer us a fruitful commentary on a life singularly blest by God and honored by the Church. They offer us as well the same promise of Jesus that Teresa knew.

In the thought of St. Paul expressed in his letter to the Romans, the hope for what she could not see, the waiting with endurance finds echo in our own lives.

In our own way and in our own time, with her and with St. Paul, we know and believe that the Spirit, who searches hearts, still intercedes for all of us, prays for us, shows us how to wait with endurance, and indeed, teaches us to pray.

The Gospel passage from Jesus' gentle yet impassioned last discourse to his disciples reminds us, as it did so deeply in the life of Teresa, that to be rooted in Him as the vine in the branch...will mean times of pruning to bear fruit that will last. In many ways, the apostolic visitation of our lives rather than a source of anxiety has provided a deeper rooting, a strengthening of our ties to one another and to promoting the kind of Church that Teresa saw and served so well

As IHM Sisters we are blessed indeed to have two doctors of the Church, renowned for their teaching on prayer, their practical sense, as patrons, models and advocates.

And finally ...

As we enter into this liturgy let us call to mind the words of Teresa on this her feast day ... let us take them to heart ... as we take up another day of life.

*Remember that you have
only one soul,
that you have only
one death to die,
that you have only one life,
which is short and has to be
lived by you alone;
and that there is only one
glory which is eternal.
If you do this, there will be
many things about which
you care nothing.*