

TERESA OF AVILA – A WOMAN FOR ALL AGES

St. Teresa of Avila, whose Feast Day is on the 15th October, was born during Holy Week in 1515 and died in Alba de Torres in 1582. Her life and achievements have earned her many titles – ‘reformer, writer, foundress, doctor of the Church and sensitive Saint.’ These achievements, together with her warm human personality, her sense of humour and her single-minded courage, have undoubtedly acknowledged her as one of the great women of all ages.

Teresa lived in an age very similar to our own, an age of exploration and discovery, an age of revolution and upheaval.

In the world known as the Spanish ~Golden Age, society was not very encouraging towards women. If anything, it was just the opposite. As Carmelite Sr. Dobner, one of the most prolific Carmelite nuns and Catholic women of today, explains: ‘Men were in control, and women had to accept that.’ Not Teresa! From an early age, she was determined to prove she knew how to get what she wanted. Teresa was particularly fascinated by hearing and reading stories about the martyrs who gave up their lives in order to see God. So much so, she persuaded her younger brother Rodrigo to run away with her so they too could be martyrs and see God. Fortunately, they were quickly rescued! Such was Teresa’s determination.

“Just being a woman is enough for my wings to fall off,” wrote Teresa insightfully in her autobiography. Again, according to Sr. Christiana Dubner, this statement reminds us that despite all the social conventions of that era which ‘clipped’ the wings of women, Teresa would not let herself be restrained.

I first ‘met’ Teresa many years ago through her books. Her writings brought me closer to her. There is so much I admire about her. How despite her ill-health, the many, many setbacks she endured, the constant travelling, she spent endless hours through the night writing. I once ‘wrote’ her a letter expressing my admiration for all she had been blessed with in achieving during her lifetime despite her many difficulties. I poured out my heart to her telling her of my own hopes, dreams and aspirations to be a writer. And then sometime later, rather presumptuously, I ‘wrote’ myself a letter which was full of what I imagined Teresa would have advised me.

There was much I felt we had in common, or at least, I liked to believe we had! Literally, she would feel precious time had been lost whenever she did not have time to read a book. My mother delighted in telling people that I was born, not with a silver spoon in my mouth but with a book in my hand. I embraced the fact that Teresa loved reading about the heroic deeds of knights, which were very popular at that time. It reminded me of when I was a student and how hopeless I was on the subject of history, and how I relied heavily on reading historical, romantic novels from the library to help overcome my ignorance.

However, I can recall one little point of difference between us which makes me smile. When Teresa realized that God was calling her to become a nun, I remember praying desperately to God not to send me the same vocation! I just wanted to write!

Teresa accomplished many wonderful, spiritual and humanitarian achievements in her amazing lifetime, far too many for me to even begin to touch on. That is why I have mainly concentrated on our mutual love of reading and writing. Her fortitude and stamina have never ceased to amaze and encourage me. Apart from all her spiritual gifts and her beautiful relationship with her Creator, she was an independent and autonomous woman. When she understood that God was calling her to be a nun, and after she had told her father, who rejected the idea, she left her parent's house and entered the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila.

I am convinced that even if Teresa had not been born to become a saint, she was definitely born to become a writer. Despite all her protests about her inability and reluctance to do so – she was very much part of the privileged few who are renowned as original and creative writers. Gifted with a keen intelligence and such a creative imagination, she exuded that feeling for life and insight into people and life's events.

Finally, for me, above all else, she was rich in human qualities. Her compassion, sense of humour and sensitivity enabled her to express human as well as divine truths which were clearly understood. Teresa of Avila would have been a wonderful contributor to today's Plenary Council!

Peggy Spencer