



Women in the Liberal Arts Tradition

with Dr. Kathryn Smith

Lecture 6: St. Teresa of Avila

Outline:

St. Teresa of Avila

- Saint Teresa was a Carmelite nun, a 16th century monastic reformer, and a mystical theologian who lived in Spain during the golden age.
- She was born on March 28, 1515 to devout Catholic parents.
- She learned to read at an early age without formal education.
- On November 3, 1536, Teresa left her father's house to become a nun.
- In 1554 she had a powerful conversion experience setting her on a firm path to seek union with him through prayer. She then increasingly experience mystical visions and illuminations.
- Saint Teresa was declared a doctor (from docere, to teach) of the Catholic Church in 1970 by Pope Paul VI.
- She founded 17 women's monasteries in Spain.
- The core of her teachings are presented in three major works:
 - *The Life of Teresa Jesus* (her spiritual autobiography)
 - *The Way of Perfection*
 - *The Interior Castle* (or *The Mansions*)
- She died at the age of 67 on October 15, 1582 and was canonized.

The Spanish Inquisition

- One way the inquisition sought to control the spread of heterodox belief was by censoring or banning books.
- During her life, she was subject to inquisitorial inquest for the practices she instituted in her monastic communities as well as for the content of her writing.
- Two waves of inquisitional inquest (1576 and 1578) questioned the reformed practices of Saint Teresa's reformed Carmelites. Their accusers especially found fault in their practice of mental prayer.
- Theresa's writings are considered a branch of mystical theology. Much of the controversy surrounding the publication of her writing centered on their mystical content. As a result, her autobiography was published posthumously.
- To avoid this censorship, she wrote *The Interior Castle* in the third person.

The Catholic Counter Reformation



- A key part of the Counter Reformation in its efforts to withstand the spread of Protestantism was the Council of Trent.
- The spirit of reform that permeated the Catholic Church during the years of the Counter Reformation affected many monastic traditions like the Carmelites.
- In the case of Teresa, she believed that the Carmelite orders had become too lax in their adherence to the original rule and sought to return to the order's founding.

The Interior Castle, St. Teresa of Avila's seminal work

- The main purpose of all of her writings was to guide her fellow monastics in their spiritual journeys and specifically to help them find union with God through mental prayer.
- All of her writings describe illuminations, spiritual visions, and mystical experiences.
- Two themes stand out as important to understand St. Teresa's writings:
 - The importance of prayer and contemplation
 - The emphasis on interiority or subjectivity in spiritual matters
- Saint Augustine influenced Teresa through his *Confessions*.
- Throughout her writings Teresa encourages the person seeking deeper spiritual understanding to examine their interior life and to practice private meditations and contemplation.
- *The Interior Castle*, her mystical theology is unified in highly poetic imagery and tropes reminiscent of the Song of Songs.
 - The images and the words must draw the mind into a different state of understanding, a grasping not of the rational discursive part of the mind but a more poetic or intuitive faculty.
- She uses the overarching metaphor of the soul as a castle with many rooms.
 - The first three mansions represent natural prayer (the purgative mystical stage).
 - The second three mansions represent mystical prayer (the illuminative mystical stage).
 - The final mansion completes the union with God (the unitive mystical stage).

Practical Suggestions

- The introduction to the life of a saint can begin in the early grades.
- In Catholic classical schools, students may want to memorize some prayers associated with St. Teresa of Avila.
- Older students would benefit from reading the first chapter of *The Interior Castle*.
- The first chapters of Teresa's autobiography might be read alongside of Augustine's *Confessions*.