

Companion guide  
for the video program

PIONEERS  
of the  
Spirit

Teresa  
of Avila

Gateway Films  
**VISION**  **VIDEO**

## Pioneers of the Spirit TERESA OF AVILA

### Background

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was a sixteenth century mystic whose Christian witness continues to inspire untold numbers of religious inquirers. To this day, thousands of pilgrims flock to her native town of Avila, Spain each year to pay homage to her remarkable faith and life.

Thanks to the text of the book of her *Life*, we have much detailed autobiographical information about Teresa. Although she was a member of a wealthy merchant family in northern Spain, Teresa's family were *conversos*, Jews who had converted to Christianity during a period of religious persecution in Spain. There were painful memories of these persecutions in her family history, and it is generally held that these memories may have contributed to the very human struggles to discover self-acceptance one finds in Teresa's autobiography. Yet this was not the only painful aspect of Teresa's life. Her mother died when she was a young girl, and throughout her life Teresa struggled with debilitating physical illnesses. As a medieval Spanish woman, she also struggled with cultural views of women as dishonored and impure, unable to lead full spiritual lives, with little to give or offer others.

But Teresa's view of herself and her life changes dramatically as she struggles in prayer to learn something of the nature of her relationship with God. Bringing her history into prayer and offering it to God, Teresa found that the divine light threw into sharp relief the complexity of her longing and desires, interwoven with her limitations, denials, and failures. At first, Teresa felt God's immediate consoling presence, particularly in the early years of her life as a Carmelite nun. This was followed by an eighteen year period of spiritual dryness. But Teresa never gave up her daily life of prayer. Finally, something new began to awaken in Teresa's consciousness; an awareness of something else coming into the picture. That unexpected "wild card" was a new experience of God's grace. As Teresa progresses into deeper and deeper experiences of God, she finds her whole being drenched in grace, and eventually discovers the truth of a self not limited by culture or family history, but, rather, freed to be what it is in its totality, in relationship with God in the world.

Teresa's "strong determination to please God in everything", the fruit of the saving love she received from God, became the axiom of her existence and led her to live a life very much engaged with the world around her. Her lasting contributions to the Christian tradition include not only her reform of the Carmelite order (a model of how the Church reforms itself through the grace-filled courage of its faithful, yet critical members), but also the living legacy she has handed on to us in the form of a guide to the pattern of Christian spiritual growth. Teresa consciously designed her description of the four stages of visionary prayer, or "four waters", to be helpful to others. She maps the effects of grace awakening in the consciousness of those who determinedly seek to know and love God in order that we might discover the wonder, joy, love, and fulfillment she came to know in her life of prayerful, determined devotion to God.

### Questions for Discussion

At the outset of the video the narrator poses the question, “can the life and words of this sixteenth century saint reach across the centuries and provide meaningful insights to contemporary seekers?” What aspects of Teresa’s struggles seemed pertinent to you as a contemporary seeker? Difficulty in sustaining a life of prayer? Tensions between desire for God and other attachments which vie for your time and attention? The status of women?

Teresa feels a great sense of relief and joy after the difficult decision to commit herself to the monastic life. What similar experiences have you had in your struggles to make your own commitments to God? What can Teresa’s experience teach us about discerning the right path at future crossroads in our spiritual commitments?

Teresa experiences many highs and lows as her relationship with God progresses toward maturity. At times she strongly felt God’s consoling presence, at others she lost any felt sense of God’s support. Elisabeth Koenig emphasized that persisting in prayer through the absence of consolation is an important stage in the process of spiritual maturation. Ellen Barrett compared this to being faithful to someone in a difficult relationship - that the fidelity through periods when one is not receiving something in return for one’s efforts lays the groundwork for intimacy. What do you think of these suggestions regarding the value of selfless love in the context of one’s relationship with God? Have you ever had to force yourself to go to church or say your prayers when you just didn’t feel like it? Have you ever had a similar experience of deepening intimacy with God after a “wilderness” experience, a time in the “desert”? Have you ever had this experience in a relationship with another person?

What do you think of Teresa’s determination to found reformed convents across Spain in light of the Inquisition’s violent authority and suspicion of her? What do think was the source of her courage and determination? What do you think is the connection between prayer and the fortitude to do unusual and remarkable things? Have you ever known anyone like this? Have you ever experienced this yourself?

Does the combination of contemplative life and active, no-nonsense work in the world seem an unlikely combination to you? How might these two aspects of one’s life be harmonized by one’s faith in God? How do you weave together seemingly contradictory aspects of your own life?

Teresa discovered a strong sense of calling or vocation. Do we each have our own God-given calling and identity? If so, how do we discover what it might be?

Teresa was a woman whose self-identity was deeply scarred by tragic and painful experiences. How might her faith in God have assisted the healing of these scars? What might we learn from her example in this regard?

It is suggested toward the end of the program that episodes in Teresa’s life show us that God does not seek perfection from us, not even emotional perfection, but wants us to know with certainty that the foundation of our life is God and God’s love. How do you respond to this suggestion?

### Practical Application Suggestions

In St. Teresa's spiritual autobiography she describes a spiritual exercise she began each night before bed in order to develop an affective companionship with Jesus as a method of prayer. She writes: *Most nights before going to bed when I commended myself to God in preparation for sleep, I always pondered this episode of prayer in the garden [Jesus praying to God in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he is handed over to suffering and death]. . .I strove to be his companion there. If I could, I thought of the sweat and agony He had undergone in that place. I desired to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced. . .*

This affective mode of prayer centered on scripture, imagining oneself in the scriptural passage, has been a very fruitful prayer technique for many Christians through the centuries. Perhaps it is a method you would like to incorporate into your prayer life. If you are interested in learning more about this method of prayer, read Thelma Hall's *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina With 500 Scripture Texts for Prayer*. Paulist Press, 1988.

### For Further Reading

Tomas Alvarez and Fernando Domingo, *Living with God: Teresa of Avila's Concept of Prayer*, tr. by Christopher O'Mahony and Dominica Horia, Carmelite Center of Spirituality, 1980.

Shirley du Boulay, *Teresa of Avila: A Biography of One of the Most Remarkable Women of All Time*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1991.

Carol Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics*.

Kieran Kavanaugh and Ortilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa*. Washington, D.C., 1976.

Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*. London, 1990.

Allison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. Princeton University Press, 1990.

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