

Readings for Today: *Romans 8: 22 – 27; Psalm 18 (19): 7 – 10; John 15: 1 – 8.*

Teresa was born in 1515, into a large and wealthy family of Avila in central Spain. She had a happy and pious childhood. Aged seven she and her eleven-year-old brother Rodrigo ran away from home, hoping to be martyred by the moors and so getting quickly into heaven – an uncle soon brought them back. Her mother died when she was thirteen and she was sent to a convent to be educated.

After a serious illness she decided to enter a Carmelite convent. At first her father refused his permission, but when she ran away, he gave his consent, and at twenty she began her religious life. Life in the convent was relaxed, nuns were allowed to have visitors, to employ their own servants and to have ‘holidays’ away from the convent. Teresa lived a comfortable, life but was frequently ill and came out of the convent for three years, during which time she nearly died.

For twelve years she struggled to live a life of prayer – torn between the call of God and the easy life of the convent, but began to experience interior voices and visions – in one of which a seraph drove a fiery spear into her heart. She wrote that it left her “all on fire with the love of God”.

Teresa was caught up in the sixteenth century movement to reform the Catholic Church, including its religious orders. She proposed to found a convent which, in place of the laxity of her own convent, would observe the strict Carmelite Rule, including its requirement of poverty. This led to great opposition to Teresa and her supporters, but the new convent of St Joseph was opened in 1562, and in 1567 the Father General of the Carmelites gave Teresa permission to form other reformed convents as well as two houses for friars. For nine years she travelled throughout Spain, facing both practical difficulties and organized opposition to her work, but, with the help of her friend (Saint) John of the Cross, she founded twelve houses. In 1576 there was a major attempt to suppress the Reform, but, with the support of King Philip II, the reformed houses were made a separate Carmelite province. This led towards complete independence in 1594 as the separate Order of Discalced Carmelites: (‘discalced’ means ‘without shoes’ – a mark of their poverty).

Teresa’s health deteriorated under the strain of her work, and she died in 1582. She was canonised in 1622 and declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970.