

# Celebrating St. Teresa of Avila: Reformer

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## **Reformer**

For us to understand the place of St. Teresa of Jesus as a reformer of a religious order we have to first place the 'call to renewal' within its historical context.

Firstly we must consider the fact that there is the continuous rise and fall of civilizations, depending on who you ask our own Western culture seems to be in a lull or state of decomposition in spite of the many tremendous medical and technological advances.

St. Teresa lived in the "Golden Age of Spain" and is one of the contributors to that Age but we have to examine how that Age came to be. Before the Golden Age, Europe had been racked by international wars, civil wars, wars of succession, famines, droughts, plagues all which contributed to the decline of the Western Civilization (and would have remained lost if not for the monastic libraries) which is known as the Dark Ages which covers roughly 200 years (11 and 1200's) and which had an effect on the entire infrastructure of the known Western World (and the Church within that world).

Because of wars, famines, and plagues (especially the bubonic plague) there was a vast reduction of the population of Europe – some estimate that half of the population was lost to the Black Plague (Bubonic Plague, also called The Black Death) – with a loss of 75-200 million people. All infrastructure was impacted as was that of the Church, the lack of education and the need for clergy drove the education and quality of the clergy down which in turn impacted the quality of teaching which in turn impacted the quality of understanding of the faith. The situation did not start to change until the Italian Renaissance which began to dawn in the 14th Century but didn't really gain solid ground until the early 16th Century.

## **The Spains of the Catholic Kings**

We think of Spain as a 'country' and that is a modern concept. Whereas the truth of the matter is that the Iberian Peninsula was a conglomeration of kingdoms each with its particular dialect. Even today it is not unusual to hear a Spaniard speak of 'Las Españas' (The Spains) As the Renaissance began

to dawn in Italy, Spain began to emerge as a 'nation' under the aegis of 'The Catholic Kings,' Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452 – 1516) and Isabel of Castile (1451-1504). The ascension of Isabel to the throne of Castile was itself a dynastic struggle. The title of 'Catholic Kings' was granted to them by Pope Alexander (Borgia) VI in 1496 for their defense of Catholic Dogma in their kingdoms. It was under their reign that 'Spain' left the Middle Ages and entered into the Modern Age.

This 'rebirth' was rooted in the reform movement started by the Catholic Kings (Ferdinand and Isabel) and the tireless work of the Franciscan scholar Cardinal Cisneros who was also the confessor of Isabel of Castile. The printing press made it possible to offer people a growing source of spiritual literature. Cardinal Cisneros had the first polyglot bible printed subsidized by himself, the Complutensian Polyglot, in six volumes with various languages depending on the Testament text: Aramaic, Greek, Latin, Hebrew; he also founded the Complutense University (1500); published the first printed edition of the missal (1500); the breviary (1502) of the Mozarabic Rite in order to preserve this rite as well as established a chapel in the Cathedral of Toledo where this rite is still celebrated.

## **Influences**

### **Catholic Kings**

The religious reform in Spain actually had its beginning in 1474 under the auspices of the Catholic Kings (Isabel and Ferdinand) who desired to unite the 'Spains' under a common language and a common faith. The reform of the Catholic Kings, with the help of Cardinal Cisneros, began with the reform of the episcopate. They petitioned the Holy See and were granted the special privilege to present candidates for the office of Bishop to the Roman Curia. The Kings established three criteria for all possible elections to the office of Bishop. That the candidates: 1) be native of the kingdoms to which they were being presented; 2) that their lives be honest and irreproachable; and 3) that they be at least of the middle-class and be well educated.

The Catholic Kings (Isabel and Ferdinand) were also able to begin the reform of the 'lower clergy,' regular (priests of religious Orders) and secular (what we would call today diocesan), with the same success. In this way the reform reaches the peoples of Spain through a reformed clergy, bishops and pastors.

## **Devotio moderna**

'Devotio moderna' was 'school of spirituality' that formed in the Netherlands and was considered a way of 'reformation' of the interior man which would then lead to the reformation of the entire body of believers through personal conversion. This 'school of thought' was of great influence in the reflections of the classical scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466 – 1536), a Dutch Renaissance humanist, Catholic priest, social critic, teacher and theologian.

“One of the best known of Erasmus’s many followers was the famous preacher, writer and clerical reformer Juan de Avila (1499-1569), who exercised wide influence in Spain, and later in Italy and France as well...a brief analysis of the life of Juan de Avila and his advocacy of an active, committed clergy, his social ideas regarding poor relief and the rejection of worldly honor, and his contributions to the field of education is essential to an understanding of religious movements in Avila and the environment in which Teresa of Jesus created her reform programs.”

## **The Ascension of Charles I**

With the ascending to the thrones of Castile and Aragon by Charles I, we begin to bring into Spain a huge influx of various spiritual themes and ideas that were spread throughout the world. Charles, son of Joanna I of Castile and Philip the Fair, Duke of Burgundy and son of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (Hapsburg dynasty), becomes Charles the I of Spain but simultaneously Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, in him are united the Hapsburg, Burgundian, Castilian, and Aragonese inheritances. Charles was the ruler of Spain from 1516 and Emperor from 1519, he abdicated the Spanish throne in favor of his son Philip II in 1556 as well as that of Emperor in favor of his brother Ferdinand I. During his time on the Spanish throne, because of the colonies in America, it was said that the sun did not set on his empire.

The important fact to remind ourselves of is that at that time there was no separation of Church and State, again a modern idea we must divest ourselves of when reading this stage of history, and both Charles as Holy Roman Emperor and Philip II as King of Spain were not only very religious but interested in protecting the faith as it was known to them: the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

## **Reform of Religious Orders: The Discalced Orders:**

Discalced is a term signifying religious orders in the Catholic Church whose, members, both men

and women, are barefooted or who wear sandals with or without covering for the feet. In the O.T. bare feet symbolized reverence for the divine presence (Ex 3.5), humiliation (Dt 25.9), poverty and shame (Is 20.24), penance and supplication (2 Sm 15.30). In the West the discalced movement didn't appear until the 12th century with the earliest being St. Norbert (1080 – 1134), founder of the Order of Premonstratensian Canons, and Joachim of Fiore (1135 -1202). St. Francis of Assisi saw in bare feet the symbol of the imitation of Christ and of the apostolic life, as well as penance, poverty, and humble social status. Many of the religious institutes founded during the 16th century as well as the reformed branches of the older Orders were 'discalced'. This was a way in which they identified themselves as 'reformed.' The Franciscan Friars of the Alcantarine Reform were completely barefoot. Among the discalced religious that have survived to the present time are the Minims (1493), the Camaldolese Monks (1522), the Discalced Augustinians (1532), the Servites (1593), the Discalced Carmelites (1568), the Trinitarians (1594), the Reformed Mercedarians (1604), and the Passionists (1741).

### **Teresa's Reform**

All religious Orders were affected by the wars, famines, plagues and the social decay that followed these tragedies of the Middle Ages. In the light of these difficulties the Rule slowly was mitigated (or softened) by ecclesiastical authority to soften the rigor of the Rule in the face of the collapse of the social infrastructure. At the time of St. Teresa the Rule was not yet enforced in its vigor. There were several attempts on the part of the Order to reform itself but these didn't come to any real fruition until the Discalced Reform of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross in 16th Century Spain. In the developing history and intrigue it was deemed necessary that there be a juridical (legal) separation of the two branches in 1575, (initially in the form of a separate province) the Discalced and the 'Calced' or Carmelites of the Ancient Observance.

Against many battles, disappointments and betrayals, Teresa founded the first monastery of the Discalced Reform within the walls of Avila under the patronage of St. Joseph in 1562, the first of many monasteries she will establish. In 1568 with John of the Cross begins the reform of the Friars of the Carmelite Order at the tiny out-of-the-way hamlet of Duruelo.

Teresa's main point was that the Order recuperate its contemplative ideal and embrace the ideals of solitude, silence, and prayer as did our spiritual forefathers, the 'venerable hermits' of Mt. Carmel but

in the light of the recent reformation Council of Trent. The 'new insight' that Teresa brought to the table was that the contemplative life was to be seen and understood to be an apostolate. Within the sphere the spiritual life she gave testimony that a soul did not have to be perfect to be able to enjoy graces from God or His Presence. She was also able to give a general understanding of the spiritual life not from a philosophical or speculative perspective but from an experiential one and the same can be said for St. John of the Cross.