

Teresa of avila: the  
progress of a soul by  
cathleen medwick  
essay sample



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There is a saint in every common man but we usually forget that there is the common man or woman in every saint. Saints are usually portrayed as divine, pure, happy and innocent people who are ready for martyrdom anytime the Lord our God asked for it. Cathleen Medwick, author of *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul*, changes this perception by her very realistic portrayal of Teresa's life.

Medwick, a features writer/editor for women's magazines like *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Mirabella* and *House & Garden* admits that she is not a Christian herself but has spent 20 years researching about this popular woman saint. She aimed only to show the progress of Teresa's soul and in the process gave us a very clear idea of the very human contradictions this saint faced within herself.

Teresa de Avila was born to a well-off Castilian family on March 28, 1515. She was the third child in a brood of nine children, not counting the first two step siblings she had on her father's side of the bloodline.. Her mother was just 14 years old when she married Alonso de Cepeda and whiled away her time reading romantic novels. It was her mother's romanticism plus her love for God that made Teresa want to become an idealistic seven year old martyr.

She convinced her eleven-year old brother, Rodrigo that if they got out of Sierra de Avila, they would encounter moors who will kill them because they are Christians. If they do get murdered, they would be able to skip the preliminaries and immediately become saints. Of course, their uncle was able to find them before the moors did.

She grew up to become like any normal teenager. She loved to wear dangling earrings and ropy necklaces. She liked to use perfume, and fix her hair in the latest fashionable styles. As she was a very attractive fifteen year old, a scandal began to brew because one of her cousins flirted with her. This prompted her father to send her to a convent that would prepare her for a devout domestic life.

She found it hard to focus on prayer for even when she was in the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila, male callers would flirt with her. She saw it difficult to maintain the ideals of the Carmelite enclosure because their monastery was also very poor. Instead of praying, the nuns had to accept the attention of benefactors. Some had to go home to their families to be taken care of when they were sick. Some even had to ask their families for food.

At the age of 18, she suffered from an unknown illness that paralyzed her for a year. After this episode, she began to read the works of Catholic mystics which eventually led to her own spiritual experiences. After some time, she became fearful that her experiences may be satanic in nature instead of holy so she sought the counsel of male confessors on how to pray even fervently. They advised her to write down what happened to her and this started her divine popularity. She was around 40 years old when she became a visionary and her experiences also led her to think of a new Carmelite monastery.

Tired of the gossip around her visions, she decided to found a new convent in the middle of Avila with pure-minded followers. Her first monastery was St. Joseph. They wore sack cloths, and lived the simplest lives. However, her

levitations continued and even became stronger to the point that she instructed some nuns to be beside her when she prays so that they would pull her back on the ground when she floats. There were even times when she had to hold on to the altar grille to stop herself from floating during communion. Some of the other nuns envied her and she pre-empted jealousy by dismissing her levitations as insufferable.

Her popularity grew stronger and she caught the eye of several duchesses and princesses who would ask her to visit them in return for charities.

Teresa did not like being used as a trophy by the nobility but she followed God's instructions to be cordial with these people because they were to be her financial and political aid to establish more convents.

One of these was the Princess of Eboli.

The princess asked Teresa to establish a convent, tried to become a nun and failed. With the convent's collapse, the enraged princess sought revenge against Teresa by sending her autobiography to the Inquisition. The Inquisitors at that time were very interested in her because of her mystical experiences that may border toward heresy. The fact that her father was also a converso or Jewish convert was also a cause for Inquisitors to doubt her.

From 1562 to 1582, Teresa was able to establish 17 discalced convents and a friary. She traveled by mule and would surprise townspeople with her sudden visits at night where she would force the owner of any hamlet she could find to accommodate her and the rest of her nuns and priests. To top it all, she would wake the town with her bell early in the morning so that <https://assignbuster.com/teresa-of-avila-the-progress-of-a-soul-by-cathleen-medwick-essay-sample/>

everyone can attend mass. Although people complained, Teresa's determination was hard to resist.

She was not without troubles. Political authorities opposed her ideas because they do not believe in having so many convents in their areas of responsibility. She had her arguments against Church authorities who also wanted to meddle in monastery matters. The Princess of Eboli was not the last benefactor who thought that their charity gained them the right to dictate on Teresa's manner of conducting her mission.

Being a woman, she found it hard to teach the word of God. A Roman nuncio even accused her of making false doctrines because according to the orders of St. Paul, women should not teach. It is a blessing that God gave her allies like Domenico Banez, an esteemed- Dominican theologian and a young Carmelite friar named John of the Cross.

As she grew older and the monasteries became further distant from each other, Teresa began to write down her instructions to her nuns and priests instead of giving them verbally herself. She made meditations, prayers and hymns. She also wrote a lot of letters to clerics and benefactors which accounted for the popularity of her beliefs even outside her monastery walls.

Her writings also contained so much of the challenges she faced - not only from others but within herself. She used to have raptures that tended to be erotic in nature that left her speechless and frozen in one position for hours.

She had her own way of conversing with God - refreshingly honest and passionate. She was a great administrator who had doubts in her own

decisions. She lived a simple life despite her love for vanity. She was a  
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visionary who feared that she might be lacking in prayer. Teresa was simply a woman who did what she had to do.

Teresa died in 1582 at the convent of Alba de Tormes. When one of her confessors ordered for her grave to be opened, they found her body to be intact. She was canonized in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV. She was the first woman ever proclaimed to be a Doctor of the Church in 1970 by Pope Paul VI.

Teresa, as shown by Cathleen Medwick, is a pure soul of a woman. We may not levitate and hear voices but her story stands as proof that it simply takes honesty in our selves and determination to effect change in this world.