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# FLARR Pages #45: Teaching Teresa: Some Considerations and Suggestions, Part I

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# FLARR PAGES #45

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- St. Teresa de Avila
- Reform in Spain
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## “Teaching Teresa: Some Considerations and Suggestions, Part I,” Thomas C. Turner, UMM

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), since 1970 a Doctor of the Church, founder of the discalced Carmelite Order of Spain, is perhaps the most important figure of Spanish mysticism. She was, as well, despite almost insurmountable resistance, one of the greatest reformers of Spain. Her success was remarkable and she still serves as a model for women of today, with her “determination” to get things done in a male dominated world. The purpose of this article is to offer some considerations and suggestions for teaching certain aspects of St. Teresa’s life and times. Sources are recommended.

### Some Important Dates:

1515	The Birth of Teresa
1522	Death of Mother
1531	Augustinian Convent
1536	Carmelite Convent (La Encarnación)
1538-	
1532	Serious Illness
1539	Epilepsy Attack
1543	Father Dies
1554	“Second Conversion”
1556	Beginning of Visions
1559	Transverberation (Controversial Vision)
1562	Foundation of St. Joseph’s (Avila)
1565	Finishes Book, “Su Vida” Begins Book, “Way of Perfection”
1567	Other Carmelite Foundations Authorized Meets San Juan de la Cruz
1567-	
1582	Many Carmelite Foundations
1570s	Resistance to Reform
1580	Discalced Carmelites Recognized as Separate Province
1577	Writes Book, “Interior Castle”
1582	Teresa Dies

Source: Shirley du Boulay’s *Teresa of Avila: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: BlueBridge, 2004), 271-274

### Medwick’s Biography

Cathleen Medwick’s *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul* (Doubleday, New York, 1999) is a delightful biography which emphasizes St. Teresa’s powers as a very clever woman in a man’s world. It is appealing to contemporary students and presents Teresa’s life in a rather dramatic fashion. Seen in this context it is helpful to assign to students a number of “dichotomies” to explore in the text, extremes between which St. Teresa balanced, in her personal and convent life; in her health, vision and language; in her political and social context:

#### Personal Life and Convent Life:

Regrets	↔	Hopes
Daily Routines	↔	Defining Moments
Mundane Devotion	↔	Heroism
Action	↔	Melancholy
Uneducated	↔	Letrado
Sisterly Affection	↔	Love of God
Worldly Affairs	↔	Enclosure
Calced	↔	Discalced
Established Orders	↔	New Orders
Correspondence	↔	Travel
Timely Decisions	↔	Consultation
Action	↔	Contemplation
Mendicant	↔	Endowed

#### Interior Health, Vision and Language:

Sickness	↔	Health
Effects of Disease	↔	Visions
Certainly	↔	Doubt
God	↔	Devil
Human Readiness	↔	God’s Action
Prayer Activity	↔	Passivity
Experience	↔	Metaphor
Humility	↔	Fame
Solitude	↔	Noise

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Dichotomies Continued: Political and Social

King	↔	Pope
Duque de Alba	↔	Ruy Gómez
Duquesa de Alba	↔	Doña Ana
Men (Power)	↔	Women (Agility)
Catholicism	↔	Protestantism
Inquisition	↔	Religious Chaos
Approved Books	↔	Indexed Books

This exercise is ongoing and culminates in an end-of-term essay that students write for evaluation purposes. It points to the difficulties in her life.

### Setting the Historical Stage

St. Teresa participated in a most complex society which is to a great extent "foreign," both in time and culture, to the experience of our students. Therefore, I have students develop individual reports, in Spanish, on the several chapters of Jodi Bilinkoff's interesting and well-documented *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

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Bilinkoff's first chapter, especially, brings Avila alive for students. It includes an illustrated map, streets and buildings, with an overview of the walled city and establishments immediately outside the walls (e.g. convents La encarnación and San José). The chapter includes: the history of Avila (with a depiction of the legendary Jimena Blázquez, heroine against the Moors); an explanation of how the "barrios" differed according to occupation, rank and ethnic diversity; a history of the wool industry (weavers, dyers, carders, combers, spinners, fullers, etc.); descriptions of "Moriscos" and Jews: the former were metalworkers, carters, haulers, craftsmen, the latter artisans, shopkeepers, medical specialists, tax collectors, and moneylenders.

In her second chapter Bilinkoff describes the oligarchy of around 300 families which constituted the "aristocracy" of Avila. There were nobles, essentially land owners, and lower-ranked "hidalgos," who were also propertied. Lineage was important as was "limpieza de sangre." These people dominated the City

Council and the Cathedral Chapter, important organizations of power in the city.

Bilinkoff thus provides a frame for the struggles that St. Teresa faced in the founding of her convents. St. Teresa's paternal grandfather, who had Jewish origins, grew wealthy in the silks and fine woolens industry. Her father married into a noble family and purchased a certificate to attest to his noble birth, although he came from a "converso" family. St. Teresa herself, by insisting on founding "unendowed" convents, skirted the nobility who were firmly in control of the finances of most convents, and depended on the new merchant class for help. Bilinkoff points to the strong role that class consciousness played in St. Teresa's history. Later she would spurn gifts from well-meaning, but domineering noblewomen. The book continues with excellent historical analysis. In Chapters 4 and 5 there is an extended treatment of religious reform in general and Carmelite reform as St. Teresa saw it.

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### The Crucial Vision

Students are naturally drawn to the most controversial vision that St. Teresa had, that of the piercing of her heart by an angel of the Lord:

"Very close to me, on my left, an angel appeared in human form,... he was not tall but short, and very beautiful, and his face was so aflame that he seemed to be one of those superior angels who look like they are completely on fire. They must be the ones call cherubim-they don't tell me their names-but I am aware that in heaven there is such a difference between some angels and others, and between these and still others, that I would not know how to explain it. In his hands I saw a large golden spear, and at its iron tip there seemed to be a point of fire. I felt as if he plunged this into my heart several times, so that it penetrated all the way to my entrails. When he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out with it, and left me totally inflamed with a great love for God. The pain was so severe, it made me moan several times. The sweetness of this intense pain is so extreme, there is no wanting it to end, and the soul isn't satisfied with any thing less than God. The pain is not physical, but spiritual, even though the body has a share in it-in fact, a large share... Medwick, pp 56-57

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