

## Life

The Carmelites have two well-known saints with the same name in different translations: Teresa and Thérèse, and are generally known as Teresa the Great and Thérèse the Little Flower to differentiate. St. Teresa was born in Avila, Spain in 1515. Her father was a devout and disciplined merchant. When she was young, like other girls of her age, she cared about boys, clothes and gossips. Her mother died when she was fourteen years old, and her father sent her to study in a convent. Teresa began to have a calling and entered the Carmelites Monastery at the age of 20. At first, her monastic life was devout, but the monastery's system was loose, with many visitors, and coupled with her beauty and personal charm she became trapped in a worldly life involved in flattery, vanity and gossip more than spirituality. Once she was seriously ill, and almost died, and her feet were paralyzed for three years. She was never fully healed, and sometimes her sickness became an excuse to stop praying. She practiced mental prayer from time to time but felt that her spirituality remained lukewarm.

When Teresa was 39 years old, one day she was inspired by a statue of Christ's grievous sufferings on the cross and was determined to work harder on her prayer life. Soon she realized God's rich love and gained abundant mystical experiences and visions. In addition to working hard to sanctify herself, she decided to reform the Carmelite Order and restore the previous lifestyle such as penance and silent contemplation. Since 1562, she founded 17 new Carmelite convents in Spain. It was a difficult process; she had to bear the objections of fellow nuns, the suspicion of the clergy, and even the investigation by the Spanish Inquisition. Teresa also wrote religious books through her personal spiritual experiences and guides the faithful to be union with God. These books, such as "The Mansion" (or translated to "The Interior Castle"), became a classic and have great impact for the future generations. Teresa died in 1582, and Pope Paul VI proclaimed her the first female "Doctor of the Church" in 1970.

## Reflection

St Teresa teaches us to persist in praying. For her, prayer is coming into living contact with Jesus and the union of our souls with God. On February 2, 2011, during Pope Benedict XVI's general audience, he pointed out: "St. Teresa is a true teacher of Christian life for the faithful of every time. In our society, which all too often lacks spiritual values, St. Teresa teaches us to be unflagging witnesses of God, of his presence and of his action. She teaches us truly to feel this thirst for God that exists in the depths of our hearts, this desire to see God, to seek God, to be in conversation with him and to be his friends". Let us learn from St. Teresa to pray with our hearts and be witnesses of God.

## Prayer

St. Teresa fully understands our weaknesses and spiritual challenges, especially how we are easily distracted. She taught us two important things when praying: convergence of the mind and give our full attention. Let's read and reflect on her teaching on prayer:

- "For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us." (The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus." 8:5)
- "What you can do as a help in this matter is try to carry about an image or a painting of this Lord that is to your liking, not so as to carry it about on your heart and never look at it but as to speak often with him, for he will inspire you with what to say." ("The Way of Perfection" 26:3,9)
- "All one need do is go into solitude and look at him within oneself, and not turn away from so good a guest but with great humility speak to him as to a father. Beseech him as you would a father; tell him about your trials; ask him for a remedy against them... Consider that it is well worthwhile for you to have understood this truth: that the Lord is within us, and that there we must be with him." ("The Way of Perfection" 28: 2,3).

May we learn from St Teresa to pray to the Lord from the depths of the heart  
and be a witness of God.  
St. Teresa of Avila, pray for us.