**Week 12: St. Teresa of Avila/Corpus Christi Sequence**

*“Lord Jesus, teach me to be generous; teach me to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to seek reward, except that of knowing that I do your will.” - St. Ignatius of Loyola*

St. Teresa of Avila

* b. 1515-d.1582, Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda was born to a Jewish father and a Christian mother. Her brothers grew in their Jewish faith while, much to her father’s despair, Teresa decided to join a convent. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Teresa could always naturally see so clearly the gift of relationship with “the Beloved”. She realized that conversion was never anything that could be accomplished by force.
* Teresa was said to have been strikingly beautiful. As a child she loved to wear beautiful clothes and nice perfumes. She was very aware of how she came across to people. She very much wanted people to like her. In fact, in many ways, she was not the sort of person that anyone would have imagined would later become a saint.
* When Teresa’s father feared that her wonderfully outspoken and charming character might bring dishonor to the family, he sent Teresa to the convent to go to school. She struggled at the school with the decision of whether she should become a nun or not, but she feared both becoming a nun and the idea of marriage. This stress had a negative effect of Teresa’s health and she was sent home to recover.
* She stayed at home for the next couple of years and helped care for her siblings (her mother had passed away when Teresa was 13 so her father appreciated her help). She continued to care for her siblings and their children throughout her life.
* At the age of 20, Teresa entered the convent not out of love, but out of fear according to her autobiography. She feared that the lifestyle that she was drawn to would lead her to hell if she stayed in the world. Little did she know, the convent that she chose, because it was less restrictive than her other options, held with it more worldly temptations with less protection than living in the world would have.
* The stressful situation at the convent caused Teresa to get very ill. She was sent home. She was introduced to the “Spiritual Alphabet” which was a Franciscan guide to centering prayer, and it changed her life. Teresa was ill for several years and at one point many thought she had died, but she eventually made what many spoke of as a miraculous recovery.
* Often, saints describe the experience of dealing with a deathly illness as a turning point of their life. Teresa does not describe this time as the turning point of her life, rather it was the turning point of her father’s life who began to pray with a fervency that lasted for the rest of his life. Her own turning point came almost 20 years later after the death of her father while she simply walked past an image of the crucified Christ and it sent her to her knees sobbing.
* About this moment in her autobiography, Teresa writes, “*The vision of Christ left upon me an impression of his most extraordinary beauty, and the impression remains today; one time is sufficient to make this imprint. I had a serious fault that did me much harm; it was that when I began to know that certain persons liked me, I found them attractive, I became so attached that my memory was bound strongly by the thought of them….By turning my gaze just a little inward to behold the image I have in my soul, I obtained such freedom….”*
* After Teresa’s “second conversion” she began to reform the Carmelite order. They would no longer accept gifts and endowments from people because the gifts always came with stipulations which are not from God. Teresa says that this reform was not her work, but it was initiated by God and directed by God every step of the way.
* When she was 50, Teresa met St. John of the Cross, he was 25 at the time. They recognized in each other immediately their spiritual companion. The two served as spiritual directors and confessors for each other until Teresa’s death.
* Teresa and John’s relationship was clear through the hundreds of letters that have been recovered from Teresa. John, at one point, burned all of his letters from Teresa after a realization that her letters were the last thing that he was attached to.
* Teresa travelled all over Spain to set up convents who were willing to obey the rules of her reformed order. It was difficult to convince people to set up a convent that would not receive an endowment, but Teresa was rugged, charming, and hard to ignore, so by her death she had seventeen different foundations scattered across Spain
* Teresa worked very hard not only to set up the convents, but to manage them and settle disputes either in person or by letter that arose within each of her convents. All the while, she was doing something obviously abnormal during the time of the Spanish Inquisition yet miraculously avoided getting burned at the stake.
* Writing was a passion of Teresa’s, and she wrote much during her lifetime. Besides all of her letters she is also known for her Autobiography, Way of Perfection, and The Interior Castle.

**Reflection Questions:**

Teresa describes much of her life as thirsting for attention from others. What might you thirst for in your life? When she received a vision of the beauty of Christ she felt that image imprinted in her soul, and it changed her. She no longer had to attract others with her looks because she knew she held the beauty of Christ within. What might Christ place in your heart to quench your thirst? Are there any prayers that arise in you?

Are there any words of Teresa that you feel drawn to? Can you describe the draw? Do the words invoke in you something that you relate to deeply? Do the words awaken in you any invitations for your prayer life? Do the words express any of your own desires?

Teresa reformed the convents of her time to create a more sacred space for the sisters. Describe a sacred space that you can go to. Are there any distractions in your sacred space? Does your sacred space need any reforms?

Meeting John of the Cross allowed Teresa a new freedom of expression that she had not experienced before. Is there anyone in your life who you feel provides a safe space for you to freely speak about your experience of God?