

PROFILE OF ST. THERESA OF AVILA

DATES - BORN : 28/03/1515, DIED 3/10/1582

ST. THERESA – To understand the saint, we have to know something of the times in which she lived.

The sixteenth century was a time of upheaval and reform in the Church. Great movements across Europe had embraced the new religiosity of the Protestant movement spearheaded by reformers like Martin Luther, Erasmus (also a Greek scholar) and Thomas Cranmer (author of the Book of Common Prayer still used by many in the Church of England). However, there were parts of Europe which remained staunchly Roman Catholic, and were therefore perceived as being more traditional.

Theresa was born into a country and region which remained loyal to these beliefs and few religious practises had changed since the Middle Ages. She belonged to an order of nuns known as The Carmelites, who were well established. Her family, typical of many at the time was a large one. Her father had married twice and the total number of children who issued forth were 12.

In the book: 'Praying with St. Theresa of Avila' the author, Rosemary Broughton, states that the saint was influenced along with one of her brothers, by the stories of saints and religious recluses (also recognised today as hermits). Many of these belonged to a tradition which we call 'mystical' and had been the original religious men and women who prayed and influenced many in their own generations.

There was a strong social emphasis in the church of her day – families and communities were encouraged to form bonds with local religious foundations and at the Convent of the Incarnation it was common for sisters and families of the nuns to reside and help with the furniture, food and in assisting novices to complete the Orders of the Day (usually five orders were observed in the religious life of monasteries and convents).

Characteristics which mark out St. Theresa's life are:

Firstly, her personal sense of the closeness of God and her affinity with the suffering of Jesus. Secondly, she had a strong will and was determined to see through the schemes she had initiated.

Thirdly, St. Theresa had sought to cultivate a deep sense of prayer for herself and the communities which she served. This was in keeping with the original intention of the Mount Carmel Foundation.

Next, she knew the power of the human imagination to transform the phenomenal world enabling the spiritual life to reveal itself in all of her enterprises.

Finally, St. Theresa had the confidence of many influential men of her time.