

# *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*

A Biography



Carlos Eire

LIVES OF GREAT RELIGIOUS BOOKS

LIVES OF GREAT RELIGIOUS BOOKS

---

*The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*

## LIVES OF GREAT RELIGIOUS BOOKS

- The Book of *Exodus*, Joel S. Baden  
The Book of *Revelation*, Timothy Beal  
The *Dead Sea Scrolls*, John J. Collins  
The *Bhagavad Gita*, Richard H. Davis  
*The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*, Carlos Eire  
John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bruce Gordon  
The *Book of Mormon*, Paul C. Gutjahr  
The Book of *Genesis*, Ronald Hendel  
The *Book of Common Prayer*, Alan Jacobs  
The Book of *Job*, Mark Larrimore  
The *Koran* in English, Bruce B. Lawrence  
The *Lotus Sūtra*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr.  
*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr.  
C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, George M. Marsden  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Martin E. Marty  
Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, Bernard McGinn  
The *I Ching*, Richard J. Smith  
The *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, David Gordon White  
Augustine's *Confessions*, Garry Wills  
The *Talmud*, Barry Scott Wimpfheimer

## FORTHCOMING

- The *Analects* of Confucius, Annping Chin and Jonathan D. Spence  
Josephus's *The Jewish War*, Martin Goodman  
Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Joseph Luzzi  
The Jefferson Bible, Peter Manseau  
The Greatest Translations of All Time, Jack Miles  
The Passover *Haggadah*, Vanessa Ochs  
The *Song of Songs*, Ilana Pardes  
The *Daode Jing*, James Robson





FRONTISPIECE. Portrait of Saint Teresa by Fray Juan de la Miseria, 1576. *Santa Teresa de Jesús*, Convento de Santa Teresa de Jesus, Ávila, Spain. Album / Alamy Stock Photo.

# *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*

---

A BIOGRAPHY

Carlos Eire

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Princeton and Oxford*

Copyright © 2019 by Carlos Eire

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work  
should be sent to [permissions@press.princeton.edu](mailto:permissions@press.princeton.edu)

Published by Princeton University Press

41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TR

[press.princeton.edu](http://press.princeton.edu)

All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019936638

ISBN 978-0-691-16493-9

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Editorial: Fred Appel and Thalia Leaf

Production Editorial: Karen Carter

Jacket and Text Design: Lorraine Doneker

Jacket Credit: Josefa de Óbidos, *The Transverberation of  
Saint Teresa of Avila, 1672*

Production: Erin Suydam

Publicity: Tayler Lord and Kathryn Stevens

Copyeditor: Cathryn Slovensky

This book has been composed in Garamond Premier Pro

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

---

## CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
PREFACE: The Character of the <i>Vida</i>	xi
CHAPTER 1 Teresa's Life Story	i
CHAPTER 2 How, When, and Why the Book Was Written	34
CHAPTER 3 The Mysticism of the <i>Vida</i>	58
CHAPTER 4 The Life of the <i>Vida</i> , 1600–1800	99
CHAPTER 5 The Life of the <i>Vida</i> in Art	132
CHAPTER 6 From Enlightenment to Modernity: Skeptics, Seekers, Psychoanalysts, Fascists	164
CHAPTER 7 The Post-Mystical Intermillennial <i>Vida</i>	196
EPILOGUE Doctor of the Church, Sign of Contradiction	217
NOTES	225
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	245
INDEX	251





Frontispiece. Portrait of Saint Teresa by Fray Juan de la Misericordia, 1576. Convento de Santa Teresa de Jesús, Ávila, Spain. iv

Figure 1. Adriaen Collaert, 1613. From *Vitae Beatae Virginis Teresiae a Iesu*, in Adriaen Collaert, *Vita S. Virginis Teresiae a Iesu* (1630). 144

Figure 2. Bernardo Strozzi, 1614. *Estasi di Santa Teresa*. Museo di Palazzo Reale, Genoa, Italy. 146

Figure 3. Anton Wierix, 1614–22. Engraving. 149

Figure 4. Anton Wierix, 1622–24. Engraving. 151

Figure 5. Guido Cagnacci, 1629. Detail of *Santa Teresa e Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, 1629–1631., *La Pala dei Carmelitani*. Church of S. Giovanni Battista, Rimini, Italy. 153

Figure 6. Gianlorenzo Bernini, 1647–52. *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Italy. 155

Figure 7. Josefa de Óbidos, 1672. *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa of Ávila*. Igreja Matriz de Nossa Senhora da Assunção, Cascais, Portugal. 158

Figure 8. Giuseppe Bazzani, 1745–50. *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, Hungary. 160



THE CHARACTER OF THE *VIDA*

Written five centuries ago under vexing circumstances by a nun who claimed to commune with God, *The Life of Teresa de Jesús* is much more than an autobiography. The text has multiple levels of meaning and serves many functions simultaneously, spiritual as well as mundane. At its deepest spiritual level, it is all about the intermingling of heaven and earth, and about the highest levels of divinization attainable by humans. At its most mundane, it is a remarkable woman's account of her life in golden age Spain.

Kept under lock and key by the Spanish Inquisition for two decades, this book could have been swept into oblivion as mere ashes, since some of its early readers itched to burn it. Alonso de la Fuente (1533–92), a Dominican friar, had this to say about the *Vida* when he denounced it to the Inquisition: “This book . . . has the venom of heresy within it, so secretly expressed, so well disguised, so smoothly varnished, that those who are ignorant as well as those who are the subtlest of theologians in the world can use it as a sealed and closed manual or as scripture read in the dark of night, unnoticed by Catholic ears.” The only inspiration Teresa could have received, charged Fray Alonso, was from “an evil angel, the

same one who fooled Mohammed and Luther and all other heresiarchs.” And the most convincing proof of its demonic derivation, he added, was the fact that Teresa dealt with subjects that “exceeded the capacity of any woman.”<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, other early readers were awed by its unique contents, reckoned its rare worth, and kept the flames at bay, circulating some clandestine copies, waiting impatiently for the right moment to share the text with the world. When that moment finally came, not long after the author’s death, this book—which she was ordered to write so theological experts and ecclesiastical elites could discern whether or not she was genuinely holy—quickly became one of the most significant in the Catholic tradition. Then, over the next few centuries, as quarreling cooled among Christians, it gradually gained recognition outside Catholic circles, even in the secular world, as one of the most extraordinary autobiographies ever penned, and as one of the world’s greatest religious books.

Fittingly, as this text prevailed over all who sought to suppress it in its own day, so does it continue to prevail over all reductionist attempts to circumscribe its essence or to wedge its significance into any tidy pigeonhole, spiritual or secular. And so does it also continue to attract disparate readers and interpreters of all sorts, many of whom would loathe to share space with one another on a bus seat or a footnote.

Many twenty-first-century readers—perhaps most—will find this book to be weird or outrageous, and some will dismiss it as delusional. Much of this text is about prayer and the humdrum details of convent life, and other such issues of slight concern to a secularized world. Much of it is also about otherworldly trysts that defy reason and test the

limits of language. When all is said and done, the book is as much about God and about human potential as about the author herself, though the narrative is squarely focused on her own experiences. In page after page its author struggles to give voice to the ineffable, aching constantly for a dimension other than the one in which she is trapped—one she knows to be far higher and better, into which she ventures repeatedly—expressing her longing for it, as well as for her disdain of whatever stands in her way, including her own five senses and her beating heart. Near the end of the *Vida* she says: “Everything I see with my bodily eyes is like a dream that mocks me; and what I have seen with the eyes of the soul is what she [my soul] desires; and seeing she is so far away from it, she longs to die.”<sup>2</sup>

The *Life*, or *Vida*, as it is known in Spanish, is not really an autobiography, strictly speaking, and its title of *Vida* is somewhat misleading, for it was not chosen by the author but rather by its earliest editor, Luis de León, when it was first published in 1588. Before that, during the twenty-five years when it circulated surreptitiously in manuscript form among a very small number of readers, it was simply known as “the book” (*el libro*).<sup>3</sup> Its immediate intended audience was tiny and exclusive, and as it was being written, no one involved in the project—including the author—could imagine what would eventually become of it. Those first few male clerics who read it were unnerved by it, even those who found much to like in it. The author, a sickly nun who suffered seizures and fell into trances, and was suspected by some of being a heretic or of being under demonic influence, wrote under extreme duress, knowing that what she was writing would be minutely examined by readers who

had the power to condemn her, and that every word could be negatively construed.

Yet, despite the dire circumstances under which she wrote, and the steep slippery slopes down which every word of hers could tumble, it has always been obvious to anyone who knows how to spot talented writing that this nun had a unique poetic gift for expressing the ineffable while avoiding censure, and that—contrary to all her carping about being forced to write about herself, unwillingly—she really loved writing, and excelled at it.

Teresa de Jesús, the author, was a sixteenth-century Carmelite nun who lived in the walled city of Ávila. Before becoming a nun and taking on a religious name, she was known as Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda. In the English-speaking world she is more commonly known as Teresa of Ávila, without the accent on the capital “A.” In the last three decades of her life Teresa wrote a great deal, despite her constant engagement in practical affairs as the leader of a new religious order—four books, some two dozen poems, hundreds of letters, and various other texts—but it is her *Vida*, or *Life*, that has had the greatest impact of all, not just because it tells the remarkable story of her evolution into a mystic and monastic reformer from her own perspective but also because of the details she provides about her many otherworldly encounters. Few other books in the Christian tradition contain as rich a description of supernatural visions and ecstasies, or as gripping a narrative of one soul’s search for intimacy with God.

Teresa’s *Vida* is a mystical text, above all, or, more precisely, an autobiographical exposition of mystical theology. “Mysticism” is a troublesome term, loaded with various meanings, some of which are pejorative. Take, for instance,

one of its definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “mysticism is religious belief that is characterized by vague, obscure, or confused spirituality; a belief system based on the assumption of occult forces, mysterious supernatural agencies, etc.” Teresa’s mysticism was anything but “vague” or “confused,” and the forces she assumed were anything but “occult.” Such a definition of “mysticism” is inappropriate for Teresa. A more accurate definition that applies to Teresa and her *Vida* can be found in the same dictionary: “mysticism is belief in the possibility of union with or absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender; belief in or devotion to the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the intellect.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, a “mystical experience” is an encounter with divine or heavenly realities, and a “mystic” is someone who claims to have such encounters. This is precisely the definition that will be assumed in this book when the terms “mystic,” “mystical,” “mystical experience,” or “mystical theology” are used.

Encounters with divine or otherworldly realities are the very stuff of religion, and claims about such encounters can be found in most cultures around the world. But there are as many different kinds of mysticism as there are religious traditions. Christian mysticism is theocentric, that is, focused on encounters between humans and the God of the Bible, the God who revealed himself to the ancient Jews and then became incarnate in Jesus Christ. The fact that the Christian God is triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that this Trinity is an unfathomable mystery, makes all encounters with the divine in the Christian tradition quite different from those in the two other monotheistic Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam. The additional fact that the Son,



the second person of the Christian Trinity, is simultaneously divine and human, and that his humanity does not cancel out his divinity—or vice versa—makes Christian mysticism have even less affinity with Judaism and Islam. The differences between Christian mysticism and that of polytheistic or nontheistic religions are even greater.

Teresa's *Vida* is more than a narrative of her encounters with the Christian triune God. It is also an analysis of those rare supernatural encounters, and of the ways in which such mystical states can be attained. In some ways, the *Vida* is also a manual, or instruction book, for by outlining the precise ways in which she came to have these encounters, and by analyzing different methods of prayer, Teresa provides instruction for anyone who desires to follow the same path. Although providing such instruction was not the sole motivation for writing the book, that instructive function became one of its most distinctive traits for centuries, down to our own day. When Pope Paul VI raised Teresa to the exalted rank of "doctor of the church" in 1970—one of the first two women ever to be so honored—it was due as much to the practical usefulness of the *Vida* as to the way in which she drew theological lessons from her encounters with the divine.<sup>5</sup>

When all is said and done, however, it is not just the *Vida*'s how-to approach to prayer and to developing a life of the spirit, or its engrossing narrative, or its feminine perspective that have made it one of the world's great religious books. It could be argued that above all, it is really its audacious, unrestrained optimism about the human potential for love and divinization, and its affirmation of the ultimate triumph of good over evil, that have earned it a special place among the other texts in this series.

LIVES OF GREAT RELIGIOUS BOOKS

---

*The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*



## Teresa's Life Story

---

### CHAPTER I

The city of Ávila squats defiantly on a semiarid plateau in the old Spanish kingdom of Castile, as if unnaturally sprung from the earth, a boxy rectangular outcrop teeming with stone buildings and tiled rooftops, ringed by massive walls thirty-six feet high and nine feet thick. Eighty-eight curved towers extend outward from the crenellated ramparts at regular intervals, like mute giant sentries, making the whole city seem ever ready for a siege. Ávila's fortifications were built in the twelfth century, when war was constant and such bulwarks were needed, not just to keep enemies at bay but also to make them think one's city was an impregnable fortress, as invincible as its own arrogance.

Symmetrical Ávila mocks the landscape that surrounds it, so given to extremes of stifling heat and bitter cold, so implacably parched and vast and empty, so devoid of visible boundaries, so sorely bereft of the straight lines, obtuse angles, deltoid curves, and all the precise order that humans can impose on the world with the aid of Euclidian geometry.

On 28 March 1515, long after those battlements had last seen any action, and shortly before the start of the Protestant Reformation in faraway Saxony, Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda was born in this utterly medieval city. She was the

fifth oldest of twelve children in her household. The two oldest ones in this brood were from her father's first marriage, a boy and a girl whose mother, Catalina del Peso, had died in 1507. The other children were eight boys and two girls from her father's second wife, Beatriz Dávila y Ahumada, who had married him when she was fifteen years old. Beatriz had given birth to Teresa when she was twenty, and would die at the age of thirty-three, shortly after the birth of Teresa's youngest sister. Nearly all of Teresa's nine brothers followed military careers and sought their fortunes far beyond Ávila's old walls, in the so-called New World that Christopher Columbus had stumbled upon in 1492, and that Spain claimed for itself.

Her father, Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda, was a hidalgo, a member of the lower nobility. Her mother, Beatriz, belonged to two of the leading families of the city. A well-disguised blemish lurked in the family tree, however: a secret so shameful and so potentially injurious—and so well hidden—that it would remain unknown for four more centuries, until the 1940s, when someone stumbled upon it accidentally, in an unlikely place. Tucked away in lawsuit records from Ciudad Real, two hundred kilometers south of Ávila, the secret had never surfaced in any official documents connected to Teresa herself, including those from her encounters with the Inquisition or those pertaining to her beatification and canonization inquests. Whether or not Teresa was in on the secret remains a matter of dispute, but many experts suspect that she was aware of it, indeed, and that this awareness shaped her life and her work.

This skeleton in the closet was as frightful as they came in sixteenth-century Spain, where one's social status

depended so much on lineage: Teresa had Jewish ancestors. Worse yet, her father's father had been punished by the Inquisition in 1485 for the sin of Judaizing, that is, for secretly observing Jewish rituals and customs. Authorities in church and state looked upon Judaizing as an amalgam of heresy, apostasy, and hypocritical deception, and as an especially heinous offense.<sup>1</sup>

Teresa's grandfather Juan Sánchez de Toledo was the son of a Jewish convert to Catholicism who chose baptism for himself and his family in the mid-fifteenth century. Like many other such conversos, that is, Jewish converts and descendants of Jewish converts in Spain, Teresa's grandfather had either found it impossible to discard his ancestral religion completely or to convince his neighbors that he had indeed done so. Tens of thousands of Jews had been coerced into converting, especially after widespread massacres in 1391, and throughout the fifteenth century, thousands more converted in fear of popular violence and a rash of new laws that placed many segregationist restrictions on them. Preaching campaigns launched at Spain's remaining Jews only served to incite anti-Jewish sentiment and to produce waves of questionable conversions after 1391, creating a new social class with an ambivalent identity. Conversos were fully Christian, legally, and were not subjected to the same restrictions as Jews who refused baptism, but they and their progeny were tagged as "*new* Christians," to distinguish them from the "*old* Christians" who had no Jewish ancestry.

Questions hovered over all conversos, no matter how devoutly Catholic any of them might have been or might have seemed. Suspicions surrounding converso backsliding—or Judaizing—increased rather than decreased throughout the

fifteenth century, so much so that the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella petitioned Rome in 1478 for the right to create and run an independent tribunal of their own in Spain that would identify and punish all Judaizers. Pope Sixtus IV granted this request, and so it came to be that Ferdinand and Isabella established the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition and that the hunt for Judaizers began in 1480.

When this relatively new Inquisition tribunal came to Toledo in 1485 to ferret out Judaizers, Teresa's converso grandfather Juan was a well-to-do cloth merchant who had successfully blended in with Toledan society by marrying a woman from a distinguished old Christian family. Fearing the wrath of the Inquisition, or sensing inevitable persecution regardless of innocence or guilt—or perhaps feeling remorse about secretly observing some Jewish traditions—Juan willingly confessed that he was a Judaizer. The fact that he had freely revealed his sin, expressed contrition, and begged for forgiveness earned him a full pardon and moderate punishment. But the price he had to pay for his offenses was steep.

Every Friday for seven weeks in a row, Juan, his children, and other *reconciliados* who had been forgiven had to walk from church to church through the streets of Toledo, garbed in a yellow penitential tunic known as a *sanbenito*. Undergoing this status-crushing shaming ritual was not the end of Juan's debasement, however, but only its starting point, for every penitent's yellow *sanbenito* would be hung permanently in his or her parish church, with the offender's name and sins clearly displayed for all to see.

In a culture that placed an extremely high value on honor and reputation, such as that of late medieval Spain, such humiliation could be devastating, not only to the penitent but

to all of his relatives, for generations to come. In essence, that *sanbenito* was an edict of permanent marginalization that sent a clear message as long as it hung in public, year after year: Juan Sánchez de Toledo and his kin were untrustworthy.

Juan responded to this situation by moving his family from Toledo to Ávila, where he had business contacts. In addition to transplanting his family, and to substituting his own surname and that of his children, Sánchez, with that of his old Christian wife, Cepeda, Juan was also clever enough to affirm his family's hidalgo status in a court of law in Ciudad Real, where he owned some property. Although his Jewish ancestry was mentioned in some of those court documents, that fact remained buried in those papers, far from Ávila.<sup>2</sup> What mattered most to Juan, and what allowed him to establish a new identity successfully, was obtaining the court document that affirmed his nobility, which allowed him and his progeny to pass themselves off as old Christians.

The basic assumption of his claim was simple enough: anyone who lives as a hidalgo and is recognized by his neighbors as a hidalgo must be a hidalgo, and, of course, also an old Christian. A witness from Ávila who testified in court on behalf of Juan had this to say about him and his family: "Those Toledans are considered hidalgos and also gentlemen and they mingle with the children of great hidalgos and with relatives of the leading gentlemen of Ávila . . . they have very fine horses and are very well attired, and are treated as top-notch people."<sup>3</sup>

Teresa's grandfather timed his move to Ávila most adroitly, for anti-Jewish and anti-converso sentiment continued to increase after his public shaming. In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella responded to this crisis by issuing a harsh



ultimatum to Spain's Jews: convert or leave. Although tens of thousands of Jews fled from Spain in response, tens of thousands also chose to stay and convert. This sudden increase in the number of new Christians created by the 1492 Edict of Expulsion only served to worsen suspicions about insincere conversions among all conversos, and helped unleash a new wave of repressive and discriminatory measures against new Christians.

Eventually, by the time Teresa reached adulthood, the persecution of Judaizers by the Inquisition had begun to diminish, due largely to the fact that it ran out of new Christians to haul in, and turned its attention instead to all sorts of heretics and deviants. But discrimination against new Christians continued to increase. "Purity of blood" statutes that barred new Christians from holding government or church posts and from testifying in courts of law were enacted throughout Spain in the mid-sixteenth century. By the time of Teresa's death in 1582, discrimination had become the law of the land, and proving that one had *limpieza de sangre* or purity of blood had become a prerequisite for social advancement and membership in many religious orders. The ultimate irony of this turn of events is that according to the letter of these blood purity laws, Teresa would have been unable to join the Carmelite order, much less reform it, and—to top it off—she would also have been ineligible for canonization as a saint.

We know relatively little about Teresa's childhood, and the details we do have, mostly from her *Vida*, hide almost as much as they reveal. The *Vida* portrays her parents as very "virtuous and fearful of God," and credits them with instilling in her a reverence for things divine at an early age. "My father liked to

read good books,” she said, “and had some in Spanish so that his children could read them too. And my mother always took great care to make sure we said our prayers, and to instill in us devotion to Our Lady and to some saints.” Such efforts paid off, she claimed, for she “began to awaken” to piety “around the age of five or six” (1:1.34).

From the very first page of her *Vida*, Teresa dwells on the effect that books had on her, as well as on others, and this theme is carried through the entire narrative. In various ways, “the book of her life” (*el libro de su vida*) is a book about books and about how the right combination of reading and prayer, and the right kind of spiritual direction from the right kind of person, can lead one to God. This linkage of reading, praying, and following directions is essential in Teresa’s mind, for reading on one’s own without the other two components can lead one astray. Teresa stresses this point in the first few pages of her *Vida*, mostly through storytelling and carefully chosen examples from her childhood.

For instance, Teresa gives no details about her education but instead simply relates how she and one of her brothers took to reading the lives of the saints on their own, and how reading about martyrs inspired her and that brother to leave home in search of martyrdom. “We agreed to run away to the land of the Moors,” she says, “so that they might behead us there.” Although their parents stopped them before they could get very far, Teresa and her brother continued to be inspired by the lives of the saints in other ways. “When I saw that it was impossible to go anywhere where we’d be killed for God’s sake, we decided to become hermits, and we would build hermitages out of rocks, as best we could, in an orchard we had at home.” Similarly, Teresa says that when

she played with other girls, she loved “building convents and pretending to be nuns” (1:6.35).

Teresa also highlights the undesirable effects that the wrong kind of books had on her as a child. Much like the fictional character of Don Quixote (and also much like her flesh-and-blood contemporary Saint Ignatius Loyola), Teresa became addicted to reading chivalric romances, “so excessively,” she says, “that I could never be happy unless I had a new book.” These romances, as she later saw it, made her focus on frivolous, worldly things such as her clothes, hairbrushes, cosmetics and perfume, and harmful “childish” trifles rather than on things divine. They also inclined her to strike up a close friendship with some cousins, who were equally addicted to worldly frivolities, and with some other unnamed relative from whom she learned “all kinds of evil” (2:3.37). Teresa’s dalliance with bad books and bad company, which was compounded by the absence of good advice, led to a love of sin so profound that she “lost nearly all” of her soul’s “natural inclination to virtue.” Teresa provides no details about these sins of hers, or about her “depraved” behavior, but she does say that it was due to her “wickedness” that in 1531, at the age of fifteen, she was sent to live at the Augustinian Convent of Our Lady of Grace, where other girls of her social status—but “less depraved” than her—were educated (2:1–6.36–38).

Teresa’s confinement in a convent outside the walls of Ávila might have had less to do with her behavior, however, than with circumstances at home. Teresa’s mother had died three years earlier, in 1528, when Teresa was only thirteen years old, and the mother’s role had been assumed by Teresa’s older half sister María. When María married in 1531 and

moved to her husband's household in a nearby village, Teresa's widowed father faced a daunting challenge. Preserving a teenage daughter's honor was a high priority for any *hidalgo* father, but to do that properly his household needed an older female presence. As Teresa put it, "now that my sister had married, being alone in the house without a mother was not a good thing" (2:6,38).

Teresa had no burning desire to become a nun when she was sent to Our Lady of Grace, but she enjoyed her life at the convent, and it was there that she got her first taste of monastic life and began to develop the habit of praying regularly. After only a year and a half, unfortunately, as she was beginning to contemplate a life as a nun, illness suddenly forced her to return to her father's house. According to Teresa, the illness was "serious," and she recovered very slowly. Fevers and fainting spells plagued her, and she needed constant care. After some months with her father, she was sent to María's house, and it was on her way there, while she stopped for a brief stay with one of her father's brothers, a widower who liked to read devotional texts, that she was introduced to the genre of literature that would shape her personality most intensely.

Later on in life, as she was writing her *Vida*, she would look back on the few days she spent at her uncle Pedro's house as a significant turning point. It was there, while reading devotional texts to her uncle and discussing them with him that she "began to understand the truth . . . that all things are as nothing, and that the world is vanity and quickly passes away." Fearing that she would soon die from her illness and go directly to hell, and "inspired by servile fear more than by love," she decided to become a nun. It