

# “A Great Cloud of Witnesses”

A Historical Series of the Murals on the Walls of Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Church

## Saint Theresa of Avila

16th Century Spain

Born in 1515, St. Theresa was the third child of a Spanish nobleman. Her mother died when she was 14. This affected her greatly, but she was comforted by many diversions, including reading tales of chivalry. “These tales,” she says in her autobiography, “did not fail to cool my good desires, and were the cause of my falling insensibly into other defects. I was so enchanted that I could not be happy without some new tale in my hands. I began to imitate the fashions, to enjoy being well-dressed, to take great care of my hands, to use perfumes, and wear all the vain ornaments which my position in the world allowed.”

Noting this sudden change in his daughter's personality, Teresa's father decided to place her in a convent of Augustinian nuns in Avila, where other young women of her class were being educated. St. Theresa was later inspired to enter religious life, not from any particular attraction to it, but merely because it seemed the safest course.

In 1535, against the objections of her father, she secretly entered the Carmelite order. Though her father later gave his permission, St. Theresa compared the pain of the break to that of death. Shortly after she entered the Order, she became seriously ill, and her health never entirely recovered. She began the practice of mental prayer, or praying in silence, with the soul resting in contemplation of God. Prayer was often hard and dry for her, but she persisted.

Her intelligence, warmth, and charm made her a favorite, and she found pleasure in being with people. It was the custom in Spain in those days for the young nuns to receive their acquaintances in the convent parlor, and Teresa spent much time there, chatting with friends. One of Teresa's charms was a sense of humor. In the early years, when an indiscreet male visitor to the convent once praised the beauty of her bare feet, she laughed and told him to take a good look at them for he would never see them again-implying that in the future he would not be admitted.

She gave up mental prayer for a time, but when finally Teresa withdrew from the pleasures of social discourse, she found herself able once more to pray the "prayer of quiet." She began to have intellectual visions of divine things and to hear inner voices. Though she was persuaded these manifestations came from God, she was at times fearful and troubled. Spiritual directors were divided on the origin of these graces. She often went into ecstasy in prayer, and on occasions experienced levitation. Yet, for three years, she suffered from the disapproval of those around her; and for two years, from extreme desolation of soul. She was censured and ridiculed as a victim of delusion or a hypocrite. Slowly, her spiritual directors began realizing her visions and graces were from God.

Her desire to follow God more closely led her to found a new community of nuns, based on a stricter lifestyle, on where nuns would not spend their days chatting with acquaintances in parlors. Though this only occurred after much opposition and jealousy, she was later able to open other convents in other towns in Spain. Her courage led to a papal investigation of the Carmelite convents in Spain, and she was asked to help reform some of them.

Her method of selecting novices was characteristic. The first requirement, even before piety, was intelligence. A woman could attain to piety, she thought, but scarcely to intelligence, by which she meant common sense as well as brains. St. Theresa died in 1582. She was the first woman named a Doctor of the Church, and is the patron saint of Spain. **Her Feast day is October 15.**



Each month, this series will feature the murals painted on the walls of Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Church along with history and commentary. You can also find this series on our website at [www.hcscchurch.org](http://www.hcscchurch.org).  
*Historical commentary researched and prepared by Anthony Lickteig (Seminarian).*

