

Progress of a soul

by [J. Mary Luti](#) in the [April 5, 2000](#) issue

*Teresa of Ávila: The Progress of a Soul*, by Cathleen Medwick

At a time when practicing contemplation could get you either the garrote and the stake or a halo and a feast day, Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) was a mystical sensation. In a church anxious for reforms but at war over who should direct them and how far they should go, Teresa started her own. In a male-dominated culture, she was a woman who read, a writer who meant to publish, and a theological gadfly. In a society anxious about reputation, bloodlines and orthodoxy, Teresa—born to a Jewish converso family—managed to neutralize her detractors and, only 40 years after dying, ascend to the altars, a bona fide saint.

Attempting to say something intelligible about this prodigious nun is not for the fainthearted, though many fools have rushed in. The literature on the Spanish Carmelite nun is legion, but Teresa remains a relatively unknown figure outside certain circles (although recent feminist interest may be changing this). People who do not study Teresa or pray to her sometimes read her works, but even persevering readers get lost in her unruly prose. Making sense of her spiritual experiences—visions, voices, levitations and, yes, hot penetrations—is tougher still. It's no wonder that some critics, for whom hearing voices is a sign of mental illness and levitation a party game, call her the patron saint of religious pathology.

Cathleen Medwick aims for a different judgment and a wider public. She has no in-house claim and she tells us she is not a Christian. She aims only to portray Teresa "as she was," a soul in progress toward God. Though authorial disinterest may be impossible, Medwick comes close by scrupulously respecting Teresa's conscious motives and expressed self-understandings. If Medwick has an axe to grind, it's hard to spot.

The metaphor of Teresa's life as a progress—in part a nod to the age of exploration in which Teresa lived—points to a lifelong inner journey "as full of wonder and terror as any ocean voyage through uncharted seas." It took courage to navigate the soul; the dangers were real and many. Even readers familiar, for instance, with Teresa's

battle to authenticate her visions will find Medwick's vivid narration of that episode disturbing. Not meant to be a critical biography, the book nonetheless provides lucid accounts of such turning points, of the mystical phenomena that marked Teresa's maturation, and of her writings on prayer and discipleship.

Medwick's metaphor also fits the style of Teresa's life outside her "interior castle." During her final 20 years, in an era when only masochists traveled for pleasure, Teresa was constantly on the road founding and supervising convents. Medwick understands that this enterprise shaped Teresa as much as Teresa shaped it, and its progress is as much the heart of her narrative as is the progress of Teresa's soul. Medwick takes us for a wild ride recounting these foundations and the internecine struggle Teresa's reforms unleashed.

Although readers untutored in Catholic ecclesiastical politics might tire of talk about briefs, bulls and obediences, no one will be bored by this story's plot twists and quirky characters, wonderfully drawn in some of the book's best writing. Could there be, for example, a more sinister nemesis than the princess of Eboli, a breathtakingly self-absorbed woman with a black eye-patch and a refined taste for betrayal? Following a disastrous stint as a nun in a convent she had forced Teresa to establish, the princess sent Teresa's top-secret autobiography to the inquisitors to avenge the convent's collapse after an exasperated Teresa ordered the remaining nuns to desert it hastily, in the dead of night. Wow!

But the evil princess is nowhere near as fascinating as Medwick's Teresa—so attractive, expansive, incisive, committed and mordantly witty; possessed of a bottomless capacity for intimacy and an equally bottomless capacity for self-doubt and loneliness. (Her relationships with men were always more satisfying than her friendships with women; yet she complained that no one really understood her, and in truth nearly all her closest allies disappointed or disparaged her.) This Teresa is single-minded, bending even God to her will. She is a workaholic, perpetually restless, shrewdly pragmatic and always ready to deal. She is coy and Clintonesque in her evasions, yet always striving for simplicity and a transparent conscience. She remains unswerving in hope while enduring monstrous headaches and crippling depression. Alternately domineering and compassionate, fragile and indestructible, faithful and fickle, she is admirable and altogether inimitable. This Teresa will please no one who believes that saints are actually holy, but it is the Teresa familiar to her contemporaries—both those who considered her a menace to the church and those who regarded her as one of its shining saviors.

Medwick's hands-off strategy makes the saint real, even modern; yet this approach turns out to be a weakness as well as a strength. Her refusal to overinterpret means that she occasionally underinterprets, giving a stranger to Teresa's milieu insufficient help in assessing this unusual life. We hear God speak repeatedly, and to her credit, Melwick never arches an eyebrow. Yet because we are told too little about this God, we also miss something important about Teresa. For whom did Teresa drive herself so mercilessly? Why did she love the God we find in these pages? Why did "He" love her? Medwick doesn't give us enough clues on these matters, nor even suggest why Teresa interested her so much that she spent 20 years researching and writing her story. This seems an odd detachment at the core of a wonderful, well-written, original and necessary book.