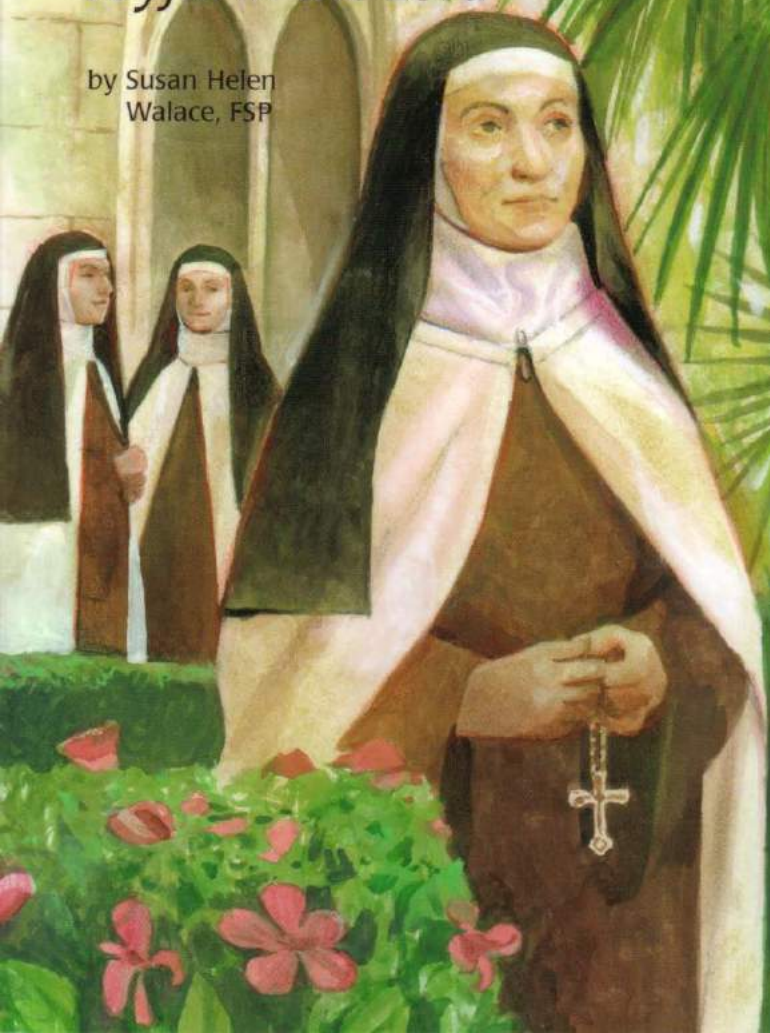


Saint Teresa of Avila

Joyful in the Lord

by Susan Helen
Walace, FSP



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Written by Susan Helen Wallace, FSP

Illustrated by Barbara Kiwak



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TERESA'S WORLD

The sixteenth century was a time of learning, discovery, culture, and faith. This was especially true in Spain, the greatest military power in Europe. Christopher Columbus had recently sailed to the New World. The explorers Hernan Cortez and Francisco Pizarro would soon claim vast new lands in Mexico and Peru for their king. The Spanish people were united in their Catholic faith.

There was trouble in the world, too. Soon Martin Luther, a German monk, would make his break with the Church of Rome. Christianity would be divided by Protestantism. There would be a great deal of political and religious upheaval in Spain and other European countries in the years to come.

But in the little walled town of Avila in the bleak, windswept Spanish region of Castile, none of that mattered on Wednesday, March 28, 1515. The day dawned peacefully, and a new baby girl was born into the world. The family who gathered focused all their attention on her. None of

the troubles of the outside world could disturb the joy of that morning.

Don Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda, the baby's father, was thirty years old. His first wife had died, and the baby's mother, Doña Beatriz de Ahumada, was his second wife. From Don Alonso's two marriages, twelve children would be born. Teresa was the sixth of them.

Don Alonso and Doña Beatriz loved all their children dearly. Teresa, with her bright dark eyes and curly black hair, was always a favorite with the whole family. She was a friendly, lively child. Papa was very proud of her, as he was of all his children. Each of them, he believed, was intelligent and good.

Papa was a good person himself. He treated everyone with kindness and respect. He made it a point never to use bad language, to tell lies, or to make insulting remarks. The family servants were always treated fairly. "Who wouldn't want to work for Don Alonso and his wife?" they all agreed.

Some Spanish families were wealthy, but others were poor. Some could claim to be related to the nobility. Others were ordinary. Don Alonso respected them all, because he knew they were all God's children.

From the time Teresa was very small, her mother knelt with the children every day and taught them morning and evening prayers. Teresa would fold her hands, close her eyes tightly, and repeat the words as her mother said them. Teresa and her brother Rodrigo also spent many happy hours listening to her father read aloud. They listened intently to stories about the saints, especially those who had died as martyrs because of their love for Jesus.

Rodrigo was nearly four years older than Teresa, and they were very close friends. One day, when Teresa was seven years old, the two were having a serious conversation.

"Rodrigo, when martyrs are killed, they go straight to heaven. Don't you think it would be a good idea to be a martyr?"

"Oh, yes," Rodrigo answered promptly.

"Me, too," the girl agreed confidently. "Being a martyr is the fastest and easiest way to get to heaven. Papa says that in Africa the Christians are being persecuted and killed. Africa is where we need to go!"

The two determined children slipped out of the house and headed down the dusty road that would take them outside the town of Avila. They had a long way to travel, it seemed.

"Where *is* Africa, anyway?" Teresa asked her brother.

"It must be lots farther," Rodrigo decided.

Soon they were beyond the city walls and about to cross the stone bridge over the Adaja River. Hungry and tired, they trudged on—but not for long. A man traveling on horseback soon spotted the two small figures on the road. It was their Uncle Francisco.

"*What* are the two of you doing here?" he exclaimed.

The children looked at each other nervously. Teresa explained, "We're on our way to Africa to die as martyrs for Jesus."

"Oh, no, you're not!" their astonished uncle said. He got off his horse and hoisted the two children onto his sturdy animal. He walked alongside, scolding them, as he took them back home.

Mama and Papa were shocked as Teresa and Rodrigo were lifted gently to the ground.

"What's this all about?" Papa asked.

"Could we tell you after supper?" Rodrigo asked piteously. "We're starving!"

Uncle Francisco hid a smile and turned away. He knew that his niece and nephew

were safe now. It was time for him to go back home.

Papa and Mama gave both children a firm scolding. Rodrigo and Teresa hung their heads and listened quietly.

“Did you think that only martyrs die and go to heaven?” Papa asked. “Everyone on this earth, everyone you and I know—and those we don’t know—will die some day. We will all die.”

The eyes of Teresa and Rodrigo were riveted on their father’s face. They were silent for a moment. “When we die,” the little girl asked quietly, “what will happen to us? Where will we go?”

“If we love God,” Papa assured the children, “we’ll go to heaven to be with Jesus, Mary, and the saints forever.” The two children glanced quickly at each other.

“But what happens to people who sin?” Rodrigo asked.

“Everyone sins, Rodrigo,” Papa said patiently. “Sins are deliberate acts that hurt our friendship with God. But if we are truly sorry for our sins, and try hard not to sin again, God will always forgive us.”

Now Teresa and Rodrigo understood. There weren’t any convenient shortcuts to heaven! To be happy with God forever, they

would have to love him and lead good lives—and that wouldn't always be easy. It was a lesson Teresa would never forget.