

Day Two: New beginnings

As is appropriate for our pilgrims' first full day in Avila, today's itinerary concentrates on places associated with new beginnings in St Teresa's life. The pilgrims begin by visiting La Santa church, built over the house where Teresa was born, and then continue to the Monastery of San José, the first monastery to be founded by Teresa and the beginning of what was to be her reform movement within the Carmelite Order.

Teresa was born on 21st March 1515 in the family house situated in the southern part of the city, not far from the medieval walls. Although Teresa's life was to coincide with a golden era for Avila, with much new building and renovation of the city's buildings, the church now standing over Teresa's former home was not constructed until well over a century after her birth. It was built by the Discalced Carmelite friars who purchased the site containing the remains of the de Ahumada house and began work on the new church in 1629. In order to maintain the original alignment of the family home, the main altar of the church faces north-west. A chapel within the church marks the room of Teresa's birth, and there is also the small garden in which Teresa played as a child.

Teresa's first foundation, St Joseph's, was originally a collection of small buildings, of which a number remain, including the kitchens, refectory and cloister. The original chapel was replaced with a new church between 1608 and 1615. The convent is situated to the east of Avila, outside the walls but only a short distance from the city centre. Teresa founded the new monastery on the feast of St Bartholomew, 24th August, 1562 with four new novices receiving the habit and the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the convent chapel. Teresa herself was recalled by her prioress to the Monastery of the Incarnation that same day, and it was not until the December that she was able to take up permanent residence in her new foundation. Here she was to spend some of the happiest years of her life, living in relative peace until August 1567 when she took up the task of making further foundations beyond Avila. During this time Teresa delighted in living with like-minded souls, commenting that it was 'the most wonderful consolation for me to be able to live with souls so detached' (*Life*, 36.26) and fulfilling her desire 'to withdraw from everything and live my profession and vocation with greater perfection and enclosure' (*Life*, 36.5). It was during her time at St Joseph's that Teresa wrote the *Way of Perfection*, and her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*.

Our two pilgrim sites today then represent places of new beginning for Teresa; first the place of her birth, and then the initial foundation of her reform movement. Beginnings were important for Teresa and recur as a theme throughout her writings. She understood herself as born for God and given new

life through the saving work of his Son. All she lived and laboured for was, therefore, at his service and under his providence, but this didn't mean that she could simply sit back and wait for things to happen. Teresa was a big believer in making a determined beginning, in the human effort required to get things going, and in the courage that would be called for in the soul who sets out on the spiritual quest for God.

Now returning to those who want to journey on this road and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from this water of life, I say that how they are to begin is very important – in fact, all important. They must have a great and very resolute determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses.

(Way of Perfection, 21.2)

As such, Teresa knew how critical the first stages of prayer are. When she sets out her first teaching on prayer in the book of her *Life*, she spends much time providing advice for beginners, encouraging them not to become disheartened in their labours, and in the *Interior Castle* she commends those who start out on the life of prayer, commenting that 'they have done quite a bit just by having entered' (*Interior Castle*, I.1.8). Teresa is writing both her *Life* and the *Interior Castle* when she is already herself experienced in the advanced stages of prayer, having been gifted with many extraordinary mystical experiences. Yet she knows that in the life of prayer we are all beginners, that there is a constant need to return to the first stages, to root ourselves in humility, in self-knowledge and in the human effort to attend to our God. There is no soul on the journey who is 'so much a giant that it has no need to return often to the stage of an infant and a suckling. And this should never be forgotten. [...] There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it isn't necessary to return very often to the beginning' (*Life*, 13.15). St Teresa of determined beginnings, pray for us!

Pilgrims' Liturgy

I am Yours and born for you,

What do you want of me?

Yours, you made me,

Yours, you saved me,

Yours, you endured me,

Yours, you called me,

Yours, you awaited me,

Yours, I did not stray.

What do You want of me?

We pray for ourselves; we ask for the humility of beginners, for the grace of fresh starts, for the courage of those setting out on the journey.

We pray for all who are scarred by life's messiness, for those trapped by addiction, for all those constrained or restricted by past mistakes or wrong decisions. We ask for each the grace of a fresh beginning, new hope and Teresian determination.

Heavenly Father, you enable your saints to draw untold resources of humility and charity from the fountainhead, Christ our Saviour. By their prayers, may we never be separated from the love of Christ, in whose name we make our prayer. Amen.