



WOMEN PATRONS OF EUROPE AND DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH

Church of Santa Maria
della Vittoria

SAINT TERESA OF AVILA





DICASTERY FOR EVANGELIZATION
SECTION FOR FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS
REGARDING EVANGELIZATION IN THE WORLD



MINISTERO
DEL TURISMO
REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

WOMEN PATRONS OF EUROPE AND DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH

Jubilee journeys

Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria

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4 themed routes to follow

The Jubilee is a great event for all peoples during which each and every pilgrim can immerse themselves in the endless mercy of God.

It's the Year of return to the essence of fraternity, mending the relationship between ourselves and the Father.

It's the Year that calls us to conversion, an opportunity to take stock of our lives and ask the Lord to direct them towards holiness. It's the Year of solidarity, of hope, of justice, and of commitment to the service of God, living in joy and peace with our brothers and sisters.

But, above all, the Jubilee year has at its center the encounter with Christ.

For this reason, the Jubilee asks us to get moving and to overcome the confines in our lives. When we move we don't just change place physically, but we transform ourselves too. For this reason, it's important to prepare well, to plan the route and



have a clear sight of our destination. In a sense the Holy Year pilgrimage begins before the journey itself: its starting point is the decision to do set out on the path.

To fully experience the 2025 Jubilee, through walking and prayer, four routes have been prepared for pilgrims within the city of Rome, each with its own theme.

Europe in Rome

The Pilgrim Path of the Churches of the European Union, includes visits to 28 churches and basilicas, historically linked to EU member countries for cultural or artistic reasons or because they served as places of welcome for pilgrims from individual member states of the European community.

Pilgrimage of the Seven Churches

Originally the idea of Saint Philip Neri in the 16th century, the pilgrimage of the Seven Churches is one of the most ancient Roman traditions. It's a 25 km route winding through the streets of Rome.

Jubilee Churches

This is one of the churches designated as a meeting place for pilgrims. Catecheses will be held in these churches in different languages to rediscover the meaning of the Holy Year. They will also offer the sacrament of Reconciliation and host events aimed at nourishing the faith with experiences of prayer.

Women Patrons of Europe and Doctors of the Church

This is a pilgrimage that involves stopping in prayer in those Roman Churches linked to Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), Saint Brigid of Sweden, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, and Saint Hildegard of Bingen.

The Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria

Reasons for a pilgrimage

The church of **Santa Maria della Vittoria** brings you into contact with the Carmelite community who live the same spiritu-



fig.1

ality as Saint Teresa of Avila and a visit here also allow you to admire Bernini's famous Cornaro Chapel which commemorates the Spanish saint's experience of

faith with powerful visual impact.

The sculptural display for which the church is most famous represents the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa of Avila. Those who analyze the masterpiece from a purely psychoanalytical or erotic perspective fail to understand the heart of the work itself - and of Teresian spirituality. Anyone who wants to see an orgasm dressed up as Christian ecstasy or some kind of ambiguous version of the two, is clearly unfamiliar with the Biblical Song of Songs, and also with the experience of love of mystics and nuns. (fig.1)

That Old Testament book already mentioned, in a shocking but magnificent way, proclaims that the same love which unites a bride and groom exists between Israel and its God, as well as between the soul and its Lord. Christian revelation understands this personal love in an even deeper way as starting from Christ: he is the spouse who dies for love of his bride, the Church, and she loves him in return with a love that leads her also to give herself entirely.

The phrase which Bernini placed at the top of his great work in Santa Maria della Vittoria is incredible: "*Nisi coelum creassem ob te solam cream*" (If I had not created heaven, for you alone [Teresa] I would create it). It is a revelation of the love that Teresa receives from her Lord.

Here is the love of God which really *is*

credible: God created the entire universe and Paradise for those whom he loves. Everything is done, starting from creation and the history of salvation, for mankind, so that we human beings can know the love of God and enjoy it. If modern man asks cloistered sisters and nuns how they can live without human love, they respond with an even more radical question: 'How can one live without your heart being warmed by the love of Christ?' In the representation of Teresa of Avila's ecstasy of love, Bernini depicts three dimensions in what was a very new artistic way, but always in total fidelity to the saint's mystical experience.

First of all, he represents ecstasy as a mystical marriage: it is no longer Cupid, as in classical art, but an angel who bears Christ's love arrow. It is a true love which impacts powerfully on the senses, like all true love. Teresa wrote about it as follows: *"The soul grieves for the absence of God, but it is not the soul that experiences the pain. Instead, a kind of arrow from time to time pierces the heart and innards so powerfully, as to leave one incapable of doing or wanting anything. Although it is not a physical pain but a spiritual one, the body also participates a little, or rather a lot. Then a very sweet idyll passes between the soul and God."* Secondly, the sculptor represents Teresa's ecstasy at the very moment of her death. The saint is not kneeling, as was the case in the iconography up to that time, but lying on her deathbed, which occurred at the age of 70. A witness to Teresa's death wrote: "She was

so inflamed with love that it seemed she couldn't wait to leave her body to go to her spouse."

The entire complex of the Chapel was designed by Bernini and you can see, on the floor, the dead rising from their tombs, to reunite with the Lord, for the Chapel is also the burial place of the Cornaro family. Thirdly, Bernini wanted to connect ecstasy to the Eucharistic celebration, not only by placing the sculptural centerpiece over the altar where Mass is celebrated, but also by including a bas-relief showing the Last Supper. The message is clear - the union between Christ and every soul is consummated not only in the privileged experience of ecstasy, but also every time they participate in the Eucharist.

Bernini studied the architectural arrangement of the building to ensure the light would come directly from above, in front of the Ecstasy, to complete the symbol of the dove, the Holy Spirit who descends, illuminates and consecrates.

The representatives of the Cornaro family - it was Cardinal Federico who called Bernini to work on the Ecstasy - look on from their theatrical boxes, thus suggesting that Teresa's intimate and very personal experience also has a public meaning and concerns every soul, called to the wedding of love with Christ, through the sacraments.

The saint's ecstasy thus becomes a public event, to which visitors are also admitted, with the nobles of the house discussing it from their front row seats. Above, the painted stuccos connect,

in the perfect unity willed by Bernini for the Chapel, the earth and the heavens, with musician angels clearly visible, rejoicing at Teresa's wedding with Christ. They carry the books with which the saint glorified God and enlightened men on the path they should follow to reach him. Bernini also had four bas-reliefs made for the space above and they contribute to the story of Teresa with the following scenes:

- Teresa, together with her younger brother, decides to leave to be martyred by the Turks and thus give glory to God.
- Teresa with the instruments of penance kneeling and showing her wounds to the crucified Christ.
- The appearance of Christ to Teresa who thanks her for her devotion to His mother, the Madonna.
- The mystical wedding of Christ and Teresa: He offers her a nail from the cross as a gift.

Teresa's "works" are not glorified in these four frames, as might have been perfectly legitimate – they do not recall, for example, the monasteries she founded or the reform she led. Instead, it tells of her intimate, interior experience of communion with Christ, an experience to which the ecstasy of love which is represented by the sculpture in the center belonged.

Visiting the church

When the Carmelites entrusted Carlo Maderno with the design of the current church, built between 1608 and 1620 (the

same years in which the architect was working on the central nave of St Peter's Basilica), the surrounding area was on the edge of Rome. It was located on Via Pia, commissioned by Pope Pius IV who also gave his name to Porta Pia, and it was, to all intents and purposes, in the countryside even if technically within the Walls of the city. The Carmelites served in St. Peter's as confessors at the time and the new building with its adjoining convent, inherited the title of a small pre-existing chapel dedicated to St. Paul the Apostle – the fresco in the Dome, by Cerrini, represents the carrying off of St. Paul to heaven and in the choir of Santa Maria della Vittoria, behind today's high altar, the visitor can still see Saint Paul in heaven by Gherardo delle Notti.

The facade of the church is by Giovan Battista Soria, and was paid for by Cardinal Scipione Borghese, to whom the Carmelites donated, in return, a sculpture of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite, now to be found in the Louvre, which had been discovered during excavations for the foundations of the church. During the same year that saw the new church completed, the Catholic forces achieved an unexpected victory in the battle of the White Mountain in Bohemia. When the army led by Maximilian of Bavaria seemed to have its fate sealed, a Carmelite priest, Fr Dominic of Jesus and Mary, who had founded the convent on the Via Pia and who had been sent as a chaplain to the troops, joined the soldiers on the front line. Around his neck he wore



fig.2

an icon of the Madonna and Child that he had found in a castle. The image had been damaged by the Protestant armies who had gouged out the eyes of Joseph and Mary. As the Carmelite placed it around his neck, rays of light flowed from the image, giving courage to the troops. Upon his return from the victorious battle, the image was enthroned above the central altar (fig. 2) and the name of the church changed to *Santa Maria della Vittoria* (Our Lady of Victory). The apse fresco shows the entry of the image, by now considered miraculous, into the city of Prague, while the swords in the apse were placed there as a sign of homage and, in the sacristy, four paintings represent the different phases of the battle. Even the fresco on the nave vault reflects the tensions of the time - the Orazi brothers, working between the end of the 17th and start of the 18th centuries, depicted the Virgin triumphing over here-

tics, who are depicted with their books, in defeat. (fig. 3)

In the Chapel of the Most Holy Trinity, a canvas by Guercino shows the three divine persons, while in the chapel of St Francis of Assisi there are three works, with the central altarpiece showing the Virgin Mary and St Francis. These are by Domenichino.

Also in the chapel of the Trinity is the tombstone of Cardinal Berlingero Gessi, who was responsible for the *Fabbrica di San Pietro* (the maintenance operation of the basilica) and who had the great merit of having called Caravaggio to paint the image of St Matthew in the Contarelli Chapel in the church of *San Luigi dei Francesi* - further proof that Caravaggio always had the ecclesiastics of the time on his side.



fig.3