



Bárbara Mujica

# Women Religious and Epistolary Exchange in the Carmelite Reform

The Disciples  
of Teresa de Ávila

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Women Religious  
and Epistolary Exchange  
in the Carmelite Reform



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# Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World

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*The Disciples of Teresa de Ávila*

*Bárbara Mujica*

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The publication of this book is made possible by grants from Georgetown University.

Cover illustration: [Artist unknown; no date] Bl. Anne of Jesus, Saint Teresa of Ávila and Bl. Anne of St. Bartholomew, Carmelite Saints, The Church Stella Maris, Haifa, Israel.  
Dreamstime Stock Photos.

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 343 5

e-ISBN 978 90 4855 156 9

DOI 10.5117/9789463723435

NUR 685

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# Prologue

When I began my book *Teresa de Ávila, Lettered Woman* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), my intention was to produce a study of the epistolary writing not only of Saint Teresa, but also of the women who carried the Discalced Carmelite reform beyond Spain. However, it soon became evident that the abundance of material on the subject merited more than one volume.

My research on Teresa took me to Madrid, Valladolid, and the Vatican, but my work on her disciples has sent me further afield. Thanks to several grants from Georgetown University, I was able to visit convent archives and rare book holdings in Valladolid, Lisbon, Paris, and Antwerp. In addition, John Buchtel, former Director of the Georgetown University Booth Family Center for Special Collections, generously procured many rare documents for me, while Patricia O'Callaghan, Librarian of the Carmelitana Collection at Whitefriars Hall in Washington, D.C., provided me with access to the library's rich resources. I am indebted to the University, Dr. Buchtel, and Ms. O'Callaghan, as well as to the convents in Spain and Belgium that allowed me access to their holdings.

Writing this book has been a personal journey. The profound spiritual wisdom of Teresa's disciples, their bravery, pluck, and determination to share the Teresian charism with those hungry for the interior life, despite opposition from local authorities and even members of the male hierarchy of their own order, have been an inspiration to me. These women ventured into war zones, faced language barriers and cultural challenges, and stood up to powerful ecclesiastics. They were involved in every aspect of convent life—from homeopathic nursing to architectural design. They often suffered intense poverty, but they maintained their rituals whether in a comfortable convent, a private home, or a leaky, dilapidated church building. They were fighters, tough and resolute, foremothers of today's female pioneers who break old barriers and set new records. Today, most of their achievements are barely known, but I am hoping that this book will focus new attention on these extraordinary women and inspire further study by future generations of scholars.



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# Introduction

## Abstract

*Women Religious and Epistolary Exchange in the Carmelite Reform* tells the story of the Carmelite expansion beyond the death of Teresa de Jesús, showing how three of her most dynamic disciples, María de San José, Ana de Jesús, and Ana de San Bartolomé, struggled to continue her mission in Portugal, France, and the Low Countries. Like Teresa, these women were prolific letter writers. Catalina de Cristo, a Carmelite nun who never left Spain, also produced a corpus of letters that reveals the distress of those who anxiously waited for news of their sisters abroad. In devoting themselves so assiduously to letter-writing, these women, as Joan Ferrante has shown, were continuing a long monastic tradition that had begun in the Middle Ages.

**Keywords:** early modern women's letter-writing, Teresa de Jesús (de Ávila), María de San José (Salazar), Ana de Jesús (Lobrería), Ana de San Bartolomé (García), Carmelite reform

The sixteenth century was a period of crisis in the Catholic Church. Monastic reorganization was a major issue, and women were at the forefront of charting new directions in convent policy. The story of the Carmelite Reform has been told before, but never from the perspective of the women on the front lines. Nearly all accounts of the movement focus on Teresa de Ávila (1515–1582), known as Teresa de Jesús in the Spanish-speaking world, and end with her death in 1582. Founder of the order of Discalced Carmelites, Teresa was one of the most dynamic leaders of the Counter-Reformation and left a large corpus of written material. Accounts of her movement are based mostly on her treatises and on early histories and biographies, in particular, those of Diego de Yepes and Francisco de Ribera. My book *Teresa de Ávila, Lettered Woman* (henceforth *Lettered Woman*) provides an in-depth view of Teresa's correspondence and describes the reform as Teresa experienced it and as events unfolded. *Women Religious and Epistolary Exchange in the Carmelite Reform: The Disciples of Teresa de Ávila* continues the story of the reform beyond the death of the

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Mujica, B., *Women Religious and Epistolary Exchange in the Carmelite Reform: The Disciples of Teresa de Ávila*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020

DOI 10.5117/9789463723435\_INTRO



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Foundress, showing how the next generation of Carmelite nuns struggled well into the seventeenth century to continue her mission both in Spain and abroad.

What distinguishes *Women Religious* is the primacy of female-authored sources, in particular, letters. Teresa's most dynamic disciples, María de San José, Ana de Jesús, and Ana de San Bartolomé, were all prolific letter writers, although much of their epistolary writing has been lost. The book concludes with the letters of Catalina de Cristo, a Carmelite nun who never left Spain, but whose reflections reveal the distress of those who, in an age of painfully slow communications, waited anxiously for news of their sisters abroad. All of the women studied here produced a substantial corpus of writing. Following Teresa's example, they wrote treatises, spiritual memoirs, poetry, and, above all, letters.

Letter-writing was clearly essential to Teresa's mission, but it also responded to her natural tendency toward nurturing and sociability. Over the span of her career, Teresa may have produced as many as 15,000 missives, of which only 450 survive.<sup>1</sup> María Leticia Sánchez Hernández and Nieves Baranda Leturio have seen epistolary production as the "epicenter" of her writing activity. They argue that "Teresa of Ávila was the first nun who abundantly and systematically produced letters" ("Conventual," 87). However, Joan Ferrante and her associates have shown that, in devoting herself so thoroughly to letter-writing, Teresa was actually continuing a long monastic tradition that had begun in the Middle Ages.

*Vidas* (spiritual memoirs with autobiographical material) are another significant source for research on early modern nuns, but *vidas* were nearly always written at the behest of spiritual directors anxious to examine their charges' orthodoxy. The defensive nature of much of this material necessarily skews it. Although, when writing letters to men in authority, nuns often used the same self-protective strategies as in their *vidas*, their letters to close friends paint a more authentic picture of their lives.<sup>2</sup> Their personal correspondence supplements and enriches their autobiographies, enabling us to assess their circumstances more accurately.

## Pen and Prayer: Writing in Medieval Convents

Throughout the middle ages, women wrote letters. Ferrante and her associates have collected hundreds of letters by women, both secular and religious,

1 According to Efrén de la Madre y Dios and Otger Steggink. For other estimates of the number of letters that Teresa produced, see Mujica, *Lettered Woman*, 9.

2 See *Lettered Woman*, 63–67.



dating from the fourth to the thirteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Some of the nuns—for example, Radegund of Thuringia (520–587)—were not only highly literate but corresponded with influential political figures in verse. Certainly, one of the most outstanding examples of medieval epistolary production is that of the German nun Hildegard of Bingen, who used letter-writing to exert astonishing influence over powerful men. For more than 30 years, Hildegard corresponded from her cloister with persons of every class and rank, including popes, kings, clergy, and laypersons, from as far away as England and Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> Countless medieval women letter writers, most of them less celebrated than Hildegard but no less active, maintained relations with friends, relatives, business associates, patrons, confessors, and others through correspondence.

By the late Middle Ages, correspondence was an essential part of convent life. Letters served as the means of communication by which nuns kept in touch with family members, friends, and contacts in other convents. Although most nuns were illiterate, even those who couldn't write often had access to an amanuensis. Several studies attest to the centrality of letter-writing in medieval convents. For example, in the nineteenth century, Jakob Wichner discovered a formulary, or group of model letters that served for imitation by a twelfth-century female community at the Benedictine monastery of Admont. Early in the present century, Alison I. Beach visited the monastery and found nineteen complete letters and fragments written in Latin by Admont's nuns. These findings document not only the interaction of nuns with the world beyond the cloister, but also their use of epistolary models to perfect their letter-writing.

At various times throughout the Middle Ages, the Church attempted to curb nuns' letter-writing. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII issued an order, known as *Periculoso* (*Danger*), requiring that all nuns be cloistered, which, in some cases, was interpreted to mean that all extramural contact, including through letters, was banned. Yet, the papal order was imperfectly enforced, and many medieval nuns continued their epistolary activity. A few also wrote treatises, meditations, or poetry, and some even produced books. For example, thirteenth-century Dominican nuns in Germany and Switzerland made psalters for their own use, disregarding prohibitions on the practice issued in 1249, 1254, and 1263 (Oliver, 106). In an effort to eradicate such activity, clerics sometimes went so far as to ban the possession of writing instruments in convents, a trend that became more pronounced after the Council of

3 These have been published online at *Epistolae*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/>.

4 Much of her correspondence has been preserved and published in a modern edition by Joseph L. Baird.

Trent (Lowe, 7). At the highly literate Dutch Augustinian monastery in Windesheim, where nuns were required not only to read in the vernacular, but also to know some Latin, the sisters developed a system of “praying with the pen”—copying down passages to memorize for meditation—and created spiritual guidebooks, or “instructions for living,” written by women for women. However, in 1455, the local chapter forbade nuns to describe their visions or mystical experiences in writing, thereby putting an end to much of their production of spiritual literature (Scheepsma, 242).<sup>5</sup>

### “The Woman Question” and Early Modern Women’s Writing

The Renaissance affinity for codifying the behavior of different classes of individuals sparked a spate of conduct literature, including Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*. The prescriptive approach to education is especially evident in the conduct manuals for women that proliferated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Georgina Dopico Black asserts that “the sheer number of conduct manuals” written during this period is “staggering,” and mentions scores of them (17).

The explosion of such books reflects a new preoccupation with the *querelle des femmes*, or “woman question,” an intense debate among theologians and moralists, beginning around 1500, on the nature and proper position of woman. One issue of concern was education. In the opinion of some misogynists, women could not be educated, as they were capable only of parroting ideas, not thinking for themselves. Juan Huarte de San Juan (1529–1588) even urged parents to do everything possible to beget male children, as females, he contended, lacked rationality and understanding (*Ingenio*, 607, 614). On the other hand, Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), an avid champion of women, argued that women were actually superior to men and deserved to receive the best education possible. In his influential treatise, *On the Education of a Christian Woman* (1524), Juan Luis Vives (c. 1492/3–1540) sought to redefine woman as a crucial component of the family, and thus, of the social structure. Like Agrippa and other pro-woman moralists, Vives was an avid defender of women learning to read. On the subject of writing, however, he was less enthusiastic. While it was fine for women to copy inspirational passages to reinforce their virtue, he argued, teaching girls to write could lead to unhealthy correspondence and undue interest in the affairs of their husbands or fathers.

5 A “chapter” is a meeting of clergy.



In spite of the opposition of some moralists, educational prospects for women improved in the sixteenth century. In Spain, girls as well as boys increasingly had access to education. Spanish noblewomen were “literate, numerate, and proficient in Latin,” which enabled some of them to exert political influence and function as litigators or negotiators (Nader, 6). However, not only noblewomen but also the daughters of wealthy merchants and artisans commonly learned to read (Howe, *Education*, 59ff). Nieves Baranda Leturio points out that female literacy rose in Ávila throughout the sixteenth century until, by the early seventeenth century, nearly 25 percent of women could read (“L’Éducation,” 30).<sup>6</sup>

The religious sphere reflected the same ambivalence toward women’s writing as society in general, even among women themselves. Teresa clearly championed female literacy and stipulated in the Constitutions of her order that all Discalced Carmelite nuns were to learn to read—although though not necessarily to write—and that prioresses were to supply them with inspirational books.<sup>7</sup> Imitating Teresa, who composed four treatises, letters, short prose pieces, and poetry, many nuns wrote down their spiritual experiences or dictated them to a confessor or an amanuensis. Isabelle Poutrin asserts that some convents were veritable beehives of literary activity (Voile, 131–134). In *Untold Sisters*, Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau published the writings of many early modern Spanish and Spanish American nuns, demonstrating the richness and variety of their production.

Yet, as in the late Middle Ages, some priests considered nuns’ writing, especially letter-writing, a direct and incontestable violation of enclosure. When, in 1563, the Council of Trent reinstated claustration for all nuns, it remained silent on the subject of epistolary exchange. The text reads simply: “The holy council, renewing the constitution of Boniface VIII [...] commands all Bishops that [...] the enclosure of nuns be restored wherever it has been violated and that it be preserved where it has not been violated [...]” (Session 25: 5. 224). Enforcement was left up to the superiors of the order.<sup>8</sup> Sánchez and Baranda assert that the Tridentine rules on enclosure, ratified in 1565, did not put a stop to epistolary exchange and that as in the Middle Ages, nuns perforated the cloister walls through writing (“Conventual,” 87). Baranda and María Carmen Marín Pina argue that “many people maintained relationships with nuns,” for “the cloister was a permeable space in close

6 Baranda reminds us, however, that, among peasants, virtually none could read.

7 See my article, “Was Saint Teresa a Feminist?”

8 As John O’Malley explains, a number of issues were left unresolved. For a complete discussion of the session, see O’Malley, *Trent*, 240.

communion with its environs" (36). The Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz defended herself from clerics who censored her writing by arguing that "the Church permits writing by women saints and those who are not saints alike" (91).

Yet, the issue was not so clear-cut. Although certain convents permitted and even encouraged letter-writing, others forbade it, holding that writing interfered with nuns' spiritual lives. Meredith K. Ray and Lynn Lara Westwater note that "a variety of decrees in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries repeatedly tried to regulate and even prevent nuns from writing letters [...] fearing that epistolary communication offered too much interaction with the secular world, that it might expose nuns to influences from which they ought to be protected" (20). In Italy, for example, the Patriarch of Venice Lorenzo Priuli and Antonio Grimani issued regulations restricting letter-writing by nuns in 1591 and 1592. They insisted that abbesses review all letters written or received by their nuns to make certain that both content and correspondent were suitable. In 1644, another order "exhorted nuns not to write letters at all, even to their most immediate family" (Ray and Westwater, 20).

Similarly, in the English convent of Louvain, the confessor Richard White determined that epistolary activity was antithetical to spiritual life. In 1668, he warned the prioress that "no time is more unprofitably spent, nor no greater occasion of distraction, than in idle correspondence of unnecessary letters" (qtd. in Walker, 162). He specified that prioresses should limit themselves to two letters to family per year, if possible, and he restricted the number of letters ordinary nuns could write to one each year. Claire Walker postulates that such limitations on epistolary activity were especially common in cloisters of exiled English nuns, like the one in Louvain, because the women were more anxious to maintain ties to home through letters than in convents where relatives lived nearby.

As we shall see in the chapters on María de San José, some clerics objected to the influence nuns could wield through the pen. They feared that, through letters, belligerent nuns could stir up insurgency and challenge their authority. In the case of María, the Discalced Carmelite hierarchy found her correspondence so threatening that they forbade her to write letters and had her existing letters burned.

Of course, not all priests discouraged nuns from writing. Many maintained vigorous epistolary exchanges with sisters and encouraged them to write not only letters, but also *vitae*, spiritual guidebooks, and chronicles. Teresa de Ávila's most frequent correspondent was her colleague Fray Jerónimo Gracián, who commanded her to write *The Interior Castle*, generally considered her masterpiece. Teresa probably did not resent the command to write,



maintains Alison Weber, but rather enjoyed having the opportunity to record her thoughts and experiences (“Three Lives”). For nuns like Teresa, who maintained an epistolary relationship with men of power, letters extended their influence far beyond the convent.

Some nuns who produced *vitae* and prayer manuals wrote not only for the enlightenment of their sisters, but also for a broader audience. Although prohibitions existed against nuns publishing their writing, some justified sending their work to the printer by arguing that it could benefit the souls of all Christians (Baranda and Marín, 21). Often, when nuns’ writing was printed, this was done posthumously, as in the cases of Teresa and Catherine of Siena.

While men of intellect often considered it essential to compile and print their correspondence, women—lay or religious—almost never did. The Italian nun Arcangela Tarabotti was an exception. She wrote secular works, including letters, which she sought to publish in order to establish herself as a literary presence, and several of her missives reveal the urgency with which she sought to gain the support of powerful male intellectuals. For the most part, though, letters were considered void of enduring significance, and most were destroyed by the recipients, either immediately after they were read or after the sender’s death (Sánchez and Baranda, 88).

Unlike Tarabotti, women religious did not typically see themselves as authors, and literary aspirations among them were rare. Baranda and Marín note that, “for their contemporaries, they did not occupy the territory we include in what we now call *belles lettres*” (36). This does not mean that their writing lacked creativity, style, or literary value or that the writers were incognizant of the literary mechanisms and devices then in use. However, monastic writing had its own characteristics. Nuns followed certain models (the confession, the hagiography), which distinguished their works from other literary production.

The custom of confessors assigning, editing, and “correcting” nuns’ work means that we cannot be certain how much convent writing actually originates in the mind of the writer. *Vidas* could be “not only a means of expressing spiritual restlessness and a more intense and purified devotion, but also a procedure of control and repression for ecclesiastical authorities,” writes Fernando Durán López (15). Priests could induce an exacerbated sense of sin or an inflated sense of saintliness conveyed through the relation of divine favors. Letters offer a more authentic glimpse into the minds of their authors than writing filtered through editors and censors, but even these can be problematic. As I show in *Lettered Woman*, although Teresa revealed her true emotions in many of her letters, she also altered her tone and language depending on the recipient. The nuns who followed Teresa

were heirs to her epistolary practices, although not all of them were as astute as she at manipulating language to obtain the desired effect.

## A Note on Epistolary Practices

I have described the art and importance of letter-writing in early modern Europe in Chapter 2 of *Lettered Woman*, but will provide some pertinent information here.<sup>9</sup> Epistolary practices were highly codified in sixteenth-century Spain, and mastering epistolary art was an essential part of a humanistic education. Aristocratic young men, and later the sons of artisans and tradesmen as well, studied the numerous epistolary style manuals that circulated throughout the century, among them Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis* (1522) and Juan Luis Vives' book of the same name (1536).

Although Teresa was aware of these manuals, she paid little attention to prevailing epistolary conventions, which she found so complex she joked that only a university professor could explain them (*CWST* 1, *Life* 38:10). Numerous scholars, such as Américo Castro, Juan Marichal, and Helmut Hatzfeld, have argued that she did not consult style manuals at all, but rather wrote as she spoke, infusing her letters with colloquialisms and refrains. However, Pilar Consejo believes she probably did consult courtesy books, and Carole Slade notes that she would have been familiar with epistolary protocols from her associations with friends with court connections (Consejo, "The Business of Courtesy"; Slade, "Teresa de Ávila and Philip II). For the most part, Teresa avoided epistolary adornment and blurred traditional distinctions between personal and official letters. She routinely ignored classical epistolary sequence—*salutatio*, *exordium*, *narratio*, *conclusio*—ordering her letters in any way that she deemed effective. Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb note that women often ignored established epistolary practices "to produce their own versions of *decorum* in shaping their letters to the recipients and to the situations" (7).

In early modern Europe, letters often served as a means by which men promoted a particular image of themselves. For example, as Lisa Jardine demonstrates, Erasmus portrayed himself as a master scholar in his letters and published them to establish his authority. Although women rarely published their correspondence, in an age when their lives were largely regulated by men, they availed themselves of letters to fashion their own self-images, argues Maria Luisa Doglio (17). In the case of women religious, the objective

9 See *Lettered Woman*, 44–67.

of correspondence was not to demonstrate the writer's mastery of the art of the letter, but to convey information, elicit action, or assert authority. Although Teresa generally disregarded epistolary convention, she was a master of manipulating language to achieve her own ends. For example, when addressing influential clerics or nobles in her letters, she was careful to show proper deference to rank and to present herself as a humble, unlettered woman who was simply doing God's will. In so doing, she boosted her own moral authority, which enabled her to advance her cause more effectively. In this sense, she created her own "version of *decorum*" to serve her reformist objectives.

Like Teresa, her disciples Ana de Jesús and Ana de San Bartolomé disregarded convention except with respect to forms of address. Their letters tend to be unstructured and conversational in tone. The epistolary style of María de San José is more difficult to assess, as almost none of her personal letters remain. Her extant business letters, most of which were written to clerics in response to Nicolás Doria's unjust treatment of her and her allies, are meticulously crafted documents filled with legal, theological, and historical arguments. Her few extant personal letters are mostly intended for groups of nuns. Their purpose is to inform her sisters about her battles with the Discalced hierarchy, console them for the hierarchy's abuse, and encourage them to remain true to Teresian ideals. Like her business letters, these erudite missives were consciously fashioned to elicit a particular response.

Epistolary exchange involved not only letter-writing, but also letter delivery, which could be complicated and costly. Early in the sixteenth century, the Taxis family created a courier connection between Spain and the Netherlands, which Philip II greatly expanded to facilitate communication with Rome and Spain's representatives elsewhere in Europe. Although the mail service was originally established for royal correspondence, by the time Teresa had launched her reform, it was available to the general public. However, the post was not always reliable. Letters could get lost, stolen, or destroyed by bad weather. Many people preferred to entrust their letters to a friend or a paid messenger, whose fees were generally paid by the recipient, not the sender. But even messengers could be unreliable. Some were dishonest and stole valuables from the mail they were transporting. For Teresa, an additional danger was that opponents of the reform might assault the messenger and intercept secret communications. As a precaution, she often used code names for herself and her collaborators and made multiple copies of her letters.<sup>10</sup> Although her disciples did not face this particular

10 See *Lettered Woman*, 46.



obstacle, conflict within the order and ongoing wars in Europe sometimes required letter writers to exercise caution.

In early modern Europe, letters often reached a far greater audience than just the addressee. The letters of women religious were routinely passed around among family members, read aloud in the convent refectory, or shared with male associates. Often, the writer instructs the recipient to show a missive to specific friends or collaborators. Chapter 12, on the letters of Catalina de Cristo, illustrates just how important letters from the foundations abroad were to the nuns of the convent of San José in Ávila. Not only did they all read Ana's letters to her friend Catalina, but several of them appended their own messages to Catalina's replies. For both male and female religious orders, letters were a means of maintaining a sense of community. They served to inform, encourage, and console, and they were essential to sustaining what the early Jesuits called the "union of hearts," when members had to travel.<sup>11</sup>

## The Disciples of Teresa de Ávila

Except for Catalina, all the nuns included in this volume were close friends of Saint Teresa. María de San José and Ana de Jesús were prioresses who regularly corresponded with her. Ana de San Bartolomé was her personal nurse and, later, her amanuensis. In France, years after Teresa died, she too became a prioress. Ana did not correspond with the Foundress because, during Teresa's lifetime, La Bartolomé, as the Saint liked to call her, was rarely far from her.<sup>12</sup> However, Ana did correspond with many people of diverse ranks and circumstances, and she left a copious body of letters. Catalina de Cristo was a lay sister who professed at San José de Ávila on 20 April 1584, two years after Teresa died, and lived there until her own death in 1627. She was a close friend of Ana de San Bartolomé, and her letters provide insight into how those nuns who stayed behind in Spain coped with the absence of their spiritual sisters.

María and the two Anas took the Teresian reform to Portugal, France, and the Low Countries. Their letters reflect the challenges they met along the way: the strains of travel, life in a new land, war, poverty, bitter cold, linguistic barriers, the resentment of foreigners, encroaching Protestantism, and the hostility of priests anxious to maintain control of the female religious

<sup>11</sup> See O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 62–63.

<sup>12</sup> I use La Bartolomé throughout this volume, not only because that is what Teresa often called her, but also to distinguish her from Ana de Jesús.

houses. The case of María de San José is particular because her clashes with the Discalced Carmelite hierarchy led to the destruction of nearly all her letters and other writing. Yet, thanks to some serendipitous discoveries and meticulous research on the part of contemporary scholars, we are piecing together her story.

The writings of the disciples of Saint Teresa provide a wealth of new information on how prioresses managed their institutions, disciplined their charges, and protected the interests of their order. They provide an intimate look at everyday life in convents, depicting nuns' activities, such as sewing, writing, teaching, nursing, and performing music, as well as practices such as ritual whippings. Many of their letters reveal warm friendships and mutual support, but others expose the dark side of convent life: jealousy, infighting, cliquishness, and problematic "special friendships," which Teresa condemned vehemently. These letters expose the difficulties these women faced as they struggled to spread the reform into Portugal (then part of Spain), France, and the Low Countries, and bare the emotional trauma they experienced in hostile and confusing surroundings. The fierce battles between Protestants and Catholics, between Calced and Discalced Carmelites, and between opposing Discalced factions are depicted vividly in this material. A significant number of the letters have never been published before, and almost none of them have ever been published in English. Unless otherwise indicated, all the English translations from Spanish, French, and Portuguese that appear in this book are my own.

Through their letters, we hear these women's voices and come to appreciate their bravery, determination, and loyalty to their Mother Foundress, who, they believed, continued to guide them from heaven long after her death.

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